

Fellowship of Professional and Amateur Artists'

Summer Art Exhibition, July 2012

at Wellingborough Museum

by David Rafer B.A. (Hons), Ph.D.

Thank you to the Fellowship's organisers for offering me the opportunity to select this year's art exhibition awards. This year's F.P.A.A. exhibition was launched on preview night with a visit by the Mayor of Wellingborough and I enjoyed taking the opportunity to attend and meet some of the artists. The Society's artworks remain diverse with an eclectic mix of styles, techniques and subjects worked to the highest standards and making my selection all the harder.

Awarded works



The inaugural winner of the Celia Hanbury Memorial Prize of Best Animal was No. 151, Margaret Watts for her pastel picture entitled, 'Good Friends'. There were many great animal paintings to choose from for this award, causing me much angst in my decision. In the end, I found myself drawn back to the simple humour and composition of Margaret Watts's 'Good Friends' assured, by those that knew Celia, that she would have appreciated this quirky, idiosyncratic

work. I also paused to reflect on my own enjoyment of viewing a couple of Celia Hanbury's animal pastels exhibited in exhibition last year, particularly enjoying 'Elvis at Granchester'.

With these thoughts in mind, I chose Margaret Watts's work as she has not only used animal subjects for her composition but given her picture a humorous quality through the positioning of two mischievous-looking dogs. The grass has been worked with a fleecy, energetic quality matching the way the artist has approached the animals' fur. Light is picked up on the tips of the blades of grass. Watts positions her subjects looking away from our view, leaving us to ponder their expressions. We are aware from the stiffness and intent posture of both animals that their attention has been simultaneously caught by something out of frame.

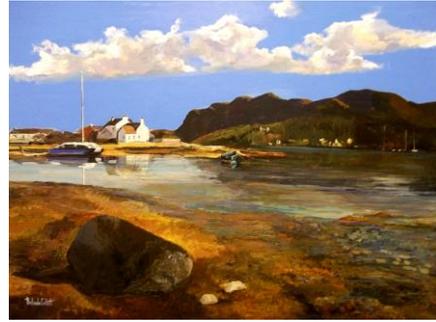
I hope, whether or not I'm judging again, that this prize continues into future exhibitions as there are always many laudable art works created by society members exploring animal subjects and themes. The scope for art is ever present not only in the unusual and exotic but also in the most ordinary, everyday household pet.

Best Pastel was awarded to Graham Plant for his picture entitled, 'Shelby', No. 113. Comments from the society founder confirm the swiftness Mr Plant employed in creating this work, the artist realising colour and form in two hours and not returning to re-work later. The model who sat for this picture was Shelby and the picture was done from life. The work depicts the timeless theme of a naked female model sitting as an artist, positioned in the darkened background, works on realising her as art. Mr Plant adopts a realist approach capturing the truth of light falling upon folds of flesh with subtle cross shading. The artist in the background is only a vaguely drawn shape, a presence rather than a recognisable individual. The model is the work's main subject, being apportioned most of Plant's canvas. She's seated upon drapes with an expression of long sufferance combined with the realisation of the activity around her. In contrast to the quick work of the artist, the model remains still, her right



hand clutching the folded drape as if holding onto an anchor. There's attention to proportion, line and detail, Plant creating a pleasantly expressive work.

Best Acrylic was awarded to Belinda Collett for her acrylic painting entitled, 'Plockton, Scotland' No. 28. For this landscape painting, Collett exploits the crisp quality of acrylic colours to good effect to achieve a bright blue Scottish sky cut by a broodingly dark mountain backdrop. The artist selects a classic view across Plockton harbour, capturing some of the Loch Carron village houses along with a yacht and a boat. She pays close attention to such details as the reflections of houses and boats and scudding, cotton wool clouds as well as utilising a harmonised colour scheme. There's the suggestion of further cottages along the far loch-side and the high mast of the yacht links sky to shore. The beauty of the scenery dominates the diminutive cottages, providing impressive richness.



Best Watercolour/Mixed Media was awarded to Gill Denbigh for 'Eryngium', No. 35, mixed media. Denbigh's picture gives us bursts of colour through which bob various umbels of Eryngium, or sea holly, allowing liberal use of purple and blue washes. The striking way Denbigh merges her background hues creates bursts of watercolour in a swirling, kaleidoscopic effect. These background areas or forms surpass our ability to equate them to a perceptible subject. Whilst the background has a soft, misty, insubstantial, wet on wet watercolour fluidity, it contrasts with the hard spiky, spiny Eryngium leaf shapes and stems. Background washes sometimes spill over Denbigh's Eryngium, adding atmosphere. However, careful attention is paid to the details of leaf shapes, umbels and stem structures.



