



The Blake Society Ltd

BLAKE EDUCATION 2011 60th BLAKE PRIZE



CONTENTS

1

Blake Prize 2011

Introduction

2

Highly Commended

3

Blake Poetry Prize

Reception of the 2011 Blake Prize Finalist Exhibition

4

Judging Religious Art in Contemporary Australia

Dr Julian Droogan

5

**Contemporary Australian Muslim Artists and
the Hybrid Identity**

Nur Shkempi

6

Making Art

COVER ARTWORK

Left – view of 2011 Finalists exhibition

Right Abdul Abdullah

Lower middle Michelle Ussher

Lower left Khadim Ali

1

Blake Prize 2011

Introduction

A key focus for the 2011 Blake Prize was the celebration of the Blake's sixtieth year. This milestone was accompanied by the publication of the monograph, *The Blake Book: Art, Religion, Spirituality in Australia*, by art historian Rosemary Crumlin. This 220-page book is lavishly illustrated and provides a detailed account of each winner and a helpful history of the development of the Prize. This rich visual survey points to some of the deeper shifts in Australian culture around religious observance and the changing notions of the idea of spirituality, which was also evidenced among the winning works for this year's prize. The 1951 winning work by Justin O'Brien, a painting that visually illustrates a Roman Catholic doctrine is a world away from the 2011 winning work by Khaled Sabsabi, a three channel video work that shows a ritual of chant and drumming by members of the Naqshbandi Sufi community in Sydney's west (*Naqshbandi Greenacre engagement*, 2010)

Sabsabi is a Lebanese/Australian artist who works in sound, video and installation practices. The work submitted for the Blake had been shown earlier in the year in a survey show mounted at the Campbelltown Regional Gallery entitled *Edge of Elsewhere*, that explored cultural diversity as its theme. Sabsabi was impressed by the values of the Naqshbandi Sufi community and developed a relationship of trust that led to this privileged insight into their life and practices. Sabsabi commented: 'to this community, mysticism is concerned with developing one's abilities and capacity through emotional, intellectual, and physical practices. They greatly respect all genuine traditions of belief and faith which seek to accept the responsibility of humanity to care for each other and our world.'

The work presents 90 minutes of video of chants, prayers and the human interaction of families, as children move about and learn unconsciously the tradition of their parents and their wider community. This format depicts religion not so much as a form of belief, but as a song, ritual and a way of being together. As the viewer approaches the three monitors on the floor, there is, laid out before the work, a small red prayer rug. There is an implicit invitation to sit down and to participate rather than to remain an onlooker. The hospitality that the artist found in this community has also found its way into the form of the artwork. It requires participation; it needs onlookers to complete its circle of appreciation. It also invites listening, as one moves from an unfamiliar ritual to some level of sympathy and understanding. As viewers we are invited to put aside our cultural preconceptions and to listen to an unfamiliar song of faith and community.

The very ordinariness of the surroundings of the Greenacre Scout Hall, where this community gathers, serves to raise questions about what it takes a community to survive in new situations. Clearly there are resources in this faith tradition that deals with displacement, loss and confusion. This resource of their faith sustains hope in the present and the possibility of finding a future in a new situation. This is a spiritual search that is echoed for many people, as they look for resources to face the present challenges of life.

References

- Artist's website: www.peacefender.com/
- Short video interview: www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMwQJWgG-3M
- Introduction to Sabsabi's winning work by one of the judges Dr Blair French: www.youtube.com/user/BlakePrize?feature=grec_index#p/u/6/bQ7FwVtdyMI
- Farid Farid, 'Unrequited Language: Khaled Sabsabi on art, humility and community', *Artlink*, Vol 31 No1, March 2011, pp 32 – 35.



Highly Commended

Alongside the winning work several other works were highly commended. These included Hayden Fowler's three-channel video that explored a series of enacted gestures that express life and death rituals partly inspired by knowledge of ancient models (*The Long Forgetting*, 2010). As part of his research Fowler underwent genetic testing to determine his own links to Paleolithic cultures and visited ancient cave sites in Europe. He has a long interest in the manner in which humans integrate their relationship to the natural world, particularly through symbolism and ritual. An excerpt of the work exhibited in the Blake Prize is available on the artist's website: haydenfowler.net/projects/the-long-forgetting.html



Hayden Fowler
Khadim Ali

Khadim Ali's work was based in his training in the ancient miniature tradition. It is a beautifully marked and burnished drawing, *Haunted Lotus from the Rustram Series* (Bamiyan Buddha), 2010, that uses traditional images from Afghanistan to comment on the internal conflicts of that country. Ali's family are ethnic Hazara and have left their traditional home in Afghanistan and are currently living in northern Pakistan where they still experience persecution due to their religious and ethnic difference. Working now in Sydney, Ali uses this tradition of images to complicate the way the Taliban uses religious stories to authorise their acts of violence towards others. In this work he layers the hero figure of Rustram over the remnants of the Buddha figures that were destroyed by the Taliban. For further introduction see the interview with Khadim Ali by Steve Meacham that was published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/from-the-biblical-to-a-broader-church-20110912-1k5va.html).

