



Vincent Fantauzzo in his Melbourne studio with a portrait of his son, Luca.

PORTRAIT

of the young man as an artist

Is Vincent Fantauzzo a great artist – or just on to a good thing?
By Konrad Marshall.

With his hands deep in his pockets, his light frame shifting from foot to foot, Vincent Fantauzzo looks down at the parquet floor, and he looks nervous.

He says he is nervous, too, this Tuesday morning in an upstairs gallery at the State Library of New

South Wales, as he awaits the announcement of the Doug Moran National Portrait Prize – a \$150,000 award the young painter is hoping to win, and easily the wealthiest prize of its type in the world.

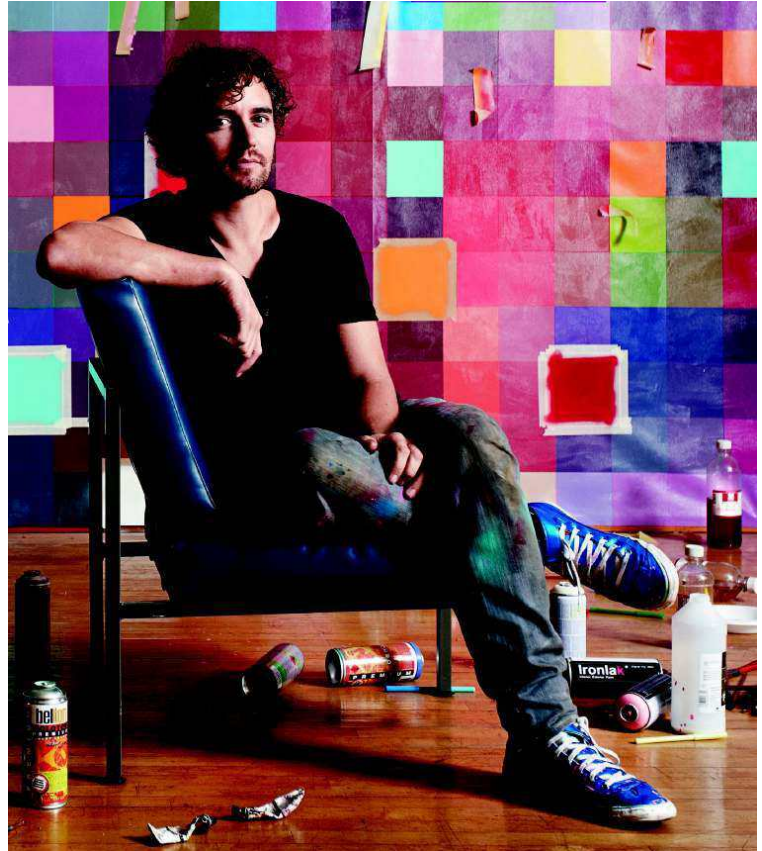
The 33-year-old Melbourne artist has agreed to let us tag along today to get a sense of life inside the quest for an annual art prize, but for now he



wants to remain outside that bubble, lest it burst, so he hangs back in an anteroom behind his wife, Michelle, and 18-month-old son, Luca, inside a little space filled with a kind of paper forest art installation. Lurking in front of those cardboard trees, he now remains perfectly still, his knotted stomach heavy from a morning meal of smoked salmon and scrambled eggs with Tabasco sauce. He is wondering, as he wondered over breakfast, whether he was invited here today as the runner-up, whether he will be one of the "highly commended" place-getters, or whether finally – after entering the Moran Prize three times and the Archibald Prize seven times – this is his moment to win a big one.

"I'm hiding out here. You go," he says, grimacing and nudging me lightly into the gallery, urging me toward the paintings on show – including his own, a photorealist rendering of his mate, film director Baz Luhrmann – while he stays put. "I don't want to see the competition."

Fantauzzo is basically worried that if he sees Adam Cullen, for instance, then the award must be going to the grungy Sydney painter and not him. Fantauzzo is not at all a tormented artist, but in order to win you have to deal with the torment of losing, a tension that for him reached its zenith then nadir in 2008 when his portrait of his friend the actor Heath Ledger was the much publicised front-runner then runner-up in the Archibald. (He entered this year with a portrait of another famous pal, chef Matt Moran). As the ceremony begins, Fantauzzo leans forward, but he fixes his gaze on nothing and no



Photography
James Geer



one, simultaneously asking himself, "What am I going to say if I win?" and "Don't jinx it."

The judge begins describing the victor, detailing an "almost photographic work" – check – by an artist they've "seen many times before" – check – whose work is "always incredibly detailed" – check.

"I think it's very easy to dismiss work that is technically beautiful as nothing more than just a clever trick, something that is just cleverly crafted," the judge says. "That couldn't be less true in this perfectly rendered work." Check.

