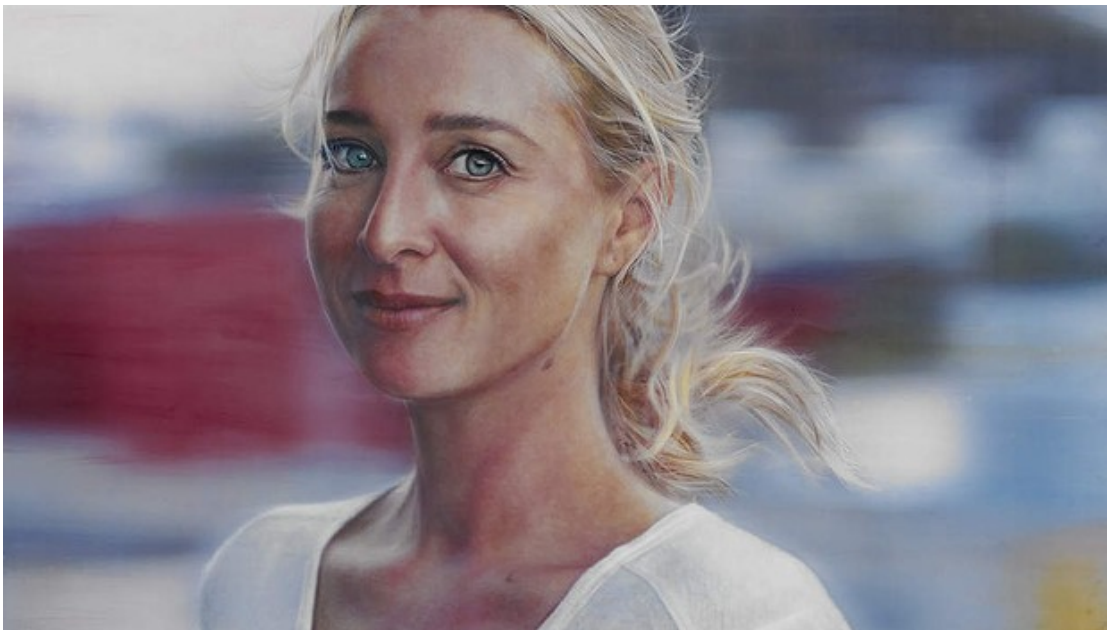


Every picture tells a story as dab hands vie for glory

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Andrew Taylor

This year's Archibald Prize will be awarded on Friday, with the decision set to be steeped in controversy no matter who wins.



Finalists Archibald Prize 2013

People's Choice: Asher Keddie titled 'Love face' by Vincent Fantauzzo

Steve Peters laid the kiss of death on Mathew Lynn last week when he awarded him the Packing Room Prize for his portrait of novelist Tara Moss.

Peters says Lynn's portrait was an obvious choice: "No.1: it has to be good, so that knocks out a hell of lot of 'em."

But in its 22-year history, the Packing Room Prize has never coincided with the decision of the 11 trustees of the Art Gallery of NSW who judge the Archibald Prize.



Made the cut: Wendy Sharpe's portrait of burlesque performer Venus Vamp. Lynn is by no means alone in standing little chance of winning the \$75,000 prize on Friday.

The trustees judge in mysterious ways, with the two artists among them - Ben Quilty and Lindy Lee - wielding disproportionate influence when it comes to choosing a winner.

But it would be an unlikely and controversial choice to pick James Powditch's portrait of Quilty, *Ben Quilty, Where Is My Mind? (After the Pixies)* irrespective of its quality.

Michael Lindeman does not rate his chances either. His *Dear Trustees (self-portrait)* is in the form of a letter to the trustees asking them to consider his "challenging" work because it would help him pay his tax, rent, legal bills and HECS debt.

"It's a pretty conceptual painting," he says. "It's quite radical, so it might divide audiences."

Lindeman, a finalist in 2011 and a past winner of the Sulman Prize, says his self-portrait has been described as childlike and a gimmick.