Michelle Ussher's work, *Luciende* (floating head), 2010, with a delicately painted surface evidencing fine washes and cracking sediment, presented an enigmatic figure of a somewhat dismembered head. Drawn from a wider series of works that are dependent on a literary theme, this work was singled out as a fine painting, with a presence that raised questions of narrative or identity that made an impact on the judging panel.

The John Coburn Emerging Artist Award was awarded to Carla Hananiah with an evocative oil painting of a landscape scene entitled *Refuge*, 2009. It indicates the continuing capacity of the Australian landscape to evoke singular moods and a sense of place that offers spiritual nourishment. Hananiah discusses her inspiration and her sense of spirituality in the following video interview: http://www.youtube.com/user/BlakePrize?feature=grec_index#p/u/4/pdjWq8ea2GI

The MUA Human Justice Award went to Perth based artist Abdul Abdullah who used digital photography to produce a moody self portrait that engaged the audience in a conversation about difference, based on the signs of male youth male culture and Muslim identity (*Them and Us*, 2011). In this video interview he takes about the work and his identity as an Australian artist who is also Muslim (www.youtube.com/user/BlakePrize?feature=grec_index#p/u/5/pNztiftEYw).

Here the Maritime Union of Australia's National Secretary Paddy Crumlin comments about the human justice aspects of the work (www.mua.org.au/news/crumlin-presents-blake-prize-for-human-justice/).

3

Blake Poetry Prize

The Poetry Prize was won by well-known writer Robert Adamson with an evocative poem that echoes his experience of the landscape of the Hawkesbury River area where he grew up and now lives (*Via Negative – The Divine Dark*). The following video interview provides an excellent introduction to the work and Adamson's approach (www.youtube.com/user/BlakePrize?feature=grec_index#p/u/1/ExJlYUxpExQ).

Other References

- Video introduction to the exhibition by Dr Rod Pattenden Chair of the Blake Society: www.youtube.com/user/BlakePrize?feature=grec_index#p/u/2/L_eNGScUYyU
- The Australian: Rosemary Neil, August 27th 2011. (<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/arts/keeping-the-faith/story-e6frg8n6-1226120547381>)

Reception of the 2011 Blake Prize Finalist Exhibition

Among the diverse responses to the 2011 Prize finalist exhibition were two key issues that provoked ongoing discussion. In an article in the Fairfax Media John McDonald raised issue with the Blake Prize about what he perceived as the lack of the criteria being applied to determine the nature of religious or spiritual art. He argued for a more narrow definition of what might be considered religious art, which in many ways could see these works fitting comfortably in to religious spaces as part of worship or educational contexts (www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/losing-my-religion-20110929-1kxua.html).

One of the judges for this years prize Dr Julian Droogan takes up some of these issues as he reflects on his learnings during the judging process in determining the finalists and winners of the 2011 Prize. His comments are contained in the following section on 'Judging Religious Art'.

A second issue, which was more of an observation, was the noted increase in the number of artists from Arabic or Middle Eastern cultural backgrounds who chose to enter the Blake Prize. One reason this might be occurring is the wider cultural diversity of people graduating from art schools and finding involvement in various aspects of the arts. Of the six winners and highly commended works this year, three of those were by artists with backgrounds in Muslim cultures. This a new turn for the Blake Prize as recent winners have generally reflected Christian or Buddhist concerns. This contribution of Muslim ideas into contemporary art is of particular significance. Nur Shkembj, the Arts Officer for the Victorian Islamic Council, has offered a personal response to the challenge of working between cultures. She describes the place of the hybrid response, where possible new innovations occur that speak to all people irrespective of their cultural background.

Michelle Ussher
View of 2011 Finalists Exhibition
National Art School



Judging Religious Art in Contemporary Australia - Dr Julian Droogan

It seems to me that at its most basic and profound level religion is about creating meaning and value in life and communicating it amongst a community.