"And the winner of the 2011 Doug Moran Portrait Prize is ..."

Two weeks later, Fantauzzo is standing in front of a mural-size image of his toddler son, who has his eyes. He conjured the massive inquisitive face as he always does, layer by layer with turps and oil paint. Then he surrounded the head with a kaleidoscope of colour blocks, almost like pixels of acrylic, spray paint and gouache.

We're inside his South Melbourne studio, an old classroom in what used to be J.H. Boyd Girls' High School, and he is explaining how he started sketching as a child, often in commission housing around Glenroy and Essendon and Broadmeadows. The middle child of five, Fantauzzo now lives in a comfortable Docklands apartment, but spent many of his early years in temporary homes, often filled with cousins and friends. "It was wild. We could draw on the walls," he says. "Our walls were like that mural, except with grey-lead pencils."

Growing up, he struggled with reading and writing, and found trouble often. "Almost every day, I was in some sort of fight," he says, hard as it is to imagine a violent streak in such a soft-spoken man. "I felt that by having a bad reputation I was at least good at being bad." Unable to cope with study, he left school at 14 to work as a cook, putting in maybe 70 or 80 hours a week in his early teens.

Boxing gave him direction. Jack Rennie, a one-time trainer of the late Lionel Rose, became a mentor, and Rose was one of the first people to sit for a portrait when Fantauzzo started painting at 19. He applied to university a year later and won a place at RMIT, telling the university he actually completed high school. "No one checked. A lot of it was interview-based, so I got away with it," he says, sheepishly. "When I started I had no idea who painted the Mona Lisa. I didn't know who Monet was. All I knew was I liked to paint."

Struggling with the scholarly component, he occasionally paid other students to write his essays. Then he chose the wrong student. "They completely plagiarised the whole thing, so then I got busted for plagiarism," he says. "I had to think to myself, what's worse – tell them that I plagiarised or tell them the real story and see what they say?" He came clean and

found the university surprisingly sympathetic, straight away testing him for a learning disability. "That's when I found out dyslexia was the problem. It was like a light went off." With the help of a disability liaison, he went on to complete his masters, then won an artistic residency at St Vincent's Hospital. He slowly developed his realist style and mailed out a folio to gallerists including Dianne Tanzer in Fitzroy.

"When I found it, I could tell – even on a bad photocopy – that his technique was very refined," says Tanzer. "You could see that this guy could paint." In 2006, she offered him a solo show, which sold out, as did shows in 2007, 2008 and 2009. In the interim, Fantauzzo travelled to work in Hong Kong and New York, painting models (Chanel Iman), actors (Justin Theroux), athletes (Lennox Lewis) and musicians (Tim Rogers) and sometimes befriending them. "I've found when I paint people I know well, I get a better result. And when other people know that person, they connect to the image more, so I guess I need to keep meeting interesting people," he says.

"But to choose famous people strategically I don't think is a good idea."

He makes friends in the same ad hoc manner as anyone. He has known the musician N'fa of the hip-hop group 1200 Techniques for years, for instance, and N'fa introduced him to Ledger. He knows Matt Moran (no relation to the portrait prize founder Doug Moran) only because his wife spotted the chef at a bar in Sydney and invited him over to their table for drinks. Making new mates isn't a calculated cultivation, and painting a portrait, he says, is also a way of getting to know someone. Earlier this year, he ate at Moran's flagship restaurant, Aria, and there said a quick hello to former Silverchair frontman Daniel Johns. Fantauzzo said later, "He's someone who I think would be interesting to paint," but he might as well have said, "He's someone who I think would be interesting to meet." As a creative professional, his connections are bound to become collaborations.

Much like last year, thundering across India on a motorbike trip with Luhrmann, each riding a donated Royal Enfield Bullet Classic 500, stopping to paint murals on village walls throughout. They raised money for charity with a photographic exhibition later, and also worked on a project for the Hong Kong Art Fair. The mural Fantauzzo is finishing now is headed there, too. He draws gracefully, purple Texta in hand, creating a bald head with a long, bulbous nose framed within a chinless face, one of dozens of feint figures inside those bright pixels on the expansive canvas, others filled by Mickey Mouse, Winnie the Pooh, Pinocchio.

Fantauzzo works from early morning to past midnight most days to get it done, breaking for a few hours, for dinner with Michelle and bath time with Luca. This is his day-to-day schedule when gearing up for any show. "You're happy but you're nervous," he



says. "You do well, and then have an exhibition, and then you get critiqued. And it can get nasty."

