

Features



Miriam Cabello before one of her Stations of the Cross Photo: Ali Blogg

Art and the inner life

A conversation with Miriam Cabello

Dorothy McRae-McMahon

Miriam Cabello was born in Chile. She and her three brothers and sister emigrated to Australia with their parents at the time of the rise of the Pinochet regime. She is now a widely recognised young artist – a finalist in the Blake Prize and Mandorla Prize, and winner of the Manhattan Arts international. She also has awards from London and Florence. All very impressive for a woman who is still in her mid-30s!

Obviously, some artists are inspired by beauty and creativity itself and express that in wonderful landscapes and other portrayals of human and environmental life. For Miriam, art has always been about emotions linked mainly with human life, and as she paints, she hopes to engage with the emotions of those who view her work.

She tells the story of a Pacific Islander Australian who saw her entry for last year's Blake Prize for Religious Art. He woke at 3am and found himself crying with grief as he remembered the image of her work, which was entitled 'The Betrayal'. He realised that the black Jesus she had painted being betrayed was linked in his heart and soul with his own treacherous experiences as a recipient of racism – being treated as "the other".

Prejudice and racism is very central to the feelings within the inner life of Miriam. Because of their genetic heritage, her siblings appear to come from different ethnicities. They look Irish, Spanish, American and Peruvian Indian – white, olive and darker skinned. You wouldn't know they were siblings. Her younger sister is darker in colouring and this led to her being bullied and called a "wog" at school, as was one of her brothers. Miriam, who could pass for an Anglo-Celt, watched this happening to her little sister, while she herself was simply accepted. At one stage, she even learned boxing in order to defend her sister.

Maybe it is not by chance that her portrayals of the Stations of the Cross, one of which was submitted for this year's Blake Prize, take us and Jesus into the boxing ring with all its nuances of calculated struggle, power, and violence. The faces, rather than being "religious" renderings of meekness and asexuality are confronting, real faces. The "drip" effect, which is the background of many of her paintings, represents prison bars – the imprisoning of so many black people around the world.

As you walk around and look at paintings like those of Miriam Cabello, you realise that art is connecting with your own inner life. It takes you deeper into your own emotions and may touch you in

ways which the artist herself could not anticipate. It is as though her own journey in life and her skill as an artist flows onto the canvas. This is then set free to invite in others, not only a reflection on what she might be conveying and to receive the gift of the beauty and colour itself, but to experience another flow of insight and emotion.

Some people in our community view the arts as a luxury or as some sort of leisure activity – which on occasions it can be. However, what if the arts in general are a critical part of human existence, one that connects us with our inner life and takes us deeper into reality? Maybe art can carry us where words can never go, so that laughter, tears or meditative silences can be our only response? Maybe sometimes it sustains our spirits and adds to our strength to survive and goes on challenging things that should not be in ways that may reach people who have never been touched before?

In her Stations of the Cross, Miriam Cabello makes us look into the faces of other human beings and see there realities that will leave us without words – just the questions and the emotions which are held in the depths of the search for truth. ssm

To see more about Miriam Cabello and her work go to: www.mlcgallery.com

Top marks for state schools

John August

A number of achievement and service awards for public schools in the Sydney region were recently celebrated, in Zetland.

Schools throughout NSW have developed a great deal of innovative and highly creative projects. Outside the Sydney region one example is Plumpton High's extremely successful Young Mothers program. Within the Sydney region, James Macdonald, a student of Waverley Public School, raised \$1,000 for the Leukemia Foundation. Sarah Mulhearn, of Fort Street High School, worked to reduce her school's carbon footprint. Karl Dela Torre, of Ashfield Boys High, organised part of the school's Harmony Day events and forged links with Amnesty International. Anewesha Sinha, a student of Ashfield Public, organised guests at the School's Sorry Day Assembly. Teachers were also recognised. Three of them from the Intensive English Centre in Marrickville High School received awards, and Lois Aspen of the St George Girls High School was recognised for her contributions to Textiles and Information Technology.

The Visual Arts and Design Department of Dulwich Hill High School was recognised for its many specialist programs. The school originally faced a merger, but managed to re-invent itself and overcome those issues. Closures and mergers are much discussed in the media, but there's less coverage of schools that faced their challenges and overcame them – and here was a prime example.

However, a number of schools were also jointly recognised for their cooperative approach to high school transition. For example, Alford's Point, Bangor, Illawong, Lucas Heights, Menai Primary and High, Tharawai and Woronora Public.

Wil Bartolo, a student at Newtown Public School, received an award for his self-motivation and leadership ability. When a passing car clipped a neighbour in a wheelchair, Wil took control of the situation, calming people down and talking to the ambulance personnel when they arrived. An impressive achievement for a boy in Year 6.

Sydney Girls High School received an award for its achievements over the last 125 years. Amongst their students, Nina Ubaldi, a talented public speaker, was also recognised.

Gail Freeman, a dedicated teacher at the Alexandria Park Community School, represents Aboriginal staff at meetings. She is a member of several education committees and won an award for Outstanding Service by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander School Support Staff Member.

Geoff Dodds of Heathcote High School was nominated for an award by a former student, a gesture which underlines the dedication of past students towards their former role models.

The range of awards celebrated demonstrated the positive direction that public schools are taking, in this day and age. The NSW Minister for Education and the Sydney Regional Director, Dr Phil Lambert, and staff in the NSW Education system should be congratulated for giving schools and principals the freedom to be creative. ssm