

ART COLUMN

The Archibald Prize 2026



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This year's winner: Richard Lewer, *Iluwanti Ken*

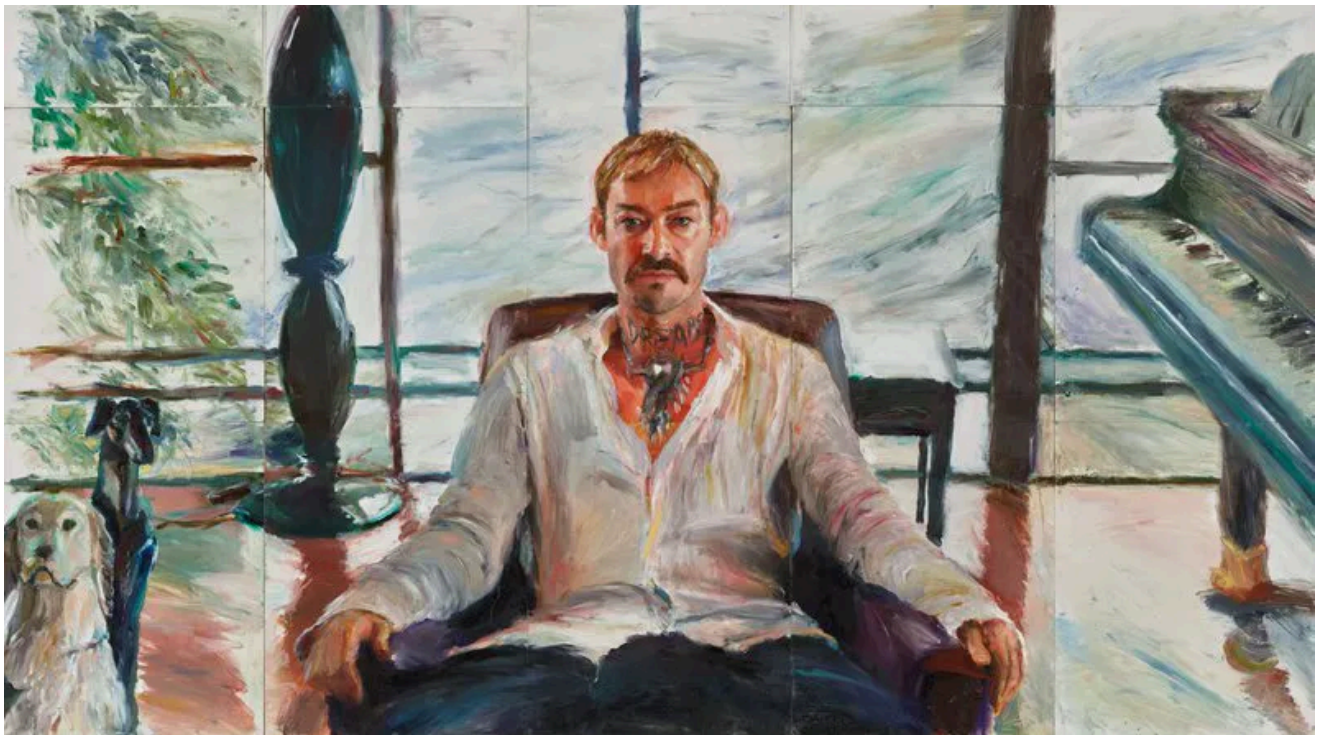
When you meet the curator of an exhibition carrying a protective helmet and fluoro vest, it can only raise concerns about what you're about to see. When that show is the Archibald Prize for portraiture, it's tantamount to a red alert – although the curator,

Beatrice Gralton, tried to assure me the protective gear related to another project altogether.

If it were that easy to be protected from the Archibald Prize, I'd race out and buy a helmet and a vest immediately. By now I've resigned myself to the idea that no barricade, no lucky charm, no vaccine can keep the annual scourge of the Archibald at bay. It comes along at the start of flu season and infects the entire nation. It's at its most virulent within the first few days, before settling in for four weary months.

I'm going to concentrate on the portrait prize and leave the companion shows, the Wynne and Sulman for another day.