A few weeks ago, Fantauzzo saw exactly how vitriolic it can get. Under the headline "Portrait of modern mediocrity", a columnist took a swipe at the artist, opining that his version of portraiture is to painting "what lip-synching is to singing". Days later, the same critic described Fantauzzo's painting of Matt Moran as "repellent", along with the summation that a person can know whether they understand anything

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about painting by simply looking at his glossy image of the chef: "If you think this is a good picture, the answer is in the negative."

Of course, Fantauzzo is hardly the first to come under fire in the push and pull between realism and abstraction. William Dargie, who won the Archibald Prize more times than anyone (eight) saw his final winner – a 1956 portrait of Albert Namatjira – lambasted as an effete portrait with "a general air of having nothing to say". "It is all of no use," the critics cried. "Colour photography, hand done, wins the day."

Gabriella Coslovich, senior arts writer for The Age, says it's almost too easy for critics to write off Fantauzzo as a mere "draughtsman" and not a real "blood and guts" artist – and yet she partially agrees with such assessments.

Take the portrait of Moran surrounded by lamb carcasses – a technically difficult work that won the Packing Room Prize at the Archibalds, but left her cold. For Coslovich, the other "meat painting" in the exhibition, Geoffrey Dyer's portrait of David Walsh, is the better work – the creepy image capturing the subject's awkwardness and gall.

Fantauzzo has twice won the People's Choice award at the Archibald, and Coslovich doesn't begrudge him his popularity with the masses. "His style is straightforward and they can see for themselves whether he's captured the likeness of his subject or

not," she says. "He's not some obscure conceptualist playing clever games and making them feel stupid for not 'getting' his work." Yet his work arouses a mixture of curiosity and dismay. "I just wish he'd let loose a little more, go a little deeper, channel something more about his subjects. It will be interesting to see how Vincent's work develops – but his shtick is clearly working for him, why would he change?"

Besides, the ballsy bravura brushwork so often lauded by more conceptual art lovers can be just as much a crowd-pleasing "trick" as photorealism. Ben Quilty won this year's Archibald with a painterly portrait of Margaret Olley, for example, and it was still slammed as "vulgar, meretricious and gimmicky".

Fantauzzo won't lose any sleep over a few words, either. "It's not going to affect what I do. I thought it was so over the top that it just looks mean-spirited – almost like the mean judge on Australian Idol," he says, stifling a laugh. "That's all right, I got paid."

He's currently painting Professor James Best, head of the school of medicine at the University of Melbourne – a job worth a little under \$20,000 (although less than half that would end up in Fantauzzo's pocket). Professor Margaret Gardner, the vice-chancellor and president of RMIT, is another who sat for him recently for a similar sum. About half his work is commission-based portraiture. It is not uncommon for figurative artists to make a living this way – much like the salaried court painters of the Renaissance. "They did the royal family, they did the church, and then they'd do their own work," says Dianne Tanzer. "Vincent gets to hone his skills, he enjoys getting to know the person he's painting, he gets to live on that money, and he becomes part of the great tradition and continuum of portrait painting."



Back in the library's cardboard forest in Sydney, Fantauzzo stretches his legs. His muscles are cramping up now, he whispers, maybe from nerves. He swallows hard, and then Michael Zavros, one of this year's judges and last year's winner, reads out a name. Fantauzzo's name. He has won the prize.

Releasing a long-held breath, his eyes light up and he creeps towards the podium. Luca is dozing in a pram. Michelle is filming her hubby on his iPhone as he utters the first words of a brief acceptance speech: "I'm so nervous I feel like vomiting."

Organisers play a clip they recorded only minutes earlier of Luhrmann in Manhattan: "Vinnie, if you're there, congratulations man," he says to the camera. "One knows a little bit about what it means to put yourself out there creatively – to be in the cut and thrust of critique and comment – but in the end the work speaks for itself."

A scrum of reporters ask him what it takes to become a great artist as he stands in front of his soft-hued image of black and gray conveying both silence and noise, serenity and tumult – a piece the judges called "an emotional tour de force". His pocket buzzes – a congratulatory text from Baz. He takes a call from Moran, too, answering with one of his happy Anglo affectations: "Hey chap" or "Hi, old boy."

Louise Doyle, director of the National Portrait Gallery and a judge, stands to the side of the action, explaining that portraiture prizes receive so much attention because they are a voyeuristic, interactive gamble – and Australians love to gamble. "It really is about the field, who puts their hat in the ring."

For working artists, particularly those who invest a lot of time in figurative work, the contests represent a real opportunity for recognition and advancement. The impact of a win is huge, starting with immediate print

articles and sound bites and vision clips. Financially, you have some breathing room, whether knocking off a chunk of your mortgage (as Zavros did last year) or taking a long-desired three-month trip to Italy for the winter (as Fantauzzo plans to do this year).

"Mostly, you have the freedom to be yourself and follow your nose and make your work for no other reason than to make your work," says Zavros. "That's the greatest gift."

