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Exclusive Culture Art & design Exhibitions

A life in lockdown: Love for painting the ocean recognised



By [Helen Pitt](#)

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Artist Alex Snellgrove has always felt a strong pull to the ocean pool at the south end of Coogee Beach.

Her parents Bill and Jill met there as teens in the 1940s and as a young child she would frolic there while visiting her grandmother from her suburban north shore home, noticing the way the light reflected on the water.



'In her element': portrait of Helen Pitt, by Alex Snellgrove, a finalist in the 2021 Portia Geach Memorial Award. ALEX SNELLGROVE

When she became a professional artist 15 years ago, swimmers in the Ross Jones Memorial Pool were regular subjects on her canvases, which have proved a popular purchase for locals and visitors to Coogee alike.

Her latest work, *In her Element: Portrait of Helen Pitt* of regular Coogee swimmer and *Herald* journalist, (me) has been chosen as one of 57 finalists in this year's Portia Geach Memorial Award.

Ms Snellgrove said her love for painting the ocean and my love for swimming in it "made this project a natural collaboration" during the COVID-19 lockdown.

A record 475 entrants have been received in the 60th year of the annual \$30,000 portrait prize for female painters.

Since it was established in 1961 by Florence Kate Geach, honouring her sister, artist Portia Geach, the award for best portrait painted from life of a man or woman distinguished in art, letters or the sciences, has been considered a springboard for artistic careers.

Previous winners include Lucy Culliton, Natasha Bieniek, Wendy Sharpe, Jude Rae, Sally Robinson and Caroline Zilinsky.



Artist Alex Snellgrove with her painting, "In her element: portrait of Helen Pitt" (in pool), a finalist in the 2021 Portia Geach Memorial Award. LOUISE KENNERLEY

Some sitters chosen in this year's finalists include ABC chair Ita Buttrose; independent politician Zali Steggall, Melbourne academic Kylie Moore-Gilbert; crossword creator and *Herald* columnist David Astle, and artists Tony Costa, Reg Mombassa, Peter Wegner and Ann Thomson.

The judging panel included Art Gallery of NSW's Archie 100 exhibition curator, Natalie Wilson, Art Gallery of NSW trustee Anita Belgiorio-Nettis and the director of S.H Ervin Gallery, Jane Watters.

"People love portraiture, even if they don't know the sitter or the painter - that's why shows such as the Archibald and the Salon de Refuses are so popular," Ms Watters said.

"But Sydney kind of missed the opportunity to see the blockbuster shows like the Archibald and Archie 100 because of lockdown this year, we hope people will be anxious to get out and see some portraits now."

The judges said the finalists were "a fantastic roll call of female artists" including previous Archibald winners Yvette Coppersmith and Wendy Sharpe, winner of this year's Archibald Packing Room prize Kathrin Longhurst, and well-known painters such as Amanda Penrose Hart, Susan O'Doherty, Tsering Hannaford and Jane Guthleben.

Actor Heather Mitchell, is also a finalist with her trademark “toast art” - pen ink on white bread - portrait of her cinematographer husband Martin McGrath.



Portia Geach finalist Kirsty Neilson's 'Ita after Whistler'.



Portia Geach finalist Jane Guthleben's 'Zali, as Flora'.

The winner will be announced before the exhibition opens November 5 at the S.H Ervin Gallery. It runs until December 19.

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