

SPORTING CHANCE: THE BASIL SELLERS ART PRIZE AND EXHIBITION

By Sue Jackson

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As a child, with my short-sightedness, poor hand-eye coordination and inclination to dreaminess, I had little aptitude for sports. I didn't go as far as Barry Humphries, who at compulsory school sports events used to sit with his back to the play, knitting, but I had no real interest. So it comes as a surprise to find that as an adult I've turned into an aficionado.

My husband has always been a keen participant as well as a viewer of a wide range of sporting events on TV. Early on I trained myself to sit next to him reading, apparently oblivious to the sports commentary. But obviously, subliminally, I have been attending all along because sport has gradually invaded my psyche.

Although I have never played golf, these days I can effortlessly distinguish Ernie Ells' swing from Adam Scott's, and I'm concerned about Sam Stosur's fluctuating form. And ever since their AFL premiership victory in 2007 I have become an ardent fan of the Geelong football team. Belatedly, I have joined the vast number of Australians passionate about sport.

Basil Sellers is one of these people. Philanthropist and businessman, Sellers combines his two great loves in a rich (\$100,000) biennial art prize. Last year, he funded fifteen finalists, out of a field of 350 entrants from across Australia, to make art about sport. A not-to-be-missed exhibition, showcasing the results, is currently at Melbourne University's Ian Potter Museum.

Possibly for the first time for a major Australian art prize, there were no restrictions on the medium used, and the pieces produced in this second exhibition span animation, ceramics, photography, sculpture, video, painting and more. Although the artists worked in isolation from each other, many of the same themes recur throughout their works, providing a unique and often confronting perspective on sport and contemporary Australian society.

In the wake of the Cronulla riots, where the self-declared white owners of the beach took it upon themselves to repel the ‘Lebanese invaders’, Phillip George, a Bondi surfer, has produced a piece called ‘Inshalla surfboard’. The psychedelic techniques favoured by surfers are combined with Islamic motifs to decorate a surf board, symbolising the necessity - ‘Sufi meets surfer’ - for a true inclusiveness in surfing culture.

The desire for inclusiveness, as well as the constraints on the realisation of that ideal, underpin many of the works. Vernon Ah Kee highlights the exuberance of the players and the sense of community that surrounds local cricket matches in his video and photographs of Innisfail Waru All-Indigenous cricket team. But as he comments, ‘As Aboriginal (cricketers)... my family can readily confirm the race and skin-colour based name-calling that pervades the game in North Queensland.’

Eric Bridgeman’s nude life-size sculpture ‘Wilma Jr. (Blacky)’ also focuses on Indigenous sports players, this time celebrity footballers. In an era when the Indigenous population of Australia represents about 2% of the national total, yet people from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage constitute around 10% of all professional players in both the Australian Football League and the National Rugby League,

Bridgeman's piece couldn't be more timely. Blacky stands alone, surrounded by the tawdry trappings of fame, a commodity on view to the curious.

But the positive side of football is not neglected. Glenn Morgan's painted tin, wood and wire sculpture of a bus full of exuberant fans returning to Geelong after the 2007 AFL premiership victory, is sheer joy. The handles, turn-able by viewers, attached to his sculptures invite participation in the artist's delight at several of the iconic moments in Australian sport.

At first glance, the video 'Gymnasium', the exhibition prizewinner, by the young Perth artists, Tarryn Gill and Pilar Mata Dupont, also invites a purely positive response. Filmed in black and white, with images of perfectly coiffed, made up and sweat-free athletes exercising in a controlled synchronous style reminiscent of the Hollywood extravaganza musicals of the 30s or 40s, it exudes nostalgia. But the uniformity, the perfection and the self satisfied smiles also evoke old newsreel images of 'the master race', and serve as a reminder of how easily nationalistic fervour about sporting prowess can degenerate.

Photographer, Ponch Hawkes, uses gender reversal to challenge the public condoning of violence, alcohol and drug abuse and sexually offensive behaviour by celebrity sportsmen. The narrative approach in her photographs is ideal for highlighting these issues, and it is impossible not to be moved by the plight of the young abused fan in the series namesake photograph 'He never should have worn those shorts'. Hawkes' use of chiaroscuro is masterly.

David Ray's all white ceramics are tiny irregularly-shaped trophies, with minute arms and sports equipment attached, indicating the endurance and determination required

to win such cups. But the display operates on another level as well. The ceramics are arranged within a glass cabinet on glass shelves, so that when viewed from a distance as a totality, they morph, Escher-style, into an exquisite chalice, topped by a tiny image of Christ's head with crown of thorns. Ray's work is a marvellous depiction of sport as religion.

This exhibition demonstrates that sport can provide rich material for artists as well as an intriguing lens through which to view contemporary society. It is an opportunity for everyone in the family to enjoy an art gallery visit. Be assured – you won't need your knitting.

The exhibition, which is free, is on at the Ian Potter Museum, Melbourne University, until 7 November.