

ARCHIE'S SEA CHANGE

The grand old men of the nation's stuffiest portrait prize will be turning in their graves.



BRUCE JAMES

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SALON DES REFUSES 2000
S. H. Ervin Gallery
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NUDGING 80, the daggiest award in Australian art is beginning to look serious, even a bit dangerous. Adam Cullen's avant-garde win in the Archibald Prize signals a sea change in the event, not least because his subject, David Wenham, starred in the television series of that name. In securing the \$35,000 purse this year, and to such resounding popular acclaim, although missing out on the Packing Room Prize, Cullen becomes a cultural player at a stroke.

While some maintain a stroke is all it took to capture Wenham's likeness, a misconception Cullen doesn't much bother to dispel, the portrait bumps the attention-seeking, difficult, unpredictable, gifted young painter into a category of notoriety that will astonish him and aggrieve his competitors.

He ceases to be an art-world also-ran, a peripheral or minority taste, suddenly assuming his place beside the likes of Judy Cassab and Bryan Westwood. If his natural predecessor is the combative Keith Looby, whose portrait of the journalist Anne Summers is the sleeper of Archibald 2000, Cullen brushes up with considerable authority in the more conservative company of colleagues such as Robert Hannaford or William Robinson. (Hannaford's absence from the gallery walls this year is concerning, with his Morrissey-clad Leah Purcell in ignominy at the Salon des Refuses.)

The doors of the academy have parted. Cullen the bad boy of grunge has entered, wearing the smirk of a battler who finally has the wherewithal to pay off some of those niggling credit card debts and buy a few quality provisions for heaven's sake, perhaps even take that long-postponed sabbatical in Noosa Heads. Where will it end? Will the Goya of Leichhardt be commissioned to paint the Queen in a wattle-yellow evening frock in the manner of another Archibald regular, the legendary Sir William Dargie?

Having made his beloved cattle dog, Growler, the subject of a ferocious painting recently on view at his Sydney dealer gallery, Yuill/Crowley, Cullen should have no problems with HRH's antsy little corgis. As for the scowl of a woman beset by state misfortunes and domestic betrayals, it should be a pushover for the painter who has immortalised Miss Gin Gin.

This isn't Cullen's maiden attempt at taking out a prestigious portrait



Art before ego... self-portraits by Jenny Sages, above, and Ann Thomson, right, and Adam Cullen's portrait of David Wenham, below.



award. His thirst for mainstream certification has raised eyebrows in the politically censorious enclaves of the avant-garde, not that Cullen cares. Sensitivity to the expectations of others, he admits, is not his strong suit. It's one of the qualities that predisposes him to memorable portraiture.

You wouldn't approach him to be flattered; flattened maybe, and flayed and defamed for good measure. His vision verges on misanthropy. He is a painter of society who, praise be, will never make a society painter.

His biting interpretations of Mikey Robins, Catharine Lumby, Max Cullen and others from the world of entertainment and letters emerged over the past couple of years in the Archibald, the Salon des Refuses and the Moran Portrait Award. If his portrait of the surfing champion Mark Occhilupo is the wipe-out of the one-off 2000 Sporting Portrait Prize, run in tandem with the Archibald, it fails to ruin the remarkable success rate that Cullen can claim for his portraits, notwithstanding his hit-or-miss technique or his crazily blokey approach to the

patrician conventions of face painting. In *Portrait of David Wenham*, Cullen deploys a newfound confidence as a painter, as opposed to a drawer or graffitist. He's always been a designer of conviction, boasting powers of pictorial organisation and placement which his fiercest critics, surprise surprise, are coming to recognise as prodigious. But here his compositional strengths play second fiddle to a diagnosis of character through colour, and the materiality of the paint.

The Wenham of the portrait is not the adorable anti-hero of *SeaChange*, Diver Dan. Instead, Cullen catches his sitter in the no-man's land between two of his most significant actorly characterisations: that of the collector's gormless friend in the imported hit stage play *ART* and the ice-cool, pathological thug in the devastating Australian film *The Boys*.

The veneer of the painting is extremely true to life in the sense of being true to Wenham, a performer who underplays his feelings, subjugating moodiness and melodrama in favour of a moral, or at least emotional, blankness that can be

somewhat unsettling at a distance, utterly spine-chilling up close. Wenham has never shown signs of wanting to chew the scenery. Without being cliché-ridden, his features represent a mask, a disguise, threatening to slip away from his face to reveal an unpalatable reality: blackness, the void, a Gorgon. Cullen's household pigments collude in this effect, seeming to leak down the picture plane and off the register of meaning.

