

Adam Knott: the artist a.k.a

CHRISTINE WESTWOOD

Founded in 1988, the Doug Moran National Portrait Prize is the richest and most prestigious portrait prize in the world. Alongside it since 2007 is the prestigious Moran Contemporary Photographic Prize. Last year the contest attracted 122,910 entries and Adam Knott was the first artist ever to be selected as a finalist in both categories.

Earlier this year I spoke to Knott about his pursuit of personal and public success in his two chosen forms of artistic expression. As a practising oil painter and photographer, Knott's instinct is to follow his creative drive across the barriers of different media; it seems to him arbitrary to have the barriers there at all.

Ever since I was a kid I was always into images but then when I grew up I found people had categories like photography, painting and contemporary art. I guess I still have that child-like naivety where I think we can all be artists but just choose a different medium for our purposes.

As a kid I was very visual, observant, always looking and reading people's emotions and how their facial expressions changed. I've always been into all types of imagery: art, illustration, photos and comics - I just respond to all of them.

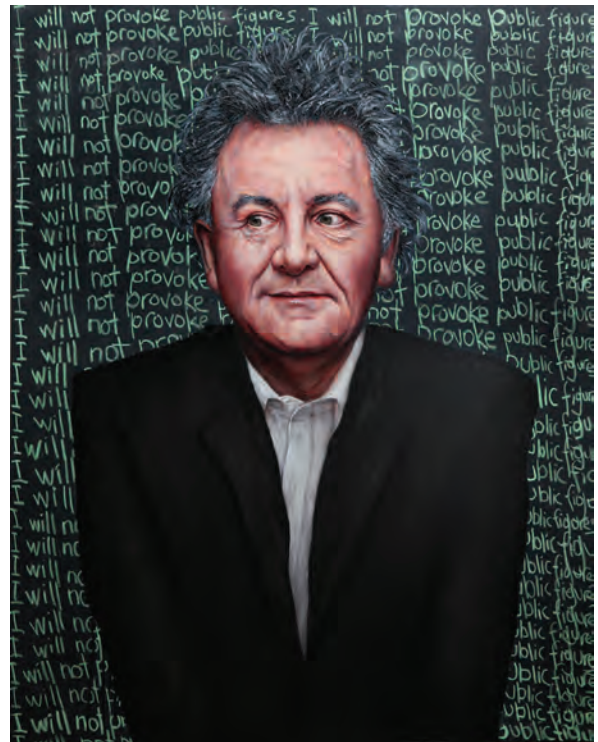
The artworld doesn't seem to think of photography as real art and there's something in me that wants to show them that photographers are not only great artists in their own right but they can also be great artists with other media. It seems that a lot of critics think almost anything goes in contemporary art as long as you can intellectualise it, but then there are these rules like you should be painting from life and photography isn't seen as art anyway.

I remember being so impressed when I met Max Dupain early in my career. I discovered he had this great love of literature and art and music and theatre, in fact all of the arts. He was considered Australia's premier photographer, but even though he chose photography to make his living, his consciousness of art was so expansive.

Knott was understandably proud at being selected as a finalist in both Moran Prizes; each category undergoes a blind judging process which is totally merit-based. Knott's artistic merit



Self-portrait, 2011, acrylic on found timber, 102.68 x 116.84cm;
all images this article of work by Adam Knott, courtesy the artist



Louis Nowra, 2010, oil and chalk on canvas, 121.92 x 152.4cm; 2010 Finalist, Moran Portrait Prize

was evident during his secondary school years; with a natural talent for drawing he excelled in art subjects and had his work selected for *Art Express*.¹ But it was the immediacy and magic of seeing photos come to life in the darkroom that set him on the path to photography; that and the more pragmatic reason that he thought he had more chance of making a living at it.

