

Portrait of female success

By KATRINA STRICKLAND

MARIA Cruz has not had her paintings hung in the darkest corners of a gallery just because she is a woman.

But while conditions for women painters have improved over the past century, Ms Cruz believes there is still the need for a prize open only to female artists.

Last night, Cruz was awarded the \$18,000 Portia Geach prize, dubbed the "women's Archibald", from a field of 265 entries, of which 58 have been hung at the SH Ervin Gallery at Sydney's Observatory Hill.

Cruz's painting, a self-portrait, features an image of her face with her name superimposed in bold green letters. At 40, and after 10 years of serious painting including numerous solo exhibitions, this is her first big art prize.

She joins a distinguished list of winners including Wendy Sharpe, who won in 1995 and went on to win the Archibald Prize last year; Jenny Watson, whose work appeared in the Venice Biennale in 1990, the year she won the prize; and 1996 winner Su Baker.

"Apart from the money, I guess it has made me reflect on women like Portia Geach who decided to think about what was happening to women in her time and do something about it," Cruz said.

"I think that has changed. I don't think (overt discrimination against women) is a problem in contemporary art prizes any more, but I think it is like a remembrance of that time and an acknowledgement that it existed."

The award was set up in 1962 to honour Geach, a painter and feminist in the early 1900s who railed against sexism in the Australian art scene.

"Portia won a scholarship to study at London's Royal Academy in 1896 and subsequently exhibited in New York, London and Paris. When she returned to Australia, she got really sick of the all-male judging panels and the way that women's paintings were always hung at the back of the room or in the dark corners," said gallery director Jo Holder.

Susan Dorothea White was highly commended for her painting, *Self Portrait after Brain Surgery*, with four other artists — Baker, Mary Moore, Madeleine Winch and Cecilia Yashiro — receiving commendations.