

Painting the true picture

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Sam Leach has moved on from the controversy that greeted his Wynne Prize-winning landscape this year, writes Andrew Taylor.

SAM LEACH doubts he will try for back-to-back wins in the Archibald Prize next year. He's even less likely to enter the Wynne Prize after all the grief his prize-winning little landscape, *Proposal for Landscaped Cosmos*, caused him this year.

"I don't really plan to enter anything in the Archibald for the foreseeable future," says Leach, who won the \$50,000 prize for his tiny portrait of comedian Tim Minchin.

"Prizes in general I think I'll stay away from for a little while.

"I've been lucky but I'm stepping back from the competitive arena to concentrate on my practice," he says. You can hardly blame him.

The 37-year-old artist briefly basked in the limelight last March after simultaneously winning the Archibald and Wynne prizes, a feat previously achieved only by William Dobell and Brett Whiteley.

But his newfound celebrity quickly soured after it was alleged his Wynne Prize-winning landscape bore an uncanny similarity to Dutch painter Adam Pynacker's 1668 *Boatmen Moored on the Shore of a Lake*.

Debate raged over whether Leach's painting was a copy and should have referred to the

17th-century Dutch artist in its title.

The head of the Australia Council's visual arts board, Ted Snell, told *The Age*: "Without referencing the original, it runs very close to breaching ethical practice."

Yet details differentiating the two works were largely ignored, including the insertion of stars and a grid of red dots representing LEDs, the removal of Pynacker's figures and boat, the massive size difference between the two paintings and Leach's coating of his miniature painting in reflective resin.

So, too, was the fact that artists, as distinct from academics, tend not to cite earlier artworks that may have influenced them.

Acknowledging his debt to the Dutch painter, Leach and his Sydney dealers, Ursula Sullivan and Joanna Strumpf, separately wrote to the Art Gallery of NSW trustees explaining the landscape was based on his childhood home in the Adelaide Hills and was idealised in a similar vein to Pynacker's fantasised idea of Italy.

Yet the debate was dumbed down to one question: was Leach a copycat?

In the end, the Melbourne-based artist kept his \$25,000 prize despite public pressure forcing the AGNSW trustees to reconsider their decision.

Leach's landscape was bought by the Newcastle Regional Art Gallery.

But mud, however unfairly it is thrown, tends to stick.

"Personally, I found it difficult when the story first broke for a whole range of obvious reasons," he says.

With a benevolence befitting Gandhi, Leach says he is "not angry, really, or annoyed".

"I obviously didn't agree with everything said but that's fine. I don't have to agree with it."

But, he says, "perhaps some details of my painting were overlooked in the debate".

"If the original Pynacker and my painting were hung side-by-side it would be more apparent than the reproductions in the newspaper."

Of course, it's not the first time Leach's art has provoked discussion.

In *Self in Uniform*, a finalist in the 2008 Archibald Prize, he depicted himself standing stiffly, one arm across his stomach, wearing a grey, militaristic suit with a red armband on one sleeve. The pose and clothes were clearly derived from a famous photograph of Adolf Hitler.

Leach, who has also painted former Victorian premier Jeff Kennett and Aboriginal academic Marcia Langton for the Archibald, said at the time mimicking Hitler was not glorifying the Nazis but warning against any revival of their hateful ideology.

"By putting myself in this painting I'm hoping to be vigilant against that [the Holocaust] ever happening again," he told the Herald.

Six months after the Wynne Prize controversy, Leach's art practice

is thriving.

He has just flown to London from Lhasa, the last stop on a six-week journey through Kakadu, Arnhem Land and the Kimberley as well as western Sichuan province and Tibet with two other Australian artists and three Chinese artists.

Leach says the trip, funded by the Australia Council, was designed to let the participants experience life in remote regions of both countries.

For Leach, who had never been north of Brisbane, it was an eye-opener. "What surprised me most was probably spending time with people living in really

traditional ways," he says, "and learning something about their culture and how they view the world.

"Basically, there's a different nation in the middle of Australia. That never really occurred to me before."

Leach's three weeks in China and Tibet, driving through 5000-metre-high mountain passes on "amazingly bad, muddy roads", provided just as many revelations, including the pervasive influence of religion on everyday life.

"I met a guy who was a living Buddha and had yak tea with him," he says.

Even more startling was his witnessing of a sky burial, a method of disposing of the dead that involves chopping up the body and feeding it to vultures.

"It literally took them minutes to eat an entire body," Leach says. "In northern Australia, you're constantly thinking you have to be careful not to become a source of food to crocodiles.

"But seeing it in action [in Tibet] it seemed somehow obvious that we should be part of the food chain."

Leach's next stop was London where he met up with his wife Emma and daughters, Phoebe, 4, and Astrid, 2.

"Both are ridiculously cute," he says, before adding, "they tend to be nightmares at particular times. But they really are very good little girls."

Phoebe already shows signs of inheriting her father's artistic skills.