The surface may be seductive, and the sitter seemingly inoffensive, but Cullen hints at the hidden levels of derangement and malfecance which we know to be within the psychological repertoire of actors and assassins.

Many have detected the phantom of Van Gogh behind Wenham's cornflower eyes and carrot-coloured outcrops of hair, so that the portrait reads as a reference to art history. If this is intentional — and in the work of a well-read art-school graduate, why shouldn't it be? — it adds to the complexity of an already highly visually loaded depiction.

Van Gogh's interest in Japanese prints of the Ukiyo-e school, including brilliantly coloured, mask-like portraits of celebrated actors, feeds through the graphic simplifications that characterise Cullen's work. That it reproduces so well, both in print format and via the medium of television, is an achievement that comes with eerie ease to Cullen. A child of his age, he factors mass mediation into his practice without even thinking about it.

In an older artist, it would be cynical. In Cullen, it's his landscape.

On two occasions in recent years, the AGNSW trustees came close to an equivalently imaginative decision. In 1986, they awarded the Archibald to Davida Allen's *Dr John Arthur McKelvie Shera: my father-in-law watering his garden*, an ungainly serenade to the sanctity of suburban man; a decade later, in 1996, Wendy

Sharpe's subversive *Self-portrait as Diana of Erskineville*, a joker in a bright brassiere and eye-popping harem pants, took out the prize. These were the sorts of works likely to have Archibald stalwarts of old — take your pick from W. B. McInnes, John Longstaff, George Lambert, Max Meldrum and Ivor Hele — rotating in their tombs.

Entrants of late have included such exploratory painters as Imants Tillers, Caroline Williams and Su Baker. Cullen's win can be seen in the context of this softening of the conservative resolve of the prize. This year, Michael Snape, Nicholas Harding, David Fairbairn, Barbara Licha, Robin Lawrence, Julie Fragar and Ann Thomson contribute further to the amelioration. The 21st century can't be far away.

Thompson and Fragar join Jenny Sages in supplying self-portrait images of extraordinary distinction. Fragar includes herself, Chuck Close and a security guard in a tripartite conception, deserving the closest scrutiny. Thomson's *Portrait of the Artist as a Painter* proves the first law of the genre: that portraiture honour the art of painting before the ego of the sitter. Sages understands this, exhibiting one of the most oblique, self-effacing portraits ever to have hung in the Archibald. Pushed to the edge of the canvas by text of the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova and by the force of her own familial ruminations, she is only secondarily present in the work. Artistry, not the artist, is her subject.

Judging by the disappointing remnants in the Salon des Refuses at Observatory Hill, artistry of any kind was in short supply for the selectors. Among the handful of paintings that should have stayed in the Archibald are Anita Rezevska's haunting *Self-Portrait in the Land of the Dreaming*, Robert Barnes's marvellous *Margaret Olley*, Stephen Lopes's quirky *Tom Gilling in the Coat of Mr Kidney* and Peter Rodd's beguiling self-portrait.

For the gentlemen, it's T-shirt season at the Salon. In their portrait representations, Charlie Cuming, Max Markson, Ian Gentle, Chris Rochester, Kyle Vander-Kuyp and Greg Crowe all sport casual tops. More flashily, Robert Denich wears a Hawaiian blouse of thermoluminescent intensity; Martin Sharp models sailor's stripes; Stuart Diver boasts mustardy ski apparel; Jiawei Shen dons Chinese gear, circa 1900; while Richard Roxburgh, painted by Evert Ploeg, goes the whole rock-star hog in a leopard-skin-printed ensemble reprised in a furry wallpaper motif with a capacity to make one's flesh crawl.

Tom Carment's *Kathleen Stewart* is superior to his *Presbyterian self-portrait*, which made it through the Archibald cull. Ann Grocott's tiny self-portrait warrants a better position. It might easily have been swapped for the bombastic inaccuracies of Shaun Clark's *Ruth Cracknell — Australian Treasure* in one of the main bays. Or Maurice Schlesinger's *Elinor & Fred Wrobel, Keepers of the Flame* — a shocker.

Bruce James is the subject of a portrait by Barbara Licha entered in the Archibald Prize.



The doors of the academy have parted for the bad boy of grunge.