

Get the picture?

The rebirth of the National Portrait Gallery has given life to an exciting visual experience that is becoming one of Canberra's top visitor hits. Bruce Holmes viewed the faces of Australia.



Her eyes draw you into the room, as if she's alive. Such is the power of the portrait of Deborah Mailman, the first Aboriginal woman to win the AFI Best Actress Award for *Radiance* in 1998. This oil painting by Evert Ploeg, two-time winner of the Archibald People's Choice Award, is one of many highlights at Canberra's National Portrait Gallery.

After ten years at the Old Parliament House site, the Portrait Gallery was reborn in December 2008 in a dedicated building, the design of which makes use of natural light and links the visitor's experience of gallery spaces to the Australian landscape. There's a sense of openness – there are no doors, just spaces you pass through, spaces that function as doorways. Entering one gallery my eye follows a line of portraits toward the changing weather outside.

Since re-opening, the gallery's popularity has soared with the anticipated 300,000 annual visitors surpassed in four months.

The collection's portraits feature different media from painting and sculpture to photography and digital video. One of the new commissions is David Rosetzky's video portrait of actor Cate Blanchett, exploring aspects of her movement and personality in a mini-film. As the camera follows Cate's hand movements, I'm mesmerised.

Music and the arts are also represented by a John Elliott photograph of Australia's first gold record winner Slim Dusty, Clifton Pugh's memorable 1958 oil painting of a young Barry Humphries and a red-toned synthetic polymer painting of Johnny O'Keefe, aptly titled *A little bit louder now...*

Australia's history features prominently, beginning with the 1782 painting of Captain James Cook by John Webber, who spent three years at sea with the explorer as the artist on the *Resolution*. Representations of politicians include the Leslie Tanner sculpture of Sir Robert Menzies as a Ming vase (a play upon his nickname), Mervyn Bishop's photograph of Gough Whitlam pouring soil into the hand of traditional landowner Vincent Lingiari, and an oil painting of Labor figure Tom Uren by Ralph Heimans titled *Gloves Off* which really captures the

spirit of Uren as the tireless campaigner for social justice and the environment.

Apart from Deborah Mailman, portraits of other Indigenous Australians include poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker) and singer songwriter Mandawuy Yunupingu.

But never fear – the curators haven't forgotten our sport. Sir Donald Bradman looks straight at you striking a thoughtful pose in an oil painting by Bill Leak. Betty Cuthbert, leading gold medal-winning track and field athlete, has been captured by painter Andrew Daly and Aussie Rules legend Ron Barassi by Lewis Miller, while around a corner I find a bronze sculpted bust of Grand Prix-winning Formula 1 driver Sir Jack Brabham by Julie Edgar. And more cricketers than you can swing a bat at.

The gallery's permanent display of 450 portraits represents the faces of Australia. It also features competitions such as the National Photographic Portrait Prize and travelling exhibitions. Until 30 August visitors can see (for \$10) *Vanity Fair Portraits: Photographs 1913-2008*, touring from London with rare vintage prints and contemporary classics from the pages of *Vanity Fair* magazine.

The gallery has something for old and young alike. On the day that I visit, primary schoolchildren from Tasmania sit before a full length portrait abuzz, not only with excitement over their own pending artwork, but also because SHE is here. And she's not Mary Donaldson from Hobart anymore – she's Her Royal Highness the Crown Princess of Denmark. And Jia-wei Shen's 2005 oil painting of the lady in blue has our Aussie princess looking very regal indeed. •

National Portrait Gallery, Canberra

Open 10am–5pm daily. Entry free except for major exhibitions.
www.portrait.gov.au

The writer was a guest of Australian Capital Tourism.

Clockwise from left, Deborah Mailman 1999, by Evert Ploeg (b. 1963); *Gloves Off* (Tom Uren) 1996, by Ralph Heimans (b. 1970); Johnny O'Keefe *A little bit louder now...* 1999, by Ivan Durrant (b. 1947).

