

Art: Portraiture on identity quest

By ART

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Girl with a Bird on her Head, A linocut by Barbara HanrahanMaitland
Regional Art Gallery

EVERY space has been rehung since I was last at Maitland Regional Art Gallery. There are eight new exhibitions, seven of original artmaking and one of well-organised historical documentation of the coal industry in the Lower Hunter.

It can't be entirely by chance that the human face is the pervasive theme of many of the exhibitions, with the annual and eagerly awaited exhibition of art from regional schools producing its usual measure of strikingly inventive portraits and self-portraits.

Also in the education wing is a virtuoso series of self-portraits painted in the gallery over several days by Rachel Milne, who is rapidly creating a role for herself in the Newcastle art scene. She seems to be the sole local resident selected to show a figure painting in the upcoming Kilgour prize at Newcastle Art Gallery.

The two largest galleries at Maitland make a serendipitous contrast. Both feature mid-career, widely exhibited women artists, who both largely base their imagery on women's faces and their complicated lives.

Vicki Varvaessos creates figure studies fraught with drama. Men and women antagonise each other in slashes of paint or exist in separate worlds.

Theatrical tension is equally evident in single female figures and anything-but-still lives, where vases, lamps and shoes set up a world in flux. There are echoes of such expressionist painters as Beckmann or Kirchner or the passionate shorthand of Joy Hester.

But it is the passionate abstract expressionists of mid-20th century who contribute the energy of great swinging brushstrokes, emphatic mark making and the curious acidic palette of heightened emotion.

The work of Madeleine Winch, in the galleries directly above, could hardly present a greater contrast. We are familiar with her favourite protagonist, the grey-eyed young woman gazing musingly from the canvas, calm, often poignant, brimming with inner life. She appeared in many exhibitions at the von Bertouch Galleries.

Madeleine Winch's works are regularly found in major art awards, with their implied search for balancing the tools of the artist against the implements of domesticity and the preservation of personal identity.

The themes expand to suggest the challenges of relationship and the benison of motherhood. But classical drawing skills and delicate colouring imply rather than flaunt emotional intensity.

The female gaze also dominates the elaborate linocuts of Barbara Hanrahan in a suite of works from 1989 in the Maitland collection. Her heroines wear button boots and costumes decorated with luxuriant peasant embroidery. But they are as bold and free as the incisive cutting of the lino block by this notable artist.

- ROBERT Dickerson's distinctive characters, with their huge eyes and pointed chins, inhabit a group of charcoal café scenes from various stages of his long career.

But Cooks Hill Galleries are also showing a delicate and fluent nude, revealing Dickerson as a different kind of expressive draughtsman.

From the well established, the exhibition goes to three painters at different points in their careers. Each has been encouraged to write of the emotional background to their works, which should perhaps be allowed to stand on their own merits.

Phil Stallard handles with aplomb a large red painting of various components. Tracey Smith scrapes back her fugitive images. The youngest, Jess Kellar, in art school, is still grappling with the alluring challenges of oil paint with considerable élan.

- AT Back to Back Galleries, Megan Wisemantel's architectural clay shrines satisfyingly contrast solidity with fragile found objects. On the walls are enthusiastic paintings by Sherrel Oakey and the inventive Susan Wicks.

- THE move by Timeless Textiles to Newcastle's east end (90 Hunter Street) is as successful as anticipated. The heritage ambience of the Lock-Up happily accommodates workshops, stock room and exhibition areas. The current exhibition is based on textiles stained, dyed and warmly tinted by tea, invoking its history, and seasonal variety in text, but also in a collection of miniature figures with modelled hands and faces and costumes elaborately constructed from traditional fabrics. Wilma Simmons is a surprise, creating small artworks with striking presence. It's a great week for the human image, with Olivia Parsonage's cast of sewn characters still at Newcastle Art Space.