Being and Becoming

Self portraits tend to record a moment. With photography, this takes just seconds, and even when the process is expanded through age-old methods such as painting or sculpture, the finished image usually reflects someone as they were in an instant. But looking into the mirror, we see more than our present self. We recognise the tension between what we are, what we were, and what we will be. We live in a constant state of change, a state of becoming.

The body's inevitable decline presents a challenge for those engaged with portraiture – especially self portraiture, with its emphasis on a core stability and a perspective fixed on the self. Movement and flux, reflected in the species as evolution and in the individual as development and aging, is difficult to encapsulate. The age and life experiences of the artists in this exhibition inevitably impact on their self-image and their portraits. For many, looking to the future is appealing, but it is leavened by the recognition that this moment – the present – is forever lost. The idea that we exist somewhere between entropy and transcendence is at the heart of this year’s National Self-Portrait Prize.

Curator: Michael Desmond

To read Michael Desmond’s essay click here.
Fiona McMonagle

Winner of the National Self-Portrait Prize 2015

One hundred days at 7pm 2015
single-channel video animation
00:00:16, looped
Animation and videography: Declan McMonagle
Courtesy of the artist; Heiser Gallery, Brisbane; and Olsen Irwin, Sydney.

Becoming is the process of change or moving toward. Everything flows – nothing stands still.

I wanted to translate these ideas about time and change into this work. So, I painted one self portrait every day at 7.00 pm for 100 days. The process itself turned out to be an intrinsic part of the work. The ritual of painting one self portrait at the same time every day was an exercise in self discipline and a test of my painting skills. I had to be in the studio every day at 7.00 pm to paint my self portrait. No excuses.

Working with video but being a painter, I wanted the artwork to have a fluidity about it. As a medium, watercolour lends itself very nicely to the moving image. The challenge was to keep the self portraits as consistent as possible. I set some rules in place: I worked with a restricted palette, used a restricted number of brushes, and was not allowed to view the previous portrait when making the next.

The result: each painting is slightly different from the next – some good, some not so good. Because of these differences in the paintings and the fluid nature of watercolour, the finished work takes on a flickering effect, reminiscent of early film making. Having pasted the paintings together, the end result is a moving, blinking self portrait that the viewer can interact with on a whole new level.
Fiona McMonagle’s work exemplifies a particular and perhaps exquisitely poignant condition for artists in the making of a self-portrait: the raw enquiry of the self through observation and reflection so acute that there can be little critical or emotional distance from the subject.

Fiona is well known for her lyrical watercolours, so it was also intriguing to see her test the capacity of 100 individual self-portraits – produced as they were under certain imposed rules - into the realm of animated film. For me it is a transformation that resulted in a poetic and aesthetically resolved melding of disciplines, and mesmerising view of the artist.

Fiona’s work engaged with the theme of ‘becoming’ in disparate ways – through process and outcome, and its success as a work is the manner in which it sustains; the way in which it holds the viewer’s eye for each of its compelling 16 seconds. Fiona’s work achieves this in a quiet but complex picture of herself, and of art practice.
The difficulty in drawing a self portrait occasionally originates from the fact that a ‘self’ has been destroyed in history, and we cannot find it. Stigmatised humans often have an intense desire for self censorship; they are distrustful of the self, and are usually ashamed of seeing and showing themselves. However, members of minority groups like to see themselves because victorious and oppressive powers have crushed and suppressed their identity and culture. They cannot find their image, and link their present with their past and future.

I have an unusual zeal for seeing this face up close. I do not want to censor or deny myself, or be ashamed of my real face anymore. I am victim of a worldview that is nothing beyond a production machine for making demons. Evoking the scarred visage of the stigmatised is therefore appealing to me because, as a subject of the truth, it connects me with the body of that society, and of all the human beings who have in any way been or are victims of discrimination, oppression and injustice. People often ask me of my paintings: who are these faces that are alien, cold and devoid of all emotions? I have only one reply: me and any other human who, as a mark of being, has been denied their place in history.

