

OPINION

Portia Geach Memorial Award: too much style over substance



[John McDonald](#)

Art critic

August 21, 2020 — 3.59pm

Share

Normal text sizeLarger text sizeVery large text size

Not even a pandemic can dampen down Australia's love of art prizes. On the contrary, it's possible the lockdown has inflamed this monstrous passion, as artists have found themselves in the studio for extended periods with no distractions. Perhaps we'll soon have an oversupply of art to go with the oversupply of investment units.



Caroline Zilinsky's *Anthea May or May Not* is the winner of the 2020 Portia Geach Memorial prize.

Those who are eagerly anticipating the Archibald Prize (I'm not among them) can warm up with the Portia Geach Memorial Award at the S.H. Ervin Gallery. Like the Archibald, the Portia Geach is awarded for a portrait of a man or woman "distinguished in the Arts, Letters, or the Sciences", as the quaint old-fashioned formula has it. The significant difference is that the competition is limited to female artists.

There are art prizes in which the winner is obvious from the moment one walks into the room. With the Archibald I always try to pick the best picture and the most likely winner, but rarely do these twain meet.

In this year's Portia Geach, of the 60 paintings that made the final cut there was no obvious stand-out. By the usual standards it's not a bad year, although there's precious little to get excited about. With such exhibitions one doesn't

expect to find masterpieces, it's enough that a work has a certain freshness, a trace of wit and originality. There's no point in expecting artists to have all the academic skills, but neither should one reward those that make a virtue out of incompetence.

The judges, in their wisdom, gave the prize to Caroline Zilinsky for *Anthea May or May Not* (Anthea Pilko, contemporary dancer). I have no idea what Anthea Pilko actually looks like, but it's clear Zilinsky is no flatterer. The dancer sits, semi-nude, on a triangular red seat. Her legs are short and knobbly, her neck giraffe-like, her torso strangely crumpled. She wears a severe, tight-lipped expression.



The Robe by Kate Beynon.

The only straight lines in this pyramidal composition are to be found on the carpet at the subject's feet. The contours of the seat and the figure display such a relentless ripple it's as if a right-handed artist had deliberately chosen to draw with their left hand, or vice-versa.

None of this is an argument against the picture. What I find most off-putting is the way Zilinsky relies so heavily on a graphic, cartoonish style. When style predominates over substance it becomes a mannerism and a brand label. One looks at this painting and sees "a Zilinsky" rather than a portrait of a particular person.

It's not an unusual tactic, even for famous artists. I'm reminded of the Roy Lichtenstein painting that features a pair of staring eyes and the word balloon: "WHAT? Why did you ask THAT? What do you know about my IMAGE DUPLICATOR?"

With his usual droll humour, Lichtenstein was gently mocking the way so many artists – no one more so than himself – rely on an easily recognisable signature style to imprint their work, and their name, on viewers' minds.

While it's axiomatic that almost all artists have a distinctive style, with a portrait I'd argue that it's important we are able to focus primarily on the subject rather than the artful fashion in which he or she is depicted.

Zilinsky isn't the only artist in the show for whom a style dictates her artistic identity. One sees a similar stylisation in Kate Beynon's *The Robe* (self portrait); in Kim Leutwyler's *Dee with pink, green and blue*, (of artist and actor Dee Smart) in which a relatively realistic figure is set against splashes of bright colour; and even in Kathrin Longhurst's *Muddy Waters* (Maia Longhurst, student), in which the larger-than-life face of the artist's daughter looks dreamily out of the canvas.

We recognise each of these styles as a distinctive brand before we think about the subject. With these three artists, each is pursuing a form of beauty, unlike Zilinsky who embraces the grotesque – usually interpreted as a fascinating form of ugliness. Of all the painters in this year's selection, Longhurst is probably the most impressive technician, but the large scale of her portrait renders it strangely impersonal even though it's an image of her own daughter.

Having spent her childhood behind the Iron Curtain, Longhurst saw her share of over-sized propaganda portraits of the Head of State. These are still in her mind when she paints a teenager in a format in which we might expect to see the features of a great dictator. Then again, like many parents, she may have simply decided that teenagers *are* tyrants.



Kathrin Longhurst's *Muddy Waters*.

Two works that make a better attempt to escape the prison house of style are Marie Mansfield's *Charlie and Kate* – an unfussy oil sketch of collector, Kate Smith and her dog; and Renata Pari-Lewis's *Phillip*, which shows a reticent Phillip Adams blending in with other antiquities in a shadowy, cavernous room.

Kate Smith has such a bright, open face – two dark eyes and the hint of a smile – that the directness of her personality shines right out of the picture. Phillip Adams is compelling for the opposite reason. Pari-Lewis has portrayed him as

being defined by the objects and artefacts he has collected. The outspoken media personality has withdrawn to his cultivated man cave, his red shirt blending in with the colour of the walls.

– For simplicity and directness, one might also mention Kiata Mason’s brilliantly coloured portrait of artist Julia Flanagan; and Michelle Zoccolo’s *Becky, Fire Crew*, (of Rebecca Jonkers) which tells us about the bushfires in the most minimal way: one firefighter, one burnt stump and a few green shoots.

There were highly commendeds for Susan O’Doherty’s *Myfanwy Gulliver in olive green coat*, and Natasha Walsh’s tiny *Doppelganger* (self portrait). Both are among the more likeable entries, although Myf looks alarmingly angry, despite the colourful carapace. As for Walsh, she is proving adept at finding new ways to keep producing miniature self-portraits. Never has a body of work been so self-centred, yet so modest.



Kim Leutwyler's piece Dee with pink, green and blue.

One strange aspect of this year’s show was the number of works in which sitters were depicted looking away, or down, or simply closing their eyes. This applies to Michelle Hiscock, Zoe Young, Victoria Reichelt and another work by Marie Mansfield. But to leave out the eyes is arguably to omit the most important part of any portrait – the point where the viewer connects with the subject and forms an impression of the person they are observing. This impression may be true or false, depending on the painter’s skill as a psychologist or a conjuror.

There are plenty of devils who appear as angels in their portraits. We look into Rembrandt’s eyes and see a warm, sensitive human being, although a very different character emerges from his biography. And yet, it’s better to be fooled than to be confronted with an overly stylised face that has no more personality than a mask, or a sitter that refuses to meet our gaze, becoming an object rather than a subject. Looking at a portrait should suggest the opening of a story, not a closed book.