



Smiling all the way to Paris, Nicole Kelly poses in front of one of her winning artworks, *Woman with green*, 2008, enamel and oil on canvas 130x141 cm, private collection © the artist.

WHEN "TAKING RISKS" PAYS OFF

There was much excitement and wonderful camaraderie at the announcement of this year's Brett Whiteley Travelling Art Scholarship winner. The many young faces in the crowd, gathered at the Surry Hills Studio on September 10, attested to the enthusiasm generated every year by the event. Then again, what young artist would not be enthusiastic at the prospect of winning \$25,000 and a three-month residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris? A great cheer went up when AGNSW director Edmund Capon read out the name of Nicole Kelly, and the 22-year-old artist from Engadine, NSW, stepped forward, looking both thrilled and astounded. While Nicole's demeanour might have betrayed her youthful age, it did not reflect the qualities of her winning works, from which *Figure in landscape* was singled out for its boldness and rawness. AGNSW judges, director Edmund Capon and head curator of Australian art, Murray Pearce, were this year aided by Archibald winner John Beard in the selection process. Of the 124 entries received from around Australia, 11 finalists were chosen. Honourable mention was given to Jessica Mais Wright, for her work *Day and Night*, and to Becky Gibson for *Milk*. But it was Nicole's body of work that most impressed

the judges: "It is bold, it is confident, it's prepared to take risks," said Capon. "There's no contrivance there".

Already a finalist in 2008, and winner of the 2007 Robert Le Gay Brereton Memorial Prize, Nicole is completing a bachelor of fine arts honours degree at the National Art School. Having initially studied photography, Nicole came to realise her real passion was drawing and painting: "I'm in the studio four days a week painting," Nicole told Look, "and I draw almost every day. In the case of *Figure in landscape*, I went to the Sussex Inlet bush and made a whole lot of quick drawings in pencil and pastels, then put them all up on my studio wall and worked from those to create the painting."

Nicole's practice is primarily concerned with the human figure: "I've always been drawn to the human body, I especially love life drawing ... I don't know if I can really pinpoint why, but it's something that definitely runs through all my work and I don't think I'm going to leave it any time soon."

Considerations on the effects of colour and texture also play an important part in her creative process, as revealed by her admiration for the work of Aida Tomescu, Frank Auerbach, Willem De Kooning and

American Expressionism: "I am interested in a process of continuous reworking of the canvas, motivated by a certain dissatisfaction ... in the end, the whole painting experience, its history, are buried within the layers you build."

Noticeably proud, Nicole's family was present at the announcement: "Right from the beginning my parents have been very supportive," says Nicole, "and they told me to follow what I love doing. They've been great." She told us she simply cannot wait to visit the many galleries and museums of Paris, in what will be her first visit to the European city: "It's so exciting! I'm particularly looking forward to seeing the work of Eugène Leroy ... and of course Matisse, the late works of Cézanne ... the list could go on and on."

LAURA PIA

This year's winner and highly commended paintings are on display at the Brett Whiteley Studio, 2 Raper Street, Surry Hills, until November 29. The finalists' exhibition can be viewed at www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/sub/bwtas09/

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