



2 November 2004

et al. WINS THE WALTERS PRIZE

Last Friday night the Auckland artists et al. won the Walters Prize, New Zealand's most prestigious and richest art award. The award was announced at a gala dinner at Auckland Art Gallery. The Walters Prize is awarded to an artist who has made an outstanding contribution to New Zealand art in the past two years.

In awarding the prize Judge Robert Storr, former senior curator at the Museum of Modern Art and director of the 2007 Venice Biennale, said:

I had not seen this work - or work by this team of artists - before, and I was very very struck by it. It seems to me that it has a couple of basic ingredients, which one hopes to find in work of this kind. One, it has an idea, and two, it has a lot of feeling. There is the tendency to dichotomise - to say the mind is separated from feeling. But in this case, the challenge to think is also backed by a whole series of other factors - sound that is difficult to deal with but also powerful; words that are difficult to listen to but that also say something. You are put in a situation where you have to do two things that the world would like you not to do simultaneously - to make sense of something and also to absorb it.

I chose the et al. because it puzzles me the most. It seems to me in a variety of ways that this team of artists has radically addressed the problem of contemporary art. In one installation you have a place to sit - but you're not sure if you should sit there; you have a whole lot of things to see - but you can't get to them; you have a series of voices speaking - someone on a television in the distance - but you can't hear them. You also hear a rather steady art historical lecture about the position of the artist, and the dilemma of what the artist intends and what the public receives. From another speaker, you hear a public debate on this kind of art and its relation to this country.

It's a very intelligent orchestration of all the dilemmas that the public actually will feel when considering work they do not know. Particularly the dilemma that I think is true of a lot of art - the art that does not love the art lover back. It doesn't necessarily spurn the art lover, it's not hostile to the art lover, but it basically says: "Come to me, but I will not reward you immediately with what you're looking for. Come to me, I will engage you in a process of figuring out what I am, and who you are."

The award comes hard on the heels of et al.'s selection to represent New Zealand at next year's Venice Biennale. Et al. receives \$50,000 from the Prize's founding benefactors and

principal donors, Erika and Robin Congreve and Jenny Gibbs, plus a return trip to New York courtesy of Saatchi & Saatchi. In New York, et al. will have the opportunity to exhibit work in their worldwide headquarters. All the finalists - et al., Jacqueline Fraser, Ronnie van Hout and Daniel von Sturmer – also received \$5000 Finalist Awards from Major Donor Dayle Mace.

Chris Saines, director of the Auckland Art Gallery says:

The Walters Prize has again shown that contemporary New Zealand art is not just a product of New Zealand based artists – each of the finalists, as it happens, have either lived or been recently working in the now global space of contemporary practice. It's really stood out this year, but it was apparent too in the 2002 Prize. In that sense the Prize is continuing to do its work, bringing new work to the public's attention and giving a bearing on what can be unfamiliar ground.

If this year's Walters Prize opened up and strengthened the conversation about contemporary art then Robert Storr's remarks on Friday and his public lecture on Saturday certainly raised up its level. I think very few of those present at the award dinner dived for the smelling salts when Storr made his call. Frankly, any one of the finalists could have taken the Prize. That et al. did has a rightness and symmetry to it on all sorts of levels. I'm tremendously pleased for them.

This is the second time the Walters Prize has been awarded. The first winner, in 2002, was Auckland photographer Yvonne Todd for her work [Asthma and Eczema](#), 2001.

Last week the [Guardian Unlimited](#) listed Robert Storr as one of the 10 most important people in the artworld. Storr spent the weekend meeting with artists, visiting galleries and delivering the Deutsche Bank Walters Prize lecture to a packed audience at the Auckland Art Gallery.

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