



**A large part of the congenial ambience of this exhibition is due to a pervasive feminine sensibility**

tioners to use photographs as a shortcut to likeness. A painter has to work a lot harder than that to engage with the subject of a portrait. Drawing is the way to understand the structure of the sitter's features, their characteristic bearing, and through all these things, something of the elusive character that is the real point of a portrait.

Photography can be misleading in making painters think that superficial likeness is all there is; and in the process it also makes them forget other important things. A portrait is also a picture, and that means composition, coherence of design and colour, and all the other things that differentiate the work of an artist from that of a Sunday painter. Composition is the first thing an artist should consider, even before or at the same time as the first studies of the sitter's features.

The composition of many pictures in the exhibition is indifferent, with figures or faces simply floating in some unaccounted-for milieu. In other cases the artists have thought seriously about it but come to the wrong conclusions.

Juliet Holmes a Court, for example, paints a self-portrait in a mirror held above her head (with great difficulty, as she says in the accompanying note). The portrait is otherwise quite a good one and conveys a sense of the artist's character that is lively and touching. But the choice of angle, while perhaps meant to suggest the way she is submerged in her vocation, is a conceit that does not make for a satisfying composition. Far worse, though, is Trudi Harley's ill-advised choice of a viewpoint from below, looking right up her nostrils.

Other cases are more complex, but worthy of consideration. Thus the asymmetrical composition of Amanda Penrose Hart's double portrait of judge Roddy Meagher and a legal friend would be more successful if the figures were not quite so squashed into the corner. Myriam Kin-Yee's self-portrait as Persephone would benefit from being a bit smaller, and situating the figure more harmoniously within the frame; she has quite a strong grasp of realist painting, but lacks subtlety. Finally Joanna Braithwaite's vision of the painter Ildiko Kovacs surrounded by butterflies is a charming poetic fancy, but would have been better on a smaller scale. The particularly self-conscious femininity of the work is ill-matched to monumentality.



**commended tribute portraits:** Top, *Luise Hercus at the Widows' Waterhole — Yarluyendi Country* Bertini; above, *Wendy Sharpe in Paris* by Shonah Trescott

holding her head with small portraits of girls as healed is really more suitable to a poster to a painting.

most striking contrast to this pictorial sensibility comes with a pause for refreshment in the cafe and a series of post-war graphic portraits by Alec Murray. One of the Goossens, and another of Annabel Murray, later Lady Goldsmith, make a fine pair contrasting uses of chiaroscuro to support formal design and the setting of the figures in it. It is doubly ironic that photography should

remind painters how to construct a picture, first because Murray's sense of composition comes from an awareness of the tradition of portrait painting, and second because photography itself is part of the trouble with portraits today.

Oddly enough, contemporary portrait painters have drawn opposite conclusions from the hyperinflation of images brought about by photography. Some take the rather counter-intuitive view that portraits don't need to be likenesses any more. The more serious danger, though, is the temptation for almost all practi-