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The art of feminism remembered

By SUSAN HELY

"It's a haunting sort of portrait. It keeps recurring in the mind's eye," said the art judge Ruth Faerber about Brenda Humble's portrait of the artist and screen printer, Virginia Hall.

The canvas, with its sitter's blocks of coloured clothing, leaps out from the 117 portraits entered in the $3,750 Portia Geach Memorial award competition. Yesterday it was announced the winner.

According to Ruth Faerber, the Portia Geach Memorial Art Award attracts work of a similar quality to the Archibald competition. However, it is for women artists only.

Miss Geach was a turn of the century feminist who studied painting with the Royal Academy, and felt there was always a resistance to women artists. This prompted her to direct a fund for women studying art when she died.

The award is made for the "best portrait painted from life of some man or woman distinguished in Art, Letters or the Sciences by any female artist."

Miss Geach campaigned for the rights of housewives and formed an influential Sydney Housewives' Association in 1917 and the Progressive Housewives' Association which investigated tea, milk, egg and meat boards.

The winning artist, Mrs Hamble, has known Virginia Hall for many years and only needed two sketching sessions to arrange the composition, but she said: "It took a tremendous mental effort to psych me up to get it right."

This win is one in a string of successes for Mrs Humble. Last year she won the Cumberland Art Award and three South Sydney Festival Community Art Awards.

Ivy Shore's self portrait in an evolutionary triptych and Susan May's painting of Lynne Roberts-Goodwin were highly commended while the painting of Ruby Brilliant by Susan Howard and Self Portrait with Children by Susan White were commended.

Brenda Humble (seated), with her portrait, and Virginia Hall.