

Paddington Art Prize 2010 opening speech by Emeritus Professor Peter Pinson

It is said that in 1901, the year of our Federation, Australia's population was already 70% urban. We were then one of the most urban nations in the world. We still are.

Yet, in 1901, although most people were living in towns and cities, the landscape and the outback - its images and symbols - still occupied a key position in Australia's national sentiment. The landscape, and our relationship to it, loomed behind our notions of identity, destiny and nationhood.

I think it still does.

The importance accorded to images of the landscape in those days was reflected in the fact that by 1901, the Wynne Prize for "the best landscape painting of Australian scenery" was already in its fifth year. The Archibald Prize for portraiture would not be inaugurated for another twenty years, until 1921. Landscape painting had quickly become the "great" subject of Australian art.

Interestingly the Wynne prize did not seem to ignite the same controversies as the Archibald, with its regular but often tediously technical spats about questions of caricature, the role of photography, whether the subject of a portrait had to formally sit for the work, and the degree to which an abstraction could remain a portrait. On the other hand (excluding the issue of plagiarism and quotation which can occur in any genre), I can only remember one occasion when controversy really swirled around landscape painting in the Wynne: in January 1945 - the year after the Dobell Archibald Prize fiasco - the Wynne was won by Sali Herman, with a painting of Kings Cross tenements. Cries went up: Is a cityscape a landscape? Were sordid buildings a suitable subject for high art? It was a storm in a tea cup, and the community's concept of the term landscape simply broadened, like elastic, to include cityscapes and seascapes.

I recently mounted an exhibition of Sydney Abstract painting of 1958-1964. The artists were abstract expressionists included Leonard Hessing, Robert Hughes, Frank Hodgkinson, Eva Kubbos, etc. I was struck by the fact that underlying their abstraction, almost all were dealing with the rhythms, shapes, textures and colours of the landscape, in a way that most of the leading American abstract expressionists didn't. I don't think I'd ever been in such a brown room. It showed how embedded the landscape was in the sensibilities of these fundamentally abstract artists.

The fascination and affection for the Australian landscape continues. The landscape remains a versatile vehicle for exploring questions of where we live, how we relate to where we live, and the

extent to which our real or imagined physical environment can provoke our fears and apprehensions. Ultimately, many landscapes tell us not just where the artists are, but who they are.

I'd like to congratulate the short-listed exhibitors and to acknowledge the principal sponsors Menzies Art Brands, International Art Services, UNSW College of Fine Arts - with whom the prize-winner can create a limited edition print probably with COFA's master printmaker Michael Kempson - and the remarkable and generous Marlene Antico. I think this prize now stands with the Wynne as one of Sydney's two prime awards for landscape painting.

Marlene used to conduct an art gallery in Paddington, and my cousin exhibited there in a mixed exhibition of plein air landscape painting. This cousin has just published a most amusing memoir, and in what might appear to some of you to be an opportunistic plug for a relative's product - well, it is of course - I shall close with a story he relates in this book. The memoir is called "Tell 'Em Nothing, Take 'Em Nowhere", and the author is Max Cullen. Max writes that he had a work in an exhibition at the S.H Ervin Gallery. He noticed Margaret Olley looking at it very closely. Max sidled up. Continuing to examine the painting, Olley said, "You're looking more and more like Ian Fairweather". Now, usually artists don't like their work being likened to the work of another artist, but Max admired Fairweather's paintings, so he took Margaret Olley's comment as a compliment.

"Thank you, Margaret" he replied.

Olley looked at him sharply and said, "Not your painting. You. You're looking more and more like Ian Fairweather."

Peter Pinson: Opening address at Paddington Art Prize, October 2010