

Anh Do paints big lives for his first solo exhibition at Olsen Irwin Gallery

April 9, 2015

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"I picked them because they've really lived a big life": Anh Do says of the friends he has painted. *Photo: Sylvia Liber*

[Why comedian Anh Do turned his hand to painting for the Archibald Prize](#)

With a portrait in last year's Archibald Prize exhibition and as a finalist in several other art shows, Anh Do's artistic credentials would seem to be beyond doubt.

But Do's gallery dealer Rex Irwin has been a tough judge to please.

"He came before last year's Archibald and he looked at all the work and he went 'This is pretty much all not good enough'," Do says. "And I said 'What about that one? That's my dad and I'm going to put him in the Archibald' and he said 'No, not very good'."

Irwin is the co-owner of Olsen Irwin Gallery in Woollahra, which will host Do's first solo exhibition *Man* later this month.

Far from being miffed, Do, who won last year's Kogarah Art Prize, says he asked Irwin to give his honest opinion.

"But this time a few weeks ago he said 'I must say they're very good'," he says. "And I think it's because it's the first time I've been able to string three months of painting together."

The large canvases in *Man* feature Do's friends painted with thick swathes of paint. Each portrait in the show is numbered, rather than named, with the viewer left to work out the character, history and occupation of Do's faces.

"I picked them because they've really lived a big life," he says. "Lots of ups and lots of downs, probably more downs you know."

"That's what sort of fascinates me," he adds. "What's funny as well as what's sad. What's the hero and the really cool dad and the flip side the alcoholic father."

A renowned comedian, author and television personality, Do's skill as an artist was brought to wide attention last year with a touching portrait of his ailing father Tam.

"That's a son's painting of a dad that he worries he might not see again," [Do told Fairfax Media last year](#).

Do told the story of his relationship with his father and the family's arduous journey to Australia as boatpeople in his award-winning 2010 autobiography, *The Happiest Refugee*, which he later turned into a stage show that he continues to perform. The latest edition of his travelogue series

Anh Does Italy screens on the Seven Network later this year.

An avid drawer in his school days, Do took up painting about four years ago, enrolling in a TAFE course following the death of a close friend.

Besides Irwin, he also enlists a number of artist friends to critique his work.

"I'm trying to catch up," he says. "I started late and I'm trying to get as good as I can be. And I'm really enjoying it."

If everyone gives their tick of approval to a painting, Do is satisfied.

"If it's half and half, then I get to decide if it's good or not," he says. "If they all go it's not good, I slash it and chuck it in the bin."

Do credits his parents with encouraging him to chance his arm and not fear failure. He also speaks of the resilience he learned from his mother Hien, who raised three children single-handedly after Do's father succumbed to alcoholism and abandoned the family.

As a teenager, Do was the family's spokesman, calling landlords to ask for extra time to pay the rent: "That gives you resilience so if I have to slash a painting or two so what?"

Do admits his mother appreciates his art more than his humour.

"She doesn't really get it," he says. "She doesn't know why people are laughing. She doesn't understand smart-arsedness. But she can look at a painting and go 'You know what? That's good'."

Do's four children are also fans of his work, venturing downstairs to his studio housed in the double garage, with enviable views of the Illawarra coast, to help out their father.

"Every now and then I'll get a visit from one of the little tackers and they try to help out, you know," he says. "They'll give me hints and tips and, they know nowadays not to, but when my youngest was four a couple of times he got in and thought he'd fix up a guy's chin."

Do says he will often slip downstairs in the middle of the night to work on a painting – a lesson taught to him by "an angry girlfriend".

"I've learnt that the muse is like an angry girlfriend," he says. "If she comes knocking you better be home because if you're not, she doesn't leave a note saying pick up after 3pm from the post office. The gift she had is gone forever."

Anh Do's Man is at Olsen Irwin Gallery from April 22 to May 10.

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