

The Doug Moran National Portrait Prize
2000 / 2001

Royal South Australian Society of Arts,
Edmund Wright House

Until March 4

SINCE its inception in 1988, the Doug Moran National Portrait Prize has gathered a reputation for inconsistency in its standards whereas its greatest rival in a similar idiom, the Archibald Prize, has maintained a high level of entries.

Of course, much of this may stem from the opinions and tastes of the judges: in this case, our own state gallery director Ron Radford and the irrepressible painter Margaret Olley. Their difficulties in selecting 32 finalists from 643 entries are profound.

Since the larrikin painters of the 1940s, Australian figurative art has radically changed. Where William Dobell's expressionist portrait caused a scandal following its winning the Archibald in 1943, traditional portraits by artists such as William Dargie and Ivor Hele continued to win the prize. Indeed, the Moran prize initially favored a Hele protege, in Robert Hannaford, and it took a few years before the prize started to reflect a more diverse approach among its painters, as well as the contemporary urge to experiment with media.

Now, the prize reflects the most stodgy and most bizarre, anti-aesthetic approaches. In most cases, I find it hard to accept the bizarre entries: their larrikinism is couched in a historical framework but rarely achieves technical competence.

As for the work itself, in comparison with the last exhibition, this selection is a little more uneven, and even a little repetitive. One certainly gains the impression that a few of these finalists, especially Kenneth MacRae's *John Laws Window Looking*, could go missing without hurting the exhibition.

Highlights include Julia Ciccarone's *Contessa*, a portrait of her mother, which offers plenty of visual interest.

Dell Walker's *A Glance in the Mirror* is well considered, its horizontal and vertical composition spiralling to a point behind the artist's reflected face. The winning entry, Kristin Headlam's *Self-portrait in Bed with the Animals*, is comparatively disappointing, its sly humor and charm no doubt elevating it above the others.

Of the South Australian entries, Daryl Austin's *Self-portrait* is full of postmodern allusions, certainly one of the most successful and thought-provoking entries. David Bromley's *John Penglase* is a tougher rendition than his usual fare, with its metallic paint and rough edges, and Greg Schulz's *Martin II, Letters* impinges on interesting political territory.

Adam Dutkiewicz