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# ART IN YEAR OF THE PLAGUE



From far left: Artist Vincent Namatjira with his Archibald Prize-winning portrait of himself and Adam Goodes; Lindy Lee with Secret World of a Starlight Ember at the MCA; Yvette Coppersmith, Nude self portrait, after Rah Fizelle, (2016); Arthur Streeton's The railway station Redfern (1893) at the AGNSW retrospective; No Friend but the Mountains (2012-20), Ibrahim Mahama installation at Cockatoo Island, part of the Sydney Biennale; No blood will be Shed (2019) by Wanda Gibson at the National Museum of Australia; Legendary Sydney gallerist Frank Watters and Teddy; Tjanpi Desert Weavers work at the National Gallery as part of the Know my Name; Pablo Picasso's L'Arlesienne: Lee Miller (1937); Henri's Armchair by Brett Whiteley (1974-75). PHOTOS: DOMINIC LORRIMER, NGA, AGNSW, WHITE CUBE

***There were many struggles, joys and unexpected twists in this year of hibernation.***



*In March last year a friend in Bangladesh forwarded a news item that said Australia's borders would be closed until September. "Is it true!!!!" he exclaimed. I was sceptical and replied that neither the economy nor people's limits of endurance would allow the closures to last that long. I thought we'd be flying again within a few months.*

It's in such moments you discover you're really an optimist. One month into 2021 and the international borders are just as firmly closed as they were at the end of March, maybe more so. The most dire predictions don't see us travelling internationally until next year. More than 30,000 Australians can't even get a flight home.

The retreat into Fortress Australia turned 2020 into a strange and unpredictable year for the visual arts. It made for a year in which public institutions struggled and private galleries enjoyed surprisingly healthy sales. While commercial galleries only require a handful of willing clients, the big institutions are vitally dependent on visitation to bring in revenue, and even to acquit their obligations with governments that use an "efficiency dividend" as a blunt instrument to penalise a museum that doesn't pull its weight.

Some museums had even greater problems with the politicians. The great blight – and false dawn – of the year was the continuing wrangle over the future of the Powerhouse Museum. In July it was announced with a fanfare that the Berejiklian government would abandon plans to destroy the award-winning building in Ultimo in response to concerted public opposition. It now seems this was no more than sleight-of-hand on behalf of a regime that still wants to sell off part of the site to developers and divide the institution into three separate components: fashion and design at Ultimo; science and technology in Parramatta; and all the rest, including collection storage, in Castle Hill. This is colossally wasteful and unnecessary. It will destroy the historical uniqueness of the museum, subject the collection to much avoidable stress and strain, create vast new ongoing expenses, and produce an unsatisfactory outcome for both the city and Parramatta.

Why is this lunatic project still on the table? When we have a Premier who sees nothing inherently wrong with pork barrelling favoured electorates or overseeing an office that destroys documents that were legally required to be preserved, we should never expect a straight answer. The entire disgraceful business has been wreathed in secrecy ever since it was announced by former premier Mike Baird, and the duplicity seems set to continue into 2021.

The Powerhouse was not the only museum doing it tough in 2020 as COVID-19 forced closures across the country. Hardest hit was the National Gallery of Australia, which needs to attract most of its audience from Sydney and Melbourne. With Canberra isolated by bushfires at the start of the year, then by border restrictions in the months that followed, it was always going to be a tough ask for new director Nick Mitzevich, who had arrived with brave talk and big ideas.

The NGA's first blockbuster of the year, *Matisse & Picasso*, was a reheated version of an exhibition concept that has been well rehearsed internationally. The idea was simple enough: bring together the two biggest names in modern art and you can't go wrong. That might have held true under normal circumstances but it would have required some exceptional masterpieces to tempt visitors to travel to Canberra, and the show followed the familiar formula of a small number of standouts and a lot of filler. Later in the year it would have been remarkable to get *any* significant loans from overseas museums, as the global exhibition network began to stall.

Although it was a low-profile affair the NGA's retrospective of Hugh Ramsay (1877-1906), was perhaps a more satisfying event. Ramsay has long been thought of as Australian art's greatest example of what-might-have-been had he not perished of tuberculosis at the age of 28. This exhibition, which brought together all of the artist's major works, didn't provide any revelations but it confirmed what an outstanding talent was lost.

By the end of the year, the NGA had moved into full COVID-19 mode, falling back on *Know My Name* (until July 4), a massive survey of Australian women's art that draws heavily on the permanent collection. At a time when there is a new determination to give prominence to female artists the curators worked hard to create an imaginative display, but it has remained difficult to draw a crowd.

The Art Gallery of NSW went into lockdown in March and was able to emerge again on June 1. Most of the shows that had been running pre-COVID were still running, and would continue for much of the year. Chief among them was the 22nd Biennale of Sydney, which brought together artists from many countries that would normally never feature in the exhibition. In selecting work for *Nirin* (aka "Edge" in Wiradjuri), the first indigenous-themed Biennale, director Brook Andrew made Haiti his first destination. Other unorthodox choices would follow, with the result being a rough-and-ready display spread across six venues. Everything would be suspended when the virus struck but a good percentage of the work would reappear in June and enjoy an extended season.

It was a provocative show but arguably one of the better Biennales of recent years because of the way it avoided the usual diet of celebrity art. Rarely has a group of invited artists bonded more successfully than the diverse crew that gathered in Sydney in March for the opening.

