

When losers are winners

When good works are overlooked in favour of talent-spotting, the Archibald's loss is the Salon's gain.

VISUAL ART JOHN McDONALD

Salon des Refusés 2009

National Trust S.H. Ervin Gallery,
until May 3

Wynne and Sulman prizes

Art Gallery of NSW, until May 24

IN 2005 the trustees of the Art Gallery of NSW dumped a painting by Elisabeth Cummings called *Arkaroola Landscape* out of the Wynne Prize exhibition. It was gratefully accepted by the S.H. Ervin for its annual Salon des Refusés, from where it was purchased for the permanent collection of the Art Gallery of NSW. It may sound strange that a painting judged good enough to be acquired for the collection was not chosen to hang in that year's competitions but this was one of the oddities – and embarrassments – thrown up by the rather haphazard way the Archibald and Wynne prizes are selected.

Put yourself in the judges'

position: watching hundreds of works being carried past by the packers at a brisk clip. Blink and you've missed something; hesitate and the moment is lost. It's understandable if the occasional good work is overlooked.

It is less understandable, and less forgivable, when lightning strikes twice. Yes, the undoubted highlight of this year's Salon des Refusés is a large painting by Elisabeth Cummings called *Riverbend*. Complex, semi-abstract and multilayered, it is not a work that offers up all its qualities in the few seconds the trustees probably devoted to it. But surely, even in that passing moment, someone should have identified this as a painting that demanded a second look.

The judges appear even more culpable when one compares the works hung in this year's Wynne with their counterparts that have ended up in the Salon. There are always a few pictures in the Salon that make one wonder how they were ever rejected from the main event but this year the rejects form a much stronger group of works than their privileged cousins at the art gallery. With a few notable

exceptions, this year's Wynne Prize for a landscape painting or sculpture is a humdrum affair.

From the current selection, Lionel Bawden was short odds to win with *The Amorphous Ones (The Vast Colony Of Our Being)* – a strange, original sculpture made from pencils glued together and then carved into a fair approximation of an eroded geological formation. This piece was first shown in Bawden's exhibition of last year called *New Works On Paper*. The joke was that each sculpture sat on a plinth that was actually a neat, rectangular stack of paper.

Jokes aside, Bawden has been one of Australia's most keenly sought-after young artists for the past few years and this award will only serve to underline his appeal with the collectors. Much the same could be said about Guy Maestri's Archibald success. While I don't doubt that the trustees set out in all sincerity to choose the best work, there is also an element of talent-spotting included in the mix.

Most of the Wynne selections – even by experienced artists such as John Peart, Rodney Pople, Philip Wolfhagen, John R. Walker and Paul Ryan – are only average by their standards. Neither is there a really outstanding indigenous work, although Frank Thirion's *Southern Stars* is the most striking, with its floating glimpses of black sky and white stars on a flat, brown backdrop.

Lucy Culliton and Joshua Yeldham give the impression that they tried a bit harder than most of their peers, while Jun Chen tried too hard – with a view of the McLaren Vale vineyards that looks as churned up as the Somme battlefields. A wall that features three near-monochrome, linear works by Fiona Lowry, Brett Bailey and Pei He was probably intended to look chic but each picture seems to drain a little life from its neighbour in forced co-dependency. Del Kathryn Barton's *Flatrock* is another



Sport as a religion ... Ivan Durrant's *Anzac Match M.C.G.*

standout work, if only because of the intensive labour and eye strain involved in a piece that is more of an abstract design than a landscape.

The mystery artist this year must be Anthony Bennett, who is represented in the Archibald, Wynne and Sulman, with three bizarre and biling paintings, each with a surface as hard, flat and shiny as a new surfboard. The virtues of these works are not readily apparent, apart from the fact that they seem to satisfy the judges' perverse desire to include a few weird and not-so-wonderful things for the sake of variety.

