

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Controversial for not being controversial

On the eve of the judging and public exhibition of the fourth annual Mortimore Art Prize, the co-creators reveal the frustration that led to the Prize's creation.



Peter Mortimore (left) and Mike Coward are helping to put Dubbo on the radar of many Australian artists

MANY ART PRIZES IN AUSTRALIA SEEM TO think they need to be controversial to be successful. On that count, the Dubbo-based Mortimore Art Prize is very different. Its back-to-basics approach of rewarding realist artists, whose work actually looks like the subject, is striking a chord with everyday art-lovers.

Dubbo Photo News Lifestyle interviewed the two men who created the art prize that is helping to put Dubbo on the map in the art world, artist Peter Mortimore and art-lover Mike Coward.

What was the main motivation for getting the prize up and running?

Peter: It stemmed basically from a discussion about the Archibald Prize. It is supposed to be a portraiture competition but we had a question mark about a lot of the works that were being named finalists.

Entries in the Archibald are supposed to be painted from life and it's actually supposed to look like the subject, but with a lot of the entries you really struggle to see the likeness in the works.

(Their discussion then moved on to what Peter and Mike saw as a similar problem with other well known Australian art prizes.)

The Wynne Prize is a prize for landscape painting which a lot of the well known landscape painters such as Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton have won. These days it's very hard to see a landscape in it.

The Sulman Prize is supposed to be about moments in everyday life, but a lot of the paintings in that really should be vetted and children under a certain age shouldn't be allowed to view it.

So (the catalyst for the Mortimore Prize) really came from me venting my spleen to Mike one day and he said he was going to start a new competition.

Has it been difficult getting a following for the Mortimore Prize?

Mike: Getting it off the ground was very difficult. Credit where credit's due, my ex-wife played a pretty important part in the first 12 months, helping to get it going. We sent out 5000 letters. We only had about a two percent response rate.

P: But I think the low response was due to people being gun shy. There is still a huge number of artists who couldn't be bothered entering an art prize. I've asked them why and they tell me they've sent entries in to other prizes and the organisers haven't even opened them. They go and look at the crap that wins (and they find that disheartening).

Do you think the interest in the Mortimore Prize has snowballed over the past four years?

M: We're at the point now after four years that I originally thought would take six or seven years. I knew the public support was out there for a prize like this.

Is the lack of recognition for realist work due to the fact it's not considered trendy, or that it's not being recognised very much by the arts community in Sydney?

M: If you talk to a lot of art people in Sydney about it, they don't realise that people still paint like this.

What has been the most common comment you've heard from visitors to the exhibition in previous years?

M: It's probably more the case that people are actually speechless.

With the magnificent painting that Ross Harvey won with two years ago, I saw people walk up to it and audibly gasp. In modern times, you don't see paintings at that level. It's the sort of reaction you'd expect for the works of 17th century masters.

P: People come back to see the exhibition again. Often there's a painting that's grabbed them and they have to come back and look at it again.

People are starved for this sort of work. Our galleries are so obsessed with 'ground-breaking' or 'contemporary' art, but people just want to see good paintings. They're not interested in seeing someone reinvent the wheel, they just



Phil Ryan



Kristian Mumford *Hannah in Straw*

want to see good stuff. (It reminds me of) that lovely old saying, “I don’t know much about art but I know what I like.”

M: Most people just can’t relate to most of the abstract stuff these days.

P: And the artists themselves are thrilled to have an opportunity to display their works amongst artists who paint in a similar way, and to be judged by other artists who they hold in an elevated view.

Paul Delprat (who was one of the judges for last year’s Mortimore Prize) runs one of the leading art schools in the world for the traditional arts, and to have someone like that even look at their work – to have Paul Delprat’s eyes pass over their work – is very exciting for them.

Is part of the ambition of the Mortimore Prize to encourage the next generation of young artists?

That’s happening already. Paul Delprat has handed out scholarships to his art school to some of our previous finalists. There’s one 15-year-old girl who has been given one of these scholarships which she can only use once she turns 18 – and she can hardly wait!

M: We’ve had some kids who’ve submitted their works to the Mortimore Prize, Paul has spotted their work and (was so impressed that he) gave them a scholarship based on just one work.

P: (Well known Lightning Ridge artist) John Murray told me other day this prize is very important. He and I have talked about the number of Australian art prizes that have gone to the dark side.

In an art world where art prizes seem to want to be controversial, does it worry you that the Mortimore Art Prize isn’t?

P: (Responds quickly) But it IS controversial. It causes a lot of comment because it doesn’t kowtow to what seems to be the accepted norm in art – (and that is) that you have to challenge public norms and decency.

Why can’t artists just challenge themselves to do a good painting and create something that is as close as possible to what they want to achieve?

M: I can give you my goal (with this prize) in just one sentence: to have the public walk away saying just how beautiful the exhibition is.

Peter, you’ve mentioned previously that the Mortimore Prize is sticking strictly to its own entry guidelines, so that if a painting arrives that doesn’t match the criteria then it isn’t accepted. It seems only fair to do so, but the fact you feel obliged to point it out infers that’s not always the case with art prizes in this country. How big a problem is it?

P: It’s a big problem – a major problem.

Why do they do it? I think it’s what we mentioned before – that they’re looking to be controversial. Everyone seems to think you have to be ground-breaking, but all the ground has already been broken in art. It’s all been done.

The only thing that hasn’t been done is an individual



Gillian Pedrana *Peter Davis*



Steph Brown *Salt of the Earth*

artist creating an individual work. All the paintings entered in the Mortimore Prize are individual – they are one of a kind.

You can go to some of the contemporary art shows and you see clones of Brett Whitely and John Olsen... but they’re just clones of these artists.

With the artists who enter the Mortimore Prize, all they’re doing is what they’re good at. They’re alone in their studio producing their work, and they’re doing it to the best of their ability.

I don’t think these artists are seeking recognition for what they do, they just want an opportunity to display their work.

We had one artist this year who nearly cried when we told them they’d been accepted into the list of finalists. And this is a really well-credentialed artist who I’ve known about for years.

The 2009 Mortimore Prize

Prize money: \$33,000

Categories: Portraiture, Landscape, Waterscape, Still Life, Drawing and Sculpture

Judging will take place on September 26

Exhibition will open to the public at St Brigid’s Church Hall in Brisbane Street, Dubbo from September 27 to October 18

It will then move to The Scots College, Bellevue Hill, Sydney from October 23 to 25

The prize winners will be shown in the St George Bank, Dubbo foyer from October 28 to November 20

Then to KIKU ARTS Gallery, Bungendore in the ACT from November 26 to December 21

● This page features a selection of this year’s finalists

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On the topic of art prizes that don’t stick to their own entry criteria, Peter Mortimore says: *It’s a BIG problem. I think... they’re looking to be controversial*
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