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## Archibald prize 2015 review - three worthy winners from an eclectic mix

<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jul/17/archibald-prize-2015-exhibition-review>

There are always upsets and curveballs in the Archibald prize. Most of the time, the art world debate concerns itself with the perennial questions of deserving winners or overlooked finalists or cruel exclusions. But it's not often a genuine surprise comes along, as with Nigel Milsom, who has won the 2015 prize for his portrait of criminal barrister Charles Waterstreet.

To catch you up on their joint story, Milsom was jailed for an armed robbery committed shortly after he won the Sulman prize in 2012. Waterstreet defended Milsom and the artist was eventually released in 2014. While in jail, Milsom also won the 2013 Doug Moran prize. His return to the Art Gallery of New South Wales as the winner of the \$100,000 Archibald isn't so much a tale of personal redemption for Milsom, but the success story of an incredibly talented artist.

The crop of finalists for 2015 was eclectic, with a few very strong contenders for winner. Milsom's work, easily the largest and most commanding picture with the sepulchral figure of Waterstreet looming from the dark shadows like Nosferatu, towers over the rest of the works, including Mitch Cairns's more modest portrait of artist Peter Powditch, hung alongside Milsom's work and awarded the runner-up sticker of "highly commended" by the gallery trustees.

Of the rest of the 47 finalists, there are some interesting pictures including Sally Ross's graphic and precise portrait of Eva Orner, Marc Etherington's faux naïve portrait of artist Del Kathryn Barton and Tony Curran's portrait adapted from an iPad sketch of businessman Luke Grealy.

The wooden spoon is once again hotly contested with Bruno Jean Grasswill's frankly ghastly image of actor Michael Caton taking the Packing Room prize, thus disqualifying it from further shame, but the real winner of worst in show goes to Shaun Gladwell for his portrait of Mark Donaldson VC. Gladwell, who is better known as a video artist, made his initial reputation as a painter but this picture, a faint reprise of German neo-expressionism, is hugely unconvincing.

The Archibald is a curious beast, with seemingly little rhyme or reason to the ebb and flow of quality in its paintings and subjects. It's something I always wondered about: why this selection? Why this winner?

In 2014, I was invited to take part in the selection of the Salon des Refuses, the SH Ervin Gallery's show of Archibald and Wynne prize rejects. The insight I gleaned from the experience is that of the 1,000 plus works that are usually entered, the vast majority have no chance – Sunday painters, protest works, amateurs and others just having a go.

When it gets down to the business of real contenders, the Archibald is a competition between about 60 paintings and, for all the hoopla and storied history, the prize is no different to any in your local community hall – it's all down to who enters.

The companion prizes to the Archibald are the Wynne prize for landscape or figure sculpture and the Sulman prize for genre painting or mural art, a pair of awards always fascinating for the oddities they throw up, both in finalists and winners.

The miniature landscape and eventual Wynne winner, Biophilia, by Natasha Bieniek is a gem, literally as smallest work in the category, too easily obscured by some commanding paintings by Kate Shaw, Ildiko Kovacs, Angus Nivison and Aaron Kinnane.

Some of the more eccentric works steal more attention, such as Theo Papatomas's Constructed Landscape – a strange and intriguing picture of paint runs and crazed surfaces – and Neil Haddon's The First Time Again, a meta-landscape mash up of samples from John Glover and Paul Gauguin and the reflectiveness of your granny's ornamental biscuit tins.

The 2015 Sulman has been won by Jason Phu for his Chinese ink and paper work, I was at yum cha when in rolled the three severed heads of Buddha: Fear, Malice and Death. Like much of Phu's recent art, it's a funny, gentle and autobiographical work, part manic poet, hungover cartoonist.

Selected by artist and former AGNSW trustee, Lindy Lee, this year's Sulman is dominated by other graphic works such as David Egan's Strolling beyond Infinity, Kate Beynon's Gaveyard Scene and Dapeng Liu's The Temple, the Sailing Boat and the Trolleybus – a surrealistic mountain scape. But for me, the greatest interest is always with the "ring-ins", such as Stephen Ormandy's gorgeous and playful Attention Seeker and Tom Carment's quietly beautiful series of miniatures Sydney Structures.

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