I had the great privilege in 2011 of being asked to be one of the three judges of the 60th Blake Art Prize. My background is as a scholar of comparative religions, and I was very excited about the opportunity of being involved with the contemporary movements in spiritual and religious art in Australia. To be honest, my own main interests have always been in the religions of the ancient world and of Asia – I came to the study of religion from archaeology, and I have had a deep fascination with the weird and wonderful in religious art, architecture and symbolism for some time. So, although I came to the project with a rather traditional perspective, I hoped that the experience of being on the Blake panel would give me a window into the living and diverse currents of religion and spirituality in Australia, and further my own interests in the complex and slippery relationship between religion and artistic expression. I was not disappointed.

My first thought, however, was how on earth can you be expected to judge religious art? To judge anything you need a set of criteria to compare it with – to sort, rank and relate – and to judge art, religious art especially, what sort of criteria do you possibly use? How do you prevent the judging process from becoming a merely arbitrary and artificial exercise, held hostage to the whims of personal taste, current fashion, and desire for shock and novelty? How do you prevent yourself from becoming something akin to a persecutory deity, passing stern and offhand judgement on the deeply personal and spiritually sensitive creations of others? I didn't know a lot about the contemporary art scene in Australia, who was 'hot' and who was 'not', nor was I well versed in the current debates about art style and process, the sort of interests and excitements that infuse the life of any cultural field. So what criteria, what perspective, should I use?

I decided that I would have to turn these limitations into strengths, and approach the art from the perspective that I did know well – religion, spirituality and how art is used to express and communicate these deep and primordial human drives.

It seems to me that at its most basic and profound level religion is about creating meaning and value in life and communicating it amongst a community. These meanings and values usually relate to the wider cosmos in some way, to the 'transcendent' world beyond the individual, and are shared amongst people through a variety of ways: through ritual, common practice, dance, story, myth, texts, and of course the visual arts. The great religions of the world, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and so on, have thousands of years worth of common symbols and practices to draw upon in order to tell their stories and knit their societies together; while all the time new religious movements, the New Age, Wicca, Scientology for example, are creating radical and innovative ways to tell or repackage new stories, crafted to fit the changing times, to create new communities. In this sense, then, religious art is about two things – about finding ways to express common stories about the universe and our place in it (why we are here, what we should do, what happens next etc.), and it is also about using the forms taken from the past, from tradition, in new ways to retell old stories or create new ones to fit the times. So, religious art could be said to be about community, tradition and innovation.

Detail Khaled Sabsabi



Thankfully, in contemporary secular Australia we are not part of a traditional religious culture, where individuals are all expected to think about the world and our place in it in a broadly similar manner.

Many of the pieces in the 2011 Blake expressed this admirably. For instance, the winning work – *Naqshbondi Greenacre Engagement*, a three-channel video installation by Khaled Sabsabi - invites the viewer to enter and participate in a space of traditional Islamic Sufi ritual within contemporary Australia. It is religious art at its most profound, not only a representation of the practices and stories that form the living heart of a religious tradition, but an actual invitation to enter into and participate in what is for most people a foreign religious community. Another example: one of the 'highly commended' pieces, by Afghani/Australian artist Khalid Ali, draws on the tradition of miniature painting from his homeland in the extraordinarily beautiful *Rustram Series* where he layers the figure of Rustum, a fictional Islamic folk hero, onto the destroyed Bamiyan Buddhas of Afghanistan. He takes traditional symbols and uses them beautifully and deftly to tell a contemporary story – one of loss but also about hope for the future. So far, all well and good.

However, then we have to consider the other side of the Blake equation; spiritual art. Oh dear, this is where things become a lot more complicated, certainly for the poor judge, but also I think a lot more interesting and dynamic. If religion is perhaps about communities and tradition, then spirituality is more commonly used to refer to individuals, their interior spaces, their hidden hopes, dreams and values, and the ways these are expressed to integrate the individual into the world. As a result, spiritual art is not shackled to tradition in the same ways the religious art often is (even when its trying to rebel against the past), and so spiritual art is often far more experimental, informal, novel, unexpected, challenging and even shocking in its form.

Thankfully, in contemporary secular Australia we are not part of a traditional religious culture, where individuals are all expected to think about the world and our place in it in a broadly similar manner (think Medieval Europe, or traditional Islam). Instead we revel in our modern individuality and freedom of expression, each of us is taught to value ourselves as an autonomous creative agent, a unique psyche, with our own desires, inner lives, hidden fears, and anxieties about our place in the world and the great questions of life, death and meaning. This means that spirituality, and spiritual art, can literally be anything that an individual artist wants it to be, any way of expressing the relationship between the individual, their inner world, and reality. How on earth is a judge expected to judge the quality and expression of another person's spiritual life? What criteria can they use?

