

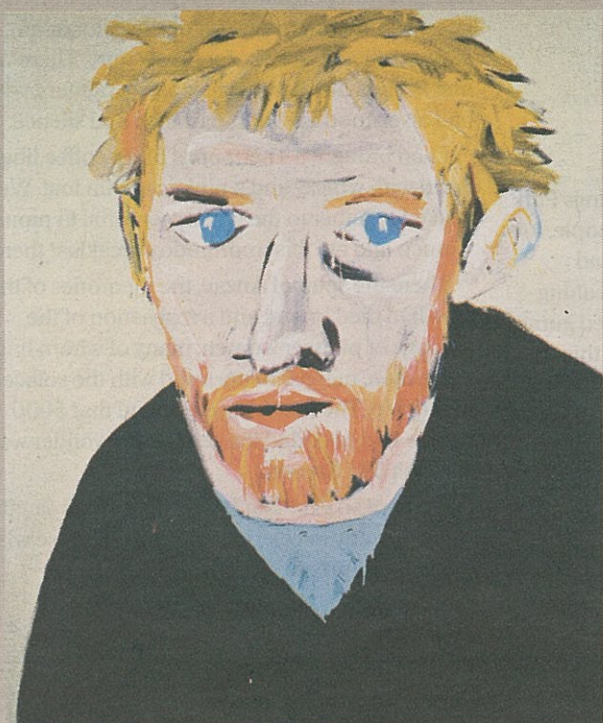
INSIDE: HOW WE TELL OUR WAR STORIES - ANZAC DAY SPECIAL IN TV AND BOOKS

Review



SITTING TARGETS

Each of these portraits won the Archibald Prize. Two also had the rare distinction of claiming the People's Choice award. With this year's winner to be announced next week, **Sebastian Smee** examines what makes a good portrait and why the judges and the public so rarely agree





FACE VALUE

AS far as art awards go, it's the one guaranteed to get the horses neighing. Every year the Archibald Prize comes around and almost invariably there is a discrepancy between the judges' choice and the public favourite.

Only twice — in 1988, the inaugural year of the People's Choice award, and last year — have artists got the nod from both the trustees and the public (Fred Cress for his portrait of fellow artist John Beard and Craig Ruddy for his contentious rendition of Aboriginal actor David Gulpilil).

When it comes to creativity, the disconnect between public opinion and expert judgment is so reliably animating that keeping them apart has become a fixed strategy on television talent quests from *Dancing with the Stars* to *The X Factor*. Curiously, however, the reason these discrepancies exist is never openly addressed.

Perhaps it is too obvious. In the case of the Archibald — this year's winner will be announced at

Rejecting suggestions that portraiture has become an anachronism in our digital age, visual arts writer **Sebastian Smee** argues that great portraits contain deep truths

the Art Gallery of NSW on Friday — it is clear that the punters have conceptions about what makes a good portrait that differ from the judges' criteria. But why the difference? What do we all expect from the Archibald entries? And what is it we want from portraiture these days anyway?

There's no question that many members of the art world find the Archibald, first awarded in 1921, a lurid embarrassment, on a par with giving your parents a lift to a swingers party.

There are plenty of minor things about it that rankle, but, in the broadest terms, such people think of portrait painting as an anachronism in the age of photography and film.

They have a forceful point — and if you had never looked at a great painted portrait, you might almost be convinced. Photography has profoundly changed what we want from the painted image, and not just in the realm of portraiture.

But today's critics of portraiture in fact belong to a tradition of heaping scorn on portraits that predates photography.

"Portraiture is always independent of art and has little or nothing to do with it," wrote Benjamin Robert Haydon, a British painter who died in 1846. "Wherever the British settle, wherever they colonise, they carry and always will carry trial by jury, horseracing and portrait painting."

It's a wonderful quote, and it opens *Let's Face It*, Peter Ross's jolly account of the history of the Archibald. What Ross doesn't tell us is that Haydon was a history painter whose ambitions outstripped his abilities and who turned to commissioned portraits to feed his family. He ended up committing suicide.

