

Hitting the bullseye

with the 2000 Archibald Prize

by senior correspondent Jennifer Martens

Pablo Picasso said, "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he has grown up." Adam Cullen, the 2000 Archibald Prize winner and a SSAA member, has clearly solved that problem. According to his parents, the 41-year-old was drawing before he was walking.

The artist

Adam was first paid for his talents as a young cartoonist for a local newspaper. Confident his artistic abilities would bring him further success, he went to school to study art and received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1986 and a Graduate Diploma of Professional Art Studies in 1987 from the City Art Institute. As he developed his talents, he was able to secure some solo exhibitions, his first in 1993. He has an insatiable appetite for knowledge; he obtained a Masters of Fine Arts from the University of New South Wales in 1999 and is currently pursuing a PhD in Fine Arts.

Since that first exhibition, Adam has had more than 200 solo and group exhibitions including the Archibald Prize, the Sulman Prize and the Mosman Art Prize. His work is featured in many public collections such as The Art Gallery of NSW, The National Gallery of Australia and every other major state gallery. His work also plays a major role in a number of private collections, including that of Sir Elton John and Labor Minister, the Honourable Duncan Kerr.

Adam admits that he was a bit of an underground artist before winning the Archibald Prize for his portrait of Australian actor David Wenham. "Winning the Archibald was really great," he said. "It automatically increases your audience...all of a sudden you sort of enter the mainstream."

This was not the first time Adam had tried to win the Archibald, which fosters portraiture and is Australia's oldest and most prestigious art award. In 1996, as a Sydney 'grunge' artist, he had his first crack at it with a portrait of Thomas Keneally, author of *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*. He was happy with his subsequent entries, portraits of Australian actor Max Cullen (who happens to be Adam's cousin) and Edmund Capon (the director of The Art Gallery of NSW). The fourth time proved the charm. He chose David Wenham as his subject after seeing the film *The Boys*. "I saw it and thought

'wow', I have to paint him." The portrait, using Dulux house enamel, was a painting of David's character in the movie.

Winning another Archibald would be nice and Adam does plan to enter again this year, possibly with a painting of a fellow Australian artist, but that is not his priority right now. Winning the award instantly raised his profile and increased the demand for his work. Regular exhibitions with his dealers in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney take precedence and most of his time.

Despite his success in portrait painting, Adam says he only paints one portrait a year - for the Archibald. These days, he prefers to express himself through various forms of art including painting, drawing and, recently, installation art, which is art that uses sculptural materials and other media to modify the way people experience a certain space. He creates some of this type of art with his girlfriend and fellow artist Cash Brown.

Most of Adam's work portrays animals and humans in various stages of psychological and physical trauma and decomposition - something that might not appeal to everyone. But conformity has never been that important to Adam. While at university he distinguished himself from his peers when he fulfilled an assignment by shackling a rotting pig's head to his leg. "It was a performance piece that lasted a few weeks. I had to endure this thing as a friend, an alter ego, a companion," he said. "It ended up as a nasty sibling.

"I was very young and an idealist. It was a great environment to express myself." For his creativity, effort and obvious resilience, Adam received a high distinction.

Recently, he has collaborated on a children's book with Mark Brandon 'Chopper' Read - another project that saw him go against the grain. He illustrated Read's book, *Hooky the Cripple - the Grim Tale of a Hunchback Who Triumphs*. Adam said it was "received well as a novelty item". The book, however, received sharp criticisms by the NSW State Education Department and the Queensland Government tried to have it banned. As far as Adam was concerned, there was no better advertising because if you are publicly criticised, you automatically get press. And, as most people know, any publicity is good publicity.

While working on the book, the two became quite good friends. Adam was the



best man at Mark's wedding in 2002 and they are currently working on part two of *Hooky the Cripple*.

The sporting shooter

Adam grew up in the bush and remembers getting an air rifle for his 10th birthday. That is what sparked his interest in shooting. Other than the time he shot holes into a canvas for one of his paintings, he doesn't really combine his interest in shooting with his love of art. However, he said, "I have always thought that firearms look great on a gallery wall...I see their potential as a sculptural kind of medium." He has always liked the aesthetics of firearms and the great sounds they make.

While he currently does not own a firearm, he does plan to purchase a .22 Magnum and a single-shot shotgun. He intends to head to the Pilliga scrub outside of Baradine - his preferred hunting spot - to help rid the environment of foxes and other vermin. Adam says he is drawn to shooting because it offers him a respite from his daily life, is a way for him to relieve stress and allows him to enjoy the great Australian bush.

Living in Wentworth Falls in the upper Blue Mountains, where he has a studio overlooking the distant Grose Valley, he has the perfect backdrop for his other hobbies of camping, ornithology (bird watching) and herpafauna (snakes).

Musician Frank Zappa said, "Art is making something out of nothing and selling it" and Adam does just that. He has gone from an infant with a biro in his hand to one of the 10 most collectable artists in the country.

For more information about Adam Cullen, check out *Scars Last Longer* by Ingrid Periz or simply type 'Adam Cullen' into your web browser to discover a plethora of information and examples of Adam's work. ●