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## OPINION

# *Surprise! The pandemic improved the standard of drawing in Australia*



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Art critic

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If anyone should know about drawing, it's Guy Warren – he's been doing it for about 90 years, although he only began taking lessons in his teens. When I spoke with Warren last week, as he was closing in on his century, he related drawing, and art in general, back to prehistoric times. "Making a mark on a flat surface is a primal urge," he said. "It's as fundamental as making noises, singing, dancing, or telling stories. It dates back to the moment when someone picked up a burnt stick from the fire and made a mark on a cave wall."



Martin King's strangerlands #1.

We've been repeating this first venture at home decoration, with variations, ever since. It's one of the things that defines us as a species, because animals – with apologies to the Bower Bird – do not have an aesthetic sense. With our perennial knack for adding complications we have made drawing into both a highly organised discipline and a tool for spontaneous self-expression.

Events such as the 2021 Dobell Drawing Prize at the National Art School Gallery serve as reminders of the many kinds of activity permitted by an expanded definition of “drawing”. The most striking example is Nicci Haynes' *Drawing, Dancing*, a video in which we see the artist, dressed in neutral white, dancing in front of a white wall. Her movements are traced by a thin grey line, drawn with a pencil or stick of charcoal. As she moves she appears to be literally drawing in space.

It's a clever idea, and, in its connection with dancing, perhaps closer to the prehistoric cave than many other entries. Todd Fuller, who also uses video, has pulled a little further away from drawing's primal scene in an animated work that shows shadowy figures dancing on the other side of a window. It's a piece that conceals more than it reveals, a retreat to privacy in a year of lockdowns that turns the viewer into a voyeur.

Technology is taken to even greater extremes by Debbie Locke, who uses a drawing machine to translate the GPS co-ordinates of her daily walks into marks on paper. It sounds intriguing but the results are not exactly dazzling.

Kendal Hayes has used a “pokerwork machine” to depict a swimmer's head protruding from the water in an image that resembles an expanded newspaper photo.



Euan Macleod's winning entry in the Dobell Drawing Prize, *Borderlands*.

It may be a personal preference but none of these mechanical interventions seems as intrinsically interesting as a work made entirely by the artist's hand. This may be the way the judges felt when they awarded the 2021 prize to Euan Macleod for a suite of 15 pastel drawings called *Borderlands – Between NSW and QLD*. Although pastel is associated with some of the

most delicate of pictorial effects, as seen in the work of artists from Jean-Étienne Liotard to Odilon Redon, Macleod takes a rough and ready approach to the medium.

He has produced 15 quick sketches on his favourite theme of 'figure in a landscape', each work capturing vivid first impressions of a scene as it unfolds before his eyes. What Macleod loses in detail he gains in expressivity, in drawings that come across as studies for paintings rather than finished compositions. The judges (headed by guest judge painter Lucy Culliton) have rewarded the artist for his self-confidence and spontaneity – qualities that would not have been recognised as such by some of the other artists in this exhibition.

In the winning of any art prize there's as much luck as skill involved. The judges' task is an unenviable one because they are asked to make value judgments between works that are wildly incommensurable. For a panel, unless faced with an absolute stand-out, it all comes down to personal taste and persuasion. Three different groups of judges might come up with three different results.

How, for instance, should one compare Macleod's rapid jottings with Catherine O'Donnell's *Waiting for the world to reopen*, a drawing of a window so precise it looks as if it were drawn one atom at a time? Macleod has all the dash, O'Donnell all the patience. They seem to hail from different planets. Tianli Zu has aimed for the best of both worlds, exhibiting a series of loosely drawn studies of Brian Sherman in charcoal, tea and ink, alongside a neatly clipped papercut portrait.



Catherine O'Donnell entry in the Dobell Drawing Prize 2021.

