

The Archibald's racially exclusive past laid bare

As the Archibald Prize turns 100, Hollywood star Rachel Griffiths explores the art award's colourful – and racially controversial – history.



Rachel Griffiths is the presenter of the ABC documentary Finding the Archibald.

- By Rosemary Neill
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Rachel Griffiths chose Melbourne artist Natasha Bieniek to create an intimate oil painting of her for this year's historic Archibald Prize "because I didn't want the big celebrity portrait". The Oscar-nominated and Golden Globe winning-actor quips: "I feel like there's a special place in purgatory for oversized celebrity portraits where they go to die. Who wants to live with them?"

This might seem an odd joke for Griffiths to crack, given that she is presenting a three-part ABC documentary, *Finding the Archibald*, which explores the history of the nation's oldest – and most fiercely debated – portraiture prize, which it's fair to say, attracts its share of super-sized celebrity paintings.

But Griffiths, who has starred in *Muriel's Wedding*, *Hilary and Jackie* and *Six Feet Under* during her three-decade career, is less guarded – and much more fun – than your average art show presenter, and she injects that sense of irreverence and forthrightness into her new gig. In the first episode of *Finding the Archibald*, which screens on Tuesday, she characterises the prize, which turns 100 this year, as "the Melbourne Cup of the art world".

She cheekily tells painter Vincent Fantauzzo, renowned for his large, photographic-like portraits of actors including Heath Ledger, "you're well hung, is what I want to

say". Fantauzzo has won the \$3,500 Archibald People's Choice Award four times but, like many serial finalists, has missed out on the main prize, worth \$100,000. Griffiths asks him if the "weighting" of the prize monies is fair, and Fantauzzo replies, equally pointedly, that it isn't, given the high profile of the People's Choice Award.

Griffiths says she likes the collaborative nature of documentary production. "Left to my own devices, I'd be too ADHD to deliver anything by myself," she jokes. She was also drawn to the "brilliant" idea that underpins *Finding the Archibald*: examining the prize "through the lens of Australian social history".

The actor first flirted with the idea of making documentaries during her university days in Melbourne in the late 1980s, before stumbling into acting: "I always say my acting career was a funny thing that happened on the way to the forum. It took me until I was 50 to really start synthesising those (earlier) instincts I had." Then there were the personal influences that drew her to a series about art: "I'm married to a painter (Andrew Taylor) and my mother was an art teacher. I grew up watching (TV art expert and Catholic nun) Sister Wendy and being madly in love with (art critic) Robert Hughes even though I was only 15."



*Rachel Griffiths, pictured with former PM John Howard, while presenting the ABC documentary *Finding the Archibald*.*

Griffiths, who directed the 2019 film, *Ride Like A Girl*, a biopic about Michelle Payne, the first female jockey to win the Melbourne Cup, has taken on her presenting role even as her acting career is flourishing. Despite the Covid pandemic, she has wrapped filming on a second season of *Total Control*, the AACTA-winning ABC drama about women in the pressure cooker of federal politics, and she is reprising her role in Amazon Prime's first explicitly YA drama, *The Wilds*.

Finding the Archibald was filmed over 18 months around Australia, as Griffiths searches for "my all-time Archie". This is the painting that in her opinion, best reflects

“how we have changed in how we see ourselves, in terms of what a distinguished Australian looks like”.

A parallel narrative tracks how Art Gallery of NSW curator Natalie Wilson takes on the daunting detective work involved in hunting down thousands of missing works by prize finalists so she can assemble Archie 100, a landmark centenary exhibition for the AGNSW, which has just opened. “Natalie is the opposite of the celebrity presenter,” says Griffiths. “She deeply knows her material, and has never been on camera before.”

In the documentary, Griffiths visits secret vaults to check out Archibald portraits of former prime ministers including Robert Menzies. Interestingly, the portrait of Menzies that won the 1954 Archibald Prize was the result of vandalism – it was created to replace a previous portrait of him that was slashed by an unknown culprit.

Griffiths considers how John Brack’s colour-saturated 1969 portrait of Barry Humphries’ Dame Edna was “the first real celebrity portrait” and how an Archibald-winning Brett Whiteley self-portrait referenced his drug addiction through a rabid dog, with white stuff oozing from its crazed eyes.



Artist Brett Whiteley at work on his Archibald Prize-winning self portrait in 1976.

Founded a century ago with a bequest from legendary *The Bulletin* editor JF Archibald, the portraiture prize has been awarded annually to “the best portrait” of an Australian man or woman “distinguished” in art, letters, science or politics. Indigenous Australians were absent from the Archibald’s honour roll as painters or sitters, until eight-time winner William Dargie took out the 1956 prize with his moving depiction of Albert Namatjira, father of the Aboriginal art movement.

Griffiths says: “One of the strongest parts of the journey we’ve been on is really looking at First Nations representation and the idea that what it is to be Australian did not include our Indigenous people until Dargie won with the portrait of Albert. Although it is a portrait by a very traditional, stale pale male, that portrait is anything but,

because Dargie is really saying ‘This, ladies and gentleman, is what a distinguished Australian looks like.’ And that was a very radical act for the day.”



Griffiths with Vincent Namatjira.

As she searches for the definitive “Archie”, prominent painter and Archibald judge, Ben Quilty, and Aboriginal painter Tony Albert argue that Dargie’s portrait – which captures Namatjira’s anguish and dignity – is the most important painting in the prize’s history. Quizzed about what makes a winning portrait, Quilty says the judges “want more than a likeness ... it’s about the essence of that human”.

