



Enter at your own risk

Bruised egos, lost friendships and ruined marriages ... the winners aren't always grinners in the Archibald game, writes **Joyce Morgan**.

cover story

When her *Self-portrait as Diana of Erskineville* took the Archibald Prize in 1996, Wendy Sharpe noticed people pointing her out in coffee shops. She was asked to write a travel piece about a rail journey and an article about the books she was reading. Most bizarre of all, she found herself featured as Pisces woman in the astrology column of a glossy magazine.

She suddenly felt more like Diana of Wales than Diana of Erskineville. "It was like nothing I've ever experienced. But I couldn't complain," she says. "Artists don't normally have so much attention."

Unrecognised in a crowded room one minute, centre stage the next. The startled figure is blinded by camera flashes as the painting's form and style are publicly dissected. If the critics scorn that style as truly hideous, the event is simply all the more delicious to watch.

It might be the formula for the reality TV show

What Not to Wear. It's also the formula for the Archibald Prize. Since 1921, painters seeking the Australian art world's glittering prize have made a Faustian pact: to give their art and soul in exchange for instant recognition and a modest pot of gold. The \$35,000 prize money might be barely the cost of a physical makeover, but the publicity that comes with it is priceless. Or is it?

Winning the annual portrait prize has many consequences for the careers and lives of artists, beyond the sudden fame. Doors open, certainly, and commissions might follow. But bruised egos, ruined friendships and a broken marriage have been among its unanticipated results.

At the Art Gallery of NSW, which hosts the prize, trucks will begin rolling into the delivery dock on Monday. All week, the vehicles will carry the precious portraits and the hopes of hundreds of artists - hopes that in most cases will be dashed,

as only a handful survive the cull before the announcement of a winner on March 26. Of nearly 600 entries last year, 32 were selected for hanging.

Is the painting too small? Too big? Will it be dry or framed in time? Has the artist chosen the right subject? Artists around the country have already spent the summer wrestling such dilemmas leading up to Archibald time. These questions are more likely to keep them awake at night than contemplating what winning might mean.

Like the silly season, the Archibald extends over a longer period each year. Spin-off exhibitions, prizes, performances, concerts, lunches and talks have turned what began as a single event into a season. It coincides with three other art prizes - the Wynne, Sulman and Australian Photographic Portrait prizes - but these are inevitably overshadowed. The Archibald, like the Melbourne Cup, to which it is annually compared, is the main event. The winners of both are forever known for that achievement, no matter how their form develops.

Winning the Archibald is a turbocharge to an artist's career, says Edmund Capon, director of the Art Gallery of NSW. "I can't think of any single winner of the Archibald for whom winning has not been a marked boost to their careers ... It is one of the roots to recognition and stardom. It is the art world's great event of the year. The great galvanising event," he says.

Well, he would say that. His gallery benefits from the boost in visitors that the Archibald brings. Yet he strikes a note of caution: "The publicity, the visibility, all those things carry a risk with them. Once you are out in the public domain, you are up for criticism."

You certainly are. "Slapdash," was critic John McDonald's verdict on Adam Cullen's work in 2000. "A pompous apparition of a white-and-grey face floating over a shark-infested pond with ghosted figures to indulge in extra portent," was how *The Age* described Euan Macleod's winning self-portrait in 1999. Ouch.

Few winners are as resistant to such bucketings as the late Sir William Dargie, the Archibald record-holder with eight wins between 1941 and 1956. Asked the secret of his success once, he replied with the bristling machismo of some of his paintings: "I would never have managed it without the hide of a rhinoceros and a ruthless disregard for the rights of those near to me."

Macleod still winces at some of the brickbats he received within minutes of being declared the winner. He was horrified to learn that a television producer scanned the crowd at the prize's announcement for someone who hated the picture - and even more aghast when that quest proved successful. It might be show biz, but Macleod was spectacularly ill-prepared for it. "I didn't expect the level of scrutiny, that attention. There is pressure to justify whether your painting is any good."

