

Archibald brushes competition aside

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The portrait prize attracts all the attention, but what about the other winners? Adam Fulton investigates.

Michael Lindeman remembers the media scrum around the Archibald Prize winner on announcement day last year at the Art Gallery of NSW.

The Sydney artist had just won the Sulman Prize, which is awarded along with the Wynne Prize minutes before the main attraction. But the media were interested only in the Archibald. Of the three prizewinners, only the Archibald's is invited to immediately respond and is then surrounded by cameras and reporters.

Lindeman was not asked for a single interview. "Definitely the pack was after [the Archibald winner] ... It's like the art version of the Melbourne Cup," he says.

The scene is played out annually at Australia's best-known portrait prize. With a \$50,000 bounty, the Archibald is not the country's most lucrative prize for painted portraits - that is the \$150,000 Moran prize - nor necessarily its most prestigious. But few art contests come close to generating such attention.

Beside it, the Sir John Sulman Prize for genre painting and the Wynne Prize for landscape painting or figurative sculpture are lucky to rate more than a passing mention. Yet their cash prizes are sizeable - the Wynne \$25,000 and the Sulman \$20,000 - and they attract comparable numbers of entries. This year, the Wynne drew 810 to the Archibald's 798, while the Sulman had 633.

But the focus remains on the Archibald. The finalists of the three prizes are exhibited in tandem at the Art Gallery of NSW, but at any time visitors are "overwhelmingly" viewing works in the Archibald rather than the other two, a gallery spokeswoman says.

The art gallery's director, Edmund Capon, acknowledges the Wynne and Sulman can seem overlooked: "It's perfectly true - and ever thus," he says.

But they profit from being in the Archibald's company. "If it was the annual Wynne and Sulman prizes without the Archibald, I don't think the world would take a huge amount of notice," Capon says.

"Let's be realistic about things: they benefit hugely from the fact that the Archibald is the absolutely fundamental popular attraction."

Holding the three prizes in tandem "works brilliantly", he says, and they complement one another.

The artist Jon Cattapan, who judged the 2009 Sulman Prize - in contrast to 11 judges for the Archibald and Wynne - says the "glamour and prestige" associated with the Archibald mean the other two allow for "quieter" entries.

But he also believes that because those two prizes are less thematically restricted than the Archibald and their guidelines more open to interpretation, their finalists can more thoroughly reflect what is happening in Australian art.

"By default it gives you an overview of what's going on in contemporary painting," he says.

The Archibald is not the oldest of the three prizes - that is the Wynne, which began in 1897. The Archibald started in 1921 and the Sulman in 1936. The three were first held concurrently in 1939.

Occasionally, interest in the smaller two spikes. Last year, a firestorm erupted around the Wynne over Sam Leach's winning canvas, which bore an uncanny likeness to a painting by a 17th-century Dutch master. That attention, however, was an aberration.

But what of the Sulman and Wynne winners? Do they feel left out? Not at all, it seems. Lindeman, for one, liked that reporters rushed past him to get to the Archibald winner.

"I definitely knew going into the prize that the Archibald is the big one but in a way it's nice," he says. "I'm quite shy about being interviewed ... so it suited me. With all the attention being focused on [the Archibald winner], I can just kind of fly under the radar."

"In a way it's good for the Wynne and the Sulman to piggyback along."

The Sulman carries its own prestige and winning boosted his career, says Lindeman, who has also made the finals of this year's Archibald. "There's been a lot more interest in my work since winning ... The whole event was very rewarding."

The Sydney artist Lionel Bawden, who won the 2009 Wynne, says the Archibald's domination has its benefits.

"It was really emotionally overwhelming [to win] so for me it's a relief not to have that rush of media," he says of announcement day. "Winning the prize itself was incredible enough ... It gave me a kind of validation on a personal level that I found really satisfying."

There are other advantages. "Lots of the associated press around the Archibald ... is not necessarily 100 per cent positive, so it's not a bad thing to be slightly overlooked," Bawden says.

In any case, "in the art world, people have more of a perspective on what's going on in all three prizes ... so I found it had definite cachet".

Both artists think it far better to have the three held together.

"It makes the whole event more interesting," Lindeman says. "Artists who go into the Sulman and Wynne realise it's not the key prize on offer, but it's still a prestigious prize and an exciting time."

The winners of all three prizes will be announced on Friday.