At the AGNSW the Biennale works were threaded through the permanent display, putting items from the colonial era into direct confrontation with the post-colonial art of First Nations people. It

was an experiment that worked as a kind of shock tactic but the gallery has continued the practice post-Biennale by filling the permanent galleries with anomalous works as part of a program called *Archie Plus*. This signals the AGNSW's increased commitment to contemporary art (at the expense of other areas?) and creates a sideshow for the annual Archibald, Wynne and Sulman Prizes. It also has the effect of making the rooms into a confusing mishmash – an impression enhanced by large, orange labels in which a curator or someone else tells us all about a work. I'm all in favour of museums trying new things but the basic idea behind *Archie Plus* is neither new nor especially enticing.

The most noteworthy part of the 2020 Archibald Prize, which ran from September to January, was that Vincent Namatjira became the first-ever indigenous winner with a portrait of footballer, Adam Goodes, called *Stand strong for who you are*.

Although the Archibald thrives on controversy, Namatjira's victory couldn't have been more predictable. In a year when Black Lives Matter protests raged all over the world it was inevitable the Trustees of the AGNSW would finally award the prize to an indigenous artist. Namatjira's case was helped by the fact that he is one of the few Aboriginal artists who actually paints portraits, and that he came close to winning a couple of years ago. Neither were there many credible alternative choices.

The AGNSW ended the year on an upbeat note with a comprehensive retrospective of Arthur Streeton, one of Australia's all-time greats. Like so many of this country's most acclaimed artists, Streeton, for all his ability, was a problematic personality and an inconsistent painter. Even though the exhibition shows him at his best a retrospective is not a hagiography, and finding the flaws is part of the fascination of learning about the man and his work.

Down at Circular Quay, the Museum of Contemporary Art had a reclusive year, finishing with a Lindy Lee retrospective, *Moon in a Dewdrop*, that has generated surprisingly strong positive and negative responses. I felt the show had a greater internal consistency than anticipated, but have heard dissenting views from artists who dislike the way Lee embraces randomness in her splashes of ink and "formless" stainless steel sculptures. It's vaguely reassuring to know so many artists still feel strongly about form, rather than being obsessed with fashionable "topics".

Among other significant surveys this year was a retrospective of Tom Gleghorn in Newcastle, in which a former hero of 1960s abstraction came up looking much better than expected; a busy, awkward overview of Peter Kingston's career at the S.H. Ervin Gallery, that showed a talented graphic artist trying to reinvent himself as a painter; and a really impressive mid-career survey from sculptor, James Rogers, at the Drill Hall Gallery in Canberra.

In my very limited opportunities to travel interstate I was able to see two spectacular shows of contemporary art: the *2020 Adelaide Biennial: Monster Theatres*, and the second *NGV Triennial* (until April 18) which I intend to write about as soon as normal travel resumes.

Perhaps the greatest surprise of 2020 was the way the pandemic affected the fortunes of commercial galleries and auction houses. Although one might have expected the galleries to suffer like other forms of small business, many dealers had bumper years. It was partly because wealthy

collectors couldn't travel to overseas art fairs and were obliged to do their shopping closer to home. A secondary revelation was the degree to which people view art in the same way they view furniture or home appliances – as part of a domestic environment that requires periodic updating.

The same consumerist urges were applied to auctions, which set numerous records for individual artists, including an all-time record for an Australian work, in the \$6.13 million paid for Brett Whiteley's painting, *Henri's Armchair* (1974) sold by Menzies in November.

Although it has long been argued that the visual arts is essentially a luxury market that is first to feel the pinch in a recession and slowest to recover, COVID-19 has forced a reassessment of that idea. Even in a locked-down world there is so much money, so much private and corporate wealth, that sheer boredom induced a higher level of spending on so-called luxuries.

Naturally such thoughts are deeply offensive to those who see art as a sacred vocation, a way of carving deep meanings from obdurate reality. Yet under the pandemic there has been plenty of scope for the romantic or tragic view of art to co-exist with a more prosaic perception of art as a commodity. One man's spirituality is another's superannuation.

Many institutions were in two minds about how to acknowledge the 250th anniversary of Captain Cook's voyage up the east coast. Fifty years ago Cook was a national hero but today most institutions are timid and cautious in the way they deal with an explorer recast as an agent of pernicious colonialism. In 2020 public monuments to Cook were defaced and vandalised, and many delighted in the idea of tearing down an historical idol. It was left to the National Museum of Australia, in *Endeavour Voyage* (until April 26) to do a really intelligent exhibition that gave due respect to Cook's achievements while paying close attention to the indigenous point of view.

Judith Neilson's White Rabbit Gallery celebrated its 10th anniversary, and was joined by a rush of new cultural projects, from Phoenix Central Park to the Dangrove storage and presentation area in Alexandria. We will only see these new buildings come into their own as the virus subsides. They might assume a greater prominence due to the fractured nature of the Australia-China relationship, which threatens to slow down White Rabbit's acquisition of new Chinese art.

Finally a thought for some of the people we lost in 2020. Pride of place should go to the sculptor, Erwin Fabian, who died at the heroic age of 102. Other notable losses included the pioneering first director of the National Gallery of Australia, James Mollison; legendary gallerist, Frank Watters, and his artist brother, Max; prominent painters Geoff Dyer, Annette Bezor and Michael Nelson Jagamara; and mercurial, much-loved photographer, Jon Lewis. The art world will recover from an enforced year in hibernation but it will be poorer for the personalities that have left the stage forever.