Best Oil goes to Clifford Knight for 'Rush Hour, M.1.', oil, No. 75. This is a very strong composition. It is a characteristic Clifford Knight vision, with a menacing, brooding sky threatening rain over a chaotic, scrap-yard scene of rusting car bodies, devoid of engines, wheels, seats or electrics. These hulks, the leftover waste of obsolete designs are abandoned as grass grows about them and their cabs and engine spaces are but dark voids. The only hint of redemption for these rusting objects lies in the distant arm of a crane that may be transporting them to

a crusher. There's a chalky quality to the application of paint and the sketchy, brooding bleakness recalls the art of John Piper. For me, 'Rush Hour, M.1.' is far bleaker than, say, Allan Hall's 'Scrapyard', being more reminiscent of Paul Nash's 'Totes Meer' (Dead Sea). Knight's vision is unforgiving, showing us a resource that is spent and stripped, allowed to rust by exposure to the elements, unloved and unlovable. Calling this work 'Rush Hour, M.1.' is a darkly ironic indictment of the fickle motor industry whose products inevitably end in this kind of grim, post-apocalyptic graveyard, devoid of hope.

Runner-up Best in Show was awarded to Tim Hagan for 'Thicket', oil, No. 48. This abstract study of dense, tangled growth explores intertwined, tangling twigs, leaves and barbs. The intricate patterns the artist paints may originate from nature but feel as though they diverge from any purely mimetic representation. Abstracts of nature make for fascinating works and the tangled depths Hagan explores have a curious gothic feel. The thicket is painted with yellow and green highlights over brown bark and there are dark black areas evoking the suggestion of further entanglement. The distressed square



wooden frame provides a curiously crude window to this painting, a window that feels choked by the thicket. The extent of the thicket means that the audience is barred from seeing beyond, except for a small area of intense blue sky positioned above to encourage the sense of an open vista somewhere outside. The resulting artwork is both simple in design and innately complex. The abstracted weaving forms are spiky, possibly barbed and certainly dangerously abandoned. For me such works recall some of the effects produced by Kandinsky or the strange forms of Max Ernst's landscapes or the intense nature abstracts of Brian Mutton. There's a richness to such abstracts, an intangible depth and movement we struggle to appreciate. Curiously, Hagan's oil painting conveys three-dimensionality when viewed from the side rather than simply from the front elevation. There's an entrancing, dreamlike quality to the work. This haunting image feels hard to escape, playing upon our psyches. It also evoked, for me, the sense of entanglement that lies beneath most forms, a feeling Hagen forces us to confront.



The award for Best in Show was given to David Jones for his pastel picture entitled, 'Sheryl', No 70. This work stands out for its exceptional treatment of form and colour. Jones gives us a picture of Sheryl in a relaxed pose, we feel the bond immediately between artist and sitter. However, a great many technical considerations are also at play in the creation of such a picture as 'Sheryl'. A great portrait requires dedication to perception, schooling the mind to remain truthful to the subject. Only through maintaining such discipline can an artist keep faith with proportions and the positioning of such features as nose and eyes. Establishing the face's dominant forms and shapes enables the artist to build up their work, to determine where lines are and where they are not. Artists can employ contour sketches to begin with and dividers for accuracy. However the results are achieved, proportion remains a vital foundation. Jones' work demonstrates meticulous attention to these skills of observation and technique. Observing 'Sheryl' we can see the artist's attention to the subtleties of musculature under the skin, positioning and tonal variation. There's a free flow or movement to the hair falling on the subject's shoulders, leading our gaze into the work. The edges of the hair are softened. The colour and hues of the subject's eyes, dress and background are harmonised. The expression the artist captures as she gazes slightly to her left and away from the audience, is tranquil and perhaps a little wistful. There's expert positioning of pupils and attention to shape and size, her pupils wide, thus having a naturally pleasing shape and openness. Shadow is arranged to the subject's left and across her neck. There's light falling from somewhere above and an uninterrupted background ensures nothing distracts. Lighting enhances the work's dramatic reception, highlighting some areas yet also softening through delicate skin tones and in the folds of hair and dress. The artist's handling of light creates a curious effect, we feel as though light is emanating from Sheryl instead of simply illuminating her. Jones thus uses light to build three-dimensional form and to give his work its extraordinary focus and impact.