Having painted a self-portrait, he felt particularly vulnerable. Not only his work was on the line. Rumours that he was about to return to his native New Zealand to escape the publicity were wrong, he says. His win brought some unusual requests, including an invitation to appear in a coffee commercial. But the higher profile was the most valuable legacy for him. And a few years on, the barbs have lost some of their sting, and he admits that aspects of the event were fun. "At the time, I questioned it. It can push you around emotionally ... But if you don't like it, don't enter."

Artists typically spend their days alone in a studio away from public gaze. Even if their work is known, their faces rarely are. But, suddenly, even the shyest prize winner is expected to perform.

Sharpe decided to go along with the publicity whirl for a few months and then draw a line. "After a while, I felt like a fraud. I was spending so much time talking about painting, but I wasn't actually doing any," she says.

The impact on her career is harder to quantify. She has since been an official war artist in East Timor and was commissioned to paint the poolside murals at Cook + Phillip Park in Sydney. "I don't think these happened because of the Archibald, but it may have helped ... In some situations, it is that extra stamp of approval," she says.

She acknowledges that Archibald approval may have helped her sales and influenced some buyers, perhaps with an eye on an investment. But winning the Archibald is not an automatic boost in prices or commissions. More people will come to an artist's exhibitions; it doesn't mean they will open their chequebooks. But it can certainly make an artist a household name. With up to 70,000 people attending the Archibald Prize exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW and about 50,000 seeing it on tour, there is no greater exposure for artists. The prize might be a ticket to sudden fame, but fortune



"Archibald month is a bit like being an egg merchant. There are so many fragile moments."



is a different matter. Many winners, including Sharpe, Cullen and Francis Giacco, still supplement their art by teaching.

The most tangible effect on their income is the prize money. But the money doesn't go on copious quantities of absinthe and glamorous holidays. Essentially, the prize affords a better class of paint.

"I bought a new easel I'd always wanted," Giacco says. He sounds as if he's describing an immense indulgence, as if he bought a mink coat. The birth of twin daughters the following year helped take care of the rest. He was approached by commercial galleries to show his work after his win in 1994 for *Homage to John Reichard*, a work some criticised as not a portrait but a genre painting, because Reichard, a cellist, was one of five figures in a rich interior scene.

"It changed my relationship with private art galleries. It gave me more confidence. I could call the shots a bit," Giacco says. But he did not sell the prize-winning painting. He knocked back a good offer for the work shortly after the announcement, hoping he might get a better one in time. It remains in his possession.

Macleod bought a car and art materials, and Cullen used the money to relocate from Sydney to the Blue Mountains so he could concentrate on his painting, away from the city's distractions.

"There's a fantasy that winning the Archibald changes your life," says Sydney gallery owner Ray Hughes. "It doesn't. That's a fairytale. What it does is focus people's attention on an artist's work."

If artists are selling well before the win, they'll probably continue to sell well. But it doesn't necessarily mean their prices will treble. Hughes doubts it makes landing a show any easier since most winners are already exhibiting artists. He has had four Archibald winners in his stable at various times, including William Robinson and Davida Allen. He's celebrated with the victors and commiserated with the losers. He is probably the Archibald's most painted subject, having sat for painter Ian Smith each year for more than 20 years. Smith has never won the prize, but has said that he finds Hughes continually interesting.

"Rightly or wrongly, people come to great notice



Brickbats and bouquets ... Adam Cullen, top left, whose 2000 portrait of David Wenham was labelled "slapdash"; Euan Macleod, above, wasn't prepared for the criticism of his self-portrait; Kerrie Lester, far left, the Archibald bridesmaid; and Sir William Dargie, left, the king of the Archibald.

Performance art ... after her Self-portrait as Diana of Erskineville, left, won in 1996, Wendy Sharpe felt like Diana of Wales with all the attention. Francis Giacco could "call the shots a bit" with galleries after his *Homage to John Reichard*, below, won in 1994.



by winning," Hughes says. "Every artist who enters aspires to win and there's a sense of gloom when they don't get hung ... Archibald month is a bit like being an egg merchant. There are so many fragile moments."

