VISUAL ART

More than face value

In a striking series of portraits, an artist rejected by this year's Archibald judges puts insight and intelligence ahead of novelty, writes JOHN McDONALD.

This year's Archibald Prize was one of the most even contests in decades, but one of the least memorable. There have been pictures in previous competitions that would have romped home in this year's field, but the luck and timing was with Del Kathryn Barton, not with the ghosts of Archibalds past.

If there is one phantom that has a special reason to bemoan her fate, it is Jenny Sages. Considered good enough to have a touring survey of her portraits organised by the National Portrait Gallery, this year she suffered the indignity of having her work rejected by the judges of the Archibald Prize and the selectors of the Salon des Refusés.

Almost at the same time Sages' portrait of novelist Kate Grenville was being tossed aside, the survey show, *Jenny Sages: Paths to Portraiture*, was opening at the Mosman Art Gallery – the home-town venue for an exhibition that has been to Canberra, Murwillumbah, Toowoomba, Mackay and Burnie.

When an artist who has come so close to winning the Archibald Prize on numerous occasions is summarily banished, it generates a lot of speculation. I haven't seen the Grenville portrait, but it is inconceivable it could be worse than many of the pictures included in this year's Archibald and Salon hangs. No artist is immune to failure, and some works will always be better than others, but an artist as consistent as Sages can't be easily consigned to the end of the queue.

One suspects she has been a victim of that perennial Archibald syndrome, the desire for novelty. Having selected Sages' work year after year, the judges apparently decided she'd had her turn and somebody else should have the place. Many others have suffered the same fate, regardless of the painting. Kerrie Lester, another long-term Archibald bridesmaid, told me she was rejected one year for the picture she believed to be her best-ever entry.

It's harder to say why Sages was left out of the Salon des Refusés, which usually makes a point of including works by well-known artists that don't make the cut. Perhaps the selectors – David Cook, Jackie Dunn and Jane Watters – were having a collective bad-hair day, although I'm not sure David can use that excuse.

At the least it provides a lesson for young artists never to take anything for granted where art prizes are concerned. Having judged dozens of competitions, I still believe a prize tells us little about the quality of a work. In most cases, it says more about the tastes and predilections of the judges, even those rare specimens such as Yours Truly

SALON DES REFUSÉS 2013
S.H. Ervin Gallery, until May 19

JENNY SAGES: PATHS TO PORTRAITURE
Mosman Art Gallery, until May 19

who strive for objectivity. The more judges involved, the greater the possibility of an arbitrary decision. Three is the optimum number, but tradition dictates that the Archibald and Wynne prizes are chosen by the 11 trustees of the Art Gallery of NSW.

Despite these misgivings, every year I go along to the Salon des Refusés with a sense of foolish optimism. The abiding fantasy is that one will find outstanding works that shame the poor judgment of the trustees. Almost invariably one comes away with a new respect for the trustees, and this year is no exception.

There are few works among the Archibald rejects that might be counted as glaring omissions. The best of the lot is probably Angus McDonald's large equestrian portrait of artist Natalie Wilkin. It's an ambitious picture, both in size and subject, by an artist of superior technical ability. There may also be a faint allusion to Rembrandt's *The Polish Rider* – that disputed masterpiece in the Frick Collection in New York.

Some works are straightforward and unpretentious, such as Tsering Hannaford's *Self-portrait* and Daryl Austin's small picture of artist Ann Newmarch. Stephanie Brown gives us a likeness of Madam Lash looking like a benign and elderly aunt. Perhaps we're seeing the real woman at last. Leigha White's Ben Quilty makes this star of Australian art

into a character from a comic book. It would have to be a superhero comic.

Where the Salon does have an edge, it comes from the Wynne entries. The AGNSW Trustees have shown a woeful lack of interest in landscape in recent years, and the quality of the show has suffered accordingly. This year they have managed to include strong pictures by artists such as Elisabeth Cummings, Lucy Culliton and Aida Tomescu, but they gave the prize to yet another former trustee, Imants Tillers, for a homage to Albert Namatjira that reads like a diagram of a landscape.