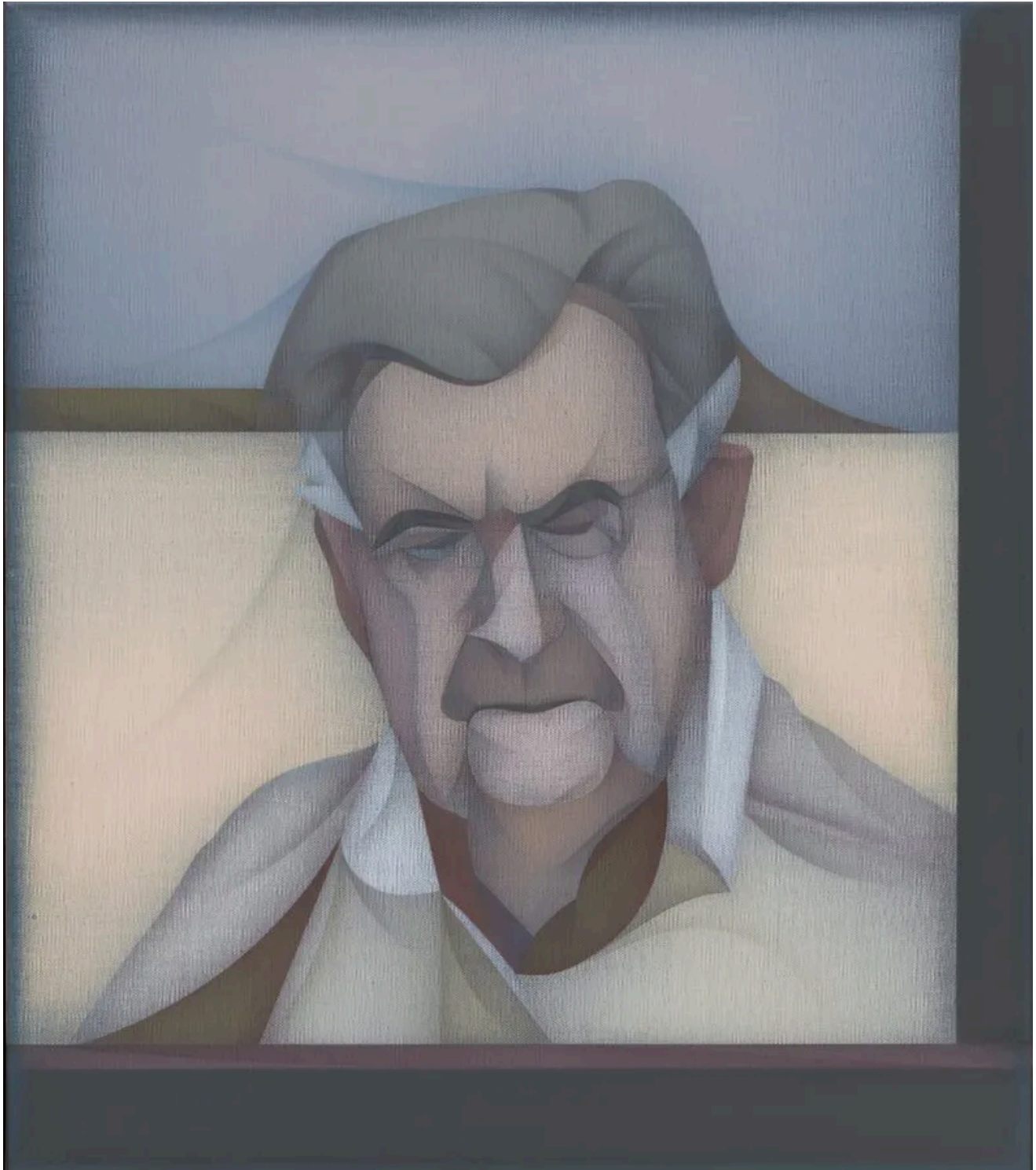
With the Archibald, it's now traditional to say: "It's the worst ever!", but this is like saying "Lest we forget" on Anzac Day. It's a timeless ritual, honoured by many.



Loribelle Spirovski, *Fingerpainting of Daniel Johns*

Although I don't remember any *great* Archibald exhibitions, I'm not sure it's possible to judge the show this way. There have been some excellent paintings over the years, many of them unlucky losers, but on most occasions the exhibition has struggled to rise above mediocrity. It may be more revealing to look at the Archibald as a cultural barometer that tells us about the type of art we prefer at any one time, and the kind of people we admire.

