

CANBERRA TIMES 15/10/1

Canberra exhibition shows Waterhouse Natural Science Art Prize short of potential

October 10, 2014

Read later

Sasha Grishin

Email article Print



Allegory: Mermaid - Too caught up by Aly de Groot uses discarded fishing line and fish hooks to comment on the devastation they cause to marine habitats.

WATERHOUSE NATURAL SCIENCE ART PRIZE

National Archives of Australia, Queen Victoria Terrace, Parkes

Closes November 9



Colour contrast: White Nuts with Black Stripes: A Still Life, by Nick Mount

The two certainties of spring in Canberra are that Floriade will burst into bloom in Commonwealth Park, while the *Waterhouse Natural Science Art Prize* winning finalists will appear at the National Archives. Although each event is unique to Australia, there is now a certain predictability to both.

Advertisement

VICTORINOX LAUNCHES THE NEW I.N.O.X. WATCH

To celebrate the 130th anniversary of its parent company in style, Victorinox Swiss Army has pulled off a tour de force: a watch of sharp, versatile design that is so strong it defies the imagination. [Find out more](#)



The *Waterhouse Prize*, run by the South Australian Museum since 2002 in honour of the 19th century founding curator at the museum, Frederick George Waterhouse, attempts to straddle art and the natural sciences. The winners are decided by a committee of six judges, three scientists and three art-related professionals. Despite the combined purse of \$100,000, the *Waterhouse Prize* consistently punches below its weight.

In contrast, *The Blake Art Prize* for religious/spiritual art, despite having about a third of the prize purse, attracts a much stronger field of artists and enjoys national respect and prestige in the art world, something which is not true of the *Waterhouse Prize*. In some ways this may appear counter-intuitive, as one would imagine that nature would be a more likely beacon for artistic inspiration in the contemporary world than religion, but this does not seem to be the case as far as the art prizes are concerned. It could also be something as parochial as the "Adelaide factor", where the art world is focused on Melbourne and Sydney, with an occasional glance at Canberra, but what happens in Adelaide is rarely taken seriously.

This year I did not see the *Waterhouse Prize* in Adelaide with the 101 finalists selected from the original field of 627 entries from 11 countries, but have seen only the 32 winning and highly commended finalists as shown in Canberra. As in all of the previous years, this year it is a very uneven field, where accomplished botanical illustrators, this year including very fine pieces by Pauline Dewar and Heidi Willis, are juxtaposed with general nature-inspired pencil drawings, including a spirited example by Carol Hudson based on a photograph, together with some rather amateurish pieces by people who undoubtedly are sincere tree huggers, but not very interesting artists. There is a problem with exhibitions which try to please everyone and are so inclusive in their scope that in the end they appear to lack a focus. The *Waterhouse Prize* interprets "natural sciences" very broadly, so that anything from landscapes to images inspired by the great outdoors qualify.

The winning entry for the \$50,000 grand prize is a large acrylic canvas with collage, *High Tide, Wynnum*, by the veteran Gold Coast-based artist Carole King. It is a competent, but visually not very exciting rendition of the tidal edge of the mangroves. It is neither particularly conservative, nor adventurous, it is the sort of work that most judges would feel that they could live with, but without anyone being particularly excited by it. In other words, a committee decision. The use of collage with undisguised bits of print add little to our perception of the work. It is not a bad painting, but not a very exciting one.

The winner of the \$12,000 painting prize was Richard Dunlop, an artist of considerable standing who creates what he self-consciously terms "a neo-Romantic Australian landscape". His *The path of the eel* is again a large painting, this time in oils on board, where he imposes several strata of observations through which he invites the viewer to explore the slippery world of the eel. The artist enjoys combining traditions in art blending the empirical studies of the natural science illustrators of the 19th century with inventive Romantic explorations of the natural world to create something of a personal pictorial mythology. Visually it is a rather attractive picture with sufficient puzzlement and illustrative clues to create quite an effective artwork.

The \$12,000 works on paper prize went to Pamela French with her rapid ink sketches of various natural objects on blank index cards arranged as a shallow tableau with 25 of these images closely mounted together within a frame. It is quite an attractive piece when viewed from a distance, but does not stand up well to close scrutiny. Titled *Studies from the shelf II*, relating to the fact that the drawn specimens apparently sit on a shelf in the artist's home, there is a largely unrealised potential to build up a closer interrelated narrative between the images.

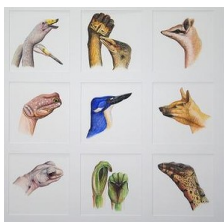
While the \$12,000 3D prize was awarded to the Sydney-Canberra glass artist, Harriet Schwarzrock, with her fascinating organic forms in the miniature installation *Breathe*. Of all of the prizewinners, I was particularly drawn to this piece and the way in which there appears to be an almost ballet-like elegant choreography in the arrangement of carefully observed biologically inspired forms. Avoiding the literalness of many of the other exhibits, Schwarzrock's blown green-tinted glass forms evoke through their shape the letters of the word "breathe". It is sufficiently subtle, so as to reveal itself slowly, yet clear and pronounced not to become lost in ambiguity.

With the massive extinction in our planet's biodiversity, the catastrophic and mounting effects of climate change, and huge threats to the extinction of species in Australia, I found this a somewhat tame exhibition. One piece which I did find hauntingly attractive was by the young Darwin-based artist Aly de Groot, titled *Mermaid - Too caught up*. The winner of last year's TOGA Art Award, she weaves rather bizarre pseudo-marine forms out of discarded fishing line and fish hooks. These creations possess an ethereal beauty, while at the same time comment on the devastation caused to marine habitats by discarded fishing lines and fishing nets.

The *Waterhouse Prize* is as yet to attain its full potential.



Flower study: Sacred Lotus, by Heidi Willis.



Fist forms: Their Lives in our Hands, by Wendy Jennings.