

# Portrait of the people's choice

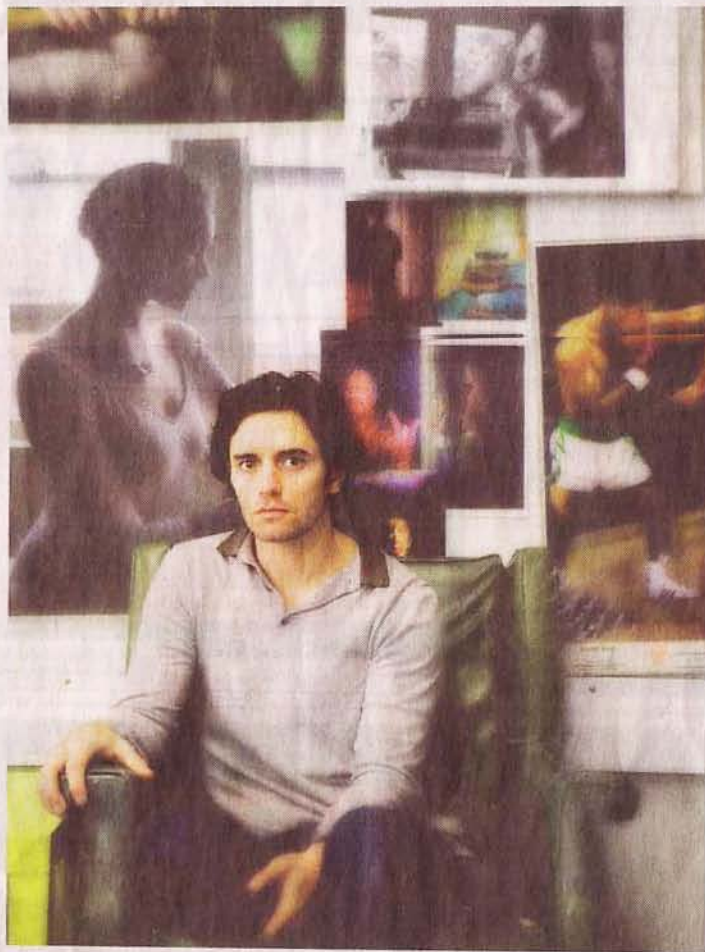
**Michael Lallo** meets one of Australia's hottest young artists, Vincent Fantauzzo.

VINCENT Fantauzzo counts the following people among his friends: director Baz Luhrmann, actor Brandon Walters, music video director Michael Gracey and 1200 Techniques vocalist MC Nfamas. He was also mates with the late actor Heath Ledger. All of them in some way contributed to his two Archibald People's Choice prizes, the second of which he collected a fortnight ago. "But I really don't have that many famous friends," he says. "It's not like I'm part of some scene or anything." Indeed, he has to be coaxed into talking about them. He's certainly not a name dropper.

But for the record, here's how this mix of actors, directors and musicians helped him become one of the hottest young artists in Australia.

A few years ago, Fantauzzo met Ledger through Nfamas, and they would hang out when Ledger was in Melbourne. "I asked Heath if I could paint him but he didn't feel ready," Fantauzzo says, nestling into an old vinyl armchair in his cavernous Southbank studio, which he shares with friend Stevan Jacks. "Then a couple of years later, he suggested we do it."

Many thought the photorealist painting, which he finished just weeks before Ledger's death, revealed a deeply tormented young man. "But Heath was actually quite positive at the time," he says. "Of course, we all have our troubles. Even if things are going well, there's always a part of us that's conflicted. What we



focused on in the portrait was the pressure Heath felt to share himself publicly. He had to be very conscious of what he said because his words could be abused so easily."

When Ledger died, Fantauzzo considered withdrawing from the competition, but the actor's parents insisted that he enter. "All his family and friends were backing me, so in that sense, it was a victory for us. But it was obviously hard to celebrate."

Much easier to celebrate was this year's Archibald win: a portrait of young *Australia* actor Brandon Walters that Fantauzzo believes is his best

work. The 32-year-old was introduced to the boy by Baz Luhrmann (whom he met through Michael Gracey).

"It's not like Baz was trying to get me to paint Brandon," he says. "He just thought I'd find him really interesting. But I knew when I met him that he'd be a good subject. He's a very intense, honest character."

Fantauzzo intended to paint Walters' entire family before deciding that a solo portrait would be better. "Brandon's family were pretty easygoing and I'd spent a bit of time with them by that stage, so they said they'd love me to do it."

Tall, good-looking and softly



Vincent Fantauzzo in his studio (left) and with Brandon Walters (above).

spoken, Fantauzzo exudes an almost boyish vulnerability and openness. Life is good for him right now. He has a motorbike, a Docklands apartment and a girlfriend — and he makes a decent living from something he'd do even if no one paid him.

But it wasn't always like this. His undiagnosed dyslexia made school difficult, leading him to "mix with the wrong people and get into trouble with the police". So he quit when he was 14, spending the next seven years working as a concreter, a house painter, a printer, an alarm technician, an amateur boxer and a chef. By the time he painted his first picture, he was 21. But despite his chequered job history, he knew he had found his calling and enrolled in a fine arts course at RMIT. "When I applied, I had only done five or six paintings and they weren't very good," he says. "I was lucky to get in. And I had no idea about art history. I didn't even know who painted the *Mona Lisa*."

Given his recent success, you might assume the occasional nasty review wouldn't bother him. "I don't think you can — or should — make art for everybody," he says. "People can have their

opinions and I think that's OK. I don't let it get to me."

"Bullshit!" cries Jacks from the other side of the room, prompting both of them to laugh. Still, it's hard to worry too much about criticism when you get to do things such as: go to Hong Kong to do 30 portraits in 30 days, paint a montage of Gough Whitlam's defining moments on a pair of Whitlam's old jeans (it's for charity) and create a two-metre by seven-metre scene of a man fighting with himself (which he's "working like crazy to finish" before his solo exhibition opens on July 4 at the Dianne Tanzer Gallery). Oh, and he and Luhrmann are working on "an animation project that's still in the conceptual stages", which means he can't say anything else about it.

He will also enter next year's Archibald but has no idea who his subject will be. "Almost anyone can make a good portrait," he says. "Even if they're awkward and don't share much, that can be good. It's the way you interpret and capture them that matters."

The Archibald Prize exhibition is on show at Bendigo Art Gallery until July 12.