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Archibald Prize review: self-portraits of artists crowd out stars

John McDonald

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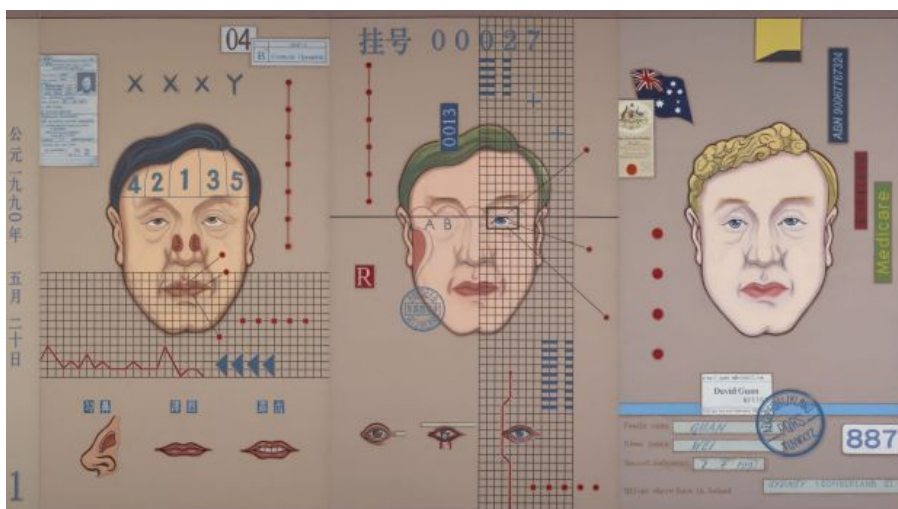
Faced with the eternal return of the Art Gallery of NSW's biggest drawcard, I'm convinced it must be approached as a carnival rather than an exhibition: the display includes big pictures and little pictures, round ones and square ones; paintings that resemble photographs, others that look like cartoons. This year there are no fewer than 51 finalists, although a rearrangement of the entrance gallery means the hang feels slightly more spacious.

Roughly half the show consists of portraits of artists, including many self-portraits. This may seem a little incestuous but it reflects the difficulty of getting anyone famous to sit for a portrait. It seems that only other artists can be relied upon to understand the time a portrait demands and not to complain if the final image is less than flattering.

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Detail from Guan Wei's Plastic surgery. Photo: supplied

Nevertheless the AGNSW trustees might ask themselves if the general public would prefer to see pictures of well known people from other walks of life. Perhaps they believe this is covered by the *everyman* innovation of the *Packers'* Prize, which this year went to

Everyman innovation of the JACKETS PRIZE, which this year went to Bettina Fauvel-Ogden's portrait of celebrity chef, George Calombaris.

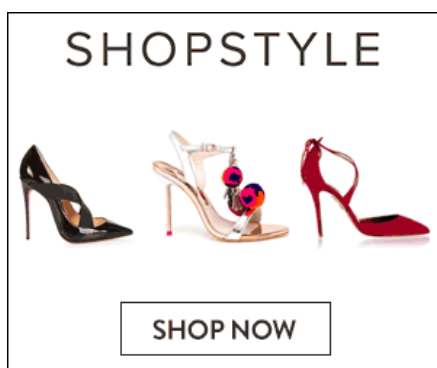
In recent years the Archibald winner has been obvious at a glance (to everyone but the bookies), but this time it's not so simple. Every picture has its pros and cons, which suggests a compromise. I'm writing this column a week in advance of the announcement so I'm obliged to speculate.



Deng by Nick Stathopoulos is a finalist in the Archibald prize. Photo: Brook Mitchell

There has been much talk, for instance, about Natasha Bieniek's Wendy Whiteley. The judges seem to like Bieniek, as they gave her the Wynne Prize last year for a ridiculous painting of a landscape portrayed on the screen of an iPad. The Whiteley portrait is more convincing, although I can't see yet another prize going to a teensy-weensy picture. The miniature scale has a novelty aspect, even if there is no denying the hours Bieniek has put in with a one-hair brush and a magnifying glass.

If one discounts the tiny pictures that eliminates about a third of the contestants, including some of the most skilful entries – notably India Mark's neat, tonalist study, *Day at the Gallery with Dane Taylor*; a spare, probing self-portrait by veteran, Nick Mourtzakis, and one of extreme delicacy by novice, Natasha Walsh. The latter is painted on a sheet of copper, with Walsh leaving part of the surface bare to suggest her shoulders and blouse.



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Nick Stathopoulos has done something similar with his larger painting, *Deng*, in which the exacting, hyperrealist detail of the subject's face is offset by a blank, white space representing shirt and collar. It's almost as if Stathopoulos decided the viewer needed a respite from the microscopic scrutiny the portrait invites.

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Less successful is Peter Wegner's portrait of John Wolseley, which conveys nothing of the subject's personality. The same might be said of Louise Hearman's Barry Humphries, which is beautifully painted but makes the great comedian seem almost anonymous. That may have been the intention but I can't help drawing invidious comparisons with John Brack's ebullient 1969 portrait of Humphries as Dame Edna.



