



Audience appeal ... Vincent Fantauzzo's portrait of the actor Brandon Walters in the Archibald Prize exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW yesterday.

Photo: Chris Lane

### By MATTHEW BENNS

A SOULFUL portrait of young actor Brandon Walters emerged as the clear people's favourite on the Archibald Prize's first day open to the public in Sydney yesterday.

The Aboriginal actor posed for artist Vincent Fantauzzo, who

won the People's Choice Award last year for his eerie portrait of Heath Ledger painted just before the actor's death from an accidental drug overdose. On Friday, artist Guy Maestri was named the winner of this year's prize with his portrait of Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu. It was considered a conservative choice

by experts who favoured the more boisterous painting of Jimmy Barnes by Ben Quilty.

But yesterday it was the wide-eyed, life-like portrait of 13-year-old Brandon - who won plaudits for his role with Nicole Kidman and Hugh Jackman in *Australia* - that stopped Art Gallery of NSW visitors in their tracks.

"It's a brooding image. If you stand back you find it's looking back at you and asking questions," said teacher Rob Notara, from Terrigal. "The technique used to paint it is unbelievably difficult."

Anne Wulff from Kensington said: "It's brilliant. It almost feels as though it's real with the depth in those dark eyes."

Gallery officer Sheraj Hundal said: "So far, the favourite choice is the painting of Brandon Walters."

Gallery spokeswoman Susanne Briggs said Fantauzzo's portrait of Ledger had helped pull in a record-breaking 152,000 people last year.

The People's Choice award is not announced until May 24.