Haunted lotus 15 2015
ink, gouache and gold leaf on paper
70.0 x 54.0 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.
Jacqueline Bradley

*Dredging jacket* 2015
woollen tweed, plastic, silk, fencing wire, brass tube, wood, muslin, card, PVA and wood glue
150.0 x 130.0 x 200.0 cm
Photography: Brenton McGeachie
Courtesy of the artist.

In my practice, I aim to make tangible the complexities of my experience of the outdoors in Australia. I create sculptures whose apparent function derives from personal experiences in the outdoors, while also addressing more location-based cultural, social and physical issues.

In *Dredging jacket*, a long circle of gridded wire trails behind a stout, tweed wool, woman’s jacket. The wire is at once a train that the wearer dons like a bride in the landscape, a net that hampers the forward movement of the wearer, and a fence that divides the wearer from the outdoors. Made to wear in Canberra’s man-made Lake Burley Griffin, *Dredging jacket* is a portrait of a moment in the outdoors in contemporary Australia.
Jon Cattapan

*Self portrait (Distended)* 2015
oil on linen
185.0 x 250.0 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

I have always thought that, by default, most work is a kind of self portrait. However, from time to time, I have sought guidance from the mirror, so to speak. Almost always, these times have been moments of critical change in my personal life.

*Self portrait (Distended)* continues my formal exploration of figurative layering over expressive abstract fields, but, in this case, thinking about the self (myself) and, in particular, the self's body becoming stretched and at one with the boiling painted ground.
Bindi Cole Chocka

I saw her from afar 2015
digital print
60.0 x 90.0 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Nellie Castan Projects, Melbourne.

The following is an edited excerpt from a letter I wrote for Women of letters in 2013. At the time, we had no idea that in just three short years, we would have endured four miscarriages, one birth of our beautiful baby boy Eli, and now our final pregnancy – with a little girl who is due in five weeks’ time. This has been one of the hardest journeys of my life and has taken a toll on us, yet has yielded us the greatest reward.

To our missing puzzle piece,
You already have a brother or sister. We’ve never met him or her either. It took us one year to conceive and then he/she only made it to six weeks old. But in our minds, we had dreamed their entire future lives with us. We were devastated when we miscarried. Couldn’t believe it hurt us both so much. How can you love something so much that doesn’t exist yet? We had been so excited that we told everyone. Then we had to tell everyone the bad news. It was hard but our friends and family sustained us. It brought us closer.

I get that it’s hard to share bad news with people but in my experience, sharing it and being supported by the community around me was the catalyst for healing. But you, my precious little baby-to-be, will be growing in my tummy and I’ll feel you and we will bond, even before you see the light of day. I’ll be your mummy and Dani will be your daddy and we will speak to you and sing to you and dream of what you look like. And the very thing we’ve longed for will be our reality. Not just a dream and a hope but a child of our very own.

We already love you, the missing piece of our puzzle.
Michael Cook

Andu (Son) 2015
inkjet print on Hahnemühle paper
image 61.0 x 55.0 cm; sheet 84.0 x 70.0 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane.

Though I have always known that I am Aboriginal, I do not have a direct connection to that part of my ancestry. So it’s natural that I want to learn more about my history. I am part of Australia’s diverse multicultural population and I know my story echoes those of people like myself, as well as those of different backgrounds. Aboriginal people are extremely diverse; our country’s history has ensured this. Circumstances from the past have made me who I am today and I’m here to share my story.

To make this image, I downloaded a photo from the Internet of someone from the Aboriginal side of my family, who probably doesn’t even know I exist. I then placed some of his features over an image of myself. This family member has very strong facial features – my lack of which is something that people mention whenever they query me about my origins.

Third parties constantly associate my artwork with my Bidjara heritage, although I have never been to Bidjara Country and have no connection with the community there. Aboriginal people today comprise many diverse groups, and the clichés of how we are supposed to appear have no currency. This self portrait shows a connection to my Indigenous origins, Bidjara Country, a place that I have never visited, yet one with which I am constantly associated. I prefer to believe that I belong to a wider community: humanity.
Janet Dawson

*Smiling cabbage with self* 2015
synthetic polymer paint and collage on wooden tondo
120.0 cm diam.
Courtesy of the artist and Stella Downer Fine Art, Sydney.
This painting is dedicated to Jan and Alan Oxenham and I. M. Michael.

