



Sad slide in prize swamp

The Archibald, Wynne and Sulman scene hits new lows, **Sasha Grishin** writes

Last year I was convinced that the standard in the Archibald, Wynne and Sulman prize exhibitions had reached rock bottom. Sadly I was wrong, this year the standard is even lower and excavation has commenced.

According to the conditions of the Archibald and Wynne bequests, the winners have to be decided by the trustees of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, but when these conditions were set most of the trustees were practising artists. Today, under the Art Gallery of New South Wales Act 1980, the gallery's board comprises 11 trustees – "at least two of whom shall be knowledgeable and experienced in the visual arts". Presently, John Beard, Lindy Lee and Eleonora Triguboff are the members on the board of trustees "knowledgeable and experienced in the visual arts", while the rest are captains of industry, bankers, senior administrators and the like. I don't know the internal politics of the meetings of trustees, but judging by the decisions made at the Archibald and Wynne exhibitions, the voice of visual literacy has been largely extinguished and this surely has to be a bad thing for an art gallery.

This year's winning Archibald entry was predictable, a portrait by one of the youngest artists at the exhibition, the 38-year-old Ben Quilty, painting one of the oldest sitters in the exhibition, Margaret Olley, a minor artist and major benefactor of the gallery. This is not one of Quilty's best works and while the paintwork may be assured, there is nothing to justify the huge scale of the painting for this diminutive sitter, other than making certain that it will be noticed by the trustees. Rodney Pople's self-portrait as Holofernes being decapitated by his wife, while watched by the rest of the family, is probably the strongest portrait in this very poor field.

The usually reliable Jenny Sages has failed with her portrait of her husband, perhaps sentiment has won

over sensibility; Fiona Lowry's portrait of Tim Silver is dull and formulaic and Tim Storrer's hollow self-portrait is frankly a bit silly. Nicolas Harding's portrait of Hugo Weaving is a very well-handled traditional expressionist portrait. There is another unconvincing Adam Cullen portrait loosely based on the actor Charles Waterstreet. Del Kathryn Barton is increasingly a disappointment as an artist, her portrait of the actress Cate Blanchett and family is glam and unconvincing, the work of a decorative society painter.

The Salon de Refusés, showing a selection of rejects from the Archibald and the Wynne, has a stronger selection of portraits, an excellent and deeply moving self-portrait of Guy Warren at the age of 90; a quirky portrait by Wendy Sharpe of Judy Cassab with a model, an excellent small self-portrait by Graeme Drendel and a reasonable James Drinkwater portrait of Charles Blackman. There is also a strong portrait by Steve Cox, *Laudanum*. This artist has gained massive publicity in Melbourne by being sacked recently from the RMIT for basically complaining about the cutbacks at the art school.

Up the road, the Doug Moran National Portrait Prize has opened at the State Library, where the highlights include Nicholas Harding's very strong portrait of the art dealer Rex Irwin, a curious but memorable miniature by Natasha Bieniek, a very honest and direct portrait by Kristin Headlam and an effective and mature portrait by Helene Grove, a stronger piece than the one hung in the Salon. There is another awkward Adam Cullen, this one of his art dealer Michael Reid, but obviously his style is popular with some, with Mia Oatley painting in his style in her portrait at the Salon. None of the three exhibitions of portraiture is particularly outstanding, but the Archibald certainly wins the wooden spoon.

The Wynne Prize for landscape painting or figurative sculpture is also a disappointment. Graham Fransella's monumental watercolour drawing, *Tree*, the winner of the Trustees Watercolour Prize, is a strong piece and a worthy recipient. The Wynne Prize itself was awarded to Richard Goodwin's *Co-isolated*

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slave, which is a rather unconvincing combination of a motorbike with steel and plastics: a triumph of design over art. Again the well-known artists have not risen to the occasion, Salvatore Zofrea appears defeated by the scale of his work, Jasper Knight is flashy, but hollow, and Philip Wollhagen and Joe Furlonger are fine painters, but have chosen to submit poor pieces. Anthony Terrance O'Carroll's *Finding ground*, is one of the strongest pieces with a dramatic structure and engaging tactile surfaces.