His comments can be seen in terms of a wider tendency in art, which was explained by the German art historian Andreas Beyer in *Portraits: a History*: "Precisely because the portrait was initially and most frequently assigned the task of faithfully representing unmistakable individuality, it was soon suspected of practising mere imitation of nature and dispensing with higher subject matter."

So it turns out that experts have always found something vulgar about portraiture. Part of the problem may be that even a bad portrait can be extremely interesting. Listen to the initial comments of anyone looking at a portrait in company — "What a good likeness", "She looks bored" and so on — and you will realise that a good portion of the fascination comes from so-called secondary concerns.

Wendy Sharpe, who won the Archibald in 1996, believes the prize has become even more conservative in the past few years. "It's supposed to be a painting prize, not a prize for likenesses," she says.

Many of the recent selections, she adds, show a preference for paintings that look like mug shots. For her, "making a painting is the first priority ... I don't paint commissioned portraits. I paint paintings".

But the fact remains that many people are more interested in gossip value than aesthetics when it comes to the Archibald.

They are stimulated by things such as the relationship between artist and sitter, the contrast between what we know about the sitter and what we learn about them from the portrait, and the thrill of subjects and artists exposing themselves in public.

Art Gallery of NSW director Edmund Capon puts it nicely: "Sydney is a city that likes to perve on people. Portraiture is one of the most revealing and satisfying ways of exercising voyeurism."

It's a satisfaction that can still be had even if the entries are, as Capon muttered on another occasion (long ago), "unmitigated crap, on the whole".

The popularity of portraiture through the ages has always belied the good taste of aesthetes and the hierarchies of theorists. This may be because we are programmed to respond to the human face like nothing else.

If we look to science, it confirms the importance of the face as a locus of expression and communication. According to Paul Ekman, the American scientist who co-developed in the 1970s the facial action coding system, the face is "our badge of identity".

A trailblazer in his field, Ekman has advised the FBI and the CIA (his intimate knowledge of the human face makes him a connoisseur of deception) and has written some of the most important books and papers on the subject of facial expression.

"We have such specialised circuitry in the brain for responding to faces because it is the input for most of our senses," he tells me. "We don't hear, see, taste or smell anywhere except in our face. It's where speech occurs and where food comes in. There's just an amazing number of things concentrated in this part of the head."

All of this certainly helps explain our intense interest in artistic depictions of the face. Casanova summed up centuries of received wisdom when he wrote in the introduction to his memoirs: "Only there, in the face, is a man's character in plain view, for that is its seat."

But received wisdom is never entirely reliable. For science also tells us there is a great difference between the human face at rest and in motion.

Some of the most telling facial expressions — Ekman calls them micro-expressions — are those that pass across the countenance in a split second, and they have a habit of giving away the true feelings of people who are working hard to control

Top 10 and doing it again

Sebastian Smee's Archibald top 10, in chronological order:

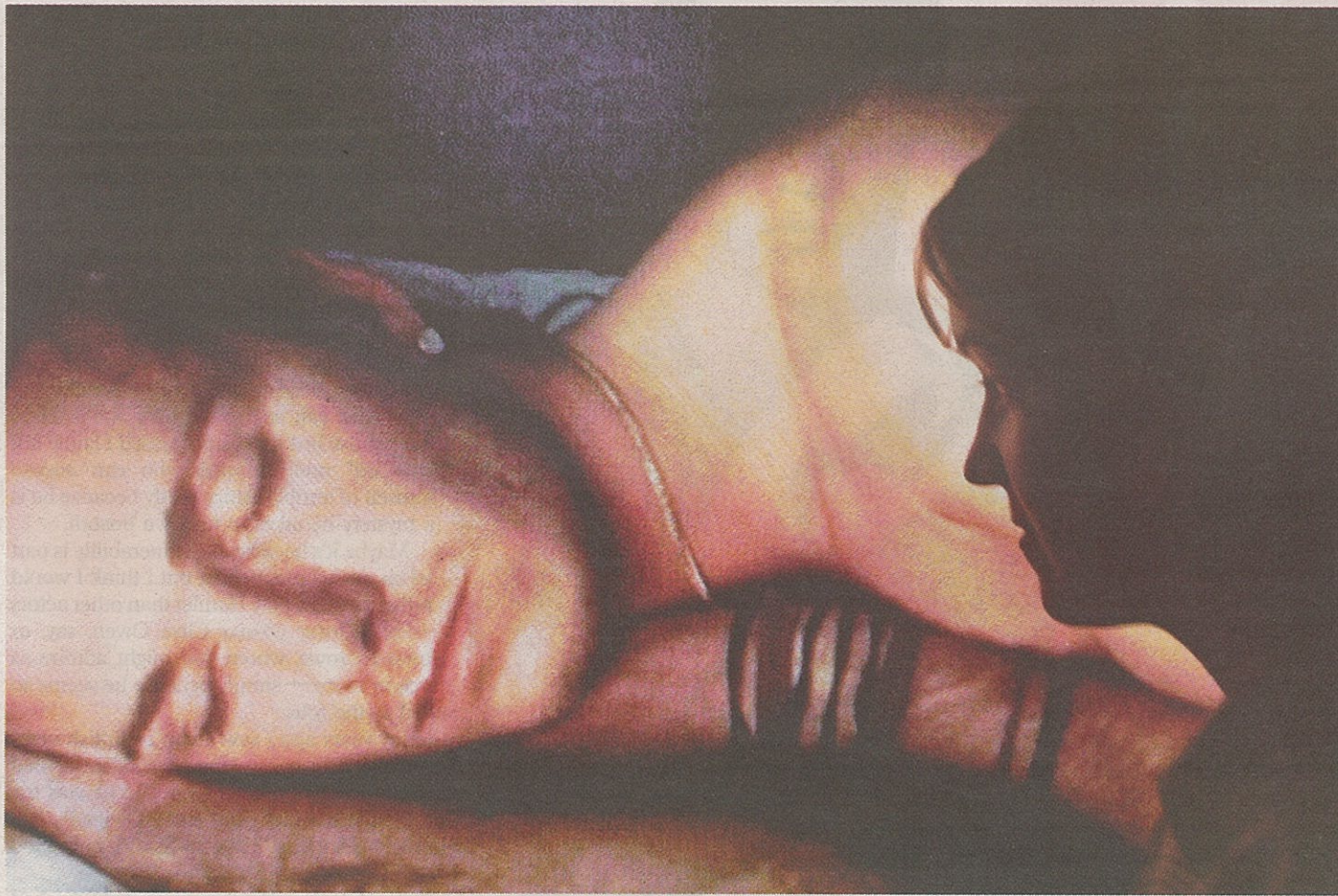
George W. Lambert, *Mrs Murdoch*, 1927
Henry Hanke, *Self-Portrait*, 1934
Normand Baker, *Self-Portrait*, 1937
William Dobell, *Margaret Olley*, 1948 (pictured)
Ivor Hele, *Laurie Thomas, Esq*, 1951
Davida Allen, *Dr John Arthur McKelvey Shera: My Father-in-Law Watering His Garden*, 1986
Fred Cress, *John Beard*, 1988
Wendy Sharpe, *Self-Portrait as Diana of Erskinvilla*, 1996
Nigel Thomson, *Barbara Blackman*, 1997
Lewis Miller, *Allan Mitelman*, 1998



Multiple winners:

W. B. McInnes (1889-1939): 1921 (inaugural prize), 1922, 1923, 1924, 1926, 1930, 1936
John Longstaff (1861-1941): 1925, 1928, 1929, 1931, 1935
Max Meldrum (1875-1955): 1939, 1940
William Dargie (1912-2003): 1941, 1942, 1945, 1946, 1947, 1950, 1952, 1956
William Dobell (1899-1970): 1943, 1948, 1959
Ivor Hele (1912-93): 1951, 1953, 1954, 1955, 1957

William Pidgeon (1909-81): 1958, 1961, 1968
Judy Cassab (1920-): 1960, 1967
Clifton Pugh (1924-90): 1965, 1971, 1972
Eric Smith (1919-): 1970, 1981, 1982
Kevin Connor (1932-): 1975, 1977
Brett Whiteley (1939-92): 1976, 1978
William Robinson (1936-): 1987, 1995
Bryan Westwood (1930-2000): 1989, 1991-92



their expressions. How is a painter adequately to convey these?