Griffiths went into quarantine – she did two stints last year – so she could travel to Central Australia to meet Vincent Namatjira, Albert’s great-grandson, who in 2020 became the prize’s first Aboriginal winner, uttering the pithy but memorable phrase: “It only took 99 years.” Vincent, whose winning portrait *Stand Strong For Who You Are*, which depicted footballer Adam Goodes, is known for his comical, naive paintings of public figures, including the Queen and Malcolm Turnbull.

“I’ve had a massive art crush on Vincent,” says Griffiths. “I love how he loves to bring the rich and powerful down to our level. What could be more Australian than that?”

Just two other portraits of Aboriginal people (the singer Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu and actor David Gulpilil) have won the prize, and women and Asian-Australians have also been grossly under-represented as subjects and prize winners. “There was definitely this filter about what a distinguished Australian looks like,” says Griffiths. Fast forward to 2021, however, and “half the finalists are female and we’ve seen the highest representation of First Nations artists. In case anyone thinks that’s box ticking, a very high proportion of the hottest artists in Australia at the moment are our First Nations artists.”

She meets former Sudanese child soldier turned lawyer, Deng Adut, looking sharp in a fedora, two-toned blazer and ripped jeans. A hyper-real portrait of the former refugee

took out the 2016 People’s Choice Award. Griffiths says that “if my grandmother came out of the grave” she would find the award’s increasingly diverse definition of distinguished Australians to be “quite confronting”.



Griffiths with Deng Adut.

Filming a national series during a pandemic certainly had its difficulties. “I did a month of quarantine last year, in different states,” she reveals. “Howard Springs was really quite delightful and the other one, I think I’ve just blacked out mentally. I took my mother and daughter to Adelaide We got to know each other quite intimately.”

Later this year, she will appear on the ABC again in season two of *Total Control*, performing opposite Deborah Mailman. She was executive producer on this drama with Blackfella Films and plays Rachel Anderson, a steely, embattled prime minister who betrays political newcomer, Indigenous senator Alex Irving (Mailman), but ends up losing her own lofty position. Griffiths says: “I haven’t done a subsequent season on a show since I wrapped *Brothers and Sisters* (the Emmy-winning US TV drama starring Sally Field). When you create a role you’re inventing a person from scratch. When you revisit it, you are making key decisions about how to expand the audience’s experience of her.”

Rachel Anderson was the manipulative antagonist to Mailman’s grittily courageous senator in season one – both Griffiths and Mailman won AACTAs for their performances though Griffiths reflects that “one didn’t get too many glimpses into who she (Anderson) is behind that prime ministerial office. The second season is insisting on her humanity, as flawed as she is, in the wake of the prime minister being deposed, disgraced, humiliated.”

Journalists often remark that she plays “strong” characters but “strong is not interesting, really,” she insists. “I was always much less interested in the strength of that character than in her brittleness. Politicians seem to have to absorb the 24-hour

news cycle in a way that puts them into fight or flight mode. When you are in fight mode over time, that's something I don't think the psyche can cope with."



Griffiths with artist Guy Warren, 100, subject of this year's winning portrait by Peter Wegner.

In the Amazon hit *The Wilds* – described as *Lost* crossed with *Mean Girls* – she plays Gretchen Klein, who is possibly the meanest “girl” of all. Klein is involved in a dodgy social experiment conducted on teenage girls who survive a plane crash and are stranded on a deserted island. Shooting is due to wrap by late August and Griffiths calls the opportunity to film this show locally “a godsend” for her and the “amazing” Australian crew.

She says that thanks to federal and state government support for foreign productions, the season two shoot was switched from an overseas location to Queensland. “I was terribly worried that this year I would have to be away from my family for eight months, which was an enormously stressful proposition, so it’s been amazing shooting in Queensland,” says the mother of three.

That heartfelt remark brings us back to the Archibald portrait created by Bieniek, who has been an Archibald finalist six times and won the Wynne Prize in 2015. This portrait depicts Griffiths resting on a sofa in a loose blouse and jeans, chilled out but with a distant, wistful look in her eyes.

Griffiths says she was drawn to Bieniek’s work because of the honesty of a self-portrait featuring the artist’s pregnancy, which was “opposite to the kind of Instagram yummy mummy”. She says that work captured an anxiety shared by many women artists – that once you become a parent, “you will never be able to do good work again because it requires a certain selfishness to be an artist, and that selfishness is always pulling against the selflessness required to be a good mother”.

She has experienced that tension but is emerging from it as her children grow up: “I’d just wrapped season two of *Total Control* and I said to the producer, Darren Dale, I

feel like I'm doing the best acting work of my career since I had children, and my oldest is about to be 18." She felt she was recapturing "the degree of focus that I had of completely becoming another person in *Six Feet Under* and (the 1998 feature film) *Hilary and Jackie*", for which she was nominated for an Academy Award. "It really is that focus that's required to disappear into the role; I feel like I had not been able to do that (due to the) tension between becoming lost in a character and meeting the needs of every child."

Bieniek's painting was a finalist in this year's Archibald contest, which was won by another Melbourne painter, Peter Wegner, for his portrait of 100-year-old artist Guy Warren. Bieniek says that rather than capturing Griffiths as a red-carpet celebrity, "my painting is about Rachel in her home. It reflects an intimate moment ... She doesn't play a character or put on a facade. She is unmasked and herself."

Griffiths also comes across as her unvarnished self in *Finding the Archibald*. "I very much believe that really good factual television can ignite passions; it can take you on journeys and really remind us of the joy that art gives us," she says. "It's perhaps the missing link because art can be so alienating to audiences – particularly contemporary art. ... The Archibald is such a wonderfully accessible show which is why it's so successful as it travels around our regional galleries and brings in massive audiences."

Finding The Archibald screens from Tuesday at 8.30pm on ABC and on ABC iview

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