

The great Irish face-off

Vera Klute is a worthy but safe winner of the Hennessy prize, writes **Cristin Leach Hughes**

What makes a good portrait? What gives the best of them their enduring power and attraction? It's not only about capturing a likeness and demonstrating skill. The best portraits fascinate and continue to draw our attention years after they were painted and their subjects gone, because they say something more than "this is an image of a certain person at a certain time". But what is that something?

Competitions such as the Hennessy Portrait Prize, now in its second year, aim to put questions about contemporary portraiture into sharp focus. What do we want a portrait to do? Can we expand our definition of a portrait? Various good answers are on offer in this year's finalists' show of seven paintings, three photographs, a video and a sculptural triptych, at the National Gallery of Ireland (NGI).

My hypothetical money was on Janet Mullarney's outstanding three-part sculptural self-portrait entitled *Research*; Picasso's *Daughter*; Pink *Fighter*. But I felt certain that Eoin Heaney's evocative black-and-white video *Last Words* would win. Of the painters, two-time finalist Helen O'Sullivan-Tyrrell's portrait of her son Ferdia sleeping was my top pick, but the prize went to Vera Klute for her portrait in oil on canvas of Anne Ryder, the mother of a friend.

It's a choice that surprised me, and not only because Klute's excellent painting isn't the most exciting of the shortlisted works. A significant part of the prize is a commission to produce a work for the National Portrait Collection, and Klute is already in it; last year her accomplished portrait of Sr Stanislaus Kennedy was added to the collection. On the other hand, you could say Klute's win is predictable, for she has already proved herself. As with the awarding of the inaugural prize to painter Nick Miller, it's a decision that feels right, but also safe.

Klute's Anne Ryder is filled with character, driven by a fascination with capturing skin tone and texture in paint. The



On show Klute's winning portrait of Anne Ryder, left; A Portrait of my Son by Lee, bottom; Barron's impressive diptych, right

prize, of €15,000 and the commission worth €5,000, will consolidate Klute's position as an artist of serious repute. Though still in her mid-thirties, she will soon have two commissioned works in the NGI. Her painting shows technical skill and depicts its subject well, fulfilling two of the criteria for a good portrait, but it only just slips past the finish line when it comes to offering a more universal message. It's a painting about ageing and resilience, about the enduring human spirit — but only just.

A good portrait succeeds by drawing its long-term worth from capturing more than a resemblance. A good portrait pivots on a wider theme, which makes the specifics of its subject ultimately less relevant



than the overarching ideas and thoughts inspired by viewing it. This is what transforms a good portrait into a significant piece of art.

Heaney's *Last Words* features people of various ages and backgrounds. Their images are interspersed with words taken from letters and final statements of the 16 men executed after the 1916 Rising. The quotes are presented without context, attribution or explanation: "No one can ever have had so true a brother as you." "Love me always as I loved you."

Heaney's filmed subjects laugh, twitch, glance sideways, compose themselves and lose their composure. We see smiling young men, a woman and a child, older bearded men, a rounded pregnant belly. We are shown frowning faces, intense stares, silly giggles. It all adds up to something great: a portrait that means something even when taken out of context.

"I will call to you in my heart at the last moment, your son." "Skin lead. Do not fret." *Last Words* is a portrait of love and loss, of what binds us together as human beings, and of a moment in a nation's history tied to who we are now. It's also a series of individual portraits, each consisting of about 10 seconds of footage, that builds to a group portrait as it unfolds.

Less a portrait of one person, more of human vulnerability and resilience, Heaney's video offers a reminder that love is the final pull, that humanity prevails. We have always needed art that does this. And yet Heaney's portrait did not win.

Mullarney's sculptural triptych succeeds on a more intimate level, and it's a joy to find it in this show. Five self-portraits are on this year's shortlist, but this self-portrait is of a different kind, not concerned with external likeness as much as an external representation of a multifaceted, internal self. A thin, grey, papier-mâché figure bends towards a punctured tin breastplate; a rough-carved painted wooden figure sits, arms folded; and a headless, pink person with arms raised stands as if in the middle of a dance, ready to defend herself or fight. Three strong, complex female figures representing one self. It's a great portrait, and would have been a deserving winner.

This year's judges — the painter Colin Davidson, the critic Aidan Dunne and the curators Anne Hodge and Catherine Marshall — also shortlisted photographers Gerry Blake and Mandy O'Neill, who was a finalist last year, and painters Mark

Heng, Aidan Crotty and Mison Lee, whose *A Portrait of my Son* is stunningly beautiful.

If they had wanted to reward a more traditional portrait they could have picked Lee's painting or Simon Burch's photograph of jockey Ruby Walsh — a lens-captured image that looks like a photorealist painting. It makes a very 21st-century statement about art and contemporary portraiture, and it's the work most obviously tied to the long history of traditional portraiture traceable through the NGI collection: an image of a public figure with the tools of his trade; a commemorative portrait. It tells us only about Walsh's public face however, not the inner person, and contains no wider, universal message. It is a superlative photographic portrait, but it would have been a boring winner.

O'Sullivan-Tyrrell's portrait of Ferdia shows the head and shoulders of a sleep-



Despite changes in taste in art, portraiture continues to fascinate

ing boy floating in a black box. It's an intimate painting about the rich inner life of a child, imagination — even in dreaming — and the impossibilities of ever knowing the workings of anyone's mind. In this way it becomes a portrait of us all, of a person being entirely themselves.

Two other serious contenders were among the painters: Stephen Johnston and Catherine Barron. Johnston's self-portrait *The Artist* offers an absurd-serious demonstration of his realist technique in which he poses with the inner structure of a lampshade over his head. It's a self-mocking, self-elevating response to the

tradition of self-portraiture and oil painting, with nods to Caravaggio, Rembrandt and Magritte. Barron's *Self Portrayal*, a diptych in acrylic ink on two shellac records, is an impressive technical feat. She appears with her hand over her mouth and her hands reaching forward, self-silencing at the same time as self-presenting. It's a public showing of a closely guarded self, which makes it enduringly successful.

This year's shortlist show is strong. The work of each of the finalists catches the eye for different reasons: intensity, intimacy, medium, technique, narrowness of focus, breadth of ambition. Klute won, but her dominance isn't clear-cut. The shortlist represents an impressive and inspirational cross section of what's great in portraiture in Ireland. □

The Hennessy Portrait Prize 2015 is at the NGI, Dublin, until February



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