



(left) Visesio Siasau with his award and *Tongan Tapa Cloth* (2014), Tongan customary pigments and dye on bark cloth, 4040 x 18060 mm.

Auckland

24th Annual Wallace Art Awards

Pah Homestead, TSB Bank Wallace Arts Centre, 8 September–8 November
EDWARD HANFLING

Art awards are funny. They provoke questions with no satisfactory answers. What criteria should be used by the judges? How can wildly different styles and media be compared? To what extent should innovation or currency be rewarded and how can it be measured? Why turn art into a competition at all? You could write a million densely theoretical books and end up a million times further away from validating the Wallace Art Awards. Or you could just be happy about it.

Artists are not always rolling in money, so there is something to be said for dishing out 'approximately \$195,000' in the form of cash prizes and international residencies. Also, judges generally have no ulterior motives; they rank the artworks they are given, and to do that they have to be brutally honest. They will inevitably fool themselves to some extent (we all

get seduced or beholden to transient influences) but will nonetheless conscientiously try to 'get it right'—even though there is no 'right' because there are no answers to the kinds of questions identified above. And when a mission is set to level 'impossible', as it is for the judges of art competitions, the results can exceed what would arise from a merely achievable task. The judges may wind up drawing attention to artworks many might not even otherwise see, rewarding artists who are themselves striving to do something good (rather than fashionable or 'contemporary'). Honesty pays.

Judges Joyce Campbell, Andrew Clifford, Ian Jervis, Andrew McLeod and Philip Trusttun picked Visesio Siasau for the 2015 Paramount Award. Siasau has previously used a range of materials to make sculptures that refer to traditional Tongan divinity figures as well as to the influence of Christianity since the nineteenth century. In 2013 he incorporated some of these figures into his first *ngatu*, or *tapa cloth*, and he has extended his commitment to this

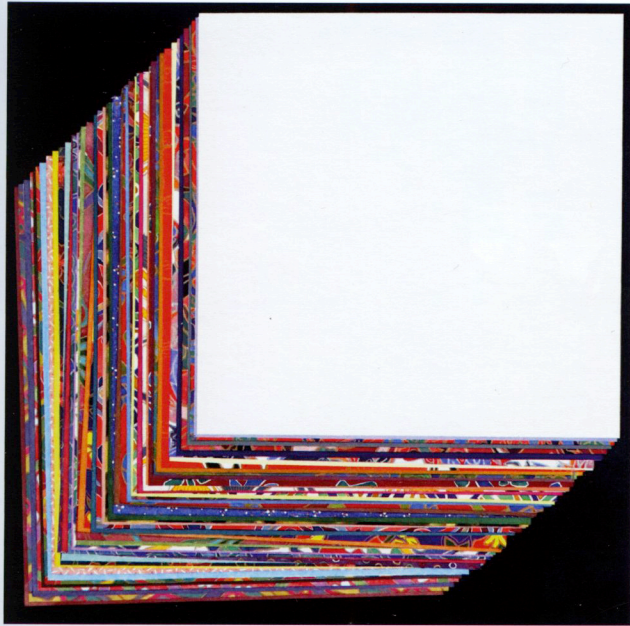
discipline with the gigantic winning entry in the Wallace Awards (only partially unrolled in the gallery at the Pah Homestead). The scale alone puts all the other entries in the shade. Of course, it is also impossible to make comparisons.

Take Yolunda Hickman's small gouache on paper *Square Field* (2015), hung behind a door as if to make it even less noticeable. Both Hickman and Siasau use time-consuming, time-honoured techniques to make things that count as 'contemporary art'. But one is exquisite and sharp, the other impressive and profound; utterly different things. The judges may have plumped for Siasau's work because its cultural value overrides other values, particularly in the Auckland context. And to say, in effect, that this cultural value is an *artistic* value is a strong and worthy statement (though there was evidently no intention to make such a statement because the judges do not discuss their individual decisions with each other).

The judges' choices also establish a particular 'look' to the exhibition. This year there are strengths in abstraction and photography. In contrast to previous years, the main finalists' exhibition seems tight—less fluffy, arty-kitschy stuff—while the historically much-loved and lauded Salon des Refusés is, to a large extent, simply refuse.

The award-winning photographs of Russ Flatt (Wallace Arts Trust Vermont residency) and Virginia Were (second runner-up), and Andrea du Chatenier's sculptural figure (riveting in its technique alone), which gained the (sadly non-monetary) Jury Award, each exemplified the ability of many of the finalists to rivet attention by creating a singular, indescribable mood. Phil Dadson was also a fitting recipient of the Fulbright-Wallace Arts Trust residency (courtesy of a different judging panel: Bronwynne Cornish, Mark Fitz-Gerald, Richard Maloy and Steve Rood).

Another fun thing about art awards is we get to measure our own judgements against those of the judges. There is a formal process for this, the People's Choice Award, but it happens regardless. For me, the 'winners' were three artists who did not look like they were trying to please anybody, perhaps not even themselves. The first was Natalie Guy with her *Something in the Air* (2015), a



set of six brass vents inserted into the skirting boards of one room in the Pah Homestead, presumably appropriated from some other building. I like it when it is a struggle to see the art, or when you are not sure if something is art or not.

Number two: Rebecca Wallis' *Armswipe* (2015)—a square stretcher covered with light, almost transparent linen, with an indigo 'swipe' of paint and medium located towards the upper right corner and congealing along the top edge of the canvas.



(above left)
YOLUNDA HICKMAN *Square Field* 2015
Watercolour & gouache on paper,
420 x 420 mm.

(above right) REBECCA WALLIS *Armswipe*
2015

Acrylic & acrylic medium on gac 100
washed, unprimed linen

(below left) ANDREA DU CHATENIER
Lucky Man—detail 2015

Clay, steel & pinstripe suiting, 2100 x 700
x 500 mm.

(below right) TOBY RAINE *Robert Plant with
White Dove and Cigarette* 2015
Oil on linen, 1030 x 760 mm.

This picture is uncompromising, not tarted up at all. Finally: Toby Raine's *Robert Plant with White Dove and Cigarette* (2015). Raine has an affection for the 'heroes' of rock 'n' roll and their antics, partly, I think, for the absurdity. He is similarly attracted to a way of painting (it could loosely be called 'expressionist') that he enacts and ritualises with the contented knowledge that it is out of kilter with 'contemporary art'. The artist's wilfulness engineers its contemporaneity.



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