

Raising the stakes

The proliferation of art awards & prizes

By Margaret Moore

In a field of endeavour that can be as much vocation as career and which is notoriously undervalued, with hours of discussion and reams of paper regularly given to improving its initiatives, policies and funding, it might seem churlish to question the role of financial prizes for the visual arts. When an individual or organisation is prepared to put up prize money for art, and artists can choose whether or not to participate, it has the appearance of being only favourable.

Art Prizes can be favourable, and their proliferation suggests many see them this way. Dissecting the model though reveals that artists should think carefully when choosing to participate. Rarely is a prize put forward out of unencumbered benevolence. It might be as much to build a market as a collection. It could be the promotion of corporate citizenship. Motivations that within them selves might be well reasoned but significantly, the enthusiastic individuals and organisations with the goodwill and the money could be counselled toward alternative possibilities for their patronage. The Art Prize Exhibition sometimes seems the least imaginative solution.

Art Prizes cause artists to compete. For some this notion is an anathema to a professional practice that is evolutionary, accumulative and multi-faceted and that should not or can not be "judged" comparatively but rather experienced and understood more inclusively. For others an art prize entry is another form of exposure of name and work, the potential for dollars either via the prize or additional sales of work and another exhibition for the curriculum vitae.

It could be argued that the prize entering process is not so far removed from applying for a grant, competing for a public commission or buyers choosing works in a commercial exhibition. In these instances though there is greater scope for supplying supporting material and other intermediaries that might or might not be seen as an advantage. The choice to participate remains.

The outcome of Art Prizes is reliant upon the selection and judging panels, and the comparative reach of the publicity and public relations generated by the organisers. From my experience, and perhaps contrary to suspicion, judging panels do invariably take this responsibility seriously and the process conducted as fairly as possible within the given criteria. Stalemates seem more rare than might be anticipated, even though panellists might bring diverse expertise and differing persuasions.

Having said this if the boundaries are not clear or the intentions not transparent the results can be less than satisfying. I recall an instance early in my career that made me sensitised to the importance of integrity of process and being well informed of intentions. As a public curator I was invited to "preview" an exhibition in the private sector. Upon arrival **I found myself expected to be choosing a winner, which begrudgingly I did feeling caught by a sense of public duty**, only to turn up to the Opening where my choice had been over ruled by an artist who had been invited to preview the exhibition after me. This awkward scenario was never repeated and my interpretation of a sense of public duty quickly matured! Thankfully in that instance the principles learned far outweighed the consequences. There is much to be said for artists and judges alike making themselves aware of what it is they are entering. The stakes can be much higher.

Who could forget the kerfuffle surrounding Fiona Hall being awarded the \$100,000 Contempora5 Prize in 1997 at the National Gallery of Victoria when the Premier of the day intervened to direct the Gallery acquire a work by one of the other five finalists. This Award was abandoned with the change of government in 1999. The Archibald Prize has survived its controversial courtroom history in the 1940s over what constituted portraiture to the present where it seems sustained by the hotbed of conjecture it elicits. Almost as much media attention is given to the Salon des Refuses and the Packer's Prize awarded by the art handlers as to the real award.

The controversy and sensationalism that can surround Art Prizes is what makes them newsworthy in mainstream media thereby attracting audiences and attracting other companies to want that same action. The news bulletins generated might be good for the sponsoring companies, the host galleries and possibly the artists though it is at this point that many a participating artist might be wishing that they had forgone that entry form and applied for a residency or studio scholarship instead!

Even so Art Prizes cannot be discussed in blanket or dismissive terms only. Most recipients of the groundbreaking Moët and Chandon Fellowships would comment upon their win as life changing and rewarding. Notably it was not confined to a cash prize. It offered time and a studio overseas for production and professional growth. State Galleries too were the recipients of funds for acquisitions filtering the affects of the award beyond the single winner. The private patronage inspiring the Clemenger Award at the National Gallery of Victoria and the Primavera exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art allows for curatorial research and vision and frequently results in artists showing a body of work or an ambitious idea that might otherwise be difficult to realise. Such initiatives are not immune from contention, but they offer a less cut and thrust approach to prize competitions.

It is food for thought that when perusing an artists resume, all but the most prestigious prizes seem rendered obscure. Whereas being the recipient of a Samstag Scholarship, or Basel Exchange, a Fellowship or inclusion in curator selected exhibitions or being in receipt of a major commission is more likely to catch the eye

of informed curators and Collectors. There are many ways to build meaningful collections and to support artistic and cultural growth. An Art Prize is but one way. When a corporation or government department puts up any money for art it would be a brave person to reject it but a braver person would help shape it to its most meaningful contribution to the health of the arts. For artists entering the prize exhibition realm, do so with open eyes, thick skin and with vigour, and refrain from over personalising the experience or speculating too seriously on what might or might not be.