There are 33 images of the smiling cabbage in the set of photographs I have cherished since 1992. The full series is far more moving and subtle than I could convey in this first exploration of the subject.

The smiling cabbage began as an amusing joke. My husband Michael and I used toothpicks to pin down green olives, tinned pear and banana skin to make a dinky face, with its new growth of green ‘hair’ leaves. The expression of the resulting face was so appealing that we couldn’t dismantle it, so we carefully put it in the garden. Michael’s photographs record its decline over many months and its final sinking back into the soil.

The ‘Becoming’ of old age has many aspects, and low-level comedy becomes very much a part of life. Stiff joints, awkward bending, fumbling fingers, anxious peering into corners to search for dropped objects, and, of course, daily forgetfulness. It can be funny and infuriating, and even sad, if one allows it to be.

I found it somewhat comical being faced with the prospect of making a self portrait at the age of 80. So, I have mixed in the life and death of the smiling cabbage with a rueful examination of my aged self.

The painting is a storyboard of scraps and recollections – the bits and pieces of an old woman’s memory. It was very difficult, but enormous fun, to bring it all together.
eX de Medici

Greetings from Canberra 2015
digital print
image 57.0 x 256.5 cm; sheet 69.5 x 269.5 cm
Printer: Robert Little
Courtesy of the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney.

Becoming.
Do you know that feeling you have when you look in a mirror and some stranger stares back – that unadorned feeling when it’s just unadorned you, and you don’t recognise who you are seeing? The day the wind changed its direction and your face changed with it. The day your actions rewrote the proportions. The day another reshaped your mouth with a sweet Judas kiss. The day your eyes narrowed at untruth, or closed, secreting the truth. The day you disappeared forever and the empty landscape of you finally, and fully, understood the meaning of the *tabula rasa*.

Do you know what I mean? Do you remember the day you woke from your sleep and saw that slave staring back at you through the glass, and that the master you were had evaporated into the night inside some random dreamscape, inside details you don’t remember, a spectre wandering without body or purpose? Do you remember the day you became a slave, the day you fell down? The day your body went empty. The day your face became a stranger.
Julia deVille

Ostara and Damocles 2015
installation: porcelain doll made by artist at age 11, sterling silver, gold plate, rubies (0.14ct), antique Victorian christening gown, bloomers from artist’s Little Red Riding Hood doll, spun polyester, linen, raven, black rhodium plate, black spinel (8.80ct), black rose-cut diamonds (5.5ct), amethyst, glass and wood
100.0 x 92.0 x 115.0 cm variable.
Courtesy of the artist; Sophie Gannon Gallery, Melbourne; and Jan Murphy Gallery, Brisbane.

Ostara (My most important lesson was silence)
My first birthday was on Easter Sunday. We had sugar eggs.
Pollination.
Easter Bunny.
Stigmata.
Mother.
The face of Jesus in my soup…
When I was 11, I made a doll. I painted her face and hands and fired her head in a kiln. I sewed and stuffed her little body and glued her eyelashes on.
I probably named her Lucy – all my dolls were named Lucy.
I have a doppelgänger named Lucy.
Anti-matter.
When I was eight, my dad and I found an elderly lady’s dead body in a coffin in a country church. He encouraged me to touch her cold, lifeless face.
The body holds nothing when we die.
Oma died, and Nanna. I felt their faces too.
Grandad Jim jumped out of the window of the hospital. He left his watch behind.
Matter is born out of consciousness, not the other way around.
My pet rabbit ran away. Sweet-pea.
Nothing is permanent. God is.

Damocles (Throw caution to the reckless wind)
My childhood was spent imagining the inanimate coming to life.
When I’m not looking, Damocles’s diamond winding key turns, and he flaps his wings and croaks.
Familiar.
Prophet.
Night’s Plutonian Shore.
Only this, and nothing more.
Fiona Foley

*School’s in* 2015
inkjet print on Hahnemühle paper
image 150.0 x 112.5 cm; sheet 170.0 x 132.5 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane.

