

# The Sydney Morning Herald

CULTURE ART &amp; DESIGN ARCHIBALD PRIZE

## OPINION

## *Archibald wash-up: why portraits of the 'great' are relics of the past*

**John McDonald****Art critic**

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Benjamin Robert Haydon, a woeful painter but one of the most engaging diarists in English letters, had thoughts about portraiture. It is, he said, “one of the staple manufactures of the empire. Wherever the British settle, wherever they colonise, they carry and will ever carry trial by jury, horse-racing and portrait-painting.”

In Australia today all three of those British staples are ingrained within our culture. I can't comment on trial by jury, but the quasi-sacred status of the Melbourne Cup and the Archibald Prize shows how tenaciously we cling to a colonial inheritance not even recognised as such. Horse-racing and portrait-painting have been granted unofficial Australian nationality, just like that great working-class hero Captain Cook.

And so when Vincent Namatjira, the first Indigenous winner of the Archibald Prize, quips “It only took 99 years”, he is being slightly disingenuous. If Namatjira had pointed out that Aboriginal people weren't even included in the census until 1967, he might have shed more light on the persistence of a colonial mentality.

When the inaugural Archibald Prize was awarded in 1921 it was unthinkable that any of the entrants could be Aboriginal. The first Indigenous painter to achieve fame in the Western art world was Vincent's great-grandfather, Albert Namatjira, in the 1930s. It wasn't until the late 1970s that traditional forms of desert art

made their way onto board and canvas, giving birth to a new movement. As for portraiture, it was virtually unheard-of in Indigenous art. Perhaps Julie Dowling was the real trailblazer in the 1990s. She appeared in the Archibald for the first time in 2001, and has returned in 2002 and 2013.



Too cute for its own good? Kaylene Whiskey's "Dolly visits Indulkana". MIM STIRLING

Portraiture was simply not part of the Indigenous mind-set. Unlike Victorian Britain there was no “great man” theory of history, no sense of empire or racial destiny. The Archibald is a relic of that way of thinking: a celebration of an individual “distinguished in art, letters, science or politics”. To the founders of the prize, the subject was implicitly more important than the artist. Today we value the subject so little that the show is usually filled with self-portraits and images of utterly obscure people.

We’ve grown especially cynical about “great men”. It would be laughable to apply this adjective to most contemporary Australian politicians – which may be the reason that only portraits of Labor leader Anthony Albanese and NSW Energy Minister Matt Kean made the cut this year. It would be a big call to ascribe greatness to this duo, but both have acted honourably on particular issues.

By contrast Ross Townsend’s portrait of Scott Morrison, which received its share of publicity but didn’t make the show (or the Salon des Refusés) is perhaps a measure of the Prime Minister’s divisiveness. Even the nature of the depictions are indicative. James Powditch painted Albo in a T-shirt, in a picture that looks like an album cover. Charles Mouyat depicts Matt Kean as a Cathy Freeman impersonator in a silvery jumpsuit, holding a burning waratah as a torch.

Townsend’s rejected portrait took a more conservative approach, showing Morrison in a suit and tie. The artist’s comment was a classic: “I think he was surprised how real it looked.” It seems that even Scott Morrison was surprised to find himself looking real for once.





An abundance of heart and soul: Archibald Prize winner Vincent Namatjira's portrait of Adam Goodes and himself. MIM STIRLING

In the authenticity stakes, Adam Goodes has it all over the Prime Minister. The subject of two feature-length documentaries last year, the former football star has become an icon for racial justice. Namatjira couldn't have chosen a more appropriate subject in a year when the Western world is besieged by protests calling for an end to institutionalised racism.

This is one of the reasons Namatjira's *Stand strong for who you are* looked like an obvious winner. There's not much technical finesse but an abundance of heart and soul. The work has an insouciance and good humour that makes most of its rivals seem brutally uptight, and this is one of the secrets of Namatjira's success over the past couple of years. In this show maybe only Wendy Sharpe has that same likeability factor, in her portrait of Magda Szubanski.

Typically, the trustees of the Art Gallery of NSW went overboard in their desire to show how much they loved Indigenous artists. Kaylene Whiskey's *Dolly visits Indulkana*, a cartoonish image of the artist meeting Dolly Parton, is a bit too cute for its own good. Tiger Yaltangki's *Self-portrait* is an amazing, surreal image, but it stretches the definition of portraiture. Blak Douglas (aka Adam Hill) has produced a huge, very slick head of Dujuan Hoosen, but it might be more at home on a billboard than a gallery wall.



The likeability factor: Wendy Sharpe's Magda Szubanski. MIM STIRLING



If the judges had been looking for technical expertise they had plenty of options, including works by Louise Hearman, Peter Wegner, Jun Chen and Jonathan Dalton. The best conceived of the lot was probably Angus McDonald's head-and-shoulders of refugee writer Behrouz Boochani, but this year 'Indigenous' trumped 'asylum-seekers'. They were fond enough of Tsering Hannaford's *Self-portrait after "Allegory of Painting"* to award it a Highly Commended, but it's easy to strike sympathetic postures once the winner is decided.

There are a few curious talking points. Monica Rohan's portrait of Lucy Culliton is rather more successful than Lucy Culliton's portrait of farmer Charlie Maslin. I hope, for his sake, that Mario Ramesh Nithiyendran never abandons ceramic sculpture for painting. Overall it's not the worst of years, although the selection is far from dazzling.

In a year with a record 1068 entries, it's ironic that the winner was so easy to pick. It suggests that the pandemic has allowed a lot of artists to dream of Archibald glory while they sit around at home, but the odds of succeeding are probably less than winning at the poker machines. It's always the house that pockets the profits, in this instance in the form of entry fees. It's a lucrative start for the gallery, but the next big challenge will be attracting and managing an audience in the socially-distanced days ahead. The AGNSW can only hope that our old colonial fixation with portrait-painting remains as strong as ever.

## The 2020 Archibald Prize

**Art Gallery of NSW, until January 10.**



Technical expertise: Angus McDonald's Behrouz Boochani. MIM STIRLING



Judges liked: Tsering Hannaford's *Self-portrait After "Allegory of Painting"* picked up a highly commended. JENNI CARTER

## John McDonald

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