2017 Bowness Photography Prize announcement notes by Susan Fereday

Firstly I wish to apologise for my zombie red watery eyes and raspy voice – in case you haven’t noticed. The result of an unfortunate brush with Spring pollen in my garden two days ago. But please let me reassure you, that when I was judging for the Bowness Prize, my vision was perfectly fine!

As one of the three judges this year – along with Corbett Lyon and Stephen Zagala – I’d like to begin by congratulating Monash Gallery of Art and all the wonderful staff who administer the Bowness Award. We all know that the MGA is the collecting home of Australian Photography, an august institution with a fabulous collection and gallery spaces, but I was impressed in my experience through the judging process to confirm that the MGA is also an ethical sanctuary.

In an art world where all too often ethical corners are cut, or artists are taken advantage of, or treated disrespectfully, the MGA’s standards of professionalism are exemplary. The care at every level, the attention to detail by staff, whose scrupulous commitment to fairness and transparency at every stage of the competition, is evident. From setting up the parameters of the award, to processing entries, first as digital files and later as physical artworks, I would like to congratulate the MGA on it’s demonstration of best practice.

I commend all the staff but in particular I’d like to mention Stephen Zagala, Senior Curator, and Katie Tremschnig, Registrar, who carefully attended to every detail of the process, and MGA’s director Anouska Phizacklea, who closely oversaw things without intruding on the judges deliberations.

Now to judging the Bowness Prize. You can imagine how difficult this process was for the three of us: Corbett, Stephen and I. We each looked at over 3,000 slide entries, by 897 photographic artists (the most entries in any year to date). So many wonderful images! Sometimes it felt like a marathon. But because the standard of works was so high it was also a pleasure.

What you see on the walls here are 59 works we selected as the best in an extremely competitive field. When we were called back two months later, after selecting for the exhibition, walking in to the gallery was an exquisite moment: to see the works in the flesh, up on the walls and beautifully presented.

Walking around the exhibition we felt – and I’m sure you’ll agree – what an inspiring collection of photographs this is. And because all the works in the Prize had to have been made in the last year, the exhibition presents a kind of snapshot, or window, onto the state of Australian photographic practise right now, without curated theme or common subject. This is a rare circumstance.

Looking around I’m sure you can see evidence of some trends. One might be the use of drones (quadracoptors) to photograph landscape and urban environments from above – a perspective previously unaffordable unless you happen to know someone with a helicopter.

Another trend, perhaps almost all-pervasive in this year’s iteration of the award, is the way works play with multiple technologies quite confidently, and experimentally, often combining: analogue and digital tools; painterly elements; performative practices; sculptural processes; antiquated photographic processes such as daguerreotype and collodian; modern camera-less techniques such as lumen printing; low resolution digital manipulation; high resolution digital manipulation, and so on.

There is great freedom in evidence. Photography is truly an elastic medium.
We judges were hugely impressed with the diversity of practice at this time. It used to be said that a photographer’s life could be summed up in 1/60ths of a second – in the tradition of the decisive moment of photo-journalists, shooting raw and printing full frame. Whether this was ever really true, today it is in no way true. Almost without exception the works you see here are the product of multiple stages, involving thoughtful decisions at every step from pre-visualisation to final presentation, even when spontaneity and the accidental are part of the method.

You can imagine how tough our task was ultimately to select the final winning works for special commendation. And now: the three works selected for Honourable Mention Awards. Each comes with a printing voucher to the value of $500 donated by the Colour Factory, Melbourne:

**#1. Danica Chappell, ‘Fermata #14’ from the series Fermata**
This is the constructivist inspired multi panelled work you see on the opposite wall. Here what appears at first to be cold formalism in a stylistic borrowing of Constructivism without it’s social rhetoric, on closer inspection turns out to be process driven, a highly personal engagement by the artist with multiple techniques in the darkroom – cameraless photographs made from collodion printing onto fragmented anodised aluminium plates, with further additions of layers of pigments and drawing – to build a work that cannot simply be reduced to its surface.
Danica describes her works as performative in nature, belonging to the artistic traditions of visual abstraction via process.

**#2. Jenny Pollak, ‘Alberto 2’ from the series Last call**
This is the colourful pigment ink-jet print you see close to the entrance. It depicts a man in France in a Skype conversation with the photographer in Australia, who has photographed the screen complete with screen icons, wobbly garish colour, and then blown up the low resolution image to a scale which loses information to pixellation. There is a familiar domestic engagement with the subject. We probably all can relate to the situation of speaking to someone on the other side of the world that feels like they could be in the next room. In this image, the photographer captures the poignancy of the sitter’s confrontation with mortality and her own feelings of inadequacy in the situation. What to say to a person in a conversation that might be their last?
The artist foregrounds the Skype technology – which is often frustratingly clunky: it’s always dropping out – which often gets in the way of personal discourse. Here she shows us a kind of poetics of the technology itself, to convey the ambivalence of distance and intimacy. The image is presented as seemingly naïve but is ultimately profound.

**#3. Del Kathryn Barton, ‘soft cake in the wind’**
This is the large rather magical work you see behind us. What is depicted looks to me like an apocalyptic beauty queen parade – perhaps post-nuclear, as the title and text might be a reference to yellow-cake. The artist’s confident facility with materials and her reference to the legacy of early Surrealist photography is in keeping with her insistence on low-means collage techniques – including the tearing of found imagery. We think of Hannah Hoch’s work ‘Cut with the cake knife Dada through the Beer-Belly of the Weimar Republic’ (1919) which cut through the patriarchal society of her time. Barton’s approach to collage is refreshingly old-school in technique, apparently simple but layered in meaning. With Barton’s addition of painted marks, the self-consciously dismembered female body is brought back to life again – animated in a way.

And now, the moment everyone is waiting for. The big reveal. Who has won the MGA Bowness Prize for 2017? The winner is: **Polixeni Papapetrou**, with her marvellous life-affirming photograph ‘Delphi’, from the series Eden.