While it's true, as the *Sydney Morning Herald* discovered last week, that the “men in brown suits” are no longer in favour, it's a very long time since they held sway. The last time the prize went to a picture of a man in a suit was Bryan Westwood's portrait of Paul Keating in 1991-92, and one can be sure it was a smart Zegna suit.



Mitch Cairns, *Gerald Mumane*

Since then, we've had every permutation of dress or undress, arriving in the present where the rule is mostly casual, although a touch of flamboyance is permitted. In this

year's show nobody looks as if they're on the way to the office, not even the Governor General, in James Powditch's portrait. But while the dress code may have been abolished, the Archibald has taken on a whole raft of new, unwritten codes.

The terms of the Prize, still displayed on the AGNSW website, is that it is awarded annually to the best portrait, "preferentially of some man or woman distinguished in art, letters, science or politics, painted by any artist resident in Australasia". This proviso has largely gone the way of the brown suits. When it comes to choosing a show rather than a winner, nobody pays it the slightest attention.



Michael Zavros, Alex with his tefillin in the sea

The other piece of received wisdom about the Archibald is that the trustees, who are the sole judges, “know nothing about art”. This may be true in some cases, but I’m sure most of the current crop can find their way around the art galleries. If they have managed to select a poor group of paintings that means either the field (of 1,034

entries!) was disappointing, or they have allowed themselves to make choices based on some dubious criteria.

As I've already explored this idea in last week's editorial, I'm not going to track back over it here. It may be a patchy show, but after a couple of viewings it's easy enough to separate the wheat from the chaff. Richard Lewer's winning portrait of artist, Iluwanti Ken, is a likeable picture, but so simplistic and illustrative, that it must be considered a soft choice. Lewer has captured his subject's distinctive posture and body shape, but his decision to float her on a blank, orange background reduces the degree of difficulty considerably. We are left with a painting that has the immediacy of a poster - a field of eye-catching colour on which any figure would stand out.

One of my readers said "[Amy Sberald](#)", and that's about right. Look at the paintings of this popular African American artist and the resemblance is too close for comfort.



Nick Stathopoulos, *A Brilliant Career* (Margaret Fink)

Iluwanti Ken has always come across as an utterly charming character, and Lewer is an artist of great facility and intelligence. Put them together and you get a disarmingly 'nice' portrait that dares you not to like it. I'm as susceptible as anyone, I like the work, but I wouldn't have given it the prize.

On reading [this morning](#) how Richard Lewer's contacts with Iluwanti were facilitated by Skye O'Meara of the APY Artists Collective, one can only hope his win is not to be used as propaganda for this group, who remain under a cloud, following the 'White hands on black art' scandal of 2023.

Were I asked to choose, I'd rate a number of other entries more highly, including Loribelle Spirovski's *Fingerpainting of Daniel Johns*, Mitch Cairns's *Gerald Murnane*, and Michael Zavros's *Alex with his tefillin in the sea*. In terms of sheer skill and technique, one might also mention Nick Stathopoulos's portrait of Margaret Fink, Tsering Hannaford's *Portrait of Loribelle Spirovski (after Dürer)*, and Dale Rhodes's small picture of Susie Porter.



Tsering Hannaford, *Portrait of Loribelle Spirovski (after Dürer)*

The *likely* winner will almost always be hanging in the main gallery. If you've already won an Archibald, like Cairns, that seems to lessen your chances. Size is also

important, with the only teensy-weensy winner in living memory, being Sam Leach's *Tim Minchin* in 2010.

Michael Zavros has shown a special kind of bravura in painting Alex Ryvchin, from the Council of Australian Jewry, who has been an outspoken opponent of the antisemitic drift in Australian life. In the local artworld the spread of that poison has been alarming, with artists who style themselves 'anti-zionists' posting hate speech on social media, and being cheered on, while Jewish artists are excluded from grants and exhibitions.



Dale Rhodes, *Susie*

There was a fuss last year when a portrait of Ryvchin by Johannes Leak was left out of the show, but despite the best efforts of *The Australian*, it was hard to believe there was anything sinister involved. Zavros's painting is a more considered work. Ryvchin's left

arm is wrapped in a tefillin, the leather band that symbolically connects the wearer to God. By placing his subject on the beach, the artist is setting up faint echoes of the Bondi tragedy.