But he insists it is not a joke.

"The portrait aims to distil many emotions and connect with the viewer," he says. "On the one hand, it's sad and humorous, sarcastic and sincere, absurd and serious."

Lindeman's entry also takes aim at *The Australian's* art critic, who described his work as "distastefully smug" last year.

He says he wanted to point out the sacrifices made by artists.

"Often they're expected to be completely submissive and bare their soul and accept any criticism, even if unfair or quite nasty," he says.

Lindeman has painted a large canvas, more than two metres high - a trait shared by many finalists and past winners (with the notable exception of Sam Leach in 2010).

On this measure, Natasha Bieniek's nine-square-centimetre self-portrait is an outside chance.

Size matters in the Archibald Prize, especially since the judges whittled down the 868 entries at breakneck speed over about four hours last weekend.

But there are fewer big heads this year, much to the relief of finalist and past winner Wendy Sharpe.

"I'm glad of that," she says. "What I find really uninteresting is a thing that looks like a hand-painted passport photo."

Sharpe is pleased her portrait of burlesque performer Venus Vamp made the cut this year, particularly since it is "something quite different from the other paintings in it".

However, portraying someone who is not a celebrity may cruel her chances. This year's exhibition is crowded with self-portraits and paintings of other artists, including Jasper Knight's portrait of Adam Cullen, who died last July, and Sarah Hendy's *Jasper Knight*.

Sharpe says artists are often subjects because they are readily accessible and lack vanity. "If someone paints me and it's not very flattering, it's not a big deal," she says. "As an artist, you tend not to care."

Sharpe's theory makes Abbey McCulloch one of the bravest finalists this year given her unflattering depiction of actor Naomi Watts.

The 12 female finalists, including McCulloch, Sharpe and 2008 winner Del Kathryn Barton, should not hold their breath.

Only seven women have won the Archibald Prize in its 92-year history, a gender disparity equalled by few other institutions in society. Abdul Abdullah's portrait of Anthony Mundine, *The Man*, is another outside chance given his subject's history of causing offence.

A finalist in 2011 for his portrait of media personality Waleed Aly, Abdullah paints the boxer with a crown on his head, which he says was a cheeky nod to US artist Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Abdullah admits his subject can be outspoken: "He really does speak his mind. He doesn't hold back at all, but he's very genuine and sincere."

The Perth-based artist says he has no idea who the trustees will favour. "In 2011, I wish I'd put money on Ben Quilty. This year it's a bit harder. I don't have a favourite."

In contrast, Sportsbet is offering odds on each of the finalists, with Michael Zavros' *Bad Dad*, which features the artist floating in a swimming pool, as the 8-1 favourite.

"We have *Bad Dad* as the early favourite as it combines amazing attention to detail and photographic qualities, but it wasn't easy framing this market," Sportsbet PR manager Ben Hawes says.

Surprisingly, the betting agency rates Lindeman as a 9-1 favourite, while Bieniek, Hendy and McLean Edwards have the least chance at 40-1.

However, these odds should be taken with a grain of salt. As Hawes says:

"Determining what takes the judges' fancy on the day is very tough and the closeness in our market reflects that."

The Archibald Prize might be big news in Sydney but stirs significantly less interest at the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra, which holds only four Archibald Prize-winning portraits in its collection.

A historian at the gallery, Dr Sarah Engledow, says the Archibald Prize is "a little Sydney kerfuffle".

"I don't come from Sydney so I don't really care much who wins the Archibald," she says. "It amazes me it occasions the comment it does in Smug City."

Her colleague, senior curator Dr Christopher Chapman, is more diplomatic. "It keeps the art of portraiture in the public arena," he says. "The prize certainly raises discussion and argument and consideration and reflection about the current state of portrait painting in Australia."

Chapman is reluctant to pick winners but nominates Marcus Callum's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and works by Fiona Lowry, McCulloch and Zavros as strong works.

"There are some that to me convey a powerful sense of psychological insight," he says.