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Confessions of an art judge: I tossed a coin to decide

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"I couldn't make up my mind so I did it by lottery" - Richard Bell, Sulman art prize judge.

THE winner feels deflated. A finalist says she is in shock.

The sole judge of the prestigious Sulman art prize has revealed to *The Sun-Herald* that he chose the winner of the \$20,000 award by tossing a coin.

"Like every prize, it's a lottery," said the judge, Richard Bell, an artist known for his provocative work.

"I couldn't make up my mind so I did it by lottery."

But the **winning artist, Peter Smeeth**, whose painting *The Artist's Fate* took him 150 hours to complete, is not amused.

"It takes away from my credibility, if that's his method," Smeeth said. "It is a bit deflating, from my point of view, if that's the whole basis for how I won the prize. I certainly would like to think I won it on merit, not on the toss of a coin."

The Art Gallery of NSW administers the award, and its website says the Sulman Prize is awarded for the best "subject painting, genre painting or mural project by an Australian artist, in oil, acrylic, watercolour or mixed media".

However, Bell used his own criteria to select 29 finalists from 633 entries. More than 20 of the artworks he selected contained animals. Asked why, he said: "I like animals. I was tempted to put in all animals. I was going to make that the criteria but I had to choose some of my friends."

Was this method unusual?

"Don't you like animals?"

When it was time to choose a winner, Bell confirmed he had written the names of four artists whose work he liked on separate pieces of paper. He wrote the names of another four whose work he disliked on more pieces of paper. Then he scattered the lot on the table and tossed a coin.

The winner, Bell said, was the artist whose name was written on the piece of paper that the coin landed on. "It took me a long time to get there," he added, but "that is pretty much it. It won. That's all that matters."

The Art Gallery of NSW had flown him from Queensland and "shacked me up in a hotel so there'd be a winner. I got 'em a winner. I would have liked it to be one of my friends. I would have much preferred that. But I gave these other dudes a crack at it."

So did he like the winning artwork? Bell said he liked what Smeeth had written on the back of his canvas "and the guts were drawn pretty good".

On the back of *The Artist's Fate*, the artist had written: "Rejection feels like it has cost an arm and a leg, getting poked in the eye with a sharp stick, being emasculated, having your heart ripped out and being left completely gutted!"

Bell conceded that some artists who entered the Sulman Prize, which is held concurrently with the Archibald Prize, might not appreciate his cavalier approach to judging.

"We're all different," he said. "There will be people who will be really upset and there'll be people who will really like it."

One finalist, Gabrielle Pool, wondered if her painting, *Dirty Little Pervert*, had been chosen because its original title, which she had lightly crossed out on the back of the work, contained a four-letter word. Pool said Bell's unorthodox method of judging was a shock.

"What would have happened if he hated the name Gabrielle?" she asked. "What if it was the name of an ex-girlfriend who took his house? The mind f---ing boggles."

Another artist, Bob Marchant, whose two Sulman prize wins in 1988 and 1989 were judged by Margaret Olley and John Olsen, said: "Both I have the greatest amount of respect for."

Marchant added: "I think it is important they choose the best people to judge the Sulman because it's just one person's opinion."

Bell was chosen as the sole judge of the Sulman prize by the 11 trustees of the gallery on the advice of the director, Edmund Capon.

But Mr Capon said he was not surprised by Bell's judging method.

"He's a stirrer by nature and I've got no problem with that at all," he told *The Sun-Herald*.

Mr Capon said the Sulman prize was a lottery, but it was easier to predict the tastes of one person rather than the 11 trustees who judge the Archibald and Wynne prizes.

"It's very much a matter of individual taste and instinct and the kind of aesthetic, wit and humour of the individual artist. And I like that," Mr Capon said.

Bell is a Queensland artist who came to prominence in 2003 when he won the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award for *Scientia E Metaphysica (Bell's Theorem)*, which included the phrase "Aboriginal Art - It's A White Thing". He accepted the prize wearing a T-shirt with the slogan "White girls can't hump".

His provocative work has also featured in the Sydney Biennale and last year's *art + soul* exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW.

Another finalist for the Sulman, Kate Beynon, who painted *Lotus Qi Gong Goddess*, said it was the gallery's choice to pick the artist, "and they would know Richard is a character and he would have unusual ways of judging".

Bell said he could not believe the gallery had chosen him as a judge.

His initial response, he said, had been: "Make sure you shack me up in a good hotel and fly me Qantas."

Because of its inflight meals? No.

"There's an animal on the back of the plane."