

Wai Art Column, 6 May 2008

By Anna-Marie Kingsley

I've just returned from 5 weeks in Tasmania. In my travels I discovered that Tasmanian's are as deeply embarrassed by "Ozzie Ozzie Ozzie, Oi Oi Oi" as is the rest of the developed world. I also learned that one of the many things I love about New Zealand is that the native wild life here is not inherently engineered to bite you or scare you to death. I was regularly frightened senseless by enormous huntsman spiders stalking across the bedroom walls late at night, and on our one and only excursion into the bush below their house, the Small trod in a bull ant nest. Admittedly rural Tasmanian's don't have to bother mowing their lawns, but the downside is that they are up to their ankles in wallaby poo.

In another rather startling moment, I was about to borrow the car, when suddenly sister's hubby sprinted out of the house and down to the garage. I got there just in time to see him pull down the sun visor and a HUGE huntsman spider land on the drivers seat and leg it out the open door. "Thought I had better de-spider the car for you" he proudly announced. I could just imagine what would have happened if I had been rattling along on the open road and the sun got too bright...

Twin sister and I saw as many art exhibitions and galleries as possible, mainly because it was a fantastic excuse to leave the multitude of Smalls and Hubby at home. I can still remember their wee faces pressed up against the window, as we roared down the drive squealing ecstatically, "We're free, we're free!"

Given that commenting critically in depth on the New Zealand art scene is just way too fraught for an intellectual lightweight like me; I'll do what all insecure Kiwis do and blow raspberries at the Aussies instead.

While I was there the Tassie newspapers were just brimming with indignation about the winner of the Archibald prize. The annual Archibald Prize for portraiture is one of Australia's oldest and best-known visual arts awards. The Prize was first awarded in 1921 and is now worth \$50,000. That's quite a lot of loot. This years winner was Del Kathryn Barton, with her family portrait entitled "*You are what is most beautiful about me, a self portrait with Kell and Arella*". I thought it was quite a neat portrait. Okay the kids were spooky in a alien possessed kind of way, and Mum looked like she if had just stuck her finger in a light socket. But hey, from one stressed mummy to another, we all have days like that and Ms Barton certainly managed to depict one of "those" days" extremely well. But goodness me, the vitriol that dripped from the media was a bit startling to the gentle kiwi artist. "It only won because it was so HUGE!" "It's the ugliest portrait I've ever seen!" Steady on mate... this is someone's nearest and dearest. We assumed she liked her kids because of the title, although artworks are often named in slight desperation after the third glass of wine. I must say I'd be rather hurt by the media's comments if I was the artist... although the \$50 big ones might temper the squashed feelings.

And then the Bald Archys winner hit the news. I didn't quite grasp the politics of the whole Oz art scene but for a bit of background this is what was reported in the paper: "Peter Batey and the Director of the National Gallery of Australia, Ron Radford, have at least one thing in common. They both think that art prizes like the Archibald are inherently absurd. "Let's not kid ourselves the Archibald is about art," Mr Radford said earlier this year. "The Archibald Prize isn't the most important art exhibition, just the most important circus." Just as the subjectivity of taste makes prizes "silly in cooking", he argued, turning "everything into winners and losers" is "even more silly in art".

Crikey, loaded paintbrushes at dawn...

Apparently for 12 years, Mr Batey has been banging on about the same point. In 1994, he began Australia's "other premier portrait prize", the Bald Archys. Described as a wilful spoof of the Archibald, it accepts satirical portraits of Australians – and uses a cockatoo to judge the winner. "I wanted to create an art competition that had a go at the pretensions of the Art establishment," says Batey, who argues his pet bird, 'Maude', is as qualified to judge art as anyone.

I have vivid imaginings of how Maude indicates the winner...

The conservative newspapers reported the winner as "This year's Bald Archy went to James Brennan. A Newcastle railway worker, James took home \$5,000 prize money for his painting. The painting shows Princess Mary (originally a Tasmanian) and her husband, Crown Prince Frederick, of Denmark, in their underwear. The couple's children and pet Tasmanian devil's are also depicted."

The slightly more down to earth newspapers came across with more detail and sounding a little more aghast. There was "Our Mary" breastfeeding the baby, depicted with thunder thighs and wearing Ug boots. The toddler was perched on the potty with his finger up his nose. And the handsome prince was dressed only in a pair of grubby Y-fronts scratching himself.

Personally I thought it was a gorgeous portrait; the light was exquisite, and the colours beautifully rich. Not to mention artistically questioning some of the universal fundamentals... "I wonder where my own Ug boots are?" and "Do they really still sell Y-fronts?"

The newspapers went on... "And, AND he's a *railway worker!*" Makes me wonder where in the social strata stay-home-mummies slots in... above or below railway workers? Isn't it odd when the Australians start to invoke class, the word "convict" pops unbidden into our minds? Quickly banished of course, replaced with the much more politically correct, "Of course, I'm sure they were all the progeny of the ships doctors..."

From my somewhat naive position, twiddling the shoelaces at the bottom of the pin-stripped trouser leg of the art world, I am assuming that the New Zealand art scene doesn't take itself quite so seriously and isn't quite so... is

“snarky” the word? At least I hope we are all a bit more grown up and mature enough to behave prettily. As my fellow Wai Art Trustee Jane Giles has repeatedly told me, “The three most important things in life are to firstly to be kind; secondly to be kind; and thirdly... to be kind.” Jane was a kindergarten teacher and therefore knows more about the interpersonal workings of “how to get on with people” than pretty much anyone else on the planet. If Jane can get two-dozen four year olds to interact nicely while slapping watery tempera paint onto a bit of flimsy butchers paper with a sharp ended paintbrush without anyone losing eyes or limbs then it's no wonder the Wai Art Awards run so smoothly.

Speaking of which... the Wai Art Awards are almost upon us. The judging panel is nearly finalized; undoubtedly a slightly more sophisticated system than a skittery cockatoo. We are busy organizing a better system of displaying the artwork thanks to a very generous donation of plywood from JNL. We have also limited the artworks to one per artist and bumped up the entry fee slightly, but we are still anticipating receiving between 150 to 175 artworks from Wairarapa artists.

Entry forms can be downloaded from the Wai Art website at <http://www.waiart.org.nz> or picked up from the Carterton Information Centre or The Village Art Shop. The prize money increases each year too. This year we are offering \$3000 first prize very generously being sponsored by The Village Art Shop in Greytown, \$1500 second prize, and \$900 third prize. 1880 Cottage Company is kindly sponsoring third prize. We also have three highly commended prizes of \$200 each, and a peoples choice award of \$500. All visitors to the exhibition get a gold star in exchange for their gold coin entry fee and they get to choose their favourite artwork and stick their star beside the artwork. The Wai Art Awards are opening on Friday 7pm May 30th at the Carterton Exhibition Centre. Tickets to the awards presentation and exhibition opening are \$30 and available from the Carterton Information Centre.

The Wai Art Awards open to the public on Saturday 31 May at 10am and continues for four weeks to Sunday 4pm June 29th. Entry is gold coin donation and visitors get a gold star to place beside their favourite artwork for a peoples choice award. The Carterton Exhibition Centre is open every day from 10am to 4pm.

Even though this is the third year we are running the exhibition it still holds all the excitement and anticipation of the first big event. I think it's the mystery of the artwork that will come in through the door, the enthusiasm of all the artists in sharing their artistic creations, and the delight and surprise shown by the exhibition visitors. It's just a wonderful process to be part of.

Paulette Harris painted the 2008 Wai Art Awards promotional artwork for our posters, entitled “The Village” (mixed media on canvas, 1m x 1m).