

Star's portrait has artist in a bind

A painter who planned to enter a study of Heath Ledger in the Archibalds is now torn, writes **Gabriella Coslovich**.

THE last and only portrait of Heath Ledger captures him as an intense, brooding young man, a distant, troubled look in his eyes. Just under his well-defined chest is a simple red tattoo of the girl who was the centre of his life — two-year-old daughter Matilda.

It is a portrait in triplicate — the pensive central figure is flanked to the right by Ledger looking bleary-eyed but grinning, and to the left by another cast deep in shadow.

Although the portrait could be interpreted as confirmation that Ledger was suffering emotionally in his final days, Melbourne artist Vincent Fantauzzo paints a very different picture of the man, saying the actor was feeling “very positive about the future”.

Fantauzzo, a friend of Ledger's, had been meaning to paint the actor's portrait for three years — but it was only last month, during a break in Ledger's frenetic schedule, that the artist was able to have him sit for the portrait. Fantauzzo flew to Perth during the Christmas break to paint Ledger at his family home, and completed the painting in Melbourne.

Yesterday, still reeling from the unexpected death of his friend, the artist reluctantly spoke about his feelings and the work. “I just can't believe it. I think everyone is saddened and shocked,” Fantauzzo said.

He was intending to enter the portrait in this year's Archibald Prize, but now he's not so sure. The art award, one of Australia's most prestigious, has a first prize of \$35,000.

“I want to make sure I am doing the right thing,” Fantauzzo said. “I have spoken to his close friends and they have

told me that he would want it to be in there, but I don't want it to bring negative attention. I just want it to be a positive thing, like a tribute to Heath, rather than people reading it the wrong way.”

Although Ledger appears troubled in the painting, Fantauzzo says the portrait was meant as a comment on the scrutiny that celebrities such as Ledger endure, and the effect it has on their lives and emotional health.

“The last few days are the perfect example of that sort of scrutiny,” Fantauzzo said.

“It was really about the public figure and everybody trying to get a piece of you.”

He has yet to title the painting and is still putting the finishing touches on it.

“I have been working on it for the past three weeks, for 10 hours a day. I have just been meditating over it and his life and his family, and I just feel really bad for his mum and all the negative attention because Heath was very positive about the future.”

Fantauzzo dismissed as rubbish reports that Ledger had been battling drug addiction before he died.

“He was not doing any drugs and he was not drinking. He was drinking soda water the whole night. He was just focused on his future and on his daughter.

“I was drinking and he was drinking soda water, and he was talking about how clear-headed he was feeling; he was really adamant about not drinking and was encouraging his friends to do the same.”

Fantauzzo said that unknown to many, Ledger was a strong supporter of artists and the arts, a fact the actor didn't like to publicise.

“He was the centre of so many people's lives and he helped so many people. He didn't ask for any of that to be known. He took time away from his holiday with his family and Christmas to sit for the painting. That was pretty kind.”

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Vincent Fantauzzo with his portrait of Heath Ledger.