Of the works in the Salon, not a single one struck me as actively bad, and there are a number that should have walked into the Wynne selection, particularly those by John Bartley, Rachel Ellis, Anne Judell, Ross Laurie and Peter Stevens. Apart from that, it requires a very hard heart to resist Robyn Sweaney's *The Smell of Rain*, the latest in a long line of suburban house studies. The biggest mystery is Ross Laurie's continued absence from the Wynne, as he is one of the most original landscapists in contemporary Australian art. It's getting tiresome repeating this year after year.

Looking at a survey of William Robinson's work in Brisbane in 2011, it was obvious that any of his major landscapes would have steamrollered everything in that year's Wynne Prize. As foreshadowed, it's tempting to say the same about Jenny Sages' best portraits in relation to this year's Archibald. These portraits may be seen together in Mosman, along with a solid 30-year survey of woodblock prints by Ruth Burgess.

The pick of the group is *Irina Baronova (handing on the baton)*, a 2007 work that shows the elderly ballerina talking to a
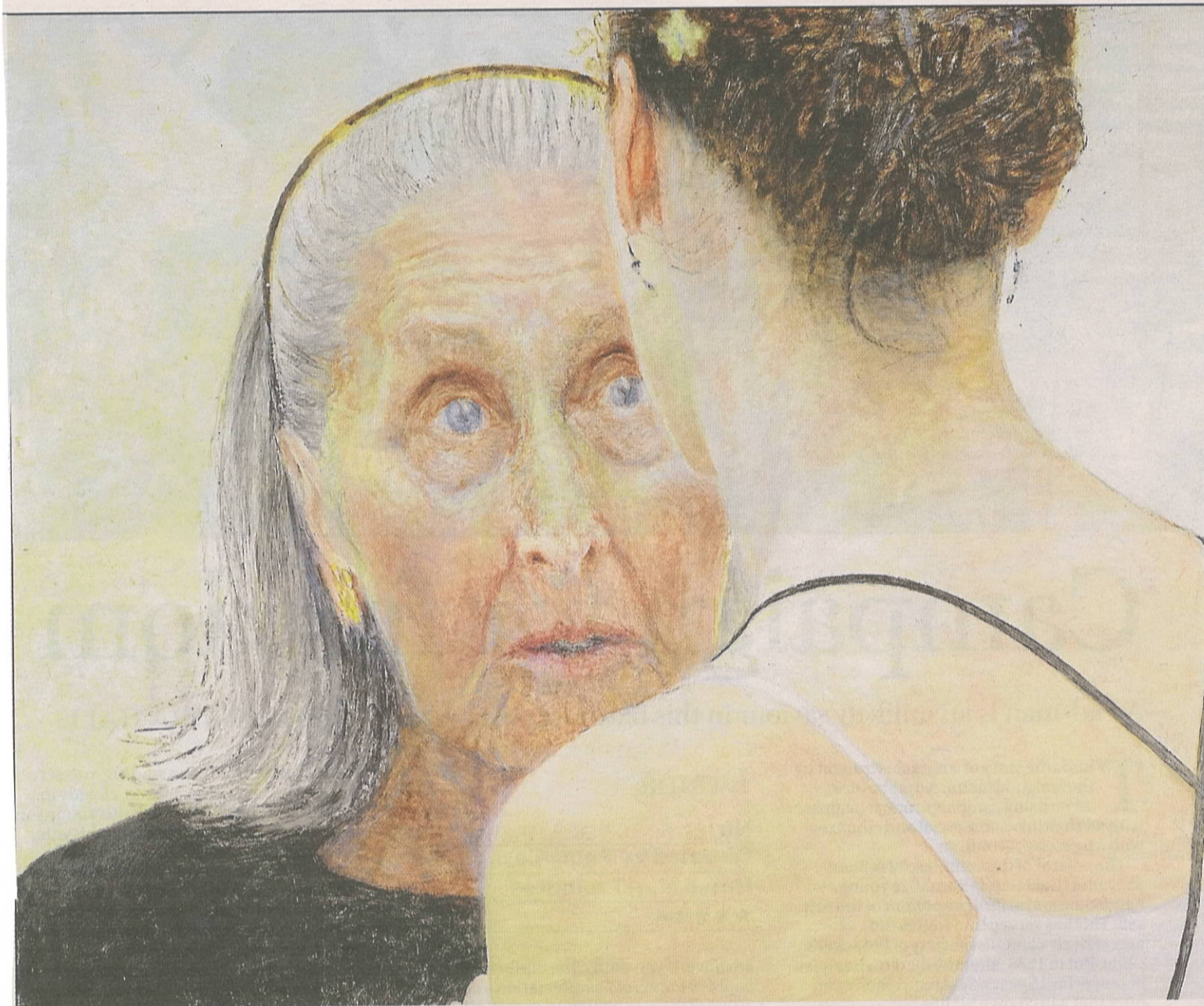
Intensity: Jenny Sages' *Irina Baronova (handing on the baton)*, a portrait of the elderly ballerina; (opposite) Robyn Sweeney's *The Smell of Rain*.

