

Why doesn't W'bool have a major art prize?



Winners of the inaugural South-West IWD Women's Art Prize, Marion Manifold, left, Claire Drylie, second from right, and Megan Radley with judge, Dr Carmel Wallace, centre. Image: Bluestone Magazine.

Analysis – Carol Altmann

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[/dropcap]ost of us probably haven't heard of the Tatiara District Council and I certainly hadn't until I stumbled across its \$12,000 biennial art prize.

The [acquisitive prize](#) began in 2013 and offers \$10,000 to the winner, plus another \$2000 shared across a range of categories: this is a \$12,000 investment by a council with a population of around 7000 people spread across places including Keith and Bordertown.

Further afield, in the red-dust steel town of Whyalla (popln:

20,000), there is a biennial City of Whyalla Art Prize offering a total of \$28,000 courtesy of the local council and some serious support from the local mining companies.

And if we cast our eye around regional Victoria, we can find, for example:

- Australia's most prestigious ceramic prize – the \$50,000 Sidney Myer Fund Australian Ceramic Award – hosted at the Shepparton Art Gallery;
- the \$20,000 Guirguis New Art Prize hosted every two years by Ballarat Art Gallery (and funded by a local surgeon);
- and the fantastic [Corangamarah Art Prize](#), a \$7500 acquisitive prize organised by Colac Health and Red Rock Regional Theatre and Gallery.

In Warrnambool, however, the council doesn't fund or facilitate any art major prize and has no immediate plans to do so.

And despite our city being home to some very wealthy individuals and businesses by virtue of inheritance, hard work or both, they appear to be a miserly bunch when it comes to supporting a major art prize.



SCOPE Galleries director Dr Liza McCosh, left, with guest judge for last year's Art Concerning Environment award, Marita Smith, director of Gallerysmith North Melbourne. Image: Bluestone Magazine.

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[/dropcap]he most lucrative Warrnambool-based art prize, as it stands, is the [biennial SCOPE Art Concerning Environment Award](#) (\$5000 first prize) organised since 2012 by SCOPE Galleries owner, **Dr Liza McCosh**, who has set a standard that few others have chosen to follow.

Instead, apart from a few notable exceptions, most of the private support for the arts comes from the estates of past benefactors – such as the Fletcher Jones Foundation, and Gwen and Edna Jones Foundations – or from generous souls who live elsewhere, like Professor Barbara Van Ernst and Geoff Handbury.

Over the years, Warrnambool has had some highly respected art prizes, such as the Henri Worland Memorial Print Prize in the 80s and 90s.

The most recent was the New Social Commentaries Art Prize – a biennial \$15,000, acquisitive prize hosted by the Warrnambool Art Gallery (WAG) and funded by the FJ Foundation from 2004 until 2008. Unfortunately, in 2008, a [controversy over the awarding of the prize](#) saw it lose much of its lustre.

Shortly after WAG director John Cunningham was appointed in 2010, he announced the prize was being reviewed. It has not been seen – or replaced – since.

The council won't allow John to speak to me directly, and he has since announced [he is leaving Warrnambool](#) to take up a new position, but council spokesman Nick Higgins said there was “no plan” to replace it.

In the gap, it is not surprising that two, smaller art prizes have been embraced enthusiastically by the local art scene.



Where the Warrnibald began: former Artlink teachers and artists Gayle Clark, left, and Jenny Altmann, with artist Alex Rees. Image: Bluestone Magazine.

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[/dropcap]first, the [inaugural South West IWD Art Prize](#) organised by Women's Health and Wellbeing Barwon South-West and the IWD Alliance saw a record crowd pack into The Artery for its launch earlier this year.

Despite the predictable, put-down comments from some men about it being limited to women artists, this \$1500 acquisitive prize has the potential to grow into something very special for Warrnambool, along the lines of a mini [Portia Geach Memorial Award](#) that has become so prestigious, artists are thrilled just to be long-listed.

With more funding – and perhaps a catchier title – the women's art prize could easily become a premier art event for south-west Victoria and The Artery.

Similarly, the [Warrnibald portrait prize](#) is so perfect for Warrnambool – because of our links to father and son John and Joseph Archibald – that I can't believe it hasn't been running for decades.

It was the brainchild of **Gayle Clark**, who formerly worked at Artlink, which is run by WDEA to help disadvantaged people or those with disabilities. The first Warrnibald was held in 2012 and attracted a full house.

When [WDEA closed the Artlink gallery](#) in 2014, it looked like the popular Warrnibald would go too, but thankfully the Warrnambool Art Gallery has seen the merits of hosting this prize in 2015, even if the council has failed to throw any money into the prize pool.

So we have two art prizes, still in their infancy, just begging to be nurtured with philanthropic, business or council dollars to cement their place in our art calendar.

Can we do it – or will Tatiara District Council leave us looking like a bunch of tight wads?