

Snappers ready for their close-up



Flash of inspiration ... *Jennifer Hawkins* by James Croucher is one of the finalists in the Moran prize.

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Photos that challenge boundaries will catch the eye of the Moran prize judge, writes Louise Schwartzkoff.

At the click of a mouse, one by one, the entries for this year's Moran Contemporary Photographic Prize flick across a 101-centimetre computer screen.

Children, adults and animals in colour, sepia, and black and white flash past the judge, North Sullivan. A bare-breasted redhead grins at the camera through pink sunglasses. A chef wields a knife. A teenaged skateboarder flies through the air.

In a day Sullivan must whittle more than a thousand entries down to 40 finalists. In the early elimination rounds, few images receive more than two seconds of his attention. "No," he says to one. "No, no, no," to three others. "Absolutely not," gets another.

The redhead earns an immediate "Yes", as does a close portrait of the former Wallabies captain George Gregan's bald head, and an image of a white-suited gentleman clutching a giant magnet.

"It's a gut reaction," Sullivan says. "It has to reach out and grab you. The ones that get through demand attention. They shout out: 'Look at me, look at me.'"

As the day wears on and the field narrows, the pace slows and Sullivan begins to agonise about his decisions. The finalists, which will hang beside the best works from the Doug Moran National Portrait Prize at the State Library, should combine innovation and creativity with technical skill. The winners will be announced at the library tomorrow.

"I'm looking for something a little unpredictable," Sullivan says. "I'm passing over plenty of great photographs here because, for me, they're not breaking new boundaries."

With a pool of \$110,000 for professional, amateur and school-aged photographers, the Moran is the country's richest photographic competition. The prizemoney comes from a fund set up by Doug and Greta Moran. At \$50,000, the first prize would be welcomed by any artist, and Sullivan wants to make the right choice.

"For me it's a huge responsibility, not just to the artists, but to the people who will go to the exhibition," he says. "I want to entertain the audience. I want to put together a collection that is really challenging and celebrates Australian life and photography."

Last year two judges worked together to select the finalists: the Museum of Contemporary Art director, Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, and the photographer Ian North.

The director of the Moran prizes, Mark Moran, reduced that to one judge because he wanted a more cohesive show. "It's a bit controversial to use a single judge but North [Sullivan] brings a very contemporary, edgy perspective," he says.

Sullivan, who regularly sat on the judging panel for the Australian Photographers Collection, prefers to work alone. "Sometimes, with a panel, there are opposing opinions on the most demanding work," he says. "Someone loves it, someone hates it, and they cancel each other out. The challenging works miss out and the ones everyone likes - the nice, warm, wholesome ones - get through."

There is no shortage of confronting images in this year's selection. It includes a baby delivered by caesarean section taking its first breath and a naked great-grandmother with the women of her family.

Sullivan admits his choices are highly subjective. "This is not a selection of the best contemporary photography in Australia. This will be North Sullivan's collection of what he considers to be strong. The challenge for me is to ensure my personal preferences don't become the underlying theme. I try to put my own tastes to the side and bring my broad experience to the fore."

Until the finalists were hung in large prints at the State Library's Mitchell Galleries, Sullivan had seen them only in digital form. Few photographers still use film but the Moran is one of the few Australian photographic competitions in which the finalists are chosen on screen.

Last year's judges saw printed and electronic works but Moran felt the digital photographers had an unfair advantage. "The images looked so good illuminated on the screen, and we noticed the judges were selecting the screen images over the prints," he says. "It's also more efficient and less expensive for photographers to submit via email."

Sullivan whizzed through the on-screen entries but waited to see the finalists printed before choosing a winner. "It's easy to look at a picture on a computer, but when it's printed in its final form it may not be as powerful," he says. "With prints, you can walk around and get an overview. You can lay things out on the floor, bring them together and compare them."

"To me, photography is visual storytelling. And when you put the images side by side you can see immediately which one will jump out and sing."