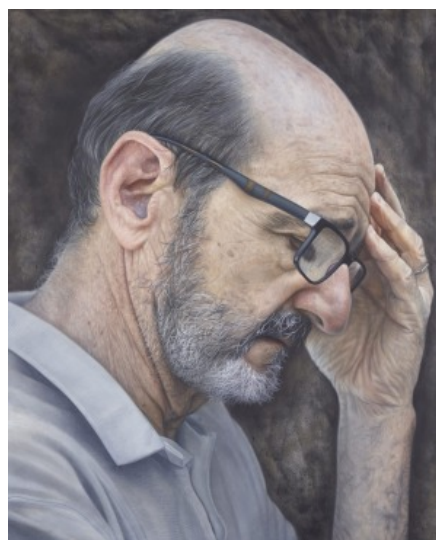
Natasha Bieniek has created a portrait of Wendy Whiteley on a miniature scale. Photo: Mim Stirling

Lucy Culliton, the only artist to be represented in the Archibald, Wynne and Sulman this year, has given us an uncharacteristically drab portrayal of herself surrounded by pigeons. One could never accuse Culliton of vanity, as she seems to have added a decade to her age, and given her arms and hands an arthritic twist.

Among the neatest, correctest entries, one might single out Marie Mansfield's excellent likeness of Euan Macleod, but the viewer will search in vain for any psychological insights. Heide Yardley does rather better with a profile of artist, Nell, dressed like a sorceress – an appropriate image for such a style-shifter.

Yvette Coppersmith paints herself as Rose Byrne, in a small but original lavender monochrome. Guy Maestri has one of the most expressive portraits in *Shattered (Griggs)*, which shows artist David Griggs flat on his back. Perhaps Griggs wore himself out painting his own Archibald entry, which features banker, Max Germanos complete with rams' horns, skull and eyeballs on stalks.

If there were a prize for sheer bravura it would have to go to Michael McWilliams, for a self-portrait in the manner of Arcimboldo, called *The Usurpers*, composed of introduced species that have flourished in Tasmania. It's unusual to see such a striking work in the entrance gallery, which is usually a hall of shame. Along with McWilliams' work one may find two strong portraits by previous Archibald winners – Nicholas



Archibald Prize finalist Kirsty Neilson's *There's no humour in darkness*. Photo: supplied

TWO STRONG PORTRAITS BY PREVIOUS ARCHIBALD WINNERS – NICHOLAS

Harding's Peter Weiss and Lewis Miller's Bernie Teague; along with a lively portrait of Pat Corrigan by Alan Jones.

This may be the first time that paintings in the entrance gallery would be creditable winners. Even so, I don't believe the trustees will abandon their time-honoured practice of choosing the winner from the central gallery. Along with Bieniek that leaves five possibilities: tricky self-portraits by Guan Wei and Imants Tillers; Marcus Wills' *The ersatz* (James Batchelor), Zoe Young's Sam Harris, and Kirsty Nielson's *There's no humour in darkness* – a portrait of depressive comedian, Garry McDonald.

The latter has attracted a lot of attention because it's rare a portrait tries to address a psychological state so directly. But although Nielson is raising awareness of an important issue, she has done so with a dull, quasi-photographic painting.

Zoe Young's portrait of model, Samantha Harris, reclining in the pose of Monet's *Olympia*, is painted in a flat, broadly decorative style reminiscent of early Bonnard and Vuillard. It's a likeable, albeit lightweight work, but I don't understand what Young is trying to tell us by putting so many books into the picture. Does she want us to know she is a good reader? Is she suggesting Harris is not just a pretty face? Either way, the gratuitous sprinkling of titles acts as a distraction, not an enhancement.

Marcus Wills, who won the Archibald with a strange picture in 2006, has painted an utterly realistic, near-nude portrait of dancer, James Batchelor. We may be impressed by Batchelor's physique but his pose is so lifeless it feels as if he is taking part in a police line-up.

In Imants Tillers's *Double Reality* (self-portrait), the artist appears as a shadowy head on only two out of 64 small panels. The sparse mixture of words and schematic images suggests alternative form of portraiture to a simple outward likeness. This may have a conceptual appeal but the work is humdrum by Tillers's standards.

That leaves only Guan Wei's *Plastic surgery* – a witty, four-panel self-portrait that shows the artist's Chinese features being transformed, unconvincingly, into western ones. As a piece of painting Guan Wei's work might better be described as a diagram, with all the depth of a cartoon. However, there are few artists who are smarter or better adapted to the requirements of art prizes. I've seen in the past how Guan Wei manages to tick more boxes than other artists, even when his picture doesn't make a strong initial impression.

At a time of division in Australian society, with ongoing arguments over the treatment of refugees, it's an opportune time to take a dig at the idea of cultural assimilation. Factor in a reference to our modish fascination with cosmetic surgery as a cure for all problems, and remember that no Chinese artist has yet won the Archibald despite many exceptional entries. These are some of the reasons Guan Wei may be the most logical winner in this flat field. On the other hand, I admit that logic has never had much to do with the Archibald Prize.

The 2016 Archibald Prize is at the Art Gallery of NSW, until October