This photograph dredges up every memory I have of primary school, high school and university life – all 18 years of the stuff. Australia’s educational tentacles are about power relationships.

I became conscious of my race in my first year at Urangan Primary School. I was made aware of my difference and was made to feel it by other school children and teachers. I was fearful of my first-grade teacher, with her flaming red hair, who made one or two of the Aboriginal children in my class blow their noses upon arrival. Luckily, I was never singled out in this way. The fear that welled up deep inside of me continued into my high-school years and remained with me to a lesser extent in my six years of tertiary study. Now I work in universities…

It’s taken a lot to overcome that fear and to realise that I am as good as anyone else working within these institutions. What I realised though is that free thinkers are not welcomed, and we are codified to perform to rigid structures. Our hands are bound by red tape, so I take a hit-and-run approach to these possessive white spaces.
Julie Gough

INTROSPECT 2015
single-channel digital video
04:39:04
Courtesy of the artist; Bett Gallery, Hobart; Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne; and Turner Galleries, Perth.

No lull in the proceedings, back-to-back projects, deadlines, tunnelling through the mire. Overcommitting without hindsight, a key achievement this year seems to be my management of the fine art of administration. This self portrait of my current circumstances is my email inbox over the past 12 months. Saved in 8,371 instances, these are the before/during/after subject lines regarding 13 group and two solo exhibitions, examinations, applications, supervision queries, casual jobs, and – somehow, in between all of this – art making.
Plastic surgery 2015
synthetic polymer paint on linen
four panels, each 180.0 x 100.0cm
Courtesy of the artist and Heiser Gallery, Brisbane.

Plastic surgery relates to my experiences as an immigrant artist. I arrived to what at first appeared to be an alien world: the landscape, creatures and people were all so vastly different from those in my previous life in China. The difficulty of making sense of my new surroundings and securing a place within them meant I found myself in a continuous struggle of push and pull. Life was strained with constant demands and adjustments. Immigrants need to find a balance of living within two cultures, two countries and using two languages. They live with their memories of a past life of family, friends and work, while struggling to make another life – this life, the here and now – meaningful.

The first canvas depicts memories of my mother country. It refers to the huge, inaccessible file that the Chinese government keeps on each of its citizens, in which records and notes are kept from birth until death on all aspects of people’s lives. The second and third canvases reflect my life after arriving in Australia, and illustrate my attempts at fitting into this new, strange land. The fourth canvas represents confirmation of a new identity, featuring several of the documents necessary to prove this identity. The detail of my name change on the business card from Guan Wei to David Guan illustrates the pressure felt by individuals to adapt successfully in a new culture and new surroundings, as society accepts or rejects immigrants based on their behaviour.

Plastic surgery was executed from my imagination, fusing reality, experience and memory. Receiving ‘plastic surgery’ in a humorous way represents a change in my identity from Chinese to Australian. In doing so, I have faced the challenges all immigrants must face and deal with. From these challenges is honed a new perspective of self-existence, surroundings and time.
Marie Hagerty

Autoportrait 2015
synthetic polymer paint and oil on canvas
200.0 x 180.0 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne.

I am looking at my reflection in the mirror.
My back is to the viewer.

I have never seen my back; therefore, it remains unfamiliar.
Like a medal or a coin, the reverse and obverse, I am a ‘Night Witch’ from World War II: vulnerable flesh bound to machine.
This is a masquerade, a portrayal of a hero in cinematic black and white – film noir.

A Venus pose with a mantilla and a pouch, ready to work. I am plane girl.
Nicholas Harding

*Beached (Yuraygir self portrait)* 2015
oil on linen
183.0 x 183.0 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane.

Much like existential driftwood, we are washed up on the shore of life. To be born is to be the survivor of a gene pool, situated on an infinitesimally small speck in a vast cosmos.

There are a few happenstances of familial history that I am particularly aware of: my paternal grandfather surviving the trenches of the Somme during World War I, where being gassed was just one of the many horrors he endured; my paternal grandparents surviving their house being bombed twice during the Blitz in World War II; and my parents deciding to emigrate from Britain to Australia in 1965 when I was eight years old. Of the mostly wonderful occurrences leading to my contemporary state, these are among the most fundamental.

