

# PORTRAITS FOR OUR TIMES

THE BEST KNOWN AND MOST DISCUSSED art prize in Australia, as everyone knows, is the Archibald Prize for portraiture. Every year we await with anticipation the announcement of participating artists' names and those of their subjects in what is very much a who's who of the gamut of present day Australian arts and politics.

The prize of \$100,000 is awarded for 'the best portrait, preferentially of some man or woman distinguished in Art, Letters, Science or Politics, painted by an artist resident in Australia...'. Last year the prize was awarded to a self portrait by a previously unknown artist (Yvette Coppersmith). It was apparently a generally well liked choice or there would have been an outcry. Whether the self of the portrait was indeed a woman 'distinguished in Art, Letters, Science or Politics' did not disqualify this entry and self portraits are particularly popular subjects.

The prize was first awarded in 1921 and is administered by the trustees of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Every year the event makes the national news and there is always a vigorous discussion of the favourites and those rejected, of the Packing Room Prize and the People's Choice Award. Local papers follow up with stories about local artists who entered and whether or not they were hung. The art of the portrait is alive and very well indeed.

When a region proud of its cultural life holds its own portrait show – with no prize apart from a people's choice award - the result can be diverse and surprising. Throw out all restrictions on media and size, dispense with the judgements of the great and the good (no winners and no losers), and what results is certain to entertain and stimulate.

This year the Blue Mountains City Art Gallery held its first portrait show. Entries included those from residents who are nationally known artists and photographers and many were from local schoolchildren. Here is a selection in a number of different styles and media—some portraits of friends and some of other people, present and past, sincerely admired, another common thread.

Jennifer Gabbay in *Making Waves* (right) has painted the portrait of her friend Sue Wiles. 'Sue is a woman for whom I have great admiration,' Jennifer says. 'Her passions in life, in particular her swimming ability and her academic qualifications, epitomize for me what a woman can accomplish in her lifetime through strength and determination.'



Jennifer Gabbay: *Making Waves* (portrait of Sue Wiles)  
acrylic and oil on board, 1150cm x 90cm

Winning a Myer Foundation scholarship to China in the 1970s led to a PhD in Chinese (women in Daoism) in the mid-80s. Sue tutored in Chinese translation at Sydney University and the University of Western Sydney and has been a freelance translator and editor for the past 20 years. She co-authored *Women of the Long March* (Allen & Unwin 1999) and was co-editor on the four-volume *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women* (M. E. Sharpe, 1998–2014).

Sue has swum in the Manly Cole Classic for the past 13 years and made it into the Masters World top ten for the 800m freestyle in her age group. She competes regularly in ocean swims and in is on the board of Masters Swimming NSW. She competed in her first triathlon when she was 75 and has participated every year since then.

Sue: 'Born in 1940 into a working class family, it took me many years to acknowledge how deep was my desire for learning, which was not encouraged by society or my family. I was extremely fortunate to live through massive social change that, in my thirties, I was able to take advantage of after I was divorced. Being healthy has been a bonus that I can take no credit for!'

[www.jennifergabby.com](http://www.jennifergabby.com)

Below: Anne Crestani, *Love Lawson—Father and Son*, Dave and Finn Warren, acrylic and oil on canvas 2017

I have had the pleasure of knowing Dave Warren for over 35 years. We attended the same high school in Sydney and by chance and serendipity we have both settled in the Blue Mountains, rearing our families and living our lives.

Dave and I have performed together in a number of local dance bands over the years, something a lot of middle-aged Mums and Dads do, apart from raising chickens and children.

Dave is a long-standing member of the iconic all-male choral group 'The Spooky Men's Chorale' founded in the Blue Mountains and who have performed for adoring audiences in Australia and overseas. Dave has become a Spooky icon, delighting audiences with his manic stage whirling (of the dervish variety) during performances of the Spooky Men's cult hit song 'Ba'hari Gibb'.

Dave possesses a surprisingly sweet and gentle singing voice encased inside his impressive 6' 6" frame, which also





*Lizard (Jo Clancy)*, photographer Ben Pearse, assistant Victoria Bramwell-Davis

supports a magnificently wild and abundant beard and hands the size of row-boat paddles. He is a sight to behold when he performs.

Aside from his dervish dexterity, Dave is also a devoted father to four (now adult) children. He and his wife Kathy have reared a bunch of very decent human beings and I have always admired the close connection he has with each of his children.

When I asked Dave to pose for this portrait with his eldest son Finn, there was no hesitation from either of them. Dave and Finn are completely comfortable in expressing their loving connection with each other. In my portrait, I wanted to depict an alternative version of masculine beauty and men in relationship.

