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REVIEW

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M16 Drawing Prize a window into nation's depth of talent

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Music, Theatre & Arts

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2021 M16 Drawing Prize, Gallery 1, M16 Artspace, 21 Blaxland Crescent, Griffith. Until December 10.

The annual M16 Drawing Prize is always a much-anticipated event. The prize focuses on works that "incorporate traditional drawing material, or expand on what drawing may be within a contemporary art practice". Very worthy sentiments and sentiments obviously embraced by this year's judges (freelance curator Gina Mobayed and artist and ANU lecturer Erica Seccombe).

From the 363 entries, the judges have selected 21 works that ostensibly embrace the prize's premise. This selection includes eight artists from the ACT and a mixture from NSW, Queensland and Victoria. The selected artists' works cover a variety of media including pencil, ink, charcoal, watercolour, gouache, pastel, monotypes, video, animation and photography on variously paper, card, fabric and photographic paper.

Overall, it is a fine exhibition with a number of beautifully and conceptually fully realised works. I have some reservations about the inclusion of photographs as drawings but I accept that an exhibition such as this whose inclusions are based on the personal (and professional) judgements of the selectors will ipso facto pose questions that are concerned with the nature of drawing in the broader sense. Prizes also celebrate individual biases and prejudices but in the doing of that raise questions about choice and relevance that always impose an interrogative edge to the reception of not only the winners but also the other selected works and here those not selected (available on the M16 website).

The winner of the M16 Drawing Prize is Blue Mountains-based artist Catherine O'Donnell. Her work *Cowdery St Window* is a bravura exercise in tonal realism. The artist's use of charcoal demonstrates a skilled understanding of the medium. The viewer is faced with a rectangular window, a Holland blind, half-drawn in front of a sheer pleated curtain, intimates the space behind and adds an element of mystery, a teasing sense of apprehension that is at once appealing and off-putting. The image asserts its ambiguous identity. The mannered trope of the rolled paper reinforces the artifice that lies at the core of this beautifully executed image.

Clare Jackson's *Holidays* was awarded the Delta Cleaning Services Prize. Her pencil on paper image of a beach towel exhibits a similar technical dexterity to the work above. Her use of

chiaroscuro and warm shades of blue, red and yellow animate the folded towelling fabric to produce an image whose dose of sentimentality echoes family memories and (perhaps) less difficult times. The removal of physical context (where is the beach?) points to both the autonomy of the object and that of the medium used to re-present it.

Kate Vassallo's *Colour Wheel* (winner of the Local Artist Award) is a strong image whose powerful energies held within the geometric strictures of its tight triangles, provides a concentrated pictorial and tonal dynamism. There is for me a celebration of the traditional in the works of the three winners. This is not a negative response but one that accepts that the hierarchies of drawing, the accepted historical tropes that have given drawing its identities over the centuries, remain relevant and pertinent amongst the plethora of graphic activities that characterise contemporary practice.

Moving through the exhibition I found Peter McLean's understanding of the expressive efficacy of black (and tones thereof) as demonstrated in *Great Uncle Charlie*, to have particular appeal. James Hale's *Tears of joy* with its 70 cards of witty, ironic and privately addressed text, was amusing and captivating, although its visual acuity was questionable. On the other hand, Annika Romeyn's *Double Vision (Mt Gingera)* is a beautifully achieved composition celebrating landscape and the expressive possibilities inherent in an astute understanding of medium and subject.

Space prohibits further discussion of individual works but I commend the M16 Drawing Prize for its embracing and celebrating the possibilities that are endemic in contemporary drawing.