When I went back for a second look at the Wynne last week, its inferiority to the Salon became even more palpable. Not only Elisabeth Cummings but Ross Laurie, Amanda Penrose Hart, Dean Bowen, Ian Grant, Tom Carment and Todd Hunter can feel themselves hard done by. If the trustees wanted something a bit unusual, how could they ignore the quasi-naive charms of Glenn Morgan? Robyn Swaney's *Local Habitat*, Marina Strocchi's *Dashwood Creek* and Euan Macleod's *Mt Griseldia Flinders* all had strong but unsuccessful claims.

The Archibald rejects are less controversial, although many could have slotted smoothly into the main show. Visitors may sample no fewer than three small portraits of the redoubtable Roddy Meagher, who must have done something to offend the trustees to be so comprehensively barred from the art gallery. Neither did Betty Churche arouse any of the senti-



Safe as houses ... Robyn Swaney's *Local Habitat*; (left) Lionel Bawden's *The Amorphous Ones (The Vast Colony Of Our Being)*.

hung with great care. The Sulman Prize, chosen by Melbourne painter Jon Cattapan, also gives the superficial impression of being more of a show and less of a canine's morning repast - at least until one leaves the main exhibition area of the art gallery and finds supplementary entries scattered in front of the cafeteria.

The Sulman is awarded for a subject painting or a mural design, which usually means "anything under the sun". In some earlier incarnations the show has been a chamber of horrors, so we may be thankful that this year's guest judge has shown a degree of conscientiousness. It may be my imagination but there is a slight Melbourne focus to the selection. Even the winner, Ivan Durrant's *Anzac Match M.C.G.*, is a blurred scene from an AFL game - an activity that has high religious overtones south of the border.

While one can entertain the gravest doubts about Melbourne's claim to be Australia's cultural capital, there is no doubt about the city's status as our sporting capital. I have a theory that the cultural aspects have declined as sporting obsessions have risen ever higher. In many Melbourne minds, art and sport are now indistinguishable. If this is not the case in Sydney yet, it may be only because we find it too hard to take anything seriously (except money).

Durrant is a curious artist and his *Anzac Match M.C.G.* is a likeable painting, although I'm reluctant to agree that this was

the standout piece in this year's show. It is hardly more than a detail of a painting, fuzzed in mock-emulation of an unfocused camera lens. The painting that stays in my mind is Dagmar Gyrullas's *Judged*, which might be classified as an old-fashioned "conversation piece". It features two men - one in bed, one standing nearby - a woman wrapped in towel, and a dog. The men look at the woman; the woman and the dog look at us. Everyone has the deadpan expression that saints wear in Renaissance paintings, even when they have axes sticking out of their heads.

The painting is like a caption competition. We have no way of knowing what is going on but we are invited to speculate. Is this a scene from a soap opera or something a bit more sinister? The work owes its appeal to this strong but ambiguous narrative, but there are many entries with no narrative whatsoever.

Every Sulman judge seems happy to accept that abstract paintings are also "subject paintings". One suspects this is because artists such as Aida Tomescu, Jeannette Siebols, Michael Iwanoff, Leonard Brown and Virginia Coventry bring a degree of breathing space to the show. The procession of figurative pictures, with their disparate subjects and styles, has a dizzying effect. Exiting this annual sideshow is like one is stepping out of a psychedelic film from the '60s. To be into it, you have to be out of it.

ment that was lavished on subjects such as Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu and Dame Elisabeth Murdoch. Her portrait, painted by her son, Peter Churche, is languishing in the salon, perhaps because it is a subtle, undemonstrative work in a competition that favours extroverts. The work is so plain it takes time to really see it but once you are hooked it seems full of melancholy and affection.

Kerry McInnes's *Euan Macleod* is a large, ambitious portrait, slightly undermined by the swathes of empty space that stand in place of a composition. The subject could not complain about the likeness, which makes him look exceptionally suave and thoughtful. This must be one of the very few portraits of another artist that manages to be flattering. Often artists paint portraits of each other because they know non-artists will not tolerate their rude departures from reality.

The Salon des Refusés is a little smaller this year and has been