



Report: Samantha Blair

# Painting by numbers

**Robyn Arianrhod** (BSc 1974, DipEd 1975, PhD 1991) is a writer and mathematician at Monash University's Clayton campus. **Peter Biram** (GradDipArts(VisArts) 1982, GradDipEd(Sec) 1991, BSecEd 1996, GradDipArts(VisArts) 2002) is an artist and teacher. Robyn is the subject of Peter's latest Archibald Prize entry entitled "The dual universes of Dr Robyn Arianrhod".

They tell their story of a 20-year friendship and connection through maths and art.

## Robyn Arianrhod

For over half my life, the School of Mathematical Sciences at Monash, Clayton has been my intellectual home, first as my undergraduate alma mater and later as a vibrant research community. I received my PhD from Monash in 1991 and taught in the School for many years and at Monash International College.

As an Honorary Research Associate in the School, I am currently working with senior lecturer Dr Tony Lan on a mathematical analysis of solutions of Einstein's equations of gravity, in the hope of understanding more about gravitational radiation. I am fascinated by the fact that mathematics is a truly multicultural, universal language that has given us not only much of our technological innovation, but also a sense of where we fit in our universe. To share this feeling with the layperson, I wrote Einstein's Heroes: Imagining the world through the language of mathematics.

Recently, I was awarded a writer's residency at the Australia Council's Keating studio in Paris, so I was lucky enough to spend an invaluable six months in the fabled city of

writers and artists researching my next book, which is also about mathematicians.

Peter and I live in the hills outside Melbourne; we first met when we moved in to neighbouring houses at the same time and over the years we have developed a mutual professional respect, despite our apparently divergent disciplines. I have three of his paintings on my walls and he has been an enthusiastic "fan" of my book.

When Peter asked me to pose for the Archibald portrait, it seemed like a great opportunity for us to creatively express something of how we feel about our disciplines and to challenge the stereotype of mathematicians as nerdy and uninterested in anything but their subject. The portrait expresses this wider interest by including a

to maintain, whilst not wanting to offend me as his friend! In the end, it has made our friendship stronger, each of us putting ourselves on the line and in the process learning more about each other and ourselves.

## Peter Biram

I am 47 and live with my partner, Anne-Marie, and 13-year-old daughter Jessica. We moved into our house almost 20 years ago and that's when I met Robyn who lived next door.

I have always enjoyed painting but have also had a career in the media and education.

I graduated from Monash first with a diploma in Visual Arts at Monash in 1981 and then a Graduate Diploma in Education, a Bachelor of Education and a Graduate Diploma in Visual Arts (Painting). During that time, I also established a career as a photojournalist and taught photography part-time at Monash. Now I am a full-time art teacher at TAFE.

The background of the portrait was born out of our long-term friendship and the professional respect I have for Robyn – this is my fourth year of entering the Archibald portrait competition, and being both a writer and a scientist, Robyn is a perfect subject under the Archibald rules.

Both Robyn and I have a love and concern for the environment and I've tried to convey this in the painting. Robyn is sitting in a "personal space" (being in a private garden). The garden represents a "micro" response to "land use" and this is contrasted with the "macro" response in the right hand panel.

The composition is broken into two halves, in order to symbolise "mathematical balance". There is also contrast between strength and femininity and an interesting juxtaposition of sensuality and the stereotypically male-dominated environment of mathematics.

Painting is my life to express my feelings and to place these ideas in a public arena is most rewarding. In many ways it's like an actor on a stage, you put it all on the line and wait for the feedback, if any. M



landscape painting as a separate panel, because I love the hills area (as Peter does too) and I am concerned about preserving its beauty and diversity. The landscape also includes mathematical symbolism because we are both inspired by the insight into our universal environment that mathematics gives us.

It has been a stimulating project – I had never had my portrait painted before, but this was extra special because of Peter's and my friendship. Our shared intellectual interests meant I was able to collaborate on the development of some of the ideas behind the painting, but emotionally, our friendship also provided some challenges. I was vulnerable as the sitter – especially because Peter does not believe a 21st century portrait should be a photographic likeness of the subject, but should express the artist's perception of the subject. But he, too, was vulnerable, because he had his own artistic interests and integrity