I don't think this question can be answered unequivocally, and I don't think that it's meant to be, but I can suggest how I went about thinking this issue through. First, does the art incite discussion and debate, does it have the power to 'move' the viewer, to invite them into the spiritual world of the artist, to pose questions, provoke difficulties and suggest new ways of looking at the world? No one, I believe, can define spiritual art because it is often more about provoking questions, about starting conversations, than about settling answers. If the art has the power to communicate a sense, a feeling or a message, even one that the viewer might find difficult and alien, then it is successful. How does one determine whether this sense, feeling or message is spiritual rather than mundane? I don't know, and I believe that the value and importance of spirituality is that that no one person can answer this question for another.



Art can be a technology to provoke a change of perception, to create altered states of consciousness, meditative insight, trance-like perception, or a sense of belonging – this, for me, is one of the main strengths and roles of spiritual art in our and any culture.

However, one question can perhaps help facilitate this conversation: does the art open a window into the spiritual dimension that can be used by the viewer to provoke change? It seems to me that spirituality is often about inner meaning, but also about inner transformation. Art can be a technology to provoke a change of perception, to create altered states of consciousness, meditative insight, trance-like perception, or a sense of belonging – this, for me, is one of the main strengths and roles of spiritual art in our and any culture.

For instance, the 2011 Coburn Award for an emerging artist was awarded to Carla Hananiah for her *Refuge*, a painted layering of mystery and illumination over an Australian landscape, which asks the viewer to consider themes of refuge, homeland and becoming. This painting provokes a sense of inner nostalgia and yearning, it has the power to start the viewer thinking about their place in the world in a new light, a new illumination, but it also has the power to transform, to create a perception of catharsis, or release, of longing and the joys of discovery and homecoming. These elevated and deeply resonating emotions are, for me, deeply spiritual and I am grateful to the artist for being able to provoke them in the viewer, to take me on a journey.

A note about the judging process: There are three judges, one an artist, one from the art world and another (me!) who is meant to know something about religion – perhaps an academic, writer, priest or yogi? You can be a judge only once. This is lucky, as in 2011 there were nearly 1000 entries, each one of which has to be poured over, the artist's statement read, thought about and perhaps discussed. I am proud and delighted by the final selection that we made for 2011. The conversations that we had in making the final cut were wide-ranging and stimulating, encompassing everything from religion, politics, identity, the spirit, the origins and meaning of religion and much, much more. I hope that the 60th Blake exhibition has the power to move others in a similar fashion, and incite ongoing conversations within our wider culture about the role and place of religion and spirituality in the twenty-first century. The Blake has been doing this now for 60 years and, I know, will continue to do so for at least 60 more.

Dr Julian Droogan is a scholar of religion, with a background in archaeology and Asian history and culture. He is a Lecturer at Macquarie University and presenter of popular courses and world tours for the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Carla Hananiah



Contemporary Australian Muslim Artists and the Hybrid Identity – Nur Shkempi

Much of my work as an artist straddles the fault lines of identity, politics and spirituality. As a Muslim, I am often questioned about the perceived contradictions between my tradition and contemporary life, as well as the religious or spiritual with that of the secular. Does the work that I create or choose to engage in occur because I am a Muslim, a woman or because I am an Australian simply responding to my socio-political environment? In my own hybrid identity, which is both a multiple and complimentary identity, I embrace the idea that many aspects of my cultural heritage, religiosity and contemporary environment inform who I am. How then, can I be expected to compartmentalise, fragment or deconstruct the composted, absorbed and blended complexity of my human identity in an attempt to answer this question?

In much of my creative expression I find myself asserting my voice partly in response to the stereotyping about Muslim women that can at times emanate quite negatively from the wider public discussion. Issues of the veil (hijab) seem to exist as media filler, and because of this public attention, the once quiet and personal expression of belief has been politicised to become an apparently contentious issue attracting what seems at times to be a relentless public debate. The very nature of creative expression prompts me to question the motivation behind the work I produce, in particular my works around the hijab. I ask myself: Am I politically or spiritually motivated when I express these issues? Am I simply being reactionary to the current political climate? Am I expressing something from the political and worldly construct as well as from the spiritual simultaneously?

With those questions in mind I look towards my male counterparts, such as Blake Prize winner, Khaled Sabsabi and MUA Human Justice Prize winner, Abdul Abdullah and see so much of what is familiar. Curiously, that familiarity in fact moves well beyond the obvious and I find myself relating more so to Khaled and Abdul for the universal story they tell rather than the fragments of a shared religious heritage. This universal story very much encompasses the reality of the hybrid or multiple identities, which seem to exist rather organically. It is quite obvious that the sharing of the personal, the spiritual, the poetic, the political, the cultural, the sublime and the absurd is not particularly unique to artists of any one distinct culture, religion or nationality. The universality of the language of the arts moves beyond concrete social groundings or norms and permeates the conscience at a level that is neither fixed nor determined.