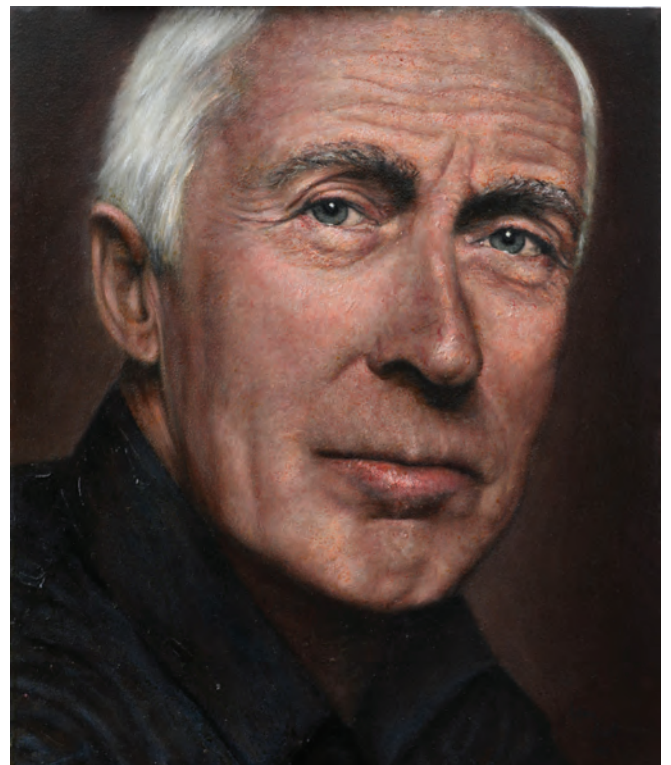
Characteristically, Knott immersed himself in real-time experience. At fifteen he wrote reports on sporting events and,



Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu, 2008, digital photograph, 121.92 x 152.4cm; finalist, 2009 National Photographic Portrait Prize, National Portrait Gallery, Canberra



Adam Cullen, 2011, digital photograph, 40.64 x 50.8cm; finalist, 2010 Moran Portrait Prize



Father, oil on canvas, 40.64 x 50.8cm

more importantly, took pictures, many of which ended up on the pages of large circulation suburban newspapers like the *St George and Sutherland Shire Leader*. In a couple of years, Knott had built up a creditable portfolio.

I didn't have the skills or resources to do professional portraits. As a teenage boy, action sports photography was a subject I related to. Making those career decisions at eighteen, I thought, 'There are a lot of people out there better than me at painting'. Well, of course there are, but when you're eighteen you don't realise that a lot of the work is done by older, more experienced artists. You just think, 'Oh, that's what I'm up against', so you look for something else you're passionate about that you hope you can succeed at. After a false start trying a Bachelor of Commerce degree, I went for photography. I rang every magazine and newspaper I'd get on the train from the [Sutherland] Shire and walk from studio to studio showing my portfolio and knocking on photographers' doors.

Even beyond just earning a living I knew I wanted to express myself in a big arena. You feel a passion about this great imagery inside you and you feel like you want to get it out there. That's why when I got offered a well paid job with a big wedding photographer I turned it down in favour of taking a job as a copy boy at the national newspaper. I thought, 'No-one's going to see my work as a wedding photographer'.

All creative people want to communicate their work, to engage or touch a public audience. Every art product is, in essence, a message that wants to be seen and heard. Some creative people are more ambivalent about it than others but Knott has always been straightforward about his need to have his work acknowledged.

I was one of the first press photographers in Australia in the 1980s to start exhibiting. The very first was Phil Blenkinsop. Before that there was Max Dupain and David Moore, and a few art photographers like Laurie Graham, but exhibitions generally weren't popular. I got called a wanker and a poser for exhibiting my photos. Now, twenty-five years later, it's seen as a normal progression for a photographer to show their work. You just have to look at the exhibitions for Sydney's Head On Festival.²

Even at fifteen, Knott was seeking to create images and find a way to communicate them to an audience. He remembers the school display cases and noticeboards where he would display mini exhibitions of his coverage of school and sports events.

It was a great buzz seeing people standing around the noticeboard and being entertained or intrigued by your images. Later, when I got photos in the local newspapers, it was that same high on a bigger scale, seeing my image, my take on something that's happened appearing in a public forum, being seen by thousands of people.

It's a natural progression for Knott to seek recognition and awards in his second career of painting too, though he also describes a bigger drive in this regard.

You feel like, 'I can't die yet because I've got so many more images to create, and I have to try this style of painting or this type of image because it represents this or that part of me'. It's almost like you're working all your foibles, all your baggage, all your inhibitions out of you, onto the canvas and onto a wall. It feels like a big energy inside that needs to be reflected back, and just as big. But the most satisfaction I get is when I finish a painting, I can't describe how good it feels. It's like a relief to get it out.

