

VISUAL ART



John McDonald

JOHNMCDONALD.NET.AU

Small wonders

A selection of petite, unpretentious portraits bolster the quality of this year's Archibald Prize.

Imagine if the Archibald Prize banned all portraits that relied on photographs. The number of entries would drop from 884 to something fewer than 100, while the exhibition would be dominated by amateurs and unknown artists. Even the subjects would be strangers to most viewers, because it's unlikely that anyone mildly famous could spare the time for repeated sittings.

Today we have less time for everything, and this fits in neatly with the inexorable rise of photography. Why bother drawing when you can pull out the smartphone and go "click"? Regardless of their own inclinations, few artists feel they can ask a subject to sit for days and weeks until a portrait is finished. The practical alternative is to sit for a few minutes while the painter does a rapid sketch and takes photos from every angle.

This places an emphasis on the artist's first impressions rather than extended observation. It also sets contemporary portraiture apart from its predecessors, even among the great 20th-century artists. Gertrude Stein allegedly sat for Picasso on 90 occasions, although he completed her portrait when she wasn't present. Any portrait by Giacometti, Balthus or Lucian Freud required numerous sittings.

For these artists it was essential to paint in the presence of the subject. Giacometti felt that "posing is an active participation in the work". A photograph may capture the physical details, but a successful portrait has to be more than a likeness. We need to feel it is providing an insight into the mystery of a particular personality. We have to get to know a person through their portrait.

Many portraits are merely paid exercises in flattery, although a small minority are calculated insults. The ideal portrait is one that doesn't editorialise, but allows ample room for complexity and contradiction.

In this year's Archibald Prize the reliance on the camera is stronger than ever, with the two most prominent paintings in the central gallery making no attempt to hide their photographic origins. I'm writing this column a week in advance of the announcement, but I strongly



suspect that Fiona Lowry's portrait of Penelope Seidler will be pronounced the winner. It's a painting that is clearly based on a photo, because Lowry paints with an airbrush. The subject would have needed a mask to stand near the artist while she worked.

The other dominant picture in the room is Tim Maguire's *Cate, take 1/Cate, take 2*, a double image of Cate Blanchett. In the wall label, Maguire takes great pains to explain his technique. Although he admits photography is "an integral part" of the creative process, with his reliance on digital adjustments and scans it still sounds tricky. The finished work is arresting, not only because Blanchett's face is so well-known, but because the double image seems an appropriate way to portray an actor whose face must assume multiple identities.

Whatever the virtues of Maguire's technique, it yields an image that is uncomfortably close to a silkscreen print rather than a painting. Lowry's picture is much better at creating atmosphere - even if the backdrop is the same misty, vaguely sinister bush landscape that recurs in all her work. The painting relies on Seidler's own piercing gaze and cleanly chiselled features for its impact.



These aspects are accentuated by the lack of colour, in the manner of a grisaille. It's a haunting image, which is more than I can say for most of the pieces in the show.

Nevertheless, this year's Archibald is a big improvement on recent outings - it's definitely looking better.

One significant change is the number of paintings that have been hung - 54, as opposed to last year's 39. This has been accomplished by the simple expedient of including plenty of small portraits - the "little gems" that make up the staple fare of Australian commercial galleries. I can't go into any great depth, but they form an unpretentious and likeable group of works.

**THE ARCHIBALD PRIZE
ART GALLERY OF NSW, UNTIL
SEPTEMBER 28**

Face value: (From far left) Fiona Lowry's *Penelope Seidler*; Heidi Yardley's *Julia de Ville*; Joanna Braithwaite's portrait of Colleen McCullough; Paul Miller captures fellow artist Greg Warburton.



Paul S. Miller's portrait of fellow artist Greg Warburton stands out, as does Troy Quinliven's vignette of a reflective Rodney Pople.

