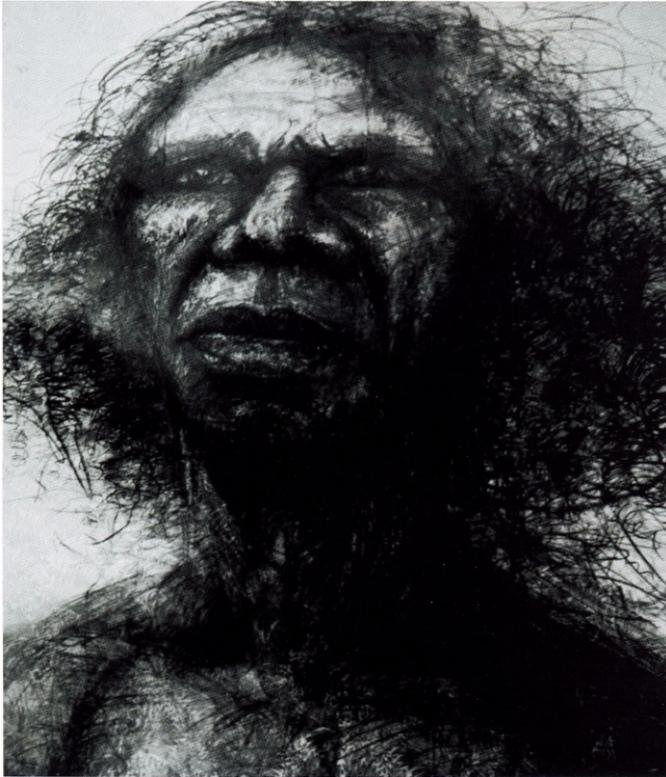


Caricature finally triumphs at the Archibald Prize

ROSS WOODROW



Craig Ruddy, *David Gulpilil, two worlds*, 2004, charcoal and graphite on wallpaper (detail). Photo Ben Rushton/fairfaxphotos.

The news that a Sydney artist backed by a substantial fighting fund is to challenge the award of this year's Archibald Prize to Craig Ruddy for his portrait *David Gulpilil, two worlds* must have heartened many. In my case any thoughts of rushing to offer my services as an expert witness evaporated when I read the grounds for Tony Johansen's court challenge. His writ evidently asserts that Ruddy's portrait does not qualify for the prize because it is a drawing rather than a painting, or specifically that since the medium used in the portrait of Gulpilil is charcoal and graphite on wallpaper it does not meet the condition that entries must be in 'oil, acrylic, watercolour or mixed media.' This proposition is so weak that the first artist or curator to walk through the

courtroom door will do as a witness to authorise how elastic the descriptor of 'mixed media' is in the contemporary art world. Even so, if the fixative, varnish or medium Ruddy used to set the charcoal dust contains any oil-based chemical a half-smart lawyer will find an expert to acknowledge that charcoal fragments set in an oil binder is technically oil paint.

Who cares if the portrait is a drawing or painting anyway? More important is the fact that it is an embarrassingly bad painting, and most significantly it is not a portrait but a caricature. The successful defence against the charge of William Dobell's winning portrait of Joshua Smith being a caricature, in the landmark court case in 1944, was not built on the assumption that caricature is allowed in the prize but that Dobell's painting was *not* a caricature. If Ruddy's portrait were challenged on the grounds that it is a caricature it would be very difficult to defend. Obviously, Johansen and his backers will not take this potentially successful tack since Johansen is quoted as saying that the portrait is a 'stunning work of art of high quality. I beg to disagree and my academic credentials in the field of caricature and racial images would perhaps give my evidence some weight in a court of law.

Two things are essential to get selected as a finalist in the Archibald: the right subject and a novel approach. Apart from the obvious option of having the celebrity subject strip nude, the drama of the pose or setting is one way to create attention, but most artists attempt to find a distinctively novel format through use of multi-panels or quirky frame or by adding sequins, real hair, or other objects, and particularly through the choice of large scale. It is this variety of mediums and formats that gives the Archibald exhibition that same particular flavour as the Higher School Certificate Art Express exhibition where immature intellects try so desperately to stand out in a crowd.

Even before meeting his subject Ruddy had his novel concept in mind to represent Gulpilil as the quintessential



Tracey Moffatt, *The movie star: David Gulpilil on Bondi Beach*, 1985, type c colour photograph, edition of 20. Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.

man of two worlds by drawing him over William Morris wallpaper, of a design that had been used in Admiralty House, the Governor-General's residence in Sydney. The Morris design was used in order to represent the epitome of culture and civilisation. In other words it serves the same purpose as the elaborate red uniform coat of Governor Macquarie that Augustus Earle had Bungaree wear in 1826 when he painted his portrait as a generic 'Native', or man of two worlds.

In the eighteenth century white Europeans first started to write about how to represent people from other worlds, particularly people with black skin, and writers such as Immanuel Kant decided that the key measures of racial difference were skin colour and hair. Craig Ruddy taps a long tradition of racial images in his use of dense charcoal and wild hair. Gulpilil's flesh is animated with colour only in the areas where the wallpaper shows through, presumably a nice touch to metaphorically represent his civilised side. But this ploy does not even deserve consideration as a half-baked idea since it requires the primary assumption that the Aboriginal body is transparent, ready for any projection.