Good portrait artists have all sorts of ways of suggesting movement and engagement, from the basic illusion that the subject's eyes are following you around the room to more sophisticated combinations of facial expression, brushwork and body language. But in the end, a painted portrait is a static presentation.

Ekman says: "It seems unlikely that static facial signs are actually related to temperament or personality. The wrinkle that one person interprets as a sign of wisdom may be interpreted by another as a sign of dissolution."

This is one reason why physiognomy — the attempt to discover temperament and character from facial appearance — lost scientific respectability long ago.

The issue is being confronted by many interesting contemporary artists who choose to use video instead of paint. For several years now, American Bill Viola has been filming faces in extreme slow motion.

Thomas Struth has exhibited films of anonymous faces doing nothing more than looking into the camera for long periods of time. And last year, London's National Portrait Gallery attracted huge crowds with Sam Taylor-Wood's film of English football star David Beckham asleep in a hotel room.

In Australia, Sydney's Ivan Dougherty Gallery is showing a group exhibition titled Face Value: Video Portraiture from the Pacific, and artists such as Tony Schwensen are making work that embraces the possibilities opened up by video and film.

The fact that Ekman's FACS, which he developed with colleague Wally Friesen, isolates and describes the roughly 10,000 expressions of which the human face is capable, is a reminder that science is all about striving for total illumination, total knowledge. Art — and specifically the art of portraiture — may have different aims.

Of course, it is perfectly possible to convey emotion in a static portrait (just look at Munch's *The Scream*). But emotion may have only a glancing relationship with character. Character — and this is the whole problem — is too complicated a phenomenon to sit so glibly on the surface. We are too deep, too variable.

Perhaps because we are so attuned to faces, we still cling to the cliché that the eyes are windows to the soul, an idea popular in Rembrandt's time. But what if the eyes are in shadow, or closed, or unreadable, or simply elsewhere — as is the case in a surprising number of great portraits, including the most famous of all? (See story top right.)

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WHEN I ask Ekman whether he thinks we are really learning about someone's true character when we look at a great portrait, he takes a deep breath and says: "I think most of the time we're not. We're reaching for prejudices, like, for instance, thinking someone's cruel because their lips are thin. Most of the time they're stereotypes."

But, he continues, "You can be a great portrait

A form of voyeurism:

Sam Taylor-Wood's portrait of English football star David Beckham asleep in a hotel room attracted huge crowds to London's National Portrait Gallery, above, and Rembrandt's *Portrait of an 83-Year-Old Woman*, 1634, far left

painter because you get the impression of a person, regardless of whether it's accurate. A great performance by Laurence Olivier doesn't tell me who he is as a person. But it's still a great performance, because I get a sense of the person he's presenting."

In effect, Ekman admits that a great portrait is less about achieving a likeness and more about the artistry, the invention, involved.

The idea certainly fits with the Italian truism *ogni dipintori dipinge se* — all painters paint themselves.

And it would most likely be corroborated by Australian artists such as William Dobell, whose Archibald-winning portrait of Joshua Smith as a humanoid stick insect in 1943 landed him in such hot water.

"Six different artists," Dobell said in his defence at the time, "would all give you a different face."

"This is what I see," Sharpe agrees, and she makes it sound like a rallying cry. "That's all you can say."

William Dargie, a conventional painter who won more Archibald prizes (eight) than anyone, had other ideas. "I consider the individuality of the artist the least important thing in a painting," he said.

But the sheer variety among the thousands of entries that arrive at the back entrance to the Art Gallery of NSW every year presses home the fact that, in the eyes of artists at least, Dobell has won the argument, hands down.