young dancer with her back to us. Baronova's piercing blue eyes in a reddish face convey the intensity of a personality undiminished by age. The composition is simple but wonderfully skilful, with the black string that crosses over the dancer's shoulder echoed by the thin dark band that holds back Baronova's hair. The older woman is partially obscured, like a cloud passing in front of the sun, but her gaze is compelling.

What is most impressive is Sages' ability to provide an insight into her subject's personality. She accomplishes the same feat with her portrait of writer Helen Garner, of 2003. Propped up in bed or on a couch, Garner looks out us with an expression of interest and attention. The carefully drawn lines in her face suggest heightened sensitivity, or perhaps anxiety. She has the kind of penetrating intelligence that nothing escapes.

John Beard took out the 2007 Archibald for a portrait of artist Janet Laurence, while Geoff Dyer won in 2003 with his picture of writer Richard Flanagan. When one sees

how powerful Sages' portraits of Baronova and Garner look in this survey, one has to say she was desperately unlucky to miss out on both occasions.

Although Sages is essentially a landscape artist of an abstract persuasion, she views portraiture as a serious sideline. The two key elements to her portraits are a fluent, immaculate draughtsmanship and a tremendous capacity for empathy.

This show reveals how Sages uses her lead-up drawings as a tool for understanding. Her quick sketches of faces, hands and poses feed back into the work in a way no photograph can match. It is through drawing that she moves closer to her subject, capturing small gestures and nuances. One might speculate that the closer she gets to a person, the more successful the portrait.

Her painting of autistic artist Anthony Hopkins is an acute study of an introverted personality. She is also good at capturing that self-contained quality we find in Aboriginal painters such as Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Gloria Petyarre. Her portrait of her

late husband, Jack, is filled with warmth and sadness. Sages seems less emotionally engaged with her double portraits of Jackie Stricker and Kerryn Phelps; Greg Weight and Tom Bass; and the fashion designers Sass and Bide. It is almost as if the presence of a third person takes something away from the artist's connection with the sitter. Yet it is only in comparison with the portraits of Baronova and Garner that one can say this, as most artists would be delighted to paint anything as good as these double acts.

It's unwise to comment on paintings one hasn't seen first-hand, but the experience of this small but masterly survey makes it seem even more unlikely that Sages' portrait of Grenville was so bad it couldn't even command a place in the Salon des Refusés. One of the melancholy lessons of the annual Archibald season is that few artists seem to understand what makes for a successful portrait. Sages has shown us, time and again, that she has the right stuff.
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