

Analysis: The wrecking of the Warrnibald



A stunning portrait of former art teacher Ollie Morgan, by Megan Cheyne, is among the 16 portraits vying for this year's Warrnibald prize (detail).

Analysis – Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] I[/dropcap]t sounds almost inconceivable, but the wonderful and extremely popular Warrnibald portrait prize has been wrecked within just 12 months of falling under the control of the Warrnambool Art

Gallery.

How?

By quietly turning it into a “prestigious” art prize where many of the local artists of all abilities and ages who entered will not have their works shown.

Indeed those works deemed not good enough have already been returned to the artists who took the time and effort to capture someone from the local community who they considered worthy of being painted.

As a result, only **16** of the original **26** entrants are on display – spread thinly across the gallery space and under ambient lighting – and in contention for the \$2000 main prize and \$2000 People’s Choice Award.

But it is not about missing out on the chance to win a sizeable prize donated by WDEA (Western District Employment Access) that has disappointed those artists and supporters who contacted *Bluestone* in disgust – it is about the spirit of the prize being ruined.



[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] A[/dropcap]s one artist said, the person she had chosen to paint was bitterly disappointed that she wouldn’t be able to take her family and friends along to see her finished portrait on the walls of the Warrnambool Art Gallery.

Another amateur artist said that she was embarrassed to have her work rejected after being encouraged to enter by a friend

for the first time after being convinced it was “a lot of fun”.

To add insult to injury, those who missed out had to forfeit their \$30 entry fee.



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Anyone who knows the [history of the prize](#) knows that it was never meant to be a professional art prize where only the best artists get to have their work exhibited.

It was the polar opposite.

Under the control of WDEA, which [runs the Artlink program](#) for people with disabilities, anyone who wanted to “have a go” at painting the portrait of someone who they believed deserved recognition for their contribution to the local community was urged to do so.

It meant lesser known and amateur artists got to hang their work alongside some of the region’s best talents.

It also meant, even more importantly, that the “quiet heroes” of our community – neighbours, volunteers, charity workers – could be honoured alongside the higher profile people of our region.

It was a winning formula, with the Warrnibald attracting people who might not normally even visit a gallery, but would do so to see paintings of faces they might know.



Matthew Clarke's portrait of artist and art teacher, Glenn Morgan, is among the final 16 portraits chosen for display.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] W[/dropcap]hen WDEA passed the hosting of the prize to the Warrnambool Art Gallery, it did so with every expectation that the spirit of the prize would continue and, in 2015, it did: all 40 entries were displayed at WAG.

But this year's prize contained a significant change in the [small print of the entry form](#).

You can read it for yourself:

[box]This in **2015**: "All entries will be accepted for inclusion in the exhibition, **except in the case of there being more than**

50 entries. In this instance, the Judges will determine the final selection. Artists whose work is not exhibited **will have their entry fee refunded.**" (emphasis added)

And this in **2016**: "The **final exhibition will be selected from received entries.** Works are not automatically included, and **entry fees are forfeited** if an artwork is not selected for display." (emphasis added) [/box]

And with that, the whole thing changed from inclusion to exclusion.

So how did this happen and who changed it?

We asked the new gallery director **Vanessa Gerrans** and in an emailed reply she said:

"While the Warrnibald has always had an element of fun, it also carries a certain prestige and showcases the talent within our region. With this in mind, WAG and WDEA decided to compile a shortlist for exhibition in 2016.

"Via the application form, artists submitting portraits were informed that not all works would automatically be included in the final exhibition. This is a standard format in competitive exhibitions such as the inspiration for this exhibition – the Archibald Prize.

"The passionate debate that surrounds which works are included, the selection of the winner by the guest judge and the work identified as the Peoples Choice provides great opportunity for discussion and robust expression of points of view. And ensures the relevance of this event."

Ms Gerrans mentions that WDEA agreed to the shortlisting process, but *Bluestone* has been told that WDEA was stunned and angry to learn that only 16 paintings had made the cut.



[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] S[/dropcap] who picked the shortlist?

“Usual curatorial processes were applied to selection,” Ms Gerrans said via email.

We can only assume that WAG curator **Gareth Colliton** had to be excused on the grounds of a conflict of interest, given that one of the 16 portraits selected was that by last year’s winner, the [sublimely talented Madeleine Peters](#), who Mr Colliton now employs at his new gallery business, Wisharts, in Port Fairy.

I want to stress that this is no reflection on Madeleine’s work – it more than deserves to be there – but for Mr Colliton to exclude himself would surely be in line with normal Warrnambool City Council protocols.

The winner of the 2016 Warrnibald portrait prize, as judged by Hamilton Art Gallery director **Sarah Schmidt** will be announced

at the Warrnambool Art Gallery tomorrow night (Friday 29/7/16).

It will be a packed house, no doubt, but to my mind the glaring blank spaces on the walls reflect the holes in the prize: the surprise, joy and communal spirit that is now missing from the Warrnibald.

Let's hope that spirit returns next year.

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