

When losers are winners

When good works are overlooked in favour of talent-spotting, the Archibald's loss is the Salon's gain.

VISUAL ART
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Salon des Refusés 2009
National Trust S.H. Ervin Gallery,
until May 3
Wynne and Sulman prizes
Art Gallery of NSW, until May 24

IN 2005 the trustees of the Art Gallery of NSW dumped a painting by Elisabeth Cummings called *Arkaroola Landscape* out of the Wynne Prize exhibition. It was gratefully accepted by the S.H. Ervin for its annual Salon des Refusés, from where it was purchased for the permanent collection of the Art Gallery of NSW. It may sound strange that a painting judged good enough to be acquired for the collection was not chosen to hang in that year's competitions but this was one of the oddities – and embarrassments – thrown up by the rather haphazard way the Archibald and Wynne prizes are selected.

Put yourself in the judges'

position: watching hundreds of works being carried past by the packers at a brisk clip. Blink and you've missed something; hesitate and the moment is lost. It's understandable if the occasional good work is overlooked.

It is less understandable, and less forgivable, when lightning strikes twice. Yes, the undoubted highlight of this year's Salon des Refusés is a large painting by Elisabeth Cummings called *Riverbend*. Complex, semi-abstract and multilayered, it is not a work that offers up all its qualities in the few seconds the trustees probably devoted to it. But surely, even in that passing moment, someone should have identified this as a painting that demanded a second look.

The judges appear even more culpable when one compares the works hung in this year's Wynne with their counterparts that have ended up in the Salon. There are always a few pictures in the Salon that make one wonder how they were ever rejected from the main event but this year the rejects form a much stronger group of works than their privileged cousins at the art gallery. With a few notable

exceptions, this year's Wynne Prize for a landscape painting or sculpture is a humdrum affair.

From the current selection, Lionel Bawden was short odds to win with *The Amorphous Ones (The Vast Colony Of Our Being)* – a strange, original sculpture made from pencils glued together and then carved into a fair approximation of an eroded geological formation. This piece was first shown in Bawden's exhibition of last year called *New Works On Paper*. The joke was that each sculpture sat on a plinth that was actually a neat, rectangular stack of paper.

Jokes aside, Bawden has been one of Australia's most keenly sought-after young artists for the past few years and this award will only serve to underline his appeal with the collectors. Much the same could be said about Guy Maestri's Archibald success. While I don't doubt that the trustees set out in all sincerity to choose the best work, there is also an element of talent-spotting included in the mix.

Most of the Wynne selections – even by experienced artists such as John Peart, Rodney Pople, Philip Wolfhagen, John R. Walker and Paul Ryan – are only average by their standards. Neither is there a really outstanding indigenous work, although Frank Thirion's *Southern Stars* is the most striking, with its floating glimpses of black sky and white stars on a flat, brown backdrop.

Lucy Culliton and Joshua Yeldham give the impression that they tried a bit harder than most of their peers, while Jun Chen tried too hard – with a view of the McLaren Vale vineyards that looks as churned up as the Somme battlefields. A wall that features three near-monochrome, linear works by Fiona Lowry, Brett Bailey and Pei Pei He was probably intended to look chic but each picture seems to drain a little life from its neighbour in forced co-dependency. Del Kathryn Barton's *Flatrock* is another



Sport as a religion ... Ivan Durrant's *Anzac Match M.C.G.*