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Salon des Refusés 2017

August 3, 2017



Wendy Sharpe: The Witching Hour - Elena Kats-Chernin (composer)

Every year I nurture a dim fantasy of a Salon des Refusés bristling with masterpieces rejected from the Archibald and Wynne Prizes by the Trustees of the Art Gallery of NSW. Every year I relinquish this thought almost as soon as I step into the S.H. Ervin Gallery. The Refusés was a great idea when it began in 1992, and is still worth pursuing today, but it's been a long time since I saw a display that would put the Trustees to shame.

Instead it's like *Groundhog Day*, caught in a time loop that keeps repeating. Almost reflexively I look for a landscape painting by Ross Laurie – and there it is! By some miracle this very accomplished artist made it into the Wynne last year, but it seems the natural order of neglect has been restored.

There's bound to be a portrait by Andrew Sullivan too... Yes, over there. Wendy Sharpe returns, and so do Sophie Cape, Tom Carment, Martin Edge, John Edwards, Peter Jones, Kathryn Ryan, Evan Salmon, Peter Stevens and Tianli Zu. While Tony Costa made it into this year's Archibald with his portrait of art dealer, Simon Chan, he's back in the Refusés with a landscape.

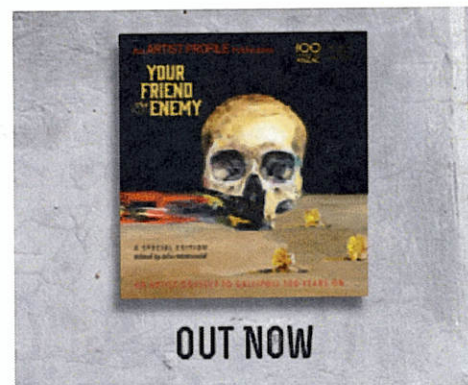
Any of these works might have been hung at the AGNSW with no discernible difference in the overall quality of the Archibald and Wynne exhibitions. It's uncanny the way the Trustees reject the same artists, year after year, regardless of skill or reputation. The judges of the Refusés do the honourable thing and give these pictures a home. They may be secretly pleased when a few big names get tossed out, because they need drawcards for this show.

From 822 entries for the Archibald and 753 for the Wynne, it's not that easy to choose three first-class exhibitions. The numbers alone suggest an embarrassment of choices, but in practical terms the really good pictures quickly choose themselves, the bad are just as quickly eliminated. The other selections might be made with the toss of a coin.

In a year in which indigenous art dominates the AGNSW hang it's strange that the trustees rejected Mantua Nangala's large *Untitled* painting, which is the stand-out work in the Refusés. In its combination of precision and monumentality this canvas is awe-inspiring, like a view of the

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night sky from the desert. Surely it's the equal of anything hanging in the central gallery at the AGNSW.

The emphasis on indigenous art may have forced out a few Wynne entries that would otherwise have made the cut. I've already suggested Ross Laurie was unlucky with *Moonlight and Shadow*, a semi-abstract landscape in which a blue tide of darkness seems to creeping up from the bottom of the picture. The same applies to Peter Stevens, whose work has echoes of artists as diverse as Ken Whisson and Ginger Riley, but still manages to convey a first-hand impression of the landscape. In *Solitary Island* one can see every brushstroke, but this takes nothing away from the lonely atmosphere conjured up.



