

Higher Art

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“Why do people think artists are special? It’s just another job” stated Andy Warhol, famous for bursting people’s bubbles – his own included. He was right, of course and yet the question of why one artist succeeds over others and how art is evaluated are enigmas to most people. If art is a job then what are the markers of a successful candidate? Insite sought informed comment which may illuminate some of the qualities of our 2008 list of “Artists to Watch”.

First the bad news: the elephant in the room which cannot be ignored is that many are called and few are chosen. John Barrett-Lennard, Director of the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery at UWA, a 20 year veteran of curating, has been on the front line observing emerging artists. He acknowledges the harsh reality that comes with the terrain and sometimes unfair expectations. “It is still the case that you can go into art schools and look at the graduating student exhibitions at the end of the year and realize that maybe ten per cent will still be active in art in ten years time and perhaps two per cent of them will have built a significant career,” he says. “In art your early career steps are seen as so critical that if you don’t make a success of it after five or ten years it is assumed that you never will. If you became an engineer you are not expected to be a world class at 25. It is a fairly horrible expectation and it is psychologically tough on some of the kids.”

Putting it further into perspective Gary Dufour, Acting director of the Art Gallery of Western Australia believes that most pieces of art have about 2.1 seconds to grab your attention or “you’re gone...off down the hall.”

In fact, if you picture the mass of graduates from art courses, fresh from their final exhibition as baby turtle hatchlings making their dash towards the sea, most being picked off by predators or being overcome by obstacles before they reach it, you might start to appreciate just what it is the survivors have. Certainly curators who are actively engaged

in assessing art to acquire it for collections have to make difficult decisions about what makes compelling art and which artists 'voices' have the potential to resonate.

Jackie Dunn is senior curator for artbank – a national government run arts support program which is the largest buyer of contemporary art in Australia. All pieces from the collection are available to rent and the proceeds are reinvested back into the collection. Based in Sydney, Artbank has a showroom at Perth's Hyatt hotel. Acquisitions are focused on emerging artists from all states. Why a piece makes the cut, says Jackie, is a tricky question: "It doesn't matter how much acquisition criteria one has for a collection – works also just have to speak to you. They have to be exciting, be innovative in terms of ideas and they have to be works of quality," she says. "It's not about novelty but about a fresh new voice or a new language that someone is developing."

Sometimes, says Jackie, it is just a matter of who is being spoken about and why. "Why is it that an artist seems to be in a whole host of new shows, and people are talking about them and curating them into exhibitions," she says. "What have they captured about the moment of the times that people are particularly interested in this new artist's voice? That's when we prick up our ears and want to have a look at their work."

Gary Dufour from the Art Gallery of WA says gallery staff actively follow the careers of emerging artists and take note of graduate shows. "Our staff go to those exhibitions and have a look. It would probably be very unlikely that we would decide to buy someone's work but what you do with emerging artists is that you note their name and then watch," says Gary. "Good collections are built on 25 year programs and you just check about every fifth year that you are going in the right direction."

He cites Rover Thomas and Julie Dowling as examples of two successful WA artists whose work was acquired early in their careers by the gallery. Rover Thomas began painting in 1984 and The Art Gallery of WA bought 17 of his works in 1987. Similarly Julie Dowling's career began rolling in the early 90s and six of her works were acquired in 1996.

“Those are the kind of decisions that the art gallery makes when we see an artist showing real promise who is doing exciting and well made work,” says Gary. “It is important,” he adds, “that the artist see themselves in some way as part of the continuity of art. In other words they are not outsiders but people who are striving to be acknowledged at the centre of whatever realm they feel they are working in; at the centre of West Australian art, at the centre of Australian art or if you look at the show that we just closed – James Angus, (a West Australian again) an aspiration to be at the centre of art internationally.”

Often we are only made aware of an artist when they win an award but how important are they as markers of a significant career and which awards rate with those in the know? Says John Barrett-Lennard “If you come out and win the Archibald prize at 25 well that is pretty good because it will get you lots of publicity but to set your heart on that is unrealistic and it is also unrealistic if the public expects that the only artists who are worth paying attention to are prize winners - that does all artists a disservice.”

He believes looking at an artists work over a period of time rather than winning or not winning an art prize is the only way to evaluate an artist. Where prizes and grants do become useful he says is when they provide an opportunity for the artist to develop. “Clearly opportunities to travel or engage with the world beyond are fantastically valuable for artists and so if an emerging artist chases a grant to travel overseas or a studio somewhere else or a foundation travelling scholarship - those kinds of opportunities are worth gold,” he says. “There is a program, for example, that is run from Adelaide called the Samstag that provides grants to artists to go and study overseas for two years. I look at those half a dozen people a year who get the Samstag scholarship and it really does seem to provide them with a whole range of opportunities that are incredibly developmental.”

“If I were an emerging artist I would be trying to target things that are developmental more so than things that simply say you have won the city of whatever art prize,” he says. “To win is always nice but it doesn’t transform your life much as you would hope it

would. And frankly if people who are awarding prizes expect them to be life changing then we have to be more generous.”

Gary Dufour agrees “Acknowledgement by your peers is important but I am not sure that awards are all that pivotal. We would rather pay attention to where a young artist is getting shows. Are they exhibiting at interesting galleries, with interesting programs? Does the person who curated the show have a good reputation? You also look at some of the opportunities they have taken up. For example if a young artist had done a residency somewhere there would have been some process of evaluation to say ‘yes they’re good’. Maybe some of the bigger prizes have an effect but I don’t know that they are the ultimate decider.”

Artbank’s Jackie Dunn also agrees that career support awards are a more relevant indication of future success citing the Samstag and support from the Australia Council as valuable markers but WA based prizes including the BankWest Prize, Perth Photomedia Prize, City of Perth Art Award and the new City of Albany Art Prize are all “good moments for us to take stock of what people are doing.”

Says Jackie “The critical issue is that we are actively looking all day, every day around the country and that is really what tells you what is good and what is worth supporting. It is our professional responsibility to do that and I think if people are buying then they have to do as much as they can along those lines and just look at everything and then they stop being completely subjective and start being informed.”

Lizzie Delfs from artsource: the Artists Foundation of WA suggests attendance at annual exhibition New Works, New Faces at Perth Galleries, which is now in its eighth year, will more than likely introduce you to the next big thing. It is a survey of the best graduate works from WA. Similarly Primavera and Hatched are national surveys of the same kind with Hatched touring annually and exhibited at PICA in Perth. Inclusion in these exhibitions, she says, usually indicates a bright future.

Despite what Warhol thought, the 'job' of being an artist, including sustaining that early promise beyond the first rays of interest, may just be what makes an artist special.

Says John Barrett- Lennard "with emerging artists it is often very valuable to have some light shone upon them but it is clear that even getting early support post-art school or when they start exhibiting is not a guarantee. Yes, there are new artists coming along and they are doing new and exciting things but we should also build a future for all our artists such that they can go on and do more evolving things."

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