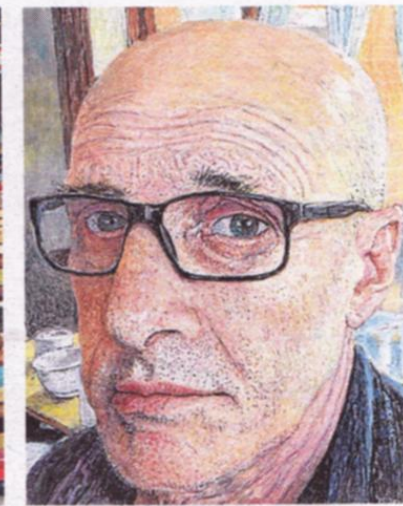
I can't include Natasha Bieniek's self-portrait in the list of small works - at 15 x 20 centimetres it is colossal by her usual miniaturist standards. She may be growing dangerously self-confident.

The best of the modestly scaled works is probably Heidi Yardley's *Julia de Ville*, in which the arms and the slant of the head denote a character who is both introvert and extrovert. It may be a working definition of the artistic condition - the ability to work in solitude for long periods, coupled with the need to have one's work seen by an audience.

The obvious scene-stealers this year are the two paintings of Barry Humphries - Tim Storrier's *The Member, Dr Sir Leslie Colin Patterson KCB AO*, and Pople's *Well Dressed for a Sydney Audience*. Storrier has already taken out the Packing Room Prize with his Rabelaisian image of Sir Les, set incongruously in that same desert landscape that provides a stage for so many of this artist's paintings. Until now I'd always thought of Les Patterson as an urban creature. At least Storrier has provided a face this time around.

Pople's picture of Humphries in a tuxedo is based on a famous Max Beckmann self-portrait, but the comparison does the current work no favours. The commanding sense of self-possession that Beckmann brings to his painting makes Pople's look like a dreadful cartoon. Humphries wears the expression of a startled chicken. He may have told the artist it was a "more than flattering likeness", but one must allow for a dose of irony.

The opposite applies with Joanna Braithwaite's portrait of Colleen McCullough, in which the artist has underlined her subject's intellectual credentials by enclosing her within a mountain of books. The trick was to make McCullough also seem completely down-to-earth. She succeeds well enough, but it's hard not to feel we are looking at a portrait of a library, as much as a writer.



Matthew Lynn has captured Ken Unsworth's features with his usual precision, but the idea of putting his subject on Fragonard's swing seems incongruous - I can't imagine Unsworth in a frilly skirt.

James Powditch's idea of portraying Nick Cave as Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* is hardly more than a laborious gag. Kate Beynon's humour is more appealing in her over-the-top portrait of artist Sangeeta Sandrasegar as a Hindu goddess seated on a monstrous cat.

Two works notable for their simplicity and directness are Dapeng Liu's portrait of AGNSW curator Cao Yin, and Mitch Cairns' Reg Richardson. Peter Churcher has found an original angle by painting his self-portrait reflected in a group of shiny balloons. The inevitable Ray Hughes is back, along with son Evan, in a picture by Jason Phu that will provide Chinese visitors with plenty of reading matter.

Wendy Sharpe's portrait of crossdresser Ash Flanders is one of her best entries in years. The face and figure are strongly defined, but there has been no attempt to fill every part of the canvas. Picasso and Matisse were known for this kind of restraint, which only arrives when an artist has become completely comfortable in his or her medium.

This might also be a good place to mention Paul Ryan's powerfully expressionistic portrait of Richard Roxburgh, which is a more dynamic, whole-hearted effort than some of this painter's indecisive pictures of recent years.

If I had to award a prize for the most boring picture it would have to be Paul Newton's portrait of Frank Lowy, which has the Westfield boss standing in a neutral space looking wise and thoughtful.

Newton is an accomplished artist, but too prone to these professional but timid images. It would have been much more interesting had he painted the Lowy patriarch having a tantrum at the recent Westfield annual meeting. A portrait capturing all that sound and fury would have been a study in personality worthy of any prize.

smh.com.au

See a gallery of Archibald Prize finalists