

THE AUSTRALIAN

Dobell spirit lingers in an abstract medium

By **MATTHEW WESTWOOD**, ARTS CORRESPONDENT

12:00AM MARCH 28, 2019 •  COMMENTS

The spirit of William Dobell was at large last night when a photographic artist won the prestigious Dobell Prize for Drawing — near the site of a celebrated court case in which Dobell was accused of bending the rules in the 1943 Archibald Prize.

The Dobell drawing prize was won by Justine Varga, who used a photographic negative as the medium for her abstract drawing called *Photogenic Drawing*.

While drawing for many people involves pencil and paper, the Dobell this year included animation, textiles, sculpture and even performance. The \$30,000 award allows artists greater latitude in their choice of medium than the Archibald Prize, which stipulates that each entry must be a “portrait painted from life”.

“It (the Dobell prize) encourages innovation and a contemporary approach to drawing,” said Steven Alderton, director of the National Art School in Sydney, which hosts the award.

“We welcome all artists’ interpretations of drawing. If their practice revolves around drawing in new or different mediums, they can submit it to the Dobell drawing prize and they are very happy to consider it as part of the exhibition. We have reviewed the conditions and we are able to do that, whereas the Archibald has a very particular frame of reference.”

Lead judge Ben Quilty described Varga’s work as a “powerful, playful and sophisticated 21st-century drawing”. Tony Albert was highly commended for his work, *Old Sins Cast Long Shadows*.

The Dobell prize was formerly held at the Art Gallery of NSW but has moved this year to the

National Art School, where Alderton said drawing was a foundational part of its instruction. He said Varga had studied both drawing and photomedia at the NAS.

The school in a former jail is next door to the Darlinghurst Courthouse, where Dobell successfully defended his Archibald-winning picture of Joshua Smith against claims it was a caricature and not a portrait.

“Before he went (to court), he came here to talk with his colleagues,” Alderton said. “Teaching staff from the National Art School walked with him around the corner and sat with him in the courthouse. So the Dobell circle comes around in full.”

In a surprise development yesterday, the NAS received a gift of a small Dobell drawing, from a donor who bought it in 1973 at a fundraising event for the Sir William Dobell Art Foundation, which presents the Dobell prize. The Dobell Drawing Prize exhibition is on display until May 25.

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Matthew Westwood, the newspaper's chief arts correspondent, was arts editor from 2008 to 2011. He has been writing about the performing arts, particularly classical music and opera, for two decades. He writes a... [Read more](#)

