

CULTURE ART & DESIGN VISUAL ART

New art prize for painting extraordinary faces

By [Linda Morris](#)

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When David Darcy's black-and-white portrait of actor Levi Miller on the set of the Australian movie *Red Dog* made it to the walls of the National Portrait Gallery it was the catalyst for the photographer to take up his paintbrush fulltime.

That was four years ago. Since then he has twice been a finalist in the Archibald Prize taking out last year's people's choice award for his hyper-realistic painted portrait of Indigenous leader Daisy Tjuparntarri Ward.



David Darcy's painted portrait of environmental campaigner Wendy Bowman. DAVID DARCY

Now his artistic practice has come full circle, and Darcy has been named one of 40 finalists for the National Portrait Gallery's new prize celebrating painted portraits.

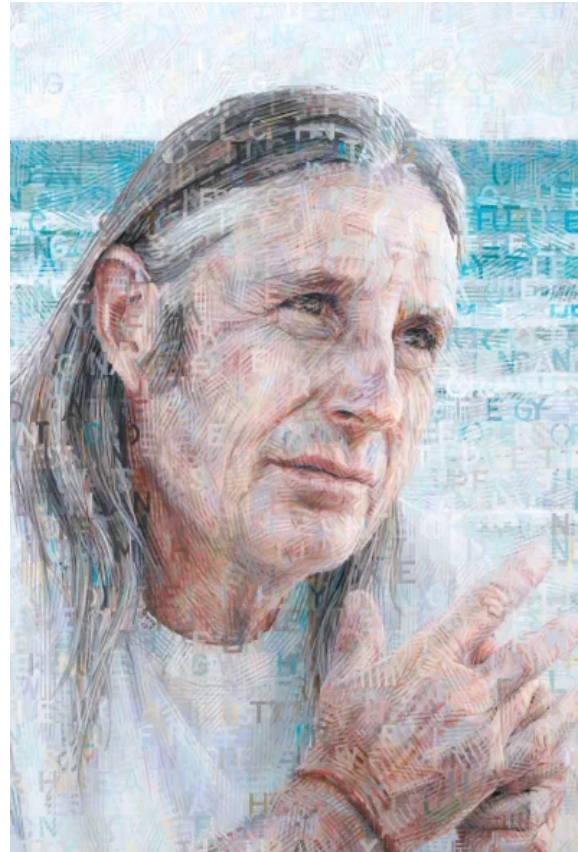
For the first time, the gallery is running separate awards for [photography](#) and [painting](#). With a \$75,000 cash prize, the annual [Darling Portrait Prize](#) award has

been established in honour of Gordon Darling, the gallery's founding benefactor along with wife Marilyn.

Darcy is a finalist with his wrinkles-and-all portrait of farmer and environmentalist Wendy Bowman, who helped stop the Chinese coal company Yancoal Australia mining in the Hunter Valley.

"With the country on fire and climate debate as it is I couldn't have picked a better subject because Wendy has been fighting mining for 30 years," Darcy says. "I said to Wendy, 'It isn't going to be a flattering painting. It's going to show an old woman who's fought a long, hard battle – there is a lot of age and weariness. It's time for others to take up the fight.'"

Darcy did consider painting Wendy for the Archibald and then [Tjuparntarri Ward walked into his Upper Hunter Valley studio.](#)



Tim Winton by Sally Robinson. SALLY ROBINSON

"Sometimes you have to go with your guts," he says. "I do like that they haven't specified [in the Darling] that [the subject] is a celebrity. It's hard as a portrait artist, I'm drawn to ordinary people and I don't seek out people with celebrity attached to them."

Unlike its better known cousin, the Archibald Prize, there is no stipulation that the sitter preferentially be "some man or woman distinguished in art, letters, science or politics".



Lenny photographed by Karen Wall. KAREN WALL

Author Tim Winton has been painted by Sally Robinson, film director Bruce Beresford by Zoe Young and Megan Wilding by Wendy Sharpe, but there are also everyday Australians among the finalists.

The gallery's director of collection and exhibitions, Joanna Gilmour, says the Darling Prize aims to be a more democratic project than the Archibald. "You get artists who are very well established and artists who are just starting out and you get sitters who are household names are very famous faces and then you get completely unknown people, friends and family members.

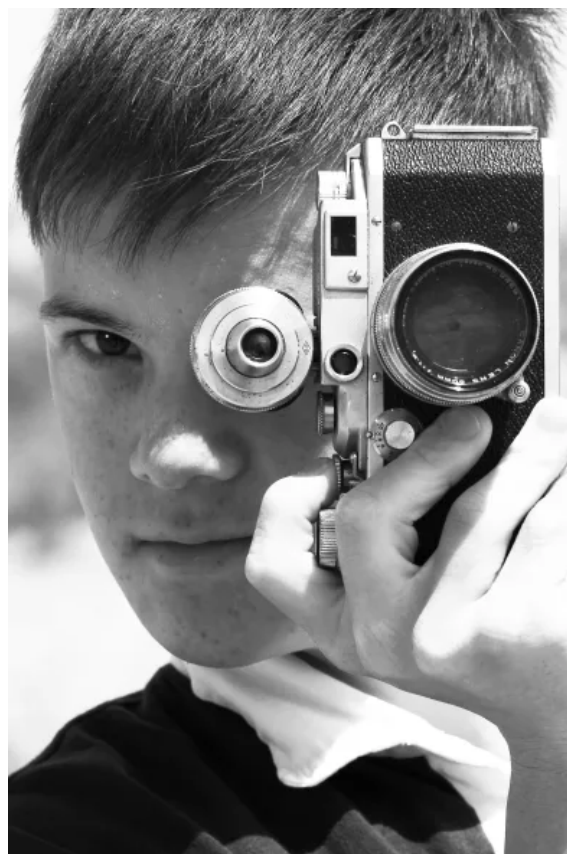
"In both prizes, you get artists experimenting with very different styles within their particular medium. In the painting prize, for example, there's a hyper-real almost photographic painting style that's very much in vogue certainly in the Archibald in recent years. You've got artists very much working in a more expressionistic or illustrative or in a graphic style. You've got artists who emulate old masters, for example, there is a meditation on the artist Hans Holbein."

Looking across the two pools of finalists, Gilmour detects among the painted works a wonderful sense of close observation, intensity and intimacy. "There is a palpable sense of exchange and engagement and connection coming across in the painted portraits. In saying that, I'm not saying at all that you can't get the same sort of thing with a photograph it's just that I think photography, because it arose out of a documentary medium first, a lot of entries we get for the National Photographic Portrait Prize retain that kind of fleeting and instantaneous quality."

In the photo medium, social and political issues tend to bubble to the fore and this year there is a strong sense of Indigenous connection to country, Gilmour says.

Judge Penelope Grist says each of the photo finalists conveys a sense of connection between photographer and sitter, as in Klarissa Duncan's portrait of her daughter, or between sitter and viewer as in Benny Capp's portrait of Martin Manca.

A connection between country and culture was integral to the meaning and intention of Sean Paris's portrait of Zellanach Djab Mara and Ben Searcy's frame of Mario Walarmerpui.



Rory, by photo finalist Michael Murchie. MICHAEL MURCHIE



Linda Morris



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