

A brush with fame

The Archibald prize draws a portrait of a nation, writes **Harbant Gill**

THE celebs have sat, the artists have rushed their canvases to Sydney, and now they await judgment for Australia's best-known art trophy, the Archibald Prize.

Athletic? Yes. Archibald darling **Vincent Fantauzzo**, twice People's Choice winner, is among the Victorian artists feeling the pace of the race.

He has had little sleep when we meet to watch the paint dry on his fifth Archibald attempt, wedged between a solo show in Hong Kong, another on Australia's east coast, a trip to India with film director Baz Luhrmann to paint a mural, and a picture for the Sulman Prize.

All that before the Archibald's deadline last Friday.

The Melbourne artist behind the portraits of Heath Ledger and young star Brandon Walters has created a powerful portrait of Luhrmann with fingers held to his tired eyes soon after the release of his epic, *Australia*.

It's a moment where 'everything is too much,' Fantauzzo says. "When you put your artwork out there, you have the pressure of the whole nation... but no matter how much pressure there is from the outside, you are putting more pressure on yourself anyway."

Fantauzzo is driven less by the Archibald's \$50,000 prize, which is small compared with other lesser-known awards, than he is by the opportunity to do his best.

He donated his first portrait, of artist Charles Blackman, to an Alzheimer's charity, he gave the Ledger portrait to Heath's mother who donated it to the Art Gallery of NSW, and he gave his People's Choice award money to Brandon Walters to say thanks.

"The Archibald has done a lot for my career... it's the most seen exhibition and the most seen portrait exhibition. This is my best shot at it so far."

Brunswick-based **Sam Leach** put long hours into his entry, a portrait of musician Tim Minchin, while preparing for shows in London, Hong Kong and Sydney. The 37-year-old has made the finals every time he has entered — with a Jeff Kennett portrait in 2007, a controversial Nazi-attired portrait of himself imitating a Hitler pose in 2008, and Professor Marcia Langton in 2009.



The artist known for his meticulous works in oil, one of which won the \$40,000 Metro 5 prize in 2006, paints two or three portraits of each subject before he is satisfied.

"One painting to figure out how he looks, another to fix up what went wrong in the second one, and third time lucky... it's the second or third one that I pick."

Leach first heard Minchin on BBC radio in his studio, and was exhibiting in London last year when he went to the "very likable" Minchin's home for the sitting before popping down to the local for a couple of beers.

"I chose him because I love his work. He has a real dedication and commitment. His music is really good but he has this layer over the top that is very funny. He's an atheist and sceptic and that is something I enjoy as well," says Leach, who has created a full-length portrait of the piano-thumping comedian with trademark bare feet.

Prahran artist **Lana McLean** also chose a musician — but to her, Wilbur Wilde is more than just musical.

"He is a powerball. He makes me feel sluggish even when I'm running around the block," says McLean, who nevertheless had the energy to drive her portrait to Sydney.

"I let all my subjects name their portraits. Wilbur calls his *Wilde in Wilburness*, as it's set in landscape and is more of a psychological portrait."

ELTHAM'S Fu Hong worked through the night to paint Mao's Last Dancer Li Cunxin, whose life features in Bruce Beresford's film.

"I sleep in the morning and paint from after dinner until four in the morning. I feel it is a beautiful time because it is quiet. It alters my mind," says the 63-year-old whose portrait of Dame Elisabeth Murdoch was People's Choice runner-up last year.

Fu depicted a relaxed Li right down

to his "naked feet", contrasting with a powerful dance scene in the background.

Dandenongs artist **Peter Biram's** seventh Archibald attempt, a portrait of *Neighbours* star Alan Fletcher, was ready early. He has lined up *So You Think You Can Dance* judge Jason Coleman for next year's prize and *Herald Sun* cartoonist Mark Knight for the year after.

"I enter the Archibald because it's an integral part of Australian art history," Biram says. "The Moran prize is \$150,000 but no matter how much they are pumping into it, it doesn't get on the radar like the Archibald. That's why you do it. Once you have been accepted as a finalist, it has to do your career some good."

See > 2010 Archibald Prize, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney, March 22-May 30. Finalists announced on March 17 and the winner on March 26.



Facing off: (top) Sam Leach works on his portrait of Tim Minchin.

Unmasked: (far left) Wilbur Wilde with artist Lana McLean.

PICTURES: Ben Swinnerton

Wrung out: (left) Vincent Fantauzzo's picture of Baz Luhrmann.