

Collage course

Adelaide artist Michael Jeffery is creating a buzz among Australian collectors with his vibrant collages made of paint skins.

Kirsty De Garis

It's hard to reconcile the shy, eyes-averted presence of Michael Jeffery with the trumpeting volume of the painting he's standing beside. He's almost apologetic. "I used to be dead quiet", he mumbles. As far as I can tell, he still is.

This ex-farmhand, who injured his back and thus went to art school, is taking serious buyers by storm. "I don't know how people heard about him; it must be the bush telegraph," says Richard Martin, Jeffery's representative in Sydney, at the opening night of his first solo exhibition in New South Wales. "People were walking in off the street and upstairs, to where I kept his paintings," he adds. They were all sold before the first glass of wine was poured on opening night.

The buzz is also palpable the following day, when we arrive to photograph the artist amid his creations at the gallery. Well-heeled types keep charging in off the street, requesting a spot on the every-lengthening waiting list for his work. When asked for his response to all this excitement, Jeffery replies with a modest smile that he feels "totally overwhelmed".

It's only standing right in front of one of Michael Jeffery's paintings that you'll feel the power of his work. Vivid yellows that leap off the canvas caught the eye of selectors for the 2006 Wynne Prize for landscape painting, for which Jeffery was selected as a finalist. *Zero*, a hefty 163cm x 200cm piece, was exhibited at the Art Gallery of New South Wales alongside the Archibald Prize this year. The artist's blues, reds, and even blacks are equally stark and immediate, and it is impossible to look away.

Born and raised in Adelaide, Jeffery showed an interest in the great outdoors from an early age, and worked with horses after cashing in a life insurance policy on a whim and heading west with his brother. A serious spinal injury made him unable to continue to work with horses, so Jeffery chose to return to his home town and complete an honours degree in fine art.

Working with a technique he calls "paint skins", he paints layer upon layer of brilliant colour onto sheets of plastic, and from these raw materials makes collages on canvas. Naturally-occurring imperfections in the paint skins turn out to be a bonus; like when the wind blows a drying skin onto itself, and layers beneath are revealed when the two are torn apart. It's this texture and form that gives his paintings their impact.

"As soon as I saw these two hanging canvases that Michael brought through the door, I thought wow," says Peter Walker, Jeffery's dealer in Adelaide, where he is showing again in March

2007. "Everybody was talking about him from the start. His pieces just have something about them," he adds. "It's almost like a new genre, the way they're put together."

As for the subject matter, Jeffery explains: "They're a condensation of all the ugly things I find in the city. I find myself inspired by the things I find quite repulsive." Which is why you'll find endless street signs and council works colours in his paintings: the yellow of a traffic barrier