

The Sydney Morning Herald

CULTURE ART & DESIGN

This was published 3 years ago

Stars of the Salon des Refuses

By John McDonald

August 3, 2016 – 8.24am



Emile Zola gave us a vivid, barely-fictionalised account of the first Salon des Refuses, in his novel, *L'Oeuvre* (aka *The Masterpiece*): "He could see the visitors' mouths gaping, their eyes narrowing, from the moment they passed the door; across the room, a group of young people were staggering back against the archway as if someone had been tickling them in the ribs; a lady had just dropped on a sofa, out of breath with laughing... Those who were not laughing were almost beside themselves with rage."

It's a different story at the 2016 Salon des Refuses at the S.H. Ervin Gallery, which brings together works rejected from this year's Archibald and Wynne Prizes at the Art Gallery of NSW. Visitors are calm and respectful. There is neither laughter nor indignation.



Artist James Powdtich with his entry in the Archibald portrait prize of Cath Keenan (pictured) which is now in the Salon des Refuses. STEVEN SIEWERT

Needless to say, there is much less to get excited about. The first Salon des Refuses of 1863 included Manet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* and Whistler's *Symphony in White No. 1: The White Girl*, two indisputable modern masterpieces.

I doubt anything from the S.H. Ervin show will still be attracting plaudits 150 years from now.

The first Refuses was a response to the increasingly narrow attitudes of the jury of the official Salon, but no one could accuse the trustees of the AGNSW of being artistic reactionaries. On the contrary, these judges are more inclined to turf out anything that smells even faintly of tradition. They are also great democrats, ready to reject a perfectly good work on the grounds that an artist has been hung several times in the past and so must make way for fresh blood.

The most extreme case of this syndrome in 2016 was the inclusion of Tsering Hannaford's self-portrait in the Archibald, while a self-portrait by her father, Robert Hannaford, was relegated to the Refuses. One might have imagined that a father-daughter combo would have been a nice talking point, but it seems the judges' antipathy to dad, once an Archibald regular, was unshakeable.

The Hannaford self-portrait is one of the best pieces in a typically patchy Salon. Although he remains a tonalist, almost by instinct, Hannaford's manner of painting has loosened considerably over the past few years. With his willingness to dispense with sharp contours one could argue that he is stylistically less conservative than his daughter.

If anyone could claim the Trustees have it in for him it's surely Andrew Sullivan, whose portrait of artist, Bill Brown, marks his umpteenth appearance in the Salon. As usual it's hard to figure out where Sullivan went wrong. It's a good likeness and a proficient composition that places his subject in his studio, not an envelope of abstract space.

I'm not sure that Nerissa Lea was taking the Archibald all that seriously when she submitted *The after Brack after Boucher* nude, featuring her husband, graphic artist Reg Lynch, bottoms up on the couch. If Brack's ageing, scrawny nude was already a parody of Boucher's buxom Mademoiselle O'Murphy, aged all of 14, I'm not sure what this makes Reg. Even those not convinced by this vision of sensuous masculinity would have to admit it's a very sharp piece of painting.

This is more than I can say for some of the other works. Jasper Knight seems to be milking our sympathies with his *Self-portrait with a bandaged head*. The picture comes with an alarming story of illness and injury, but Knight's signature style has survived unscathed. Unfortunately he's not like the artist in the Oliver Sacks essay who suffers a head injury and begins to see the world in a completely different way.

James Powditch has tried reinventing himself with his portrait of Cath Keenan, which dispenses with his usual penchant for sticking things to pieces of ply. This time he has had a group of children make a collage, and copied the results by hand. It's still tricky, but the image has an appealing retro feel, like the sleeve of a rock LP from the 1960s.

Tianlu Zu has plainly struggled with her double portrait of Penny Wong, who might have been thought enough of a political pop star to warrant inclusion in the Archibald. Wendy Sharpe, by contrast, is brimming with confidence in her portrait of Lilikoi Kaos from Circus Oz. The difference is apparent even in the cautious black-and-white of Zu's work as opposed to Sharpe's lurid tones of red and green.

I've gained a new appreciation of Marcus Wills's Archibald portrait of James Batchelor, with his slouched figure and Bonds undies, after seeing McLean Edwards' *The Journalist in the Salon*. This slapped-together, full-frontal hairy-chested portrayal of journalist, Erik Jensen, is an image to frighten the children, and perhaps the horses.

For a more enjoyable in-your-face artwork, I'd recommend Glenn Morgan's exuberant *Self-portrait in shed*, which must be the ultimate painted love letter to the man cave. Morgan, who gives vulgarity a good name, loves piling on the detail until his pictures resemble puzzles that ask the viewer to linger and ferret out every tiny gag.

One final picture worth noting is Glen Preece's *Portrait of the artist as an alcoholic* (self-portrait), in which the painter leans ominously to one side, a stunned look on his face. The work doesn't appear to have been painted by an unsteady hand, but Preece wouldn't be the first artist to be driven to drink by the Archibald.

There are only 24 Wynne rejects as opposed to 40 Archibald misses, and no real surprises. At a mere glance one recognises Ann Thomson, Euan Macleod, John R. Walker, Joanna Logue, Sophie Cape, and so on. It may be disappointing that such artists are not chosen for the Wynne, but this year the competition was a bit stiffer than usual, with artists such as Ross Laurie and Elisabeth Cummings who are forever being cruelly relegated to the Salon, taking their place in main event.

Nothing that was omitted from the Wynne is as dazzling as the 2016 winner, *Seven sisters* by the Ken Family Collaborative. It may be that five artists are better than one when it comes to painting a landscape but I suspect this only applies to those who live in remote desert communities. The non-indigenous artists were left to their lonely, egocentric ways and their signature styles.

While one could hardly expect an artist to stop doing what they do well and try something outrageous, there's a distinct lack of intensity about many of the Salon landscapes. Nothing here to drive the visitor to fits of laughter or anger.

I began looking for eccentricities such as the Cy Twombly squiggles embedded in Dan Kyle's pale bush landscape, *Morning mist*, Turon River; or Peter Stevens's *Ginger's country # 2*, a homage to indigenous master, Ginger Riley, complete with a guest appearance from Ngak Ngak the sea eagle. I only hope Stevens hasn't offended local protocol by making unauthorised use of another artist's totem. Presumably the rules don't apply for Balanda, as Carpentarians call white fellas.

Those who did seem to try a little harder included John Bartley, whose *Gathering* has a brooding power it's tempting to read as tragic or elegaic. This is exactly the kind of interpretation people attach to Mark Rothko's paintings without a moment's thought, so I'm wary of the pitfalls of treating abstract paintings as if they were straightforward documents of intent. Nevertheless, there comes a point with all works of art when a viewer has to trust his or her one's own feelings, knowing that one can never be definitively right or wrong.

Another artist who has given us a high-intensity version of her signature work is Julie Harris, whose *Extended Summer* fairly leaps off the wall. Although I'm accustomed to Harris's abstracted landscapes in which blurred patches of colour and grainy dabs of pigment cluster on the surface, I wasn't prepared for the ferocious glare she has extracted from this picture. A brilliant light bounces off an

imaginary body of water, lit by highlights of red, blue and green. It looks like an acid bath in which bodies – or at least consciousness – might be dissolved.

Salon des Refuses 2016

S.H. Ervin Gallery, until September 18
