

Redland Art Awards 2016

By Phil Brown | Arts Editor – *The Courier-Mail*

Wall to wall paintings and not an *Untitled* in sight. Okay there is Simon Degroot's *Untitled Blue* with its echoes of Rothko and Rorschach but I consider *Untitled Blue* as a title. With the advent of Post Modernism many artists were reluctant to commit to something as prescriptive and uncool as a title but I'm pleased to see that the finalists in the *Redland Art Awards 2016* have embraced titles and narratives.

This is good news for the general public who generally don't like to be befuddled by artists bent on obfuscation. Not that there aren't layers and mysteries and myriad interpretive possibilities involved in the works chosen this year. They all work on various levels and offer much for the lay viewer who will be unencumbered by art theory and curatorial fashion. But there is also enough depth to satisfy the more educated eye. Art that can work for everyone is a boon for any public gallery.

The finalists this year also prove, en masse, that rumours of the death of painting have been wildly exaggerated. There was a period when painting became almost unfashionable but painting remains, to my mind the bedrock of Australian art. It's how we tell the Australian story. From the early colonial painters to artists such as Albert Tucker, Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd, painting has always reflected Australian history and the nation's psyche. And in recent years the revelation of Indigenous art has been important in telling the stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Respected writer Patrick McCaughey points out in his book *Strange Country: Why Australian Painting Matters*, painting was deemed moribund at one stage and it wasn't that long ago. "To conceptualists, painting was no longer part of the avant-garde; it was no longer, in the worst cliché of contemporary art, 'cutting edge'." McCaughey goes on to say that "painting post 1970 in Australia survived its oft-heralded 'death'."

And so we have seen that painting, which has always been with us, has made something of a comeback and in many ways art prizes have helped sustain it through the leaner years. The critics may not entirely approve of that annual artistic extravaganza called the Archibald Prize for example but it survives and thrives because painters and the public have always embraced it. Art prizes have kept painting alive in a world where some eschewed it in favour of newer mediums. But I don't believe anything can capture the zeitgeist the way painting does and throughout Australian history it has supplied a visual narrative of our history and I see that visual narrative continuing in the works in the *Redland Art Awards 2016*.

As any award should be, it's a broad church and in this case a broader church than most. The disparate nature of the art entered in major art awards sometimes means that exhibitions of the work of finalists can lack focus. The expression 'hotchpotch' comes to mind. In this instance however it's a most delightful hotchpotch that reflects a diverse array of genres and subject matter. In turn the artists address a diverse array of narratives and whether they are mining their own personal history, psychology or reflecting on social and political or environmental themes. This can all be followed and enjoyed relatively easily because most of the works in the exhibition are delightfully accessible.

They are also thought-provoking and I get the sense that what matters to the artists will also matter to those who view these paintings. I feel this may be at least one of the reasons Redland artist Anita West took out the 2016 Meredith Foxtan People's Choice Award with her painting *Banksia in the mist*. One suspects that as well as responding to the beauty and intricacy of the work itself that viewers also felt that the inherent environmental message was a sound one that resonated with them, particularly since it related to an issue close to home and to their hearts. West points out that coastal banksias, grass trees and scribbly bark make up a small but important part of the environmental backdrop of nearby North Stradbroke Island which has been denuded by sand mining in recent decades. Concern about that issue inspired West's painting in which the banksia and the environment "calls out to be heard".

The winner this year was a more detached and cerebral work. Sydney artist Pollyxenia Joannou's *Duplicity* is a contemporary monochromatic painting that is part of an ongoing serial narrative. As the artist points out the narrative "harks to notions of a migratory history and its remnant traces that incorporate personal memory" and also reflects "the duality between cultures and a distant hum or rhythm". Pollyxenia's use of felt, on which she paints, is a conscious one because of its tactile properties and because it possesses "a sense of tactile safety, memories" and reflects "a simpler, less complicated world".

Pollyxenia's work is a sophisticated piece that rewards a deeper investigation although the abstraction may make it less accessible to some viewers. On the other hand it has an instant appeal on an aesthetic level too and you don't have to be an art critic or student of abstract art to enjoy it.

There's no doubt that Monica Rohan's *Head up shoulders back*, which won second prize, will be deemed more accessible than most. The eye is immediately drawn to Rohan's work and the lush swathes of fabric that engulf the two figures in the painting, both of which are almost certainly Rohan herself. This young Brisbane artist is one of the most collectable painters on the Australian scene at the moment. Like more established artists such as Ben Quilty and Michael Zavros her exhibitions sell out before they are even mounted and there is a long waiting list for her paintings, intricate, quite beautiful works that seem to connect in a way some artists will never do.

Rohan has been investigating her own psyche in her works which are intriguingly autobiographical. She uses the domestic appeal of fabric which works as a metaphor for the collective unconscious. *Head up shoulders back* explores the problems confronted by the introverted who are told to walk with "head up shoulders back" according to Rohan who points out that..."The two figures depicted in the painting are in open defiance against the abrupt and condescending title of the work". She points out that there is an obvious desire to withdraw and shrink away and her painting is a statement about being in the world and yet wanting to withdraw from it. So in a sense there is an ascetic as well as aesthetic concern with the artist being in the world but not of the world. This makes her one of the most interesting Australian painters working today.

The winner of this year's local environment prize was Carol McGregor for her work *Black seeds* and this is another work that values the environment and our Indigenous history. Using possum skins, cotton, ochre, ash and resin she has produced a possum skin cloak which may or not be a painting but which certainly develops a fascinating narrative about cultural and natural history.



As a lover of figurative work I am heartened by the extent to which figuration dominates this year. I have recently written about the work of Brisbane artist J Valenzuela Didi and admire his hyperreal works with their nod to Jeffrey Smart, among others. His *Hyperballad* is stylised and mysterious: a lone figure in an urban landscape serving as a cipher for exploring "our temporal existence". In fact it is our temporal existence that so many of the artists explore this year and that's a good thing because this is something we are all experiencing, I hope.

Part of this temporal existence is the sheer joy in being despite the difficulties that come our way. Part of that joy is the physical world itself and the landscape in particular, a touchstone of Australian art. A number of landscape works celebrate the world as artists see it. I love the tonal magic of Benjamin Werner's *Light rain #1 (View from Mount Coot-tha)* Brian Hatch's *Road To Mullumbimby*, an oil that actually made me think of the watercolours of Kenneth McQueen. Another tonal work, Jo Darvall's *Down river singing* also appeals. The autobiographical pieces are also compelling and Guy Morgan's *Study of the artist's son, Max* is an edgy portrait while Jaye Early's *I'm Betting on myself* is an optimistic statement about being an artist.

After, a painting of a rumpled bed by Lynda Firth explores the aftermath of sex, love or just sleep in what I read as a nod to Tracey Emin.

There's something awfully alluring about a crumpled bed which emits that siren lure urging you to go back to bed to escape the world. But this is the only world we have so we should embrace it and the artists in *Redland Art Awards 2016* seem to do just that.

<http://www.redlandartawards.org.au/review.html>