Fred Cress was feeling extremely fragile when he won in 1988 with his dark portrait of John Beard, which also took the People's Choice prize. It is the only work to have been awarded both. Sleepless after a blistering argument with his wife the night before, his mood was not helped when the taxi driver taking him to the gallery assumed he was a tourist and chose a circuitous route.

Suddenly, he was in the spotlight being bombarded with questions about what it meant to win. "I had no idea. I couldn't think of anything to say. In the end, I said, 'It will stop my mother asking me when I'm going to get a job'."

The win coincided with a change in his style of painting and a surge in creative output, as he felt that he was finally developing his own artistic voice. But there were unforeseen consequences. Within a month, his marriage to another painter ended. "It was the final nail in the coffin of my marriage ... She said winning the Archibald lengthened my shadow and she couldn't put up with it. I don't think I even benefited from the money. I think she got it," Cress says.

And he believes two of his other Archibald entries have cost him friendships with the subjects - winemaker Len Evans and the former director of the National Gallery of Victoria, Patrick McCaughey.

"Len Evans never spoke to me again ... it was a tough portrait," he concedes. "Patrick and I were great friends, but we don't seem to talk any more. And it stems back to the portrait. He didn't like it."

Undaunted, Cress is entering again this year with a portrait of artist John Olsen, the grand old man of Australian art. Ironically, it was Olsen who once described the Archibald as a chook raffle and staged a demonstration against Dargie's dominance of it in the 1950s.

Nearly two decades on, Cress finds he's still referred to as an Archibald Prize winner and is surprised at how well known the portrait is. But living in France for half of each year, he is aware that the win has little cachet overseas. "Mention the Archibald and they don't know anything about it. If I don't say it's a prize for portraiture, it sounds good. Because overseas, portraiture is not highly thought of."

Even here, the prize has never lacked critics. Almost as many articles ask "Is portraiture dead?" as "Is theatre dead?". Meanwhile, the shows go on. Certainly, the Archibald has never wanted for entrants.

Some can get obsessed by it, Capon says. "Artists perhaps realise it and step away for a year or two to take a breather from this obsession and look over other horizons. I think it's necessary they do, to always have new ingredients every year."

Kerrie Lester has been dubbed the Archibald's bridesmaid. She has never won but has been singled out for the judges' praise about six times. Better to be on the brink than ignored, she says. She entered for 14 consecutive years, with subjects that included Fred Hollows, Burnham Burnham, James Morrison and Janet Vernon, before taking a break last year. She is back in the saddle this year with a subject she won't name. Obsessed?

"I don't think I take it that seriously," she says. "It's pretty incredible to be hung, I've never been rejected. I might die if I was ... I still get nervous."

She has never taken the prize money but the competition has had an impact, giving her greater confidence in talking about her work. Several artists cited this as an enduring effect.

Not that confidence has ever been lacking in Cullen, who won in 2000 with his edgy portrait of actor David Wenham, in the role of the vicious killer he played in the movie *The Boys*. "I changed the meaning of what portraiture is," he says.

His win opened to contemporary artists what has long been seen as a conservative prize, he says. He has memorised one critic's comment that in 2000 the doors of the academy had parted and the bad boy of grunge had entered.

Although the prize might bring fame, it can be squandered if artists don't continue to build on their success. They can't sit back and assume the world will beat a path to their studio, Hughes says. He likens winning the Archibald to getting a hole-in-one at golf.

"Once you have done it, you have to go out and keep playing ... The hardest thing about winning is to realise that the next body of pictures you are making is more important." ■

The winner of the Archibald Prize will be announced on March 26. The exhibition of the Archibald, Wynne, Sulman and Australian Photographic Portrait prizes will be at the Art Gallery of NSW from March 27 until May 16.