Conservative knockers only add to the drama and intrigue. For them, the Archibald and the Moran may not have a tremendous amount of artistic credibility, says Zavros, but saying so out loud is almost daggy. "Hot artists with a capital A will have a crack at them, and the punters love them," he says. "This is a difficult country, in some ways, to make art and be an artist, so if you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

We join Fantauzzo near the end of the day. His victory opens the wrought-iron gates of Swifts, the Moran family's Darling Point mansion, said to be most expensive piece of real estate in Sydney. We arrive there for the "winner's dinner" some time after 9pm and walk up a winding driveway to the neo-Gothic castle. Inside, the place is set for a party, huge centrepieces of fruit and roses stacked on an endless dinner table, Beethoven playing, canapes being served. The "somewhat surreal" night would continue with servings of delicate dishes introduced by the chef to a motley mix of portrait painters and fashion designers and criminal lawyers chit-chatting past midnight. But, leaving Fantauzzo to relax, I miss that part of the evening, seeing the artist off as he takes a little taste of the good life, perhaps only an appetiser.

"Have one before you go," he says, lifting a fat Sydney rock oyster topped with beluga caviar, and tipping it down his gullet. "Cheers, chap. Life is good."

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THREE FAMOUS FACES

Baz Luhrmann (above)

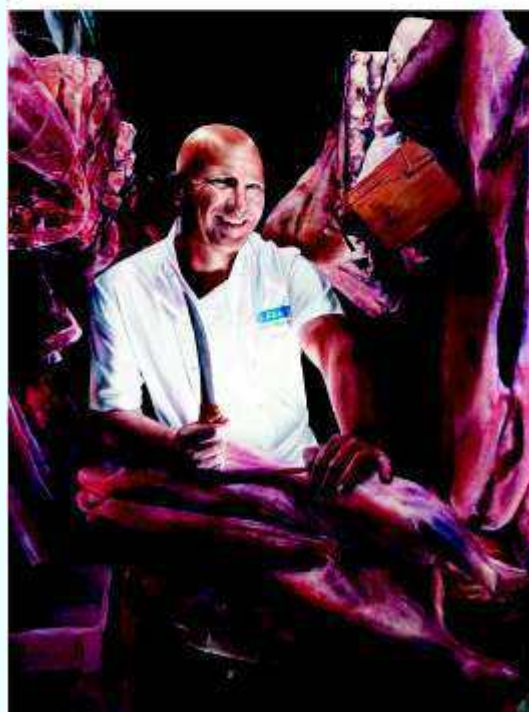
Fantauzzo’s prize-winning portrait of Luhrmann is based on a photo he took of the director when he was dealing with criticism of his film Australia. “He wanted to do a painting of me and I’m a bit funny about paintings – I don’t know why,” Luhrmann said of the work. “I was under incredible creative stress at that time ... I don’t often show that. Of course that would be the image he chose.”

Tim Rogers (top right)

“I’d been listening to his music for years but I had no idea what to expect,” Fantauzzo says. “We met in St Kilda and we were walking past Luna Park – we thought we’d take a few snaps there. He has such an interesting face, but Ruby just wouldn’t let go of his leg ... so I did these images of him with her clinging on. He’s a rock star, but it was a different side to Tim. It was the dad and his daughter.”

Matt Moran (right)

“He’s all about food, of course, and I wanted the portrait to be about that part of his lifestyle,” says Fantauzzo. “I knew he was handy with butchering and had grown up with it, so I thought I’d get him in his kitchen cutting up a lamb. We went to the butchers to get the lamb and then went into a cool room at his mate’s place and it just looked so good. We went back a couple of times and got it perfect.”





**THE ARTIST MADE THE PORTRAIT
THE PORTRAIT MADE THE ARTIST**

The first and only portrait of the late Heath Ledger was done by Fantauzzo in December 2007, weeks before Ledger's death in January 2008. In the aftermath, Fantauzzo wrestled with whether to enter the portrait in the 2008 Archibald Prize before receiving the blessing of Ledger's family. The painting won the People's

Choice Award, was runner-up for the top prize and introduced the artist to the public. Fantauzzo later turned down significant cash offers for the work, gifting it to the Ledger family, who in turn donated it to the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Fantauzzo vividly remembers going out in Perth with his friend the night before they worked on the piece: "I'd never seen people go crazy to see someone like they did that night to see him, because it was

his home town and he was back. People were lining up, bursting into tears, yelling out stuff. We went to the bathroom and people were tapping on his shoulder. I couldn't believe how intense it was. And he kept his cool and he was nice to everyone and shook everyone's hand ... We worked on the idea for the painting together. It was about keeping something to yourself, being careful about what you give out and the thoughts you're having."