Knott went on to a successful photographic career in Australia and Los Angeles³ then hit a major crisis that became an opening for the dormant painter inside. With a sudden end to work as a photographer for Time Warner, he answered an ad for a local (LA) art school, looking for teachers – 'no experience necessary'.

I put together a portfolio of drawings and went for an interview that afternoon. I was hired and they let me do classes at the school to build up my formal training. I just loved it and went to every available class I could. That was eight years ago and I've never stopped drawing and painting since.

Knott was attracted to the craft of painting; the discipline of traditional techniques makes sense to him, and he loves the challenge and strength of what may be achieved. He also finds that his skills in photography and painting feed and enhance each other

Until digital photography, I used to 'see' an image in black and white, with all the tonal values. The practice of painting has made me look at the world more through the shapes of tones which bring a three-dimensional element to a painting. Now I bring those expanded perceptual skills to photography. The painting has also helped my compositional skills.

On the other side, editorial photography has given me a lot of experience in understanding lighting, and I bring that to my paintings. Photographing countless portraits of people over the years has helped me know how to create a connection with a subject, and that's vital when you want to create a great portrait in either medium. On a practical level, I use sketches and photos as the reference for the paintings rather than painting from life.

My paintings are never a direct copy of the photograph, they're the starting point to which I bring the emotions I found in the subject. I feel that if you're a good enough painter, everything that's missing in the photograph – the subtle emotions, the deeper sense of the person you're trying to convey – you can put into the painting. That's my goal, anyway.

In comparison to an artist who has dedicated twenty or thirty years to painting practice, is it valid that a practitioner from

another medium could pick up a brush mid-career and make worthwhile, successful paintings? Can the experience and creativity learned in one artform build up a bank of visual knowledge that translates well into others?

Not counting his four years as an art teacher and related formal training, Knott has been seriously dedicated to painting for only two years. Both those years have seen him reach the finals in the Doug Moran National Portrait Prize. If praise from his contemporaries is anything to go by, painter and friend Adam Cullen describes Knott's work as 'fucking mad-arse!' (rough translation: 'I love your work!'). Former Art Gallery of New South Wales director Edmund Capon described Knott's favourite portrait (of the artist's father) as 'exquisite', and containing 'an extraordinary amount of quiet revelation'.

Knott has plans for a solo exhibition, working around a theme that will include landscapes and paintings of his childhood heroes. For the long-term, he says:

I want to reach the stage where I'm a fine artist who makes his living from fine art photography and oil painting. That would be wonderful, to create images and sell them. I still love editorial photography because as well as continuing to challenge and hone my technical and visual skills, you have all these different experiences with different people. In any case, I can't see the painting and photography being separate. They're both aspects of me, and they're connected. They always have been.

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The Moran Prizes 2011 (comprising the Doug Moran National Portrait Prize and the Moran Contemporary Photographic Prize) were shown at the State Library of NSW, Sydney, 21 April to 26 June 2011.

Entries for the 2012 Moran Prizes close 21 May 2012:

www.moranprizes.com.au

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1. *Art Express* is an annual exhibition showcasing the best work of high school art graduates in New South Wales.
 2. The annual Head On Photo Festival, begun by Moshe Rosensveigin in 2010, occurs in May and showcases photography across all genres at over ninety Sydney venues.
 3. During his twenty-five years as a photographer, Knott has had his work placed in six international awards, as well as Australian and American awards, and in the collections of the National Gallery of Australia, National Library of Australia, and the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

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Dr Christine Westwood is a freelance writer on art and culture as well as a fiction series for young adults. She is also a video artist and photo editor for *The Australian*.

LINEAGE: DAVID FAIRBAIRN SELECTED PORTRAITS 1998-2010

31 March - 27 May 2012

Exhibition launch: Saturday 31 March, 2pm

Campbelltown Arts Centre

Art Gallery Road, Campbelltown T 4645 4100

E artscentre@campbelltown.nsw.gov.au Open daily 10am - 4pm

www.campbelltownartscentre.com.au



Large head C.S. No.3 2007 acrylic, gouache,
pastel and charcoal on paper 173.5 x 199.7cm.
Collection of Mark and Maranne Schultz