He also caught up with Minchin, their first encounter since the Archibald Prize announcement, and attended the opening of Platonia, his solo show at COMODAA, a gallery specialising in contemporary art.

Leach says the exhibition of exquisitely painted miniatures of animals subtly enhanced by technology - think four-legged versions of Arnold Schwarzenegger's character in Terminator - is influenced by the work of physicist Julian Barbour, which suggests that time, as we perceive it, does not exist other than as an illusion.

The title of the show describes a timeless realm of unchanging, unmoving forms, he says. "It's something I thought applied to my work and my interests. A lot of my paintings have references to his book *The End of Time*."

The Platonia show displays Leach's diverse intellectual interests; in this case, animals and technology.

An economics graduate who chased tax returns at the Australian Tax Office for several years before dedicating himself to art, Leach has an inquiring mind and can hold forth on the political economy of 17th-century Holland or art's relationship to science and technology as convincingly as he discusses his art.

He also collects stuffed animals, trawling eBay and second-hand shops for items he admits are "not very well taxidermied. Occasionally people find things they

think I might be interested in and give them to me."

Leach also relies on his parents who own a farm at Sunbury, just outside Melbourne. "They very kindly put things in the freezer for me."

Leach relies on these deceased models although he says his art has shifted from painting animals that are "obviously dead" to ones that "might be alive but are very still".

"I tend to not want animals past a certain point," he adds. "They've got to have a semblance of life to them."

Despite the detail he painstakingly applies to his miniature paintings - a few letters or dots on a tiny LED screen, the reflection of text in an animal's eye - Leach says his eyesight is holding up: "I use glasses occasionally but it's not too bad. The back can be a bit of a problem from hunching down."

A lot of this effort is missed by the casual viewer, he admits. "I'm aware when putting in these tiny things that there's a slim chance they'll be discovered. But it becomes extra rewarding as a painter and a viewer when some things do get picked up and a different layer of the painting gets revealed."

Each work takes between 30 and 40 hours of painting so long as he does not make mistakes that need to be corrected.

Leach says his coming show, Present at Hand, at Sullivan + Strumpf in Paddington "represents another step along" this path of animals interacting with technology, including a wallaby with geometrically shaped joeys. The show also includes works that explore object-oriented ontology, Leach's latest mind-spinning intellectual pursuit. The paintings are small, but come with hefty price tags - up to \$12,100 for the 30cm x 45cm A Pair of Vicarious Walrus.

The show, which also includes Leach's take on paleolithic hand axes - reduced, he says, to a more geometric, simplified form and rendered in granite and marble - sold out three weeks prior to its opening on Thursday, repeating the sell-out success of four previous Sydney shows and this year's Hong Kong Art Fair.

"Sam's works are extremely seductive," says Ursula Sullivan of Sullivan + Strumpf. "They are exquisitely painted and presented. This provides a wonderful entry point for the viewer to get involved in the work. He draws you in and guides you into a complex subtext about human nature and our interaction with technology, corporate culture or any artificial construct.

"If you don't want to go there, you can still appreciate the stunning object the painting is."

Sullivan says the Wynne Prize controversy has not affected the market for Leach's work.

"It's true we had a few emails from overnight art experts who felt quite free to email us letters stating their horror," Sullivan says. "But they have never looked at a Sam Leach before nor since that prize.

"On the contrary, the many people who know and attempt to understand his work are extremely passionate about it and it was actually rather rewarding to see such firm support come through - more solidifying than destabilising."

Former newsreader Anne Fulwood bought a butterfly painting by Leach a few years ago. "I looked at it and was totally mesmerised," says Fulwood, who is also a trustee of the AGNSW. "It has this shimmering finish and I was perplexed.

"Is it a photograph? Is it a finely executed painting? It was just so exquisitely painted."

Fulwood describes Leach, a fellow South Australian, as "a young Renaissance man" who can converse as easily on football as on art history".

"I have taken a big interest in emerging and young contemporary artists because generally they're more affordable and that's a good thing," she says. "It's like trying to pick a winner and I feel like I have with him."

Far from harming reputations, Fulwood says the Wynne Prize debate "educated us all".

"We all learnt a lot more and that's the most wonderful thing. As a trustee, I want people to talk about art, engage with it and look at it."

Two of Leach's works, Albino Lobster and Robot Arm and Pufferfish, are owned by Artbank, the federal government's art rental scheme.

"I just thought he was an interesting young artist," Artbank director Geoff Cassidy says. "It's a combination of the beauty of his paintings with the strangeness of his ideas that makes them interesting."

Cassidy, a former director of Sotheby's Australia, has a Leach of his own, wisely purchased before his prices skyrocketed.

"The lusciousness of his work combined with a fairly rigorous conceptual framework and pretty strong work ethic has guided his success," he says.

Sam Leach's exhibition Present at Hand opens at Sullivan + Strumpf fine art in Paddington on Thursday.