Zavros always manages to distinguish himself from other photorealists with a clever twist that adds an extra layer of meaning. In this picture, he's turned a portrait into an implicit prayer, presumably for peace, both at home and in the Middle East. There shouldn't be anything controversial about such a work, but it takes courage to go against the political grain when so many of your peers are jumping blindly on a bandwagon.

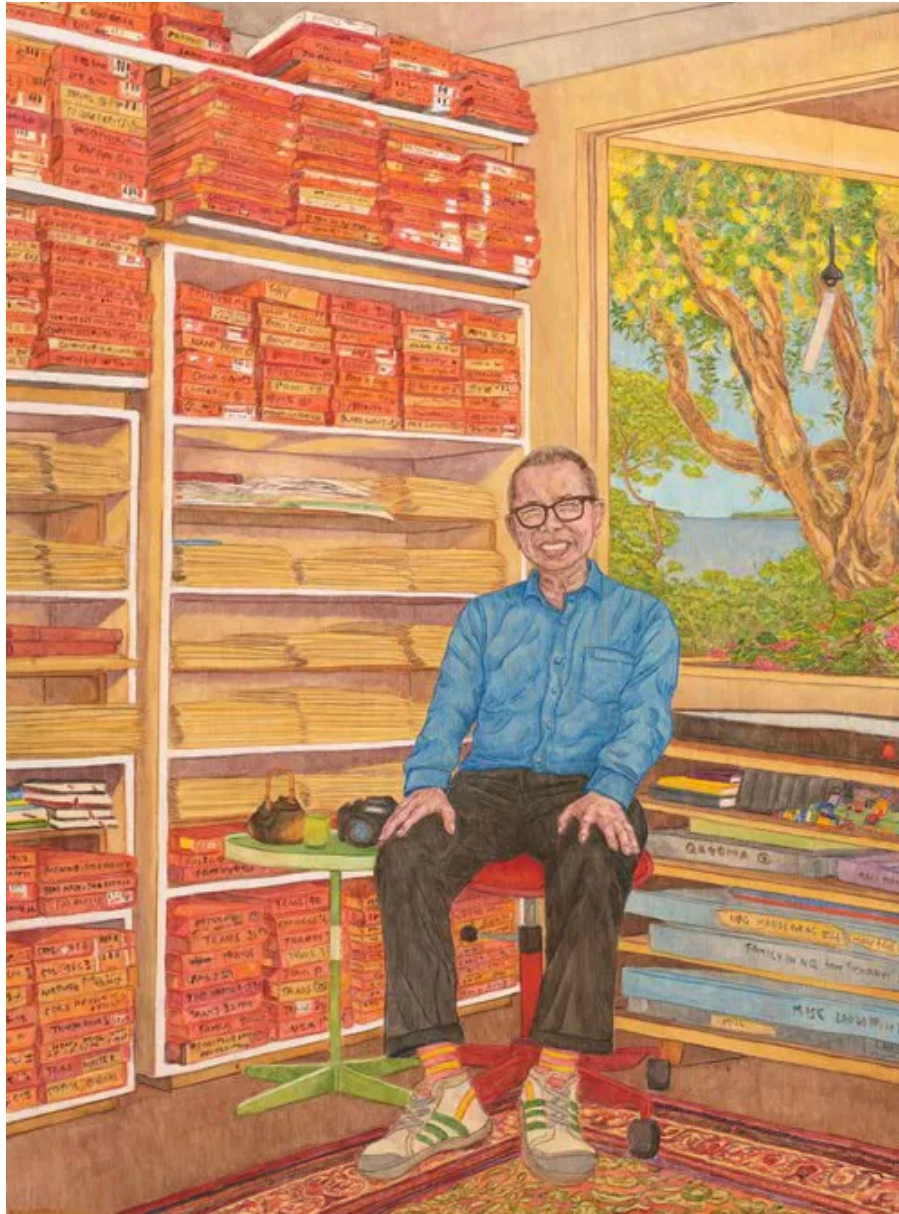


Zoe Young, *Phoebe at the Chelsea*

Where Zavros's work is painted with mind-boggling precision, Loribelle Spirovsky's portrait of Daniel Johns, former frontman for the band, Silverchair, made me think of German expressionists such as Max Slevogt and Lovis Corinth. The sitter's Buddha-like pose and fixed expression is set against swirling smears of paint that make it seem as if a storm is raging outside the window, albeit in bright daylight. We may take this

as a reference to Johns's well documented health issues. The piano on the right tells us the sitter is a musician, the dogs on the left possibly signify loyalty. A black standing-lamp or speaker resembles a work of modern sculpture or a totem. The pose is rigid, but the paintwork is fluid. It's a more psychologically compelling work than Lewer's flat but triumphant entry.