Perhaps the recent public discourse surrounding identity and Australian Muslims has made the work of Muslim artists in particular more compelling. Perhaps it is the robust hybrid identity that artists such as Abdul Abdullah have made visible in their art practice that has proved to resonate so deeply with the common human experience. As the Swiss painter Paul Klee said 'art does not reproduce what is visible, but makes things visible'. It is precisely because of this that the visibility of such universal notions in the work of contemporary artists will no doubt continue to enlighten, engage and compel us.

Am I politically or spiritually motivated when I express these issues? Am I simply being reactionary to the current political climate? Am I expressing something from the political and worldly construct as well as from the spiritual simultaneously?



Abdul Abdullah

Hybrid identities, in particular, find their breath in the transitional or 'in between spaces'. DW Winnicott notes in *Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena*, that: 'It is in the space between inner and outer world, which is also the space between people—the transitional space—that intimate relationships and creativity occur.' The 'transitional space' seems to be apparent in our everyday lives and is just as relevant to the one who practices an art form as it is to someone who would hardly consider themselves creative. We are all capable of intimacy and creativity. Universal spaces such as these exist to allow exchange and to facilitate the human interaction that moves beyond the constraints of the physical. The nature of creativity is to both encompass and move beyond the physical realm to create a spiritual experience that meets the individual in this transitional space. It is in this transitional space of intimacy and creativity that the hybrid identity, including that of the spiritual, is able to be expressed most naturally.

Nur Shkemi is a Melbourne based contemporary artist and the Arts Officer of the Islamic Council of Victoria.

Reference

- DW Winnicott, 1975. *Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis-Collected Papers*. Basic Books: New York

Discussion Questions:

- Julian Droogan comments on his interests in the 'complex and slippery relationship between religion and artistic expression.' Explore the issues in this relationship using examples from the 2011 Blake Prize and those from other times in history.
- Explore the notion of hybridity and cultural identity in the work of 4 Blake Prize finalists. Select works that were exhibited over a number of different years. Discuss the variety of approaches taken by the artists and the techniques used to convey meaning. Examples of these works can be found on the website or in *The Blake Book* by Rosemary Crumlin.

2011 Finalist Exhibition
60th Blake Prize opening night



6

Making Art

Australia is a culturally diverse country. The influence of culture from a variety of countries, races and communities pervades our lifestyle and habits. Think about the influence of culture on your life. Identify at least 2 aspects of your being and enjoyment of life that can be attributed to cultural traditions, habits, customs, food, clothing etc. How can you create an artwork that explores the multi-faceted person that you are? Make lists in your VAPD and explore ways of visually suggesting the hybrid in your identity. Create a resolved work that draws the audience into contemplating the nature of life and the influence of the myriad of cultural influences in Australia on your life.

You may like to look not only at the work of those artists who have recently explored this theme in the Blake Prize but also the work of artists such as Hossein Valamanesh, David Larwill, Guan Wei, Simryn Gill, Destiny Deacon and Kate Benyon.

60th Blake Prize opening night





Khaled Sabsabi

‘It is in the space between inner and outer world, which is also the space between people - the transitional space - that intimate relationships and creativity occur.’

NUR SHKEMBI

Full details as follows

2011 Winner

Khaled Sabsabi, *Naqshbandi Greenacre engagement*, 2010
3 channel video, sound, duration: 90:26 mins.

Highly Commended

Hayden Fowler, *The Long Forgetting*, 2010, 3 channel digital video,
duration: 19:00 mins

Michelle Ussher – *Luciende (floating head)* 2010, oil on linen,
77 x 66 cms.

Khadim Ali, *Haunted Lotus from Rustom series, no. 2*, 2010, pencil,
gouache, watercolour and gold leaf on Vasli paper, 32 x 55 cms.

John Coburn Award

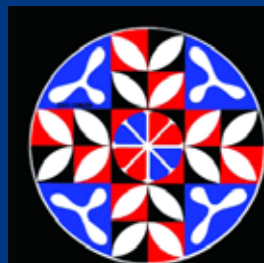
Carla Hananiah, *Refuge*, 2009, oil on board, 91.5 x 122 cms.

Prize for Human Justice

Abdul Abdullah, *Them and Us*, 2011, digital print, 120 x 80 cms.

Introduction text Dr Rod Pattenden
Learning Responses Susan Coster

Images courtesy of the artists,
National Art School
Gallery and Blake Society.
Additional photographs by Mim
Sterling.



The Blake Society Ltd