Such are the currents of a life. Born unaware of our procreative circumstance, we are the flotsam of history, carried by currents and tides, sunned and buffeted by the weather of both geography and species. Within this paradigm, we bring some direction and form to our state of being; we form relationships and acquire accoutrements that comfort us and contribute to how we define ourselves. Always integral with nature, we utilise resources to invent evermore-refined technologies that also disrupt our relationship within nature. As glorious as life can be, and as optimistic and productive as we can aspire to be, we are cadavers-in-waiting, inevitably ploughed back into the soil to fertilise the future.
Anna Hoyle

Self portrait 2015
gouache on paper on wood
overall 200.0 x 150.0 cm
Courtesy of the artist.

An anxious Governor Macarthur drives his Volvo too fast and erratically, safe in the knowledge that his airbag won’t unexpectedly fire shrapnel. However, he slows down carefully around the corners so as not to misshape his cream horns, or upset his too many sheep and trinkets.

Meanwhile, Anne Normoyle conceals herself tightly in the boot of the Volvo, avoiding exhibition openings and general advancement. Toiling on her grand lament for the chasm between nature and culture, as seen in your Bunnings store, Ms Normoyle (neigh Hoyle) trots on without doing anything about it.

The Volvo continues to groan its stodgy way through the leafy suburbs, towards the Giant Mynah Bird, a great stop-off rest place where you enter via the cloaca. Verdi’s requiem is booming inside. You can get a latte if you want, a massage, or just browse the self-help books. They just get a latte and don’t chat.

What a relief to know that becoming is fugitive. I can only hint at an array of bits that might stand for parts in my making. As with most things, I see my ordinary, embarrassing self as comic-tragic and have found the unbecoming bits useful.
Emily Hunt

*Das schwerste Gewicht (The heaviest weight)* 2015
watercolour and collage on paper, framed, with glazed stoneware and wood
117.0 x 81.5 x 31.5 cm
Courtesy of the artist and The Commercial, Sydney.

The title of this work refers to the concept of ‘eternal return’ or ‘eternal recurrence’. The inside machinations, obsessive details and portraits inside portraits throughout my large, dense watercolour reference this concept that the universe has been recurring, and will continue to recur, in a self-similar form an infinite number of times across infinite time or space.

Expanding out from this concept, some of the content of my painting was appropriated from a series of woodcuts by Lucas van Leyden (c. 1494–1533), ‘Power of Women’. The woodcut that my watercolour references is titled *The mouth of truth* (1514), in which a woman kneels before the Emperor of Rome, who sits on his throne. Her left hand lies inside the mouth of sculpted lion, an ancient lie detector of sorts.

My self portrait can be found in the corner of the painting, staring straight at the viewer. There are clues to my personality of intemperance. I have an ongoing internal battle with my flaws, my power and weakness, my truth and lies.

Flopping over onto the ledge below the painting is an anthropomorphised drunk wine bottle. This sculpture acts as a performance of my ambivalence towards the future.
Lindy Lee

Threshold between two unknown territories 2015
mild steel, ink and fire
200.0 x 120.0 x 5.0 cm
Photography: Lee Nutter
Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.

Questions of identity and belonging have always plagued me. If I’m not ‘this’ or ‘that’, then what am I? This is driven by being split between my Chinese and Australian ‘selves’ – whatever that might mean. After years of meditation, I realised that there is no single self to strive for or hang onto. In here, there is a whole tribe of ‘selves’ who are simultaneously absolute and fluid. This self portrait invokes the thresholds of constant becoming that lie between the past and the future. This moment (this self) is full, replete, and always on the brink of dissolution and rebirth.
James Lieutenant

Four views of two buildings 2015
four panels, each 80.0 x 80.0 cm
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
Courtesy of the artist.

This four-panel artwork shows the construction, completion and previous use of the World Trade Center in New York City. Based on photographs found on the generic source of the Internet, these images, while not completely recognisable, are familiar. I have deliberately omitted images of the building’s destruction, having understood them as symbolising both a time close to ours and distinctively different from it. That event sits underneath these images, planted in the viewer’s memory.

