



Peter Mortimore and Mike Coward

Mortimore Art Prize

Next month's opening of the third annual Mortimore Art Prize will draw entries from all over Australia, as artists compete for the State's richest and most prestigious realist prize. Proudly Dubbo-based, but this year also bound for exhibition in Bellevue Hill, the Mortimore's growing success has the art world talking. **Story by Jen Cowley & photography by Steve Cowley**

Mike Coward is a man who loves art. He's knowledgeable and passionate about promoting regional artists. He has an impressive collection of artworks and he's also the brains behind the State's most prestigious realist art competition. But don't under any circumstances call him an art aficionado.

"I'm not a cravat-wearing, latte sipping wanker," says the laconic principal of the Mortimore Art Prize, as we argue over what to call him. "Just call me a collector."

It's in this aversion to pretension that the Mortimore – named in honour of prolific and renowned Dubbo-based artist Peter Mortimore - had its genesis.

Frustrated by what he saw as a dearth of opportunity for realist artists to showcase their craft on the public stage, Mike contacted his friend Peter with the nucleus of an idea to address the gap left by increasingly exclusive art critics and curators. Over "a cuppa" the Mortimore Art Prize was born.

Now in its third year, the prize draws entrants from all over the nation, boasts an impressive line-up of highly acclaimed judges and will this year offer a staggering \$25,000 in prize money.

"Realist artists were crying out for something like this, particularly in NSW, because they don't normally get the opportunity to exhibit to the general public who prefer this kind of art," says Mike, who put his own time, effort and not a little money, into the project, admitting that getting the prize off the ground was "bloody difficult".

One artist who is grateful Mike persevered is Sydney-based realist painter Ross Harvey, whose remarkable and extraordinarily detailed still life "Zurburan" took out both the overall and people's choice awards in last year's competition. "Realist artists really struggle for a foot in the door," says Ross. "The art world has been hijacked by the art mafia and this (the Mortimore) fills the gap left by an increasingly avant-garde and self-absorbed art world 'elite'," he says, relishing the opportunity to "beat the drum" for realist art by returning to Dubbo in October as assistant to head judge for the Mortimore, Paul Delprat, principal of Sydney's renowned Ashton Art School. "Curators and critics have been indoctrinated, and are in turn indoctrinating the

public ... traditional art doesn't even get a look in these days."

"The term 'contemporary artist' has come to mean someone who throws paint at a wall from a great distance," says Ross, adding that he believes the artist's job is to "make beautiful things and make people aware of how lovely both life and the world are."

Also helping to judge will be renowned sculptor Alan Somerville - whose magnificent bronze diggers adorn Sydney's Anzac Bridge and who is equally enthusiastic about the importance of the Mortimore Prize to the promotion of "representational art".

Peter Mortimore, the publicity-shy but much-awarded professional artist and teacher whose name the prize bears, says its pulling power and profile are "remarkable, given the short space of time since its establishment".

Peter is looking forward to seeing the exhibition leave the bush for the first time this year to open at his old alma-mater, The Scots College at Bellevue Hill, in the heart of Sydney's art community - the eastern suburbs. "This is a fantastic opportunity to help entrench the Mortimore Art Prize's position in the art world – the chance to exhibit at Bellevue Hill is a big carrot for entrants," according to Mike, who says this year the prize has expanded to include waterscape. "Now it really covers all the genres in realist art. That's how it will look going forward into the future and I'm confident in terms of the quality of the entrants it will continue to attract, because word is really starting to get around now," he says.

Mike says that one of the most satisfying and important features of the Mortimore Art Prize is that it enables the "humble hobbyist" to compete on a level playing field with professionals. "It's not judged on name – it's judged on the work itself. It is designed to enable all traditional artists – from the weekend enthusiast to the fulltime professional – to compete on equal footing and be judged by their peers."

"We don't care what your name is – we're just interested in your art and about making sure real people have an opportunity to see and appreciate the kind of art they like." Spoken like a true aficionado. ❖