

Basil Sellers Art Prize 2010

Vernon Ah Kee, Ponch Hawkes, Noel McKenna, Glenn Morgan

The Basil Sellers Art Prize acknowledges the significance of sport as a subject for Australian artists. It recognises and encourages artists who combine artistic experimentation with reflections on Australian experience.

A 2009 government report—the Crawford report on *The future of sport in Australia*—drew the surprising conclusion that 'Australia does not have a national sports policy or vision. We have no agreed definition of success and what it is we want to achieve'. Artists have substantial responses to make to such a challenging remark. Contemporary artists are keenly aware of both the attractions and the contradictions of an Australian vision of sport.

Sport, as Vernon Ah Kee observes, is a powerful focus for community. Even the most humble sporting competition provides a framework for life itself as well as the game. The weekly rhythm of training, competing, even the post-match sausage sizzle; all create bonds connecting players, club administrators, trainers, friends and family. But Ah Kee also observes that sport draws boundaries between communities: 'the perception of cricket in Australia at the national and state representative level is of an exclusively "white" thing. Cricket, like the beach, remains a lasting bastion of white Australian power and identity'.

Often it's the contradictions in sport that prompt artists to reflect on our values and priorities. Reversing the roles in imagined scenes of 'girls behaving badly', Ponch Hawkes asks why we tolerate violence and sexual aggression among sportsmen that we would not accept from others. Noel McKenna suggests that our adulation of sporting heroes can take us down curious paths; athletes strive to deliver their best in the arena but outside of the playing field their human frailty can become evident. Celebrating popular milestones in sport, Glenn Morgan returns to a question at the heart of modern Australian history; what positive cultural values do we expect to find in sport and how do we distinguish them from the negative aspects of what is now a mass-media spectacle?

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Juan Ford, Phillip George, Tarryn Gill and Pilar Mata Dupont, Gareth Sansom

Australians love to attend sporting events but seeing sport is not simply a matter of watching games. How we see sport can shape beliefs about individual players and teams but also about communities and even nations. The visual culture of sport encompasses everything from television spectacles through propaganda, from corporate logos through the art of antiquity.

Tarryn Gill and Pilar Mata Dupont's old-style gymnasium is a picture of unity, with athletes choreographed into a synchronised whole. Sport and national unity are often connected in Australia, especially when pride and reputation are at stake in international competition. But the artists issue a caution; the synchronisation of individual performers into a unified entity was integral to Fascist aesthetics in the 1930s and '40s.

The power of sport can divide as well as unite. Sporting subcultures—petrol heads, the horsie set, cricket tragics—can be exclusive tribes, each with their own arcane language and rituals. Although surfing is associated with alternative lifestyle, surf culture can be closed and xenophobic. The sun-bronzed Aussie surfer is an ideal figure that excludes, sometimes aggressively, beach-goers who are not male or of European descent. In contrast, Phillip George declares that 'In the surf, we are all the same'. Decorating surfboards with Islamic calligraphy, he hopes to 'talk to Australian popular culture about Islam'.

Less tangible but equally powerful visions of sport emerge in myth and memory. Gareth Sansom recalls his youthful prowess as a spin bowler and contrasts the cricket of a more genteel era with a playing field now shaped by fierce political and commercial rivalries. The legend of the fiendishly elusive *doosra* adds a mythic element to Sansom's painting; a boy from a small village becomes a cunning magician while mischievous gods toy with unwitting mortals. Juan Ford considers the essentially elusive visual character of sport. For thousands of years, artists have struggled to reconcile the dynamism of sport with the stasis of art. Whether represented on a Greek vase or in a twentieth-century Futurist sculpture, sport ceases to be a mobile, physical act and becomes a frozen, schematic representation.

Basil Sellers Art Prize 2010 Eric Bridgeman, Richard Lewer, Tony Schwensen

One of the attractions of major sporting events is the fans, even if many of them don't seem quite right. In a packed stadium, with the crowd at fever pitch, it's easy to conclude that the world has gone mad. Painted faces, multicoloured hair, garish costumes and deranged chants all suggest that impassioned sports fans prefer carnival antics to conventional behaviour.

Tony Schwensen has produced videoperformances exploring the intersection of sport, fan culture and parochial values. Schwensen's attitude to the subjects of his investigations is both welcoming and critical; 'between belief in the potential and fundamental good of society and anger at its complacency and stupidity', he says. In *Attempting to approach fanaticism*, Schwensen continues his quasi-anthropological research as he attempts to learn the local languages of sports fans in New England.

Fans revere the superstar athlete as a totem; 'The creation of Wilma as a statue', says Eric Bridgeman, 'is like creating a large trophy'. Embedded in the work are the languages of ethnography and museum display; this athlete is a specimen in a museum diorama, surrounded by his tribal attributes. The result is an ambivalent message. Wilma—an imagined relation of a real-life athlete, the rugby league great Mal Meninga—is honoured but objectified, surrounded by glitzy trophies and cheap souvenirs.

Being a sport lover is also about story-telling; dissecting games, big-noting at the bar or reminiscing about legendary contests. One of the most familiar story structures is the tragic form. These are the tales of the one that got away, the putt that didn't drop, the error that cost a game. Richard Lewer's animated work *The sound of your own breathing* is an exploration of such all-time lows. The stories themselves may not recount catastrophic failures but they remind us that aspiration can just as likely lead to failure as success. Being a sport lover also means learning to 'suck it up'.

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Grant Hobson, David Jolly, David Ray

Artists intrigued by sport's powerful role in the formation of Australian identity often ask, 'Who does sport really belong to?' Does sport belong to champions, who shape its highest achievements and embody its values? Does it belong to the fans, without whom any game risks becoming a silent and empty affair? Or does it belong to the administrators and their corporate partners, recasting rules, costumes and schedules to suit international marketing objectives?

Grant Hobson's images of surf beaches on South Australia's Eyre Peninsula suggest a strong spiritual bond between athletes and the ocean. But his surfers wear the branded apparel marketed by international surf wear companies. For Hobson, local surfers, committed to both their sport and their environment, 'stand like corporate souvenirs from an ad campaign or an industrial scene, paused as the printer reloads the next colour ink on the presses. These are digital design constructs highlighting the predatory relationship between marketing and landscape in the constructed cool world of modern surf culture'.

David Ray's collection of small, roughly modelled trophies calls attention to the values underpinning a championship performance. He suggests that sport belongs to the worthy. The trophies do more than declare a triumph; the anthropomorphic ceramics act out the process of becoming a champion. This narrative traces the passage from challenge, through endeavour and ordeal, towards triumph and self-realization. In popular culture, this is the story of Rocky, as enacted by Sylvester Stallone. In art and myth, it is the story of ethical development; victory lies in discovering the best in oneself.

David Jolly's paintings of the Tour de France contrast two very different 'stakeholders' in the world of sport. Heavily backed by corporate sponsors seeking global television exposure, the riders become mobile billboards plastered with logos. Along the race route, the fans struggle to reclaim some territory. They camp by the road, paint slogans on the bitumen, crowd perilously close to the speeding cyclists and form a lurid backdrop to television broadcasts. The Tour de France is a sprawling, seemingly anarchic carnival populated by what Jolly describes as 'the most insane sporting enthusiasts I've been amongst'.