I was 15 years old when the two towers were destroyed. This moment changed my perspective of the world. Suddenly, there wasn’t much optimism; I felt troubled. It was a world that didn’t represent how I felt. The future I was promised as a child was no longer an option. Reality hit. I guess that is what growing up feels like.

This work was made using a layered screen-print process. The colours have a pop and contemporary sensibility that contradicts the banality of the images. By focusing on construction, I intend to highlight the global changes that have occurred since the World Trade Center’s destruction.
Hilarie Mais

*reflection/reach* 2015
stained wood
240.0 x 112.0 x 4.0 cm
Courtesy of the artist and William Wright Artists Projects, Sydney.

Autobiography is often the emotional starting point for an artwork; through a working through and engagement, it eventually becomes autonomous. I have been exploring patterns in nature as a depiction/manifestation of an organism’s life. Through the markings, ruptures and rhythms, we see a story of growth, change and adaptation of that life. The title and work refer to my current place in life: how I am now. I am reflecting on the enormous loss of my life partner William Wright, and the state of reaching is my current emotional state. There are two presences within the work but they overlap and are intertwined, which describes my life with Bill; we were so much a part of each other, so my self portrait has to include him. I have used the numerical sequences of 17, the birth date we both shared.

The wood is raw and stained and parts of it are exposed. I have not worked in this way for many years, but my recent trip to Japan reminded me of the sculptural ethos of respect for the material. The scale reference is of a doorway or a bed, places of transition and passage for the human body, a place of Becoming. Our entry and exit points, our beginning and end, and, hopefully, our transcendence.
Dan Moynihan

**Special effects** 2014
single-channel video, edition 1/5
02:27:54
Courtesy of the artist and Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne.

**A life in movies**

Nan and I took the bus to the Gala to see a matinee of *Ginger Meggs*. The same afternoon, she decided we should go watch *E.T.* Two sessions in one day: I was hooked.

*The Goonies*, Gala Cinema, Warrawong, December 1985
This was the first movie that I went to see with no adult supervision. The world was ours – well, for approximately two hours, at least.

*Crocodile Dundee*, Greater Union Cinema, Wollongong, May 1986
The only occasion that my family went to the movies as a unit. I remember that because it was a blockbuster, my father had to book our five seats in advance.

*Pretty woman*, Cinema unknown, Canberra, May 1990
I was 16 and, of course, had a crazy crush on a girl from school. The teachers gave us a choice – *Pretty woman* or *The hunt for red October*. I went with my heart.

*Ice Age*, Hoyts, Warrawong, April 2002
My girlfriend and I sat downstairs. It was a daytime session and empty except for the two of us. One thing led to another…

*No country for old men*, Cinema Nova Carlton, Melbourne, December 2007
I remember thinking to myself just before the end credits rolled, this movie is taking forever. I think it was taking ecstasy that turned it into a completely other experience.

*Special effects*, Astor Theatre Windsor, Melbourne, September 2014
*Special effects* is a coming-of-age story about yours truly, the age being 40. On 28 September 2014, I did what was natural: Celebrating my birthday in a cinema. Alone. And documenting this by turning the camera on myself, capturing the culmination of my 40-year history and life in movies.
John Nixon

*Self portrait – N 2015*
enamel and timber on canvas
80.0 x 70.0 x 3.0 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne.

The formal qualities of colour (in this case, orange), shape and geometry, and the active materiality of rough-cut wood are here utilised to provide a ‘self portrait’. The wooden structure is concentrated around the letter ‘N’, its form extending beyond the traditional limit of the square support and into real space. In this, the painting is an indicator of the overall philosophical position of my work: the expansive and multifaceted nature of what an artist can be. While not a traditional likeness, the portrait is an emblem of my practice as an artist, and of my being.
Patricia Piccinini

*Self portrait* 2015
graphite on paper
two sheets, each 56.0 x 76.0 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne.

I am not sure how much you could learn about me by looking at my face. I really don’t think it would tell you very much. There are so many places that make up a body, and the face doesn’t really seem the most interesting one to visit.