With the exception of one or two rather tricky items, notably Leonardo Uribe's piece – an immigration form in which the words are made from human hair; or Shona Trescott's *Ashes* – a 25-panel suite featuring silhouettes of Australian animals drawn in bushfire ash, most of the works in this year's selection fall into recognisable genres such as portraiture, landscape, abstraction or still life.

For sheer complexity, Martin King's *strangerlands 1* is hard to beat. In a large graphite drawing that is both a landscape and a commentary on the cultural construction of landscape, King puts a forest within an open book. In the background there's a reference to another landscape, by John Glover. Yet the most impressive part of the work is not so much the intellectual rationale but the skill and care that has gone into the actual drawing.

Jane Grealy's *Black Dog 2020* is no more than a picture of two dogs in a park, but as a virtuoso feat of charcoal drawing it's a show-stopper. Meanwhile Claire Tozer has created a minutely detailed record of a fire trail that would pass as pure abstraction. It's almost with relief than one turns to the vibrant colours and simple forms of Julian Martin's *Untitled*, or Amanda Penrose-Hart's honest pencil portrait of Reg Mombassa.

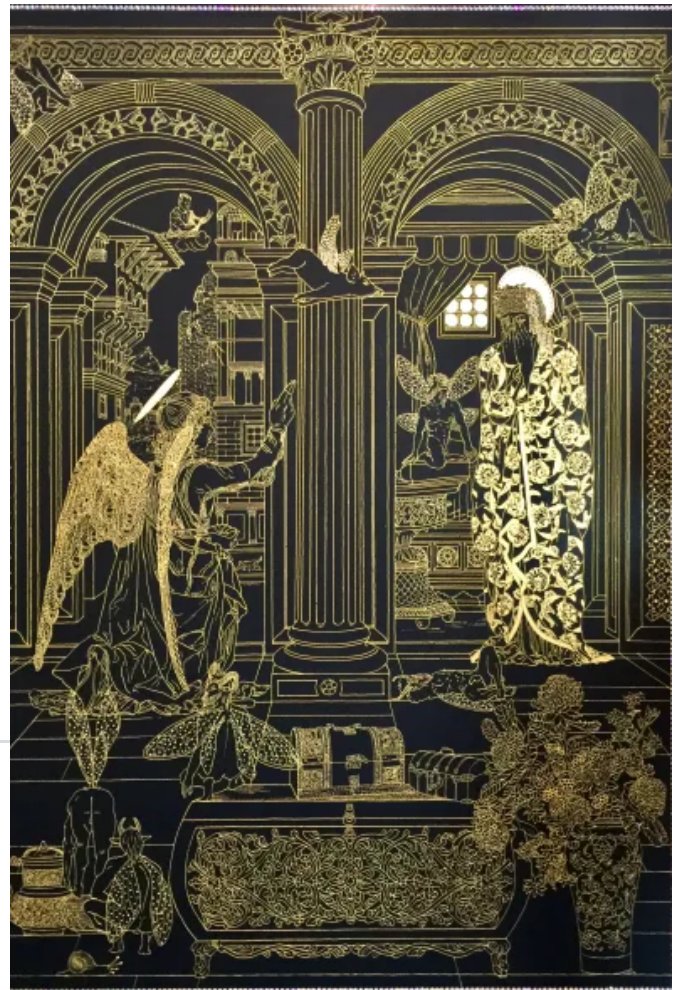
The Dobell Foundation can be pleased with the quality of the 2021 entries, which may be due to the esteem in which this award is held, or simply indicate that artists were able to spend more time in the studio during the pandemic year. There's nothing more conducive to art than a crisis, and the number of works that refer directly or obliquely to the lockdown suggests the virus has played a significant role in the make-up of this year's show. It will go down as one of the more unusual side-effects of COVID-19 that it seems to have improved the standard of drawing in Australia.

**Dobell Drawing Prize 2021 is at the National Art School Gallery, until May 22.**



**John McDonald**

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Murat Urlali's *The Gift of Art, Self portrait, A Relief after Francesco del Cossa.*