



CREATIVE CREATURE

A world-class painter living in our midst is set to take on Australia's biggest art prize.

MIRANDA LUBY visits Rhys Lee's coastal studio for some insight into his passion



A HALF-FINISHED Archibald Prize entry leans against a basement wall in an Anglesea home.

Stained brushes and cans of brightly coloured acrylics are scattered around the small room and milk crates prop up several large canvases. The floor is roughly covered with paint-splattered lino.

It may not look like much, but this is the studio of Rhys Lee, one of Australia's most highly regarded painters.

Today Rhys' Archibald entry is a self-portrait coloured in brilliant blues, but tomorrow it could look completely different.

Part of his painstaking artistic process is continuing to work on the same canvas until it's finished – no matter how many times he has to change it.

"I never throw anything out. I just keep going

until it's at a point where I'm happy with it," says the 37-year-old coastal artist, who was a finalist for the prestigious award last year.

"I have this thing where I think I should be able to do something every time that I'm pleased with.

"It's a kind of arrogance and confidence, but I just keep going until it's done. I'd be really disappointed otherwise.

"It's a s--t load of pressure. It's a nightmare."

But while Rhys can feel frustrated by his art, it's his determination to create something he connects with that's led his work to become so desirable.

Having been named one of Australia's most collectable artists twice by *Australian Art Collector* magazine, his work hangs in many private and corporate collections, including BHP Billiton and Bank of Switzerland.

The skilful painter has held solo exhibitions in New York, painted the interior walls of the RMIT Gallery, covered a billboard in Melbourne with his drawings and last year collaborated with fashion designer Lisa Gorman (who proudly owns 15 of Rhys' works) to create a range of wearable art for her collection.

But sitting in his humble home studio, a few days after returning from a major exhibition of his work in Perth, Rhys admits he doesn't see it.

"I don't get it. I really don't get it," the notoriously private artist says about his popularity.

"I mean it's really flattering to get this recognition, but I don't really see what other people see.

"This is just something I've been doing for as long as I can remember."

Growing up in Brisbane, Rhys started making

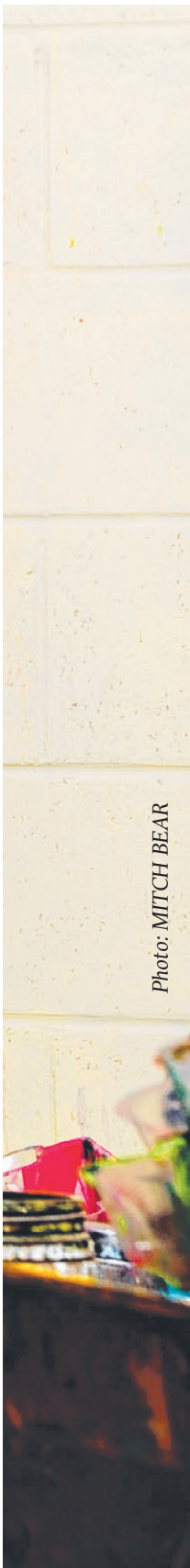


Photo: MITCH BEAR



Rhys Lee takes a break from painting (above left); a selection of his work (top); his 2012 Archibald Prize entry (above right); with Lisa Gorman (bottom left); and with models wearing clothes from Gorman.

art as a teenager using trains as his canvas.

“Graffiti was kind of an extreme outlet and a way to express myself creatively when I was younger,” he says. “It wasn’t about going out and destroying property, but about your work being seen by as many people as possible.”

Because he couldn’t keep his art, Rhys would take photos of his graffiti.

“I have whole albums full of them today,” he says. “Every now and then I’ll have half a bottle of scotch and reminisce, but I’ve distanced myself from that world now.”

Keen to push himself as an artist, Rhys moved to Melbourne after university and started displaying his work in stores. It wasn’t long before interstate galleries came calling and he began to make a living off his paintings.

Then, in 2004, he was offered his first solo show in New York.

“I kind of slapped myself then because exhibiting your art in New York is such a surreal thing,” Rhys says. “Every street you walk down has some fame associated with it, plus it’s the birthplace of graffiti so it’s an incredible place to be creative.”

Within a few years, Rhys had become known all over the world for his skilful use of colour and haunting imagery.

His powerful and eerie works often feature unearthly, ghoulish creatures with wry smiles floating in intensely colourful backgrounds.

They’re the kind of images that you would think had come from a dark and troubled mind, but the artist with a surprisingly sweet disposition says they evolved naturally.

“I don’t really know where these creatures come from, but I used to draw zombies and things when I was little,” he says. “Sometimes I tell people they’re all self-portraits. I don’t really like to explain my work too much.”

Rhys has also become famous for his grand-scale paintings, as well as the feverish pace at which he can create an artwork.

While living in New York for one of his exhibitions, Rhys painted a 20m gallery wall in a matter of days as well as producing more than 100 large works on paper.

“I love working like this because it’s such a challenge, physically and mentally,” says Rhys, who tries not to plan his work too much before

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starting. “I just head in there with scaffolding and a bunch of paint and go for it.”

Rhys spent an “intense” couple of years moving back and forth between Melbourne and New York, living in a railroad apartment with well-known Australian graffiti artist Dmote and exhibiting non-stop before deciding it was time for a break. He moved to the Surf Coast in 2009 and hasn’t looked back.

“Coming down here is the best thing I’ve ever done. I really needed a change of pace and this was the perfect place for it,” says Rhys, who lives with his partner and fellow artist Pia and their 10-month-old son, Parker. “We just love it.”

Because Rhys is increasingly private about his art, a few paintings dotted around their home like a “visual diary” of his career are the only signs of his creative passion outside his studio.

In fact, most local people he meets have no idea who he is.

“I don’t really tell people what I do when I meet them now,” the new dad says.

The artist’s lifestyle may have changed, but with last year’s Archibald Prize success and his collaboration with one of Australia’s most popular fashion designers, Rhys’ rise to notoriety has only sped up.

“The experience of putting my art on clothing was amazing because it made my work heaps more accessible,” he says. “People can just spend

however much on a jumpsuit rather than spending a lot on an artwork.

“Now I see everyone wearing it to my art shows, which is pretty cool.”

Though his Gorman alliance was planned, last year’s Archibald entry was not.

“I never had any intention of entering but I was commissioned to do this painting for a woman in Sydney and she said I had to enter it,” Rhys explains. “I said, ‘if you say so.’”

The painting (pictured), inspired by his family connection to Ned Kelly, became a finalist.

“That was pretty amazing so I thought I’d give it a shot again this year,” he says.

Rhys hopes to finish his self-portrait in the next few days for submission in early March, but is keeping the final painting private until it has been judged. The rest of the year involves more large-scale artworks and exhibitions in galleries as far away as Brazil.

And although the painter is more in demand than ever, Rhys says family, rather than art, is his major focus now – though combining the two is on the cards.

“Soon I’m going to pop Parker on some butcher’s paper with some non-toxic paint and brushes and see what he does,” Rhys says with a smile. “I’ll be disappointed if he’s not a better painter than I am, but I’m sure I’ll love anything he does.”