Dave and Finn are so completely at ease with who they are and who they love, that it was a relatively simple task for me simply to paint them as they are and as I see them. To me Dave and Finn represent the best of Blue Mountains bloke-hood.

Ben Pearse photographed dancer Jo Clancy (above) who is director of Wagana Aboriginal Dancers, on a perfect natural outdoor stage — a great sandstone rock platform with hard ironstone protrusions surrounded by low fire-ravaged scrub. The Wagana Aboriginal Dancers travel and perform nationally and internationally and have accrued considerable respect and admiration.

‘As a photographer I have always admired a dancer’s awareness of their physical form and movement within a particular spacial context. I had photographed Jo numerous times at various events and felt she would be the perfect person to collaborate with.

We located this natural performance space in the bush and over the course of two hours, Jo danced barefoot and I got many great frames. This image which I have called *Lizard*, is one of them.’

[www.benpearsephotography.com.au](http://www.benpearsephotography.com.au)



Julie Paterson  
*Portrait of Manda Kaye on double denim* (left)  
*Manda Shooting Manda* (right)

The first time I met Manda Kaye she was wearing double denim. It's a concept she loves. Another concept she loves is to bring people together to celebrate the simple fact of living in this small inclusive creative community.

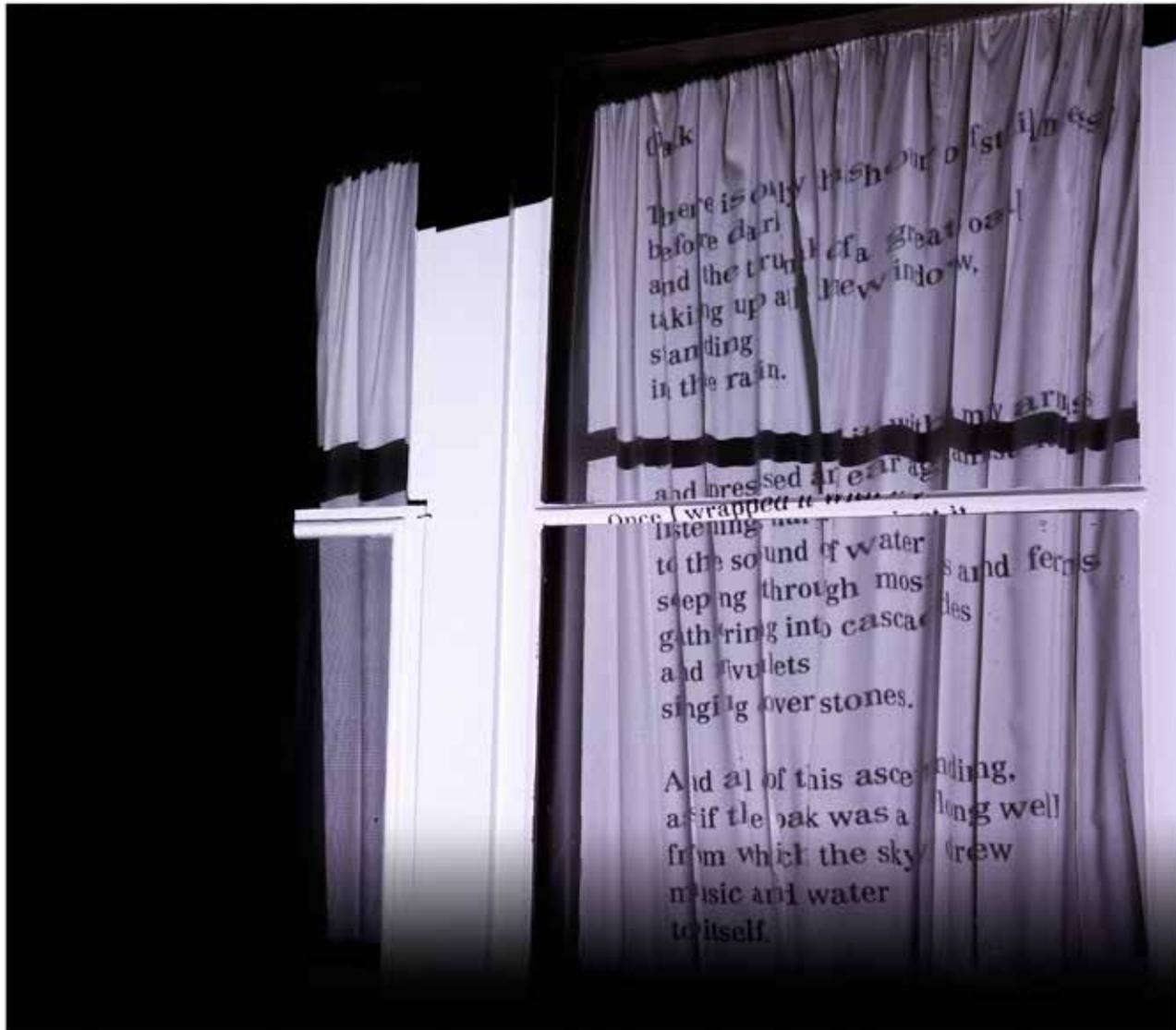
She invented the DIY Festival for this purpose. The idea is to get a group of willing friends together and make a grassroots festival event happen in your own backyard without funding or raising any money - just working together with sheer creative enthusiasm.



