

Stop the name calling and let's talk art: Cloud Arch will excite Sydney



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The bunfight over *Cloud Arch* says more about the asinine nature of our public art conversation than the sculpture itself. Like the teacup tempest over this year's Archibald, the *Cloud Arch* debate has dealt almost exclusively in name calling, personal attack and dreary utilitarianism, with nary a whisper about art, why it matters or what we should expect of it.

Last month's Archibald hoo-ha went like this. On announcement day John Olsen, perhaps Australia's most distinguished living painter, decried winner Mitch Cairns' portrait of his wife as the "worst decision" in the prize's history. The immediate art-world response, rather than providing chapter and verse as to why the portrait was so exemplary, was to attack Olsen.



Illustration: Simon Bosch

"More than ungracious," said judge Ben Quilty. "Unnecessary, careless and lacking in generosity," said previous winner Del Kathryn Barton.

"Disappointing," said Sam Leach. "Sour grapes," said Euan Macleod.

"Ungracious," echoed Guy Maestri.

"I felt really sorry for Mitch," continued Quilty in a pearl of criticism etiquette. "He's a very quiet young man, never courts controversy, a really diligent, hard-working painter with a two-year-old and a wife." As though a quiet guy with a toddler (And a wife! Heavens!) is automatically above critique.



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It's like we're all suddenly at tea with the vicar, and criticism is some kind of breach of niceness. Is that what it's come to?

Well yes, apparently. But only when the artist is local. Foreign artists are fair game. When Japanese architect-artist Junya Ishigami won approval from the City of Sydney for *Cloud Arch*, they all leapt into the sandpit. But once again there was no discussion about why. There was just the yelling, the hair-pulling, the chucking of toys.

"Critics have taken a stick to Sydney's \$11m *Cloud Arch*," screamed *The Daily Telegraph*, claiming that "the whole of Sydney is competing to mock" this "latest in a string of controversial artworks that have been slammed for either their lack of creativity or relevance".

But could they name a single such critic? Apart from Leo Schofield calling the work "modish", not really. Otherwise, the "mockery" was the usual hufflepuff from Clover Moore's avowed political opponents.



Junya Ishigami's original design for *Cloud Arch*. Sydney's extraordinarily complex subterranean conditions meant it had to be reworked.

Mostly it was cost whinge, mutterings by Moore foes Kerry Phelps, Angela Vithoulkas and Christine Forster about "fiscal responsibility" and the "giant blowout" caused by Sydney's extraordinarily complex subterranean conditions.

Is this really reasonable? We spend almost two-thirds of that every New Year's Eve. And even \$11 million, as a percentage of the light rail's \$2.1 billion, is minuscule. For 40 years, Chicago has levied 1.33 per cent of all municipal and public space projects for art. In consequence, it has a thriving art scene and a richly embellished civic fabric. Many other cities – and even Western Australia – also run "per cent for art" schemes.



Mitch Cairns, the winner of the 2017 Archibald Prize, his winning painting and its subject, his partner Agatha Gothe-Snape. CREDIT: KATE GERAGHTY

But there's also this. If money was your main concern you wouldn't do art, of any description, at all, ever. Art is a declaration that we hold other values dear; subjective, affective values like beauty, symbolism, spatial meaning. Art says yes, it's a cost – and we reckon it's worth it. In many ways, that's the point.

Money aside, the attacks on *Cloud Arch* were entirely of the puerile "it looks like a ..." variety. Haemorrhoid, big toe, polyp, sniggered the *Telegraph*, although no one cared to own these witticisms. Liberal councillor Christine Forster was bolder, calling the work both a "big tapeworm" and a "great big white elephant".



John Olsen at the opening of an exhibition of his work last year. He decried this year's Archibald decision as the "worst ever". CREDIT: JOE AMARO

But, of course, similes are meaningless as criticism. The QVB was lampooned as a white elephant for decades. The Toaster, once derided, is now much loved. The Opera House is parodied as "turtles making love". The Melbourne motorway "cheese sticks" commissioned by Jeff Kennett and designed by Denton Corker Marshall, have acquired iconic entry status; and Bert Flugelman's 1978 "shish kebab" came of age on being moved, mid-1990s, to the corner of Pitt and Spring streets, where the verticality of the site makes sense of, and is pleasingly reflected in, the form.

Public art is notoriously difficult in a heterogeneous culture because shared meaning is so elusive (hence the Captain Cook controversy). But it's still worth the bother. I've always loved [Colin Polwarth's Australian Light Horse](#) sculpture (ridiculed by the *Telegraph*), that high steps along the M4-M7 crossroads, its cavalry of poppy-red poles topped by plumes that suggest both helmets and horses' tails.



Colin Polwarth and his *Australian Light Horse Sculpture Parade*, a cavalry of poppy-red poles topped by plumes that suggest both helmets and horses' tails. CREDIT: ADAM HOLLINGWORTH

Then again, I don't much like Tony Albert's *Yininmadyemi – Thou Didst Let Fall* in Hyde Park. I find the shiny silver-tipped phallic bullets unappealing and aggressive, and the fallen rusted shells touching but messy. I also think the siting, on the mothy edge of so axial a park, seems random, notwithstanding that this may be intentional.

So yes, there's a personal element here. Kant understood that. So did Alberti. Aesthetics, they knew, are part shared, part individual. Their genius was to see that this meant we should discuss art more, not less, since that conversation – not just the public plonking of objects – is what we call culture.



Members of the Bangarra Dance Theatre perform in front of *Yininmadyemi – Thou Didst Let Fall* in Hyde Park. CREDIT: PETER RAE

It is the critic's role to build and oxygenate culture as a worm builds soil, turning ideas, examining, comparing, digesting and rearranging them to make nutrients available for the whole.

So it is an egregious error either to silence the critic (as the Archibalds sought to) or to reward crude inanities, as does the *Telegraph*. Rather, we should seek to understand and articulate exactly what we like or dislike about a work, and why. It's not personal. It's education.



Bert Flugelman's "shish kebab" statue came of age on being moved, mid-1990s, to the corner of Pitt and Spring streets, Sydney. CREDIT: PAUL JONES

Good art makes us see something anew. It's not about money, or tourism, or popularity. It's about insight – and if it comes with delight and wit, all the better. How will Ishigami's *Cloud Arch* perform against these measures?

Ishigami is famous for materialising immateriality. The delicacy of his work – like *Architecture as Air*, which won the Golden Lion at the 2010 Venice Biennale – intrigues, astounds and delights.

Of course, we cannot be certain just how *Cloud Arch* will materialise air. That's part of the excitement. But I reckon its dramatic button-hole threshold, its gravitational defiance, and its dance like thrown ribbon in the sky, will excite Sydney's municipal heart, a lasso to the heavens.