



Seeing the Lights — Anthony Hopkins, Artist. By Jenny Sage.



Paul Connor — Architect, by Kevin Connor.

# The circus is back in town

This year's Archibald Prize failed to impress, **Sasha Grishin** says.

**T**he annual Sydney art-prize circus is with us again and the Melbourne Cup of art is up and running. The winners, losers and judges are all under the spotlight.

This Archibald Prize field is one of the weakest and dullest in living memory. The winning entry, Craig Ruddy's portrait of the actor David Gulpilil, is big, black, eye-catching and ultimately unconvincing as a painting. The intensity and the resolution of the painting is not maintained for the whole composition and the huge scale seems designed more to attract the judge's eye, than for any artistic purpose. The conceptual conceit of showing one of Australia's foremost indigenous actors against a background of wallpaper from Prime Minister John Howard's dining room in Kirribilli House may be ingenious, but the execution is unsatisfactory. It is a sorry excuse for a portrait.

It is generally a very drab

selection of Archibald finalists with Kevin Connor, Jenny Sages, Brian Dunlop, Jiawei Shen and Joe Furlonger the strongest in a weak field.

The quality does not pick up with the finalist for the Australian Photographic Portraiture Prize. Last year's novelty and excitement has worn off and now we have a fairly uninspiring field. The winning entry, Rod McNicol's photographic diptych of Robert Hunter, is somewhat predictable and is reminiscent of Sue Ford's studies in ageing of many years earlier. The photograph by Canberra's Marzena Wasikowska is one of the highlights of the exhibition, as is Anne Zahalka's accomplished study. Generally, there are many forgettable photographs.

The Wynne Prize for landscape art is again a fairly lacklustre affair. It is difficult to take exception to either George Tjungurraji's winning entry or Gloria Petyarre's Highly Commended runner-up painting.



Australian Photographic Portraiture Prize winner, Robert Hunter 1984 &amp; 2004 by artist Roderick McNicol.

However, as a whole, it is a rather boring selection of landscape paintings with those by Aida Tomescu, John R. Walker, Wendy Sharpe and Geoffrey Dyer making up some of the highlights. The watercolour prize which has been awarded to John Wolseley is appropriate, as he is one of the finest watercolourists working in Australia today.

What is particularly disappointing about the display is the lack of a guiding visual intelligence in the selection of exhibits and the triumph of silliness and political correctness at the expense of qualities of art. There are just too many simply incompetent and silly works on show.

The Board of Trustees who judged the entries is dominated by non-art people — captains of industry and wives of captains of industry, many of whom have no knowledge, background or expertise in the visual arts. It demonstrates how unprofessionally we treat the visual arts. Can one imagine such an amateur lay body sitting in judgment over a rugby league game, a cricket match or an athletics competition?

What is even more of a worry is that the same group of trustees preside over acquisitions for the art gallery itself. If this group cannot

select 40 competent portraits out of the hundreds submitted, what hope is there for them guiding the gallery in its new acquisitions?

The Sulman Prize is the only one which resembles a serious art exhibition. The reason for this is that it has been selected by an artist, this year Aida Tomescu, not by a bunch of would-have-been art experts. The winning entry by Alan Mitelman, is a brilliant and effective painting, with strong works by Kevin Connor, Leonard Brown, Elisabeth Cummings, Gareth Sanson, Virginia Coventry, as well as a work by Canberra's G.W. Bot.

The art competition circus is a great money spinner for the Sydney gallery and in many ways empowers the public to participate in a democratic process of being involved in art.

However, the time has arrived to treat art with the same respect as we accord to other important activities, such as sport. Is the Sydney gallery worth a visit? Definitely yes, but not so much for the Archibald, as for the Sulman, and while there, go and see the great Rover Thomas show as well as the fabulous Man Ray exhibition.

Wynne and Sulman Prizes Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney, until May 16.

Winner of the 2004 Wynne Prize, *Untitled*, by George Tjungurraji, above.Sulman Prize winner, *Untitled*, by Alan Mitelman, below.