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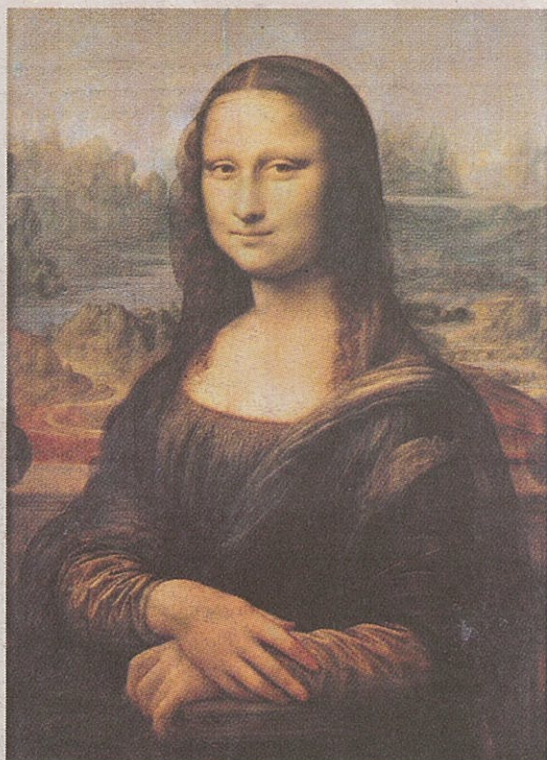
WHAT, though, of the public? Since 1989, the year after Cress's victory, the People's Choice winners have been overwhelmingly conventional, realistic, and in some cases photo-realistic depictions of their subjects. Hardly stamped with the personality of the artist and, in many cases, barely stamped with any personality at all.

This suggests three things to me. The first is that the voting public is more interested in the person depicted than in the artist — something artists may have to learn to live with (or solve by painting self-portraits, as many do).

The second is that people continue to be stimulated by the ability of paint, in sufficiently skilled hands, to construct a good likeness. (As Sharpe puts it: "People like things that are glazed and look complicated and which took a long time to do.")

And the third is that they are interested in what Ekman calls a strong presentation (their idea of how that presentation should look, however, is hugely conditioned by photography).

If we really are forced to abandon the notion that a static portrait can reveal deep truths about a person's character or soul, is this all we have left — a bit of oily alchemy and a "strong presentation"? Is this all portraiture can amount to today?



The enigma of Leonardo's touch

CONSIDER the case of the most famous portrait of all time: Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*.

Before Leonardo, good painters put a great deal of work into rendering the subject's face as accurately as possible, right down to the last wrinkle. Leonardo's great breakthrough was not to take this ability one step further but, in a sense, to roll it back.

He realised that the liveliest, most revealing parts of the human face were the areas around the corners of the eyes and the corners of the mouth.

His great invention in the realm of portraiture was the use of *sfumato* — a kind of softening or blurring of these areas, which had the paradoxical effect of making his portraits so much more lifelike.

Lifelike, but hardly more revealing of character: the *Mona Lisa* is famous, more than anything, for remaining an enigma.

Sebastian Smee



Body of work:

The Archibald-winning portraits on our cover are, clockwise from top left: Paul Keating by Bryan Westwood (1991-92); David Gulpilil by Craig Ruddy (2004); Simon Tedeschi by Cherry Hood (2002); Joshua Smith by William Dobell (1943); John Beard by Fred Cress (1988) and David Wenham by Adam Cullen (2000). Ruddy and Cress also won the People's Choice award

If it is the details and nuances of personality we want, painting surely rates as a poor cousin to literature and film. Which may be why, just as modern literature has made the mining of consciousness its chief concern (think James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Saul Bellow), contemporary artists have by and large abandoned the portrait.

But in my opinion, along with the innumerable specific truths about a person that a great portrait can reveal, there is one deep truth it can convey better than any other medium. The deep truth is that we are at once mortal and unfathomable — to each other and to ourselves.

Portraits commemorate. Renaissance thinker Leon Battista Alberti praised portraiture for its power to make absent people present, to bring the dead back to life. But a great portrait is also there to remind us that we can't.

Interestingly, many of the most powerful modern portraits seem to be about the loss of individual character, the fragmentation or dissolution of personality: Pablo Picasso's death-haunted double-headed portraits; Rene Magritte's surrealist portraits; Andy Warhol's endlessly replicated icons; Gerhard Richter's famous *Betty*, a beautiful girl in a red and white top turned inscrutably away.

Great portraits attain their status for any number of reasons. But I find that most of the greatest seem to be reminding us of the essential unknowability of other people. This apprehension, funnelled through great art, can be electrifying.

"There's nothing more fascinating," photographer Bill Henson once told me, "than to have someone stare out of [an image] into your eyes, yet never allow you to know anything about them."