Had Mitch Cairns's *Gerald Murnane* won this year, it may have required a superhuman effort to get the novelist to come along for the announcement. [Murnane](#) is a famous recluse who has never left Australia and rarely ventured outside of Victoria. Cairns has captured some Murnane's elusive, eccentric personality in a quasi-Cubist, tonal portrait that shows us a face closed to the world, divided into facets, that appears to be outside on a plain looking in through a window. It's a remarkable attempt to find a visual equivalent for an introverted writer with his own, unique way of seeing and describing the world.



Kean On See, *At the Studio of William Yang*

Among other portraits, Zoe Young's *Phoebe at the Chelsea* is one of her best entries in recent years, painted in a style that blends the sitter with the background, employing a low-keyed palette that still contains a huge variety of colours. Young's portraits often seem to have something missing, but in this instance a patchwork effect helps pull all the elements in the composition together.

Kean Onn See's portrait of photographer, William Yang, in his studio, is the most conspicuously friendly picture in the show. It's an unwritten law of portraiture to never show the teeth, but here he gets away with it. The appeal lies in a naturalness that makes us feel artist and sitter actually enjoyed the process. In comparison, most of the other works in the show feel serious and sombre. Natasha Bieniek has painted herself looking sad, perhaps reflecting on all those times she's entered the prize

without success. She should take heart from the fact that she keeps getting hung, unlike those poor daubers who have become regulars at the Salon des Refusés.



Marikit Santiago, *Even doves have pride* (collaboration with Maella Santiago, Santi Mateo Santiago and Sarita Santiago)

Tom Polo's portrait of art dealer, Roslyn Oxley, is a pretty ghastly, sub-Edvard Munch affair, in lashings of black and purple, but he has captured something distinctive in his sitter. I can recognise Ros in a certain cast of the eyes and mouth, in a way that I can't recognise Virginia Trioli in Stieg Persson's hyper-detailed portrait, or even Natasha Walsh, in a self-portrait in which she's gone too blue for her own good. Both Natashas need to cheer up. Peter Wegner's portrait of Elisabeth Cummings displays his usual consistency but doesn't have the spark of his winning portrait of Guy Warren in 2021.

Adrian Jangala Robertson has painted filmmaker Dylan River as Alice Springs' answer to Nosferatu. Morgan Stokes seems to have erased his painting of Yvette Coppersmith with a turpsy rag. Most awkward of the lot is Marikit Santiago's portrait of our Australian representative in Venice, Khaled Sabsabi, who is shown bare-chested, holding out his hand to us, perhaps in expectation of another Creative Australia [grant](#). I've enjoyed Santiago's contributions to previous Archibalds, but this is not one for the

ages. It's a textbook example of the trustees including a portrait of someone who's currently all over the media, for better or worse. A frightful picture of Ahmed Al Ahmed by Julia Dover is another example of the type. Instead of the hero of Bondi, he looks like Goya's Saturn getting ready to munch on his children.



Andy Collis, AKA *SophaDopha*

I'm neither willing nor able to go through any more of this. In its desperate need to move with the times, the Archibald can be bewildering to a poor critic, clinging to relevance in a world that has no time for criticism, only extremes of niceness and nastiness. This time around, Richard Lewer has struck a blow for niceness, while Michael Zavros has taken up arms against nastiness, but the best touchstone for our era may be Andy Collis's tiny, painted mobile phone with an image of influencer,

Sophia Begg or “Sopha Dopha” to use her online moniker. I’d never heard of Sophia, but apparently, she’s all of 22-years-old and has 1.5 million followers on TikTok. With those attendance figures I’m surprised the trustees were able to resist her charms.

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Art Gallery of NSW, 9 May - 16 August



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