Again the rejects from the Wynne at the Salon make for a stronger exhibition, with a beautiful Mostyn Bramley-Moore, a good John Peart, a sparse, but quite convincing John R. Walker landscape and a bold, but not totally resolved landscape painting by Sophie Cape.

This year's Sulman Prize at the Art Gallery of NSW, the only prize selected by an artist rather than the trustees, presents an idiosyncratic selection, I gather by Richard Bell. The winner, Peter Smeeth's *The artist's fate*, is a rather melodramatic narrative, somewhat marred by the clumsy execution. Local artists, GW Bot, of Canberra, and Elisabeth Kruger, of Queanbeyan, are represented by strong pieces.

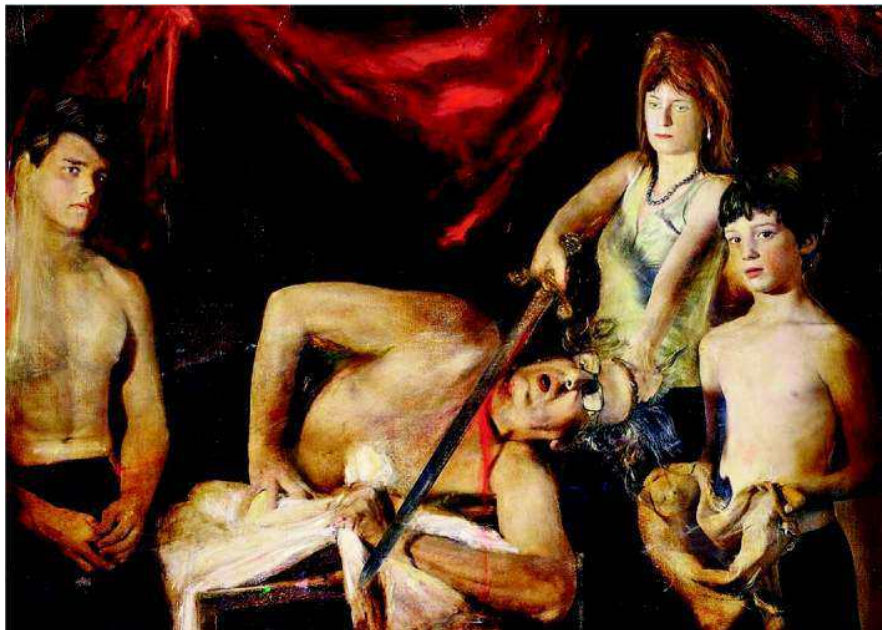
Impressive pieces by Peter Griffen, Claire Bridge, Stewart Crawford, Kate Beynon, Peta Morris and Wang Xu make this into the strongest of the prize exhibitions at the Sydney gallery.

Prize exhibitions, particularly the Archibald, are always competitive and controversial. This year with 798 entries for the Archibald, 810 for the Wynne and 633 for the Sulman, all vying for the small handful of spots up for grabs for selection, is testimony to the interest among artists. However, for the competition to have more credibility the question of art literacy among the trustees needs to be addressed. How many of the captains of industry who sit in judgment over the efforts of artists would admit to their own boards rank amateurs to make binding decisions for their industries?

• *2011 Archibald Prize, Wynne and Sulman Prizes*, Art Gallery of NSW, until June 26.

• *Salon des refuses 2011*, National Trust SH Ervin Gallery, Sydney, until June 19.

• *Moran Prizes 2011*, State Library of New South Wales, until June 26.



Rodney Pople's Archibald Prize entry *Artist and family after Caravaggio*, above, and Wendy Sharpe's *Judy Cassab drawing Marina*, left.