Above: Craig Billingham & Judith Martinez, *The Hour of Stillness*, digital photograph on archival cotton rag paper  
Deb Westbury (1954 – 2018) was a much-loved poet, visual artist, mentor and teacher — she was also our friend.  
Deb's poems were astute observations of life, love, people, and the landscapes we inhabit.

Manda also started the Blackheath Howlers. Once a month everyone is invited to congregate at Govetts Leap Lookout (aka the best bar in the Mountains) to watch the full moon rise, howl together and raise a glass to the beauty of it all.

Another reason why I created Manda's portrait on denim is that denim is her preferred material to wear, even when it starts to wear out from too much love. At that point she asks me to mend her denim, and I do this willingly, because textiles are my thing. So I patch her clothes slowly with care, working across the fabric with many stitches in the Japanese tradition of Boro.



For the best part of twenty-five years Deb lived in and around Katoomba, where she enjoyed a long association with Varuna, The Writers' House. Indeed, Deb's poem *Oak* refers to the tree that stands beside the house, and on to which her image was projected and photographed in the process of creating our portrait of her; the poem was projected on to the back of the curtains which hang in the lounge room window, which is where Deb convened many poetry events and workshops.

We would like to thank John Bragg — Deb's husband — for allowing us to project his photograph of Deb. We would also like to thank Varuna, the Writers' House, for allowing us to photograph in situ.



Above: Damian Castaldi: Sound Portrait of WeiZen Ho

My subject is WeiZen Ho, a performing artist and deviser based in Katoomba, NSW. She brings together phonic-vocals and movement, whilst her performances transform and extend mundane postures, sounds and everyday objects or speech into poetic prayer. A performance improvisation event she initiated called Sound Bites Body <<http://www.weizenho.com/sound-bites-body/>> presented 13 artists from sound, installation and dance disciplines at Bilpin International Ground for Creative Initiatives (BigCi) <<https://bigci.org/>> in February 2016. I also performed at this event with WeiZen and my portrait has been informed by that experience.

The silence of the panel can be interrupted, brought to life by a singular presence made in close proximity to the portrait. Without this physical interaction WeiZen remains silent and exists only as the visual representation of herself you see here.

Mixed Media: The photo media image of WeiZen Ho was taken in her home. The digital image is layered to create a shadow of herself behind her foreground image. This produces the effect of WeiZen moving slightly back and forth within her own body. The image is printed onto canvas with archival ink and fixed onto 6 mm board. The print and mounted cabinet dimensions are 860mm (w) x 600mm (h) x 150mm (d).

WeiZen's central figure is surrounded by three small speakers embedded around her in the front panel. The speakers are wired to electronic components fixed behind the framed panel. A small Infrared proximity sensor is also embedded in the front panel, tucked inside WeiZen's arching elbow. This triggers the sound component, which consists of the processed sound of a slow moving electrical current. All external and internal micro electronic components are programmed to trigger audio playback within close proximity of approximately 800mm to the centre/front of the portrait.

The internal and external electronic components include three 57mm, 8ohm, 0.25W speakers; one 3.7 Watt, class D stereo amplifier; one Arduino Uno R3; one SparkFun Mp3 player shield; one 8GB Class D micro SDHC Card with digital audio file; one Sharp Infrared Proximity Sensor and assorted electronic components.

Damian @The Last Bureau  
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Opposite: Leahy & Watson: *Locust Jones* (2019)  
 Locust Jones is an accomplished international artist. From his Blue Mountains studio, Locust creates epic scale artworks that delve into contemporary world politics. His method of working is more like an esoteric medium, filtering the harsh realities of the world onto paper through an automatic drawing practice. On a personal level, Locust can string you along with intriguing stories of truth that are stranger than fiction.