Still, I do respect the desire to know about somebody else. Other people are interesting – I know that, and I feel it myself even if I can’t quite accept that somebody would be interested in me. I get that people could be interested in my work – I really hope they are – but I am not my work. Although, I guess, to a certain degree, I am. And if I am, what would I look like, I wonder?

Self portraits are always idealised to a certain degree. A subjective take on the subjective. Subjectivity squared. Surely, the self portrait aspires to show us who the subject is rather than what the subject looks like. Yet, who could be less qualified to know that truth than the artist herself? Just because you know the secrets doesn’t mean you know the truth.

I spend a lot of time alone with my drawings. Ultimately, I needed to make something that I could bear to look at. And I think that there is some truth in this one.
Andrew Sayers

*Self-portrait: Man re-enters the sea* 2015
oil on canvas
180.0 x 120.0 cm
Courtesy of the estate of the artist, Melbourne.

The title of my entry into this year’s award is taken from a series of books about ocean exploration compiled in the 1970s by the pioneering oceanographer Jacques Cousteau. In this single image, I have expressed the overall theme ‘Becoming’ through two related ideas. First, that all of the large cycles of geological and biological time can be represented as life beginning in the ocean (in accordance with evolutionary theory) and ending in the ocean (as a result of human-generated impacts). Second, that the unique marine environment gives me the opportunity to express a personal and essential truth: that we are all dependent upon the cycle of breath that is so tangibly visible underwater.

I have been scuba diving since 2007. This painting records a dive that I made in Port Philip Bay, Melbourne, on 14 June 2015. The challenge for me was to create a self portrait likeness and, at the same time, to be true to the ‘mask’ of underwater breathing apparatus.
Pip & Pop (Tanya Schultz)

Who was the dreamer 2015
sugar, pigment, glitter, foam, polymer clay, puff paint, plastic flora, craft materials and electronics
100.0 x 110.0 cm diam.
Courtesy of the artist.

This work is a speculative and fictional self portrait. It expands on my fascination with narratives of wish fulfilment and journeys in search of paradise. The work is informed by Creation mythologies, Japanese folk tales and the Kami (spirits) that inhabit rocks and other landforms.

This is what I want to be: a gloopy mountain cake spirit in a fictitious landscape of my own creation.

A creator and caretaker, I quietly oversee the world in a perpetual slow spin that is hypnotic and psychedelic.
Pamela See

Intergenerational transmission 2015
digital app
Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane.

It is 3.00 am. My daughter is crying because I refuse to turn on her iPad. I have given up trying to persuade her to return to bed. I start doing the dishes.

This interactive self portrait was inspired by the lyrics ‘I’m watching you watch over me’ from the Silverchair ballad “The greatest view”. The vignettes explore the theme of ‘Becoming’ by depicting a behaviour I observed in my mother, which I have in turn modelled for my daughter. We do housework to avoid conflict.

The app contains two distinct portraits. The large figure is the shared likeness of my daughter and me at four years of age. My likeness, as a mother, is reflected in the eye of the child. The viewer is required to adjust the scale of the composition to experience the artwork.

The vector-based motifs were created by a commercial conversion service from papercuts. The interface was designed using e-publishing software. The historical references of papercut portraiture date back to the Western Han Dynasty (265–316). Creating a self portrait that is viewable on a web browser served two purposes. First, it addresses the ongoing debate in parenting circles about the level of exposure that children should have to screen-based technology. Second, it critiques how contemporary portraits are created, shared and viewed.

This artwork references the practices of three contemporary American artists: Cory Arcangel, Shepard Fairey and Tony Oursler.
Tyza Stewart

**Exit tunnel** 2015
installation: oil on board, timber, MDF, synthetic polymer paint, Perspex and window tint film
painting 185.0 x 60.0 cm; structure 181.0 x 173.0 x 151.0 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Heiser Gallery, Brisbane.

The construction of this tunnel is informed by the dimensions of my body, so that I can easily walk into it and look out through the windows. Viewers may also be able to enter or otherwise interact with this structure. If entered, the tunnel structure may allow a viewer to be alone and hidden while they observe artworks and people in the gallery.

