



MEDIA RELEASE

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AUSTRALIA'S RICHEST PORTRAITURE PRIZE, THE LESTER PRIZE, CELEBRATES RECORD GROWTH AND INCREASING SUPPORT FOR ARTISTS IN 2026

With record entries, a boosted \$140,000 prize pool, new sponsors and board members, and a strong contingent of returning finalists, The Lester Prize Main Awards 2026 is already shaping up to be its biggest season yet.

One year out from its 20th anniversary, Australia's richest portrait prize will return to WA Museum Boola Bardip with 40 finalist portraits selected from a record 1,177 entries.

The expanded prize pool includes increases to the Tony Fini Foundation Artist Prize and the Ashurst Perkins Coie Emerging Artist Prize, alongside new Highly Commended Prizes supported by Montauk Lighting Co. and Eyewall Foundation Inc.

The Lester Prize Executive Director, Shannon Yujnovich, said the unprecedented support reflects the prize's growing reputation and impact on Australian artists.

"The Lester Prize continues to grow because of the strength of our artist community and the support behind it," Ms Yujnovich said.

"Before the exhibition has even opened, we're already surpassing last year's record-breaking season. Increased sponsorship, new board members and a larger prize pool mean more opportunities for artists and greater recognition of Australian portraiture.

"We're delighted to welcome new Board members Kellie Hasluck and Andree McIntyre, alongside new sponsors Ashurst Perkins Coie, Heather Zampatti, Burgess Rawson, GT Communications, Heyder & Shears and the Giorgetta Family Foundation. Their support reinforces our commitment to backing Australian artists and the broader arts sector."

This year's finalists include 16 returning artists, including seven previous prize winners, highlighting the calibre and credibility of the competition.

Among them are the 2024 Ashurst Emerging Artist Prize winner Lucinda Tassone and 2024 Richard Lester Prize for Portraiture winner Ben Howe, whose return adds further depth to this year's field.

"Winning The Lester Prize in 2024 helped cement my place in the Australian art community," Mr Howe said.

"I'm excited to be back and reconnect with fellow artists when the exhibition opens in October."

The 2026 season also marks 10 years of support from the Tony Fini Foundation, with its prize increasing from \$20,000 to \$25,000. The Ashurst Perkins Coie Emerging Artist Prize has doubled to \$10,000, further strengthening support for emerging talent.

Russell Lester, Executive Director of the Lester Group, said the continued growth of the prize was a reflection of its impact on artists and the wider arts community.

"The momentum behind The Lester Prize continues to build year after year," Mr Lester said.

"The increased support from sponsors and partners allows us to invest directly in artists and their careers, which is exactly what the prize was created to do. We're incredibly grateful to everyone helping us champion Australian creativity."

Chair of The Lester Prize Marina Hogan echoed Mr Lester's sentiments. "With so many big plans for the future, we're very excited for the 2026 Main Awards season," said Ms Hogan.

The Lester Prize Main Awards 2026 exhibition will be held at WA Museum Boola Bardip from 9 October to 29 November 2026. Regional touring will take place in 2027 to the Pilbara following on from previous years' tours to Esperance and Manjimup.

For more information see www.lesterprize.com

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