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# The art of rejection

A few treasures and oddities shine in an exhibition of work overlooked by the Archibald judges.



So much has already been written about Sydney's \$9.3 million public sculpture proposals that I'm in two minds whether to comment or leave it alone. Nevertheless, it's an issue that won't go away. It's depressing that the very idea of a city council spending money on art brings out the philistine in a large proportion of the citizenry and the media. One wonders if the ancient Athenians had this problem.

On the other hand, the council's approach seems slightly duplicitous. Three proposals have been chosen from a long list by a panel of experts, then unveiled with suitable fanfare. The public has been invited to begin a "conversation". However, this conversation will not affect the choice of art. The selection has been made and ratepayers can only let off steam.

One never really knows what a finished work will look like while it is still in the planning stage, but of the three proposals, Junya Ishigami's *Cloud Arch* looks the most promising. It could be genuinely spectacular. As for the other two, it's hard to get excited about Hany Armanious' oversized milk crate plonked in Belmore Park, as a kind of ironic celebration of urban squalor; or Tracey Emin's little birds stuck on walls waiting to be prised off by souvenir hunters.

Neither Armanious nor Emin has come up with an especially original concept, regardless of what the committee would have us believe. One hopes the council will provide a detailed breakdown of costs, including commissions. It is alarming to read that Armanious is being paid \$1.7 million for a sculpture priced at \$2.5 million. The idea is worth about \$2, so that leaves \$1,699,998 for fabrication.

Most works of public art hang around for decades, but thankfully the Archibald Prize and its offspring last only a season. The temporary nature of these events allows one to take an optimistic approach to the annual Salon des Refusés at the S. H. Ervin Gallery. I go along every year hoping to find some masterpiece rejected from the Archibald and Wynne exhibitions, but usually leave with a feeling that the trustees of the Art Gallery of NSW made the best of a thankless task. This

year was – almost – no exception.

Although the Salon is as patchy as ever, one of the notable rejects may have been given a deliberate policy to inject fresh blood into the Archibald Prize. When the AGNSW decided that the show contains a high percentage of first-timers, it feels like a message to artists such as Jenny Sages and Robert Hannaford that they have had their day.

Sages' portrait of curator Sarah Eng is not her greatest entry, but easily good enough to have been included in this year's exhibition. Hannaford's *Phillip Adams* is only average by this artist's standards, but still superior to many entries that made the cut. The same could be said for the work of a previous Salon, Nicholas Harding, who finds himself in the Salon with a backstage portrait of four people preparing for a performance of *Waiting for Godot*.

As the trustees displayed a predilection for small pictures this year, one wonders why they couldn't find any room for Peter Wegner's tiny portrait of disability advocate Stella Young.

Another reject was Nick Stathopoulos' *Ugly – Portrait of Robert Hoge*, a man who was born with a severe facial tumour that required numerous operations. Although still looks strange by conventional standards, Hoge has gone on to a successful career as an advocate, author and political speechwriter.

Stathopoulos' deadpan, photo-realistic headshot presents the bare facts, with special pleading. It also raises fascinating issues about the purpose of a portrait, often used to flatter or beautify a subject, comes across as alert and intelligent. The picture made me think of some of the portraits painted by German and Flemish artists of the Northern Renaissance, who attended ruthlessly to the physical facts when painting donors on altarpieces. If one finds the Virgin Mary standing alongside a cross-eyed merchant with his hands clasped in prayer, wasn't it intended as arcane symbolism, exactly how the donor must have looked? The artist was fulfilling his duty – both to his subject and to his profession – to tell the truth.

Suffering from a similar affliction, I





**Face value:** (Clockwise from left) Jenny Sages' *Red Shoes*, *A Portrait of Dr Sarah Engledow*; *Sir John Gorge, Mornington* by Elisabeth Cummings; *Ugly - Portrait of Robert Hoge* by Nick Stathopoulos.

obliged to observe that the criteria for Archibald selections may not be entirely fair and objective. Some portraits are included because they are talking points rather than works of quality. Others testify to unspoken loyalties in regard to various artists or subjects.

One talking point that went begging is Peter Gardiner's *Ron Ramsey (Bonfire)*, which may be seen in the Salon. If there is an issue that deserves widespread attention it is the shabby treatment dished out to Ramsey, the successful and popular director of the Newcastle Art Gallery, who was sacked by a council that sees no substantive difference between the state's most important regional art museum and the Cook's Hill Surf Club. (This is the ugly antithesis to the artistic enthusiasm of Clover Moore's regime.) Yet the

idea of a gallery without a director threatens to make Newcastle a laughing stock and a pariah. In Gardiner's rather gloomy picture, Ramsey looks fried to a crisp. Like Morrissey, now he knows how Joan of Arc felt.

I initially thought the Salon's Wynne selection was stronger than its Archibald picks, but the choice doesn't sustain much scrutiny. This is partly because the actual Wynne Prize at the AGNSW is a better exhibition than in previous years, with Michael Johnson's *Oceania High Low* being a worthy winner. The slightly controversial aspect is that Johnson has always identified himself as an abstract artist, despite the persistent suggestions of landscape in his work. As its title suggests, *Oceania High Low* owes a debt to Matisse's late paper cut-outs, but it's unmistakably a landscape. It's the first time in years the trustees have managed to correctly identify one.

As for the Wynne pieces in the Salon, I'm almost accustomed to the fact that one of Australia's leading landscape painters, Elisabeth Cummings, has been relegated to the second tier yet again, but it's surprising that the trustees dished out the same treatment to rising star Sophie Cape.

Cummings' *Sir John Gorge, Mornington* is smaller than some of her entries in previous years, but just as vigorous and densely worked. It's mystifying to me why this painting was overlooked. As for Cape, her picture is no less dramatic than its title: *The Earth Whirls toward a Creation Unknown*. Although the work has stylistic echoes of artists such as Antoni Tàpies, and even Mike Parr, it still packs a punch. One may chart every gesture in this abstract expressionist compendium of smears, scratches and splatterings, offset by the outline of a falling figure and lines that resemble indecipherable handwriting.

Most of the Salon's other Wynne entries feel safe and conservative. The major exceptions are Peter Stevens' *Coast*, which has an appealing raw simplicity, and Craig Waddell's *The Waterhole*. This picture shows Waddell in a more restrained mood vis-a-vis colour – an area where he often seems to get carried away. Instead of being bullied by an explosive application of paint, the viewer can sense the amount of thought that has gone into this composition.

I might also give a tick to Craig Handley, whose *Council Cleanup #6* continues a long line of offbeat, unpredictable entries to local art competitions. When I look at Handley's work, I think of Dr Johnson's verdict on *Tristram Shandy*: "Nothing odd will do long." The fact that this novel is still in print should give hope to every purveyor of artistic oddities.

Nobody has ever established that an odd work of art can't also be a good one. Only time will distinguish between the oddness that continues to stimulate the viewer's imagination and the oddness that quickly palls, even at a cost of \$2.5 million.