

KZN artist wins first SPI National Portrait Award

KwaZulu-Natal artist Heather Gourlay-Conyngham has won the first ever Sanlam Private Investments (SPI) National Portrait Award. She won for her nude male portrait entitled A Young Man (177 x 80cm, oil on canvas).

The award, which aims to celebrate and showcase the best original portrait artwork in South Africa, was announced at a ceremony at the Rust-en-Vrede Art Gallery in Durbanville on Tuesday night, 27 August 2013.

Gourlay-Conyngham's winning portrait beat a staggering 1,783 adjudicated entries to the top prize of R100,000. It will now be part of 39 other selected entries in an exhibition to be held at Rust-en-Vrede until 8 October, whereafter the 40 works will tour South Africa in an exhibition presented in collaboration with the Sanlam Art Collection.

Stefan Hundt, head of SPI's art advisory service and convenor of the judging panel, commended the judges for their "exceptional dedication in making a very difficult decision, given the large number of entries received". The independent panel consisted of Hayden Proud, curator for Historical Painting and Sculptures at the Iziko SA National Gallery in Cape Town, Vulindlela Nyoni, a lecturer in printmaking at the University of Stellenbosch, and artist and art teacher Susanne du Toit. Du Toit recently scooped the prestigious 2013 BP Portrait Award in the United Kingdom.

Hundt said, "Gourlay-Conyngham's portrait was chosen for her exceptional skill, the subject choice, the sincerity of the relationship between artist and subject, and the fact that her interpretation challenged convention and pushed beyond the normal and the accepted."

Human form

Born in Durban in 1956, Gourlay-Conyngham now lives in Hilton in the midlands of KwaZulu-Natal. She has worked as an art teacher and painter since graduating with a BA Fine Arts from the University of Natal in 1978 and a Higher Education Diploma in 1980 from the University of South Africa. Her paintings focus primarily on the human form.

Daniël Kriel, CEO of SPI, said the outstanding quality and standard of the entries received was testament to the range and depth of talent South Africa had to offer. "Portraiture in South Africa has had a rich, and at times controversial, history that reflects the country's social and political evolution. It is within this context that we are proud to partner with the Rust-en-Vrede Art Gallery to celebrate and showcase the best of original portraiture in South Africa."

He said art is a passion for many of SPI's clients, and is of increasing investment interest. "We feel particularly connected to the platform of portraiture, since it resonates with SPI's vision and aims. Our expertise lies in wealth management, where we nurture and value close personal relationships with our clients. In the same way, there are few things more intimate than the relationship between the artist and the subject in a portrait."

The national touring exhibition can be seen at the University of Johannesburg Art Gallery from 24 October to 13 November, and at Stephan Welz & Co at the Alphen Estate in Constantia, Cape Town, from 26 November to 10 January 2014. It will be hosted by the KwaZulu-Natal Society of Arts during April 2014.

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