

Reviews: The Dobell Drawing Prize; Fiona Hiscock: Timelines

Left feeling a little drawn



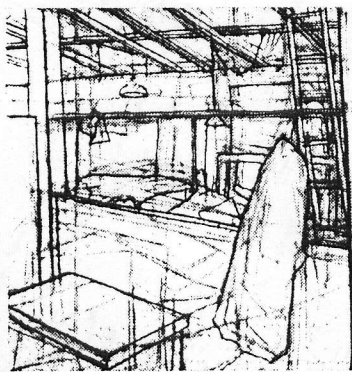
Visual art
The Dobell Drawing Prize

IF THE Dobell Drawing Prize at Westpac Gallery contains the best of drawing in this country, there are grounds for despair. Not all the works are bad; nor could you say the rest are uniformly bad; for each is bad in its own way. But apart from a few acceptable works, I get the impression that drawing today is the ideal medium for adapting a mediocre technique to a trivial theme for the sake of a pompous expression.

Peter Bonner deserves his place as the winner. His drawing of a warehouse gives sufficient information to make out the geometric forms of the architecture. Judged from a traditional definition of drawing, Bonner's manner is mean with visual data; but his mark-making isn't arbitrary. The network of lines alludes to space not only by perspective but by the intensity of greyness.

There's enough dynamism in the composition to be self-sufficient as an abstract work. But in being centred around a tangible motif, the "abstract" element is made more vivacious in its suggestion of depth. The well-crafted work is classically modern in its tension between illusion and abstraction.

To appreciate just how good Bonner's work is, you have to look at some of the others: incoherent when abstract, fluffy when illusionistic and full of silly portent when narrative.



Peter Bonner's winning drawing

Maxine Liau's formless *Chasing dreams* at least has a candid title, though it could have been called "Chasing Ideas".

Clunes tracks by Bruno Leti has a handsomeness rivalling Bonner's but none of his interest in space, nor the power to move the eye backwards and forwards in the imagination.

Guy Warren does a scruffy Chinese-inspired mountain with the title *Rock of Ages*. Superimposed on the feeble outcrop, a male and female are schematised as a see-saw in red outline, like the moon above.

Kevin Connor seems both sentimental and impatient in his naive expressionism in gouache and Indian ink. Fred Cress is monumentally corny with his image of a mourning old woman on one side of a bush and a snoop on the other side; and Salvatore Zofrea's take-off of Tiepolo is student standard.

Daniel Moynihan's *Tigerman* is fancy-dress surrealism and Andrew Sibley's *Mad lovers* is a sensational wolf-man and woman erupting in uncontrolled spatters. The image has an oily combination of flippancy and portent.

Landscape is a disappointment. Terry O'Donnell's *From above Picnic Creek* is perhaps the strongest, a bit thick on outline and with imperfect spatial relationships. Bob Baird's *Study for Oxford Falls Terrain* is a tentative mixture of fluff and line that doesn't visually explain where the land goes.

Max Miller's *Waterhole-Muttawin-gee* is pale and apologetically hatched, while Peter Kingston does a charming colonial veranda in knots and smudges.

Wendy Sharpe's vigorous study of a drawing class is described as "mixed media". In effect a painting, the work is chaotic but sanguine, one of the few that looks as if it was fun to do.

Rachel Ellis's *Autumn Light* has a kitschy title but is a worthy study of a tap by a window. David Fairbairn's *Transfer tower* is a grandiose linear groping at form, demonstrating more exertion than spatial sense, particularly in the white forms. Andrew Antoniou's *Night of Alchemy* is an imaginative decoction of Chagall, early Picasso and academic tonalism.

I left the exhibition wondering: can the best in Australian drawing really be so bad?

At Westpac Gallery, Victorian Arts Centre, until 22 June
Review by **Robert Nelson**