The tunnel invites viewers to experiment with their own physicality, and make comparisons to and find commonalities with my body. In its potential to facilitate a viewer’s play and experimentation with their physical self, the tunnel corresponds to my figurative paintings, which facilitate and depict my gender-focused play and experimentation with my body. The yellow oil painting is rendered from a digital self portrait, specifically manipulated – through erasure and by splicing multiple images of myself – in ways that may be recognised as modifying my gender. I intend the tunnel structure to draw the viewer’s attention to their own body and their perceptions of the other people in the space, in conjunction with the painted depiction of my body. In this way, they may consider not only my body and identity but also how their own physicality and identity interact.
In this new work, created especially for The University of Queensland’s National Self Portrait Prize, Thompson revisits the genre of the conceptual ‘anti-portrait’, traversing themes of memory, race, history and gender. In this work, the artist comes into a clearer, albeit partially obscured, view behind his delicately patterned hands decorated in his ancestral cross-hatching style. His head is adorned with a wreath of Australian native flowers – eucalyptus leaves, kangaroo paw and bottle brush – which is a signature of his work. Evocative of traditional garb worn in rite-of-passage ceremonies, the floral chaplet is a metaphor for Thompson’s personal journey of transition in placing himself and his work within an international context. Thompson’s process of ‘self initiation’ has been one of fearlessly seeking novel experiences and embracing new places and ideas, and this resoluteness is evident in the quiet stillness and precise vision of this evocative work.

Who better to express the process of ‘becoming’ than someone who is always exploring the universal in the human experience, who finds home in strange lands among strangers? Thompson’s peripatetic works draw from his eclectic experiences and interests; he is a chameleon and a bowerbird. Like all his portrait-based works, On becoming is a window into a moment of time, complex and always compelling.

Hetti Perkins, independent curator. Northern Arrente/Kalkadoon language group.
Kensuke Todo

*Find* 2015
mild steel
rock 61.0 x 63.9 x 89.3 cm; steel plate 182.5 x 120.0 x 0.5 cm
Courtesy of the artist and King Street Gallery on William, Sydney.

This sculpture pays homage to the poem *I was born* by Hiroshi Yoshino (1926–2014). Both simple and profound, the poem evokes the mysteries of beginnings, endings and existence.
The journey of producing this artwork began in March on my birthday – I figured it was a perfect day to take a good, hard look at myself – when I scratched my face into wet paint. I then made some charcoal drawings. I was surprised at my ability to draw after having not practiced the skill for 20 years, but also how easy it is to achieve an amateurish and inadequate result. I thought the shift to painting would be straightforward; I would simply paint myself into the landscape using shrubs and rocks to define my features... But the result was ludicrous and just downright bad.

In the back of my mind, I knew my last refuge was in the cumulus cloudscapes I know so well, so I set about making ‘nimbus heads’, but the results looked more like copies of Mr Potato Head than self portraits! No other painting project has caused me to laugh out loud as much as this one. But, of course, there were a lot of anguished groans as well. The breakthrough came out of this frustration: as I set about destroying my nimbus heads, melding the details of eyes and ears with the palette knife, a sense of what was essential emerged. I began to think of these strange atmospheric phenomena that cannot exist in the natural world as metaphors for the endless flux of self perception. It became about how I view myself. Am I not, in the end, just an instrument for observing and refining observed phenomena? A sort of barometer for measuring pressures of an aesthetic kind?

As such, my portrait is a suite of images, which is the only aspect of the work that is consistent with my original ideas. This aspect not only seems to suggest the process of ‘Becoming’ but it also confirms that I would never have been happy with using just one image to represent myself.
Judith Wright

The things we do 2015
found objects and synthetic polymer paint on wood
290.0 x 300.0 x 140.0 cm variable
Courtesy of the artist; Jan Manton Art, Brisbane; Sophie Gannon Gallery, Melbourne; Jensen Gallery, Sydney; and Fox/Jensen, Auckland, New Zealand.

We are sometimes defined by our occupations and inclinations. The mannequin in this work is standing on an old film canister, which references the movie theatre my father had when I was a child. The ‘fruit’ (my children and grandchildren) are identified by the small drawn images.

These seemingly prosaic observations are the bare bones of the imagination.