Ross Laurie, *Moonlight and Shadow*

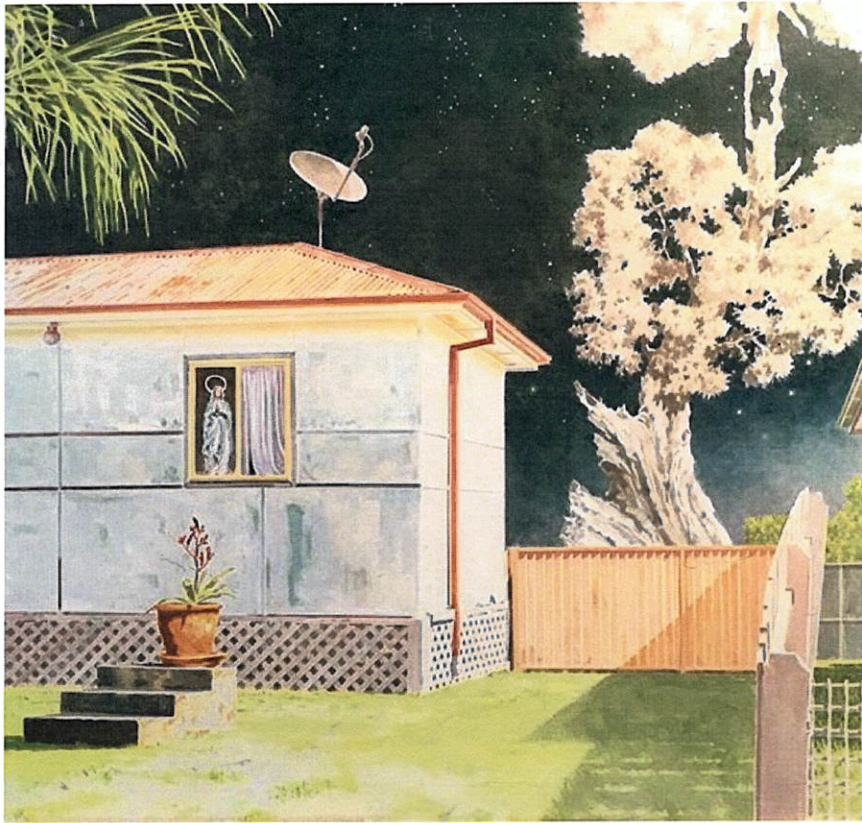
Stuart Watters's *Tree Lines*, an indefinable blend of landscape, still life and abstraction, has a niggling quality that made me want to keep returning for another look. This is usually a good sign, as the picture that offers everything at first glance is soon forgotten.

One would be hard-pushed to ignore or forget Craig Handley's eccentric suburban vignettes. *Mary's off to Bunnings (cause she's got an excellent fixer upper)* is about as suburban as it gets, although the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the window of a fibro bungalow suggests the degree to which home renovation in Australia has become a surrogate religion.

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Craig Handley, Mary's off to Bunnings (cause she's got an excellent fixer upper)

Laura Jones's *Nothing's more Important than a Hole in the Ground* is a patchy work, but gets full marks for boldness of colour – an eye-catching vista of a coral reef in blue, green, white and lavender.

When it comes to the Archibald section of the Refusés there are works that may be enjoyed, but no extraordinary discoveries. Tianli Zu would almost certainly have been hung in the Archibald with a picture of the AGNSW's retiring chief packer, Steve Peters, but she found herself in a shoot-out with Lucy Culliton, who painted the same subject. Much as the Trustees like Steve, they must have felt that two portraits would have been excessive.

Luke Cornish was even cheekier in painting Ben Quilty, who, when he isn't leaping tall buildings in a single bound and vanquishing evil-doers, serves as an AGNSW trustee. However, he reckoned without Ben's invisible shield of modesty that makes him invulnerable to flattery.

There are few more capable portraitists in Australia than Mathew Lynn, who seems to be bounced in and out of the Archibald depending on what quota of relatively traditional painters they are allowing. This year, Paul Newton, Robert and Tsering Hannaford made the cut, and Lynn missed out, but his portrait of curator, Franchesca Cubillo, is one of the most striking pictures in this year's Refusés. It may seem as if Lynn has never gotten over Velázquez, but what's wrong with that?



Matthew Lynn, Franchesca Cubilo

Among the other entries, one can appreciate David Fairbairn's consistency, with *Large Head G.E. No. 2*, and Guy Maestri's constant willingness to experiment, in his *Self portrait as a still life*. Both qualities can become vices if taken too far, but with these works the artists remain on the right side of the line.

There's an appealing freshness in Zoe Young's portrait of Lucy O'Doherty, who has been undertaking the Whiteley fellowship in Paris. The only problem is Lucy's deathly white pallor. Perhaps there's something in the French cuisine that disagrees with her.

The painting I was looking forward to seeing was Wendy Sharpe's *The Witching Hour – Elena Kats-Chernin (composer)*. Sharpe and Kats-Chernin are an excellent match: both artistic risk-takers with amazing reserves of energy. Yet this spooky green-and-red vision of the composer at her piano doesn't capture its subject. It brought it home to me that composing a piece of music requires greater discipline than making a painting, where few spontaneous flashes of the brush

can spell instant success or failure. A flurry of notes doesn't add up to a memorable composition.

2017 Salon des Refusés

S.H.Ervin Gallery, 29 July – 15 October

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Tags: Archibald Prize, Art Gallery of NSW, Australian art, landscape, portraiture, Wynne Prize

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