Because Ruddy was sure his concept of Gulpilil in two worlds was a winner he didn't really have to get to know David Gulpilil, and a few hours of contact just weeks before

the Archibald entry date to get the painting started was all he needed. The Archibald rules require at least one sitting, and that the sitter is aware they are to be the subject of an entry.

The 11,455 visitors to the Art Gallery of New South Wales who voted to make this the additional winner of the People's Choice Award also don't know David Gulpilil, although they are very familiar with the characters he has played in various movies. Invariably the character he has played, in movies from *Storm Boy* (1976) to *The Tracker* (2002), is a man of two worlds: the wild and the civilised. In his painting Ruddy represents this fiction, which is so familiar that its fundamental racist underpinnings have obviously become invisible to most of us, from art gallery trustees to ordinary punters. The essence of caricature is to create a surprising twist on a familiar image - in this case through distortion and scale. What separates this caricature from the usual playful variety is its basis in a stereotype. No artist would be taken seriously with a painting of Russell Crowe as a muscular gladiator but it seems we don't apply the same values to an image of an Aboriginal actor.

The Art Gallery of New South Wales trustees deserve to be questioned on such poor judgement. Nearly twenty years ago the artist Tracey Moffatt produced a photographic portrait

of David Gulpilil, *The movie star: David Gulpilil on Bondi Beach* 1985, and used it to critique the construction of stereotypes around the trigger of black skin. In Moffatt's construction Gulpilil was shown with tribal face paint, bright coloured beads and braided hair wearing garish swimming shorts and draped across the bonnet of a car overlooking Bondi Beach. He holds a can of beer in front of a huge ghetto blaster. Her brilliant mixture of the acceptable and unacceptable signs that white Australians use to stereotype black skin has a double edge, since she tests the proposition that the American version of urbanised or hip black wildness might be acceptable on Bondi Beach, as distinct from the campfire Aborigine of *Crocodile Dundee* or the simple bushman of *Storm Boy*. The type, that is, that Ruddy depicted. Put simply, Ruddy's Gulpilil would be at home on a souvenir tea towel but the Moffatt version never. It is too complex and threatening. The fact that 11, 455 visitors responded to Ruddy's particular caricature of an Australian Aboriginal only confirms the popularity of stereotypes. Significantly, almost ninety percent of visitors to the Archibald exhibition did not vote for this painting or did not vote at all, so any claims that the image is universally endorsed are completely spurious.

We didn't get the usual chance to compare portrait and sitter this year because in what can only be described as an act of grace toward Ruddy, David Gulpilil found an excuse to avoid returning to Sydney for the usually essential press photograph of artist and subject before the Archibald winning work. Even so my recollection of the physiognomy of Gulpilil from the character he played in *The Tracker* bears little resemblance to the image in the Ruddy portrait. My abiding memory was the fluid muscularity of his dancer's body. Suddenly he is all head, or more correctly all hair, in an undifferentiated mass broken by massive nose and mouth drawn with the same heaped crudity as the overworked lifeless eyes. The neck might seem scrawny or too narrow but only because it has to support a head almost equivalent to the width of the visible chest. The left-forward alignment or misalignment of the head in relation to the body also gives an odd goose-like character to the figure that would be difficult to explain except as ineptitude or caricature.

Such claims of distortion and departures from physiognomic reality were common during the evidence against Dobell's portrait of Joshua Smith at the 1944 trial. But then the press interest in that trial was not motivated by concern over caricature, but by the more salacious subject of homosexuality. Presumably every tabloid journalist in King's Cross knew that Bill Dobell was gay, and Dobell's defence that he knew Joshua Smith intimately was exactly the evidence they were craving. When the *Daily Mirror* front page headline screamed 'Dobell tells of two years in a tent with Joshua Smith' Dobell was well and truly outed, as Joanna Mendelssohn noted in 1997.¹

The Dobell trial made the Archibald Prize a national exhibition precisely because the popular press discovered that it is not essentially about art, but an event involving money, celebrity, petty social and art politics - the place to find a story on the good, the bad and the ugly. On the technical issue of caricature, however, Dobell was excused because he knew his subject well, too well for some, so any distortions were based on profound or personal insights. The same cannot be said in the case of Craig Ruddy and David Gulpilil. In the only press comment from Gulpilil he hinted that it might be a good idea for Ruddy to now come and spend some time getting to know him. The inference in this would seem to be that Ruddy might then be able to paint a portrait of him as an individual rather than a caricature of what he thinks David Gulpilil represents.

A serious challenge to the award of the Archibald Prize to this appalling caricatured image might remind the custodians of culture that creating a circus in the name of high art to attract crowds may be their prerogative, but it is still their duty to carefully vet the acts they select so they don't do damage to us all.

Notes

- 1 Joanna Mendelssohn, Review of William Dobell: The painter's progress, in *The Australian*, 28 February, 1997