

standout work, if only because of the intensive labour and eye strain involved in a piece that is more of an abstract design than a landscape.

The mystery artist of this year must be Anthony Bennett, who is represented in the Archibald, Wynne and Sulman, with three bizarre and bilious paintings, each with a surface as hard, flat and shiny as a new surfboard. The virtues of these works are not readily apparent, apart from the fact that they seem to satisfy the judges' perverse desire to include a few weird and not-so-wonderful things for the sake of variety.

When I went back for a second look at the Wynne last week, its inferiority to the Salon became even more palpable. Not only Elisabeth Cummings but Ross Laurie, Amanda Penrose Hart, Dean Bowen, Ian Grant, Tom Carment and Todd Hunter can feel themselves hard done by. If the trustees wanted something a bit unusual, how could they ignore the quasi-naive charms of Glenn Morgan? Robyn Sweeney's *Local Habitat*, Marina Strocchi's *Dashwood Creek* and Euan Macleod's *Mt Griselda* flinders all had strong but unsuccessful claims.

The Archibald rejects are less controversial, although many could have slotted smoothly into the main show. Visitors may sample no fewer than three small portraits of the redoubtable Roddy Meagher, who must have done something to offend the trustees to be so comprehensively barred from the art gallery. Neither did Betty Churcher arouse any of the senti-

Safe as houses ... Robyn Sweeney's *Local Habitat*; (left) Lionel Bawden's *The Amorphous Ones* (*The Vast Colony Of Our Being*).

ment that was lavished on subjects such as Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu and Dame Elisabeth Murdoch. Her portrait, painted by her son, Peter Churcher, is languishing in the salon, perhaps because it is a subtle, undemonstrative work in a competition that favours extroverts. The work is so plain it takes time to really see it but once you are hooked it seems full of melancholy and affection.

Kerry McInnes's *Euan Macleod* is smaller this year and has been a large, ambitious portrait, slightly undermined by the swathes of empty space that stand in place of a composition. The subject could not complain about the likeness, which makes him look exceptionally suave and thoughtful. This must be one of the very few portraits of another artist that manages to be flattering. Often artists paint portraits of each other because they know non-artists will not tolerate their rude departures from reality.

The Salon des Refusés is a little smaller this year and has been hung with great care. The Sulman Prize, chosen by Melbourne painter Jon Cattapan, also gives the superficial impression of being more of a show and less of a canine's morning repeat - at least until one leaves the main exhibition area of the art gallery and finds supplementary entries scattered in front of the cafeteria.

The Sulman is awarded for a subject painting or a mural design, which usually means "anything under the sun". In some earlier incarnations the show has been a chamber of horrors, so we may be thankful that this year's guest judge has shown a degree of conscientiousness. It may be my imagination but there is a slight Melbourne focus to the selection. Even the winner, Ivan Durrant's *Anzac Match M.C.G.*, is a blurred scene from an AFL game - an activity that has high religious overtones south of the border.

While one can entertain the gravest doubts about Melbourne's claim to be Australia's cultural capital, there is no doubt about the city's status as our sporting capital. I have a theory that the cultural aspects have declined as sporting obsessions have risen ever higher. In many Melbourne minds, art and sport are now indistinguishable. If this is not the case in Sydney yet, it may be only because we find it too hard to take anything seriously (except money).

Durrant is a curious artist and his *Anzac Match M.C.G.* is a likeable painting, although I'm reluctant to agree that this was

the standout piece in this year's show. It is hardly more than a detail of a painting, fuzzed in mock-emulation of an unfocused camera lens. The painting that stays in my mind is Dagmar Cyrulla's *Judged*, which might be classified as an old-fashioned "conversation piece". It features two men - one in bed, one standing nearby - a woman wrapped in towel, and a dog. The men look at the woman; the woman and the dog look at us. Everyone has the deadpan expression that saints wear in Renaissance paintings, even when they have axes sticking out of their heads.

The painting is like a caption competition. We have no way of knowing what is going on but we are invited to speculate. Is this a scene from a soap opera or something a bit more sinister? The work owes its appeal to this strong but ambiguous narrative, but there are many entries with no narrative whatsoever.

Every Sulman judge seems happy to accept that abstract paintings are also "subject paintings". One suspects this is because artists such as Aida Tomescu, Jeanette Siebols, Michael Ivanoff, Leonard Brown and Virginia Coventry bring a degree of breathing space to the show. The procession of figurative pictures, with their disparate subjects and styles, has a dizzying effect. Exiting this annual sideshow is like one is stepping out of a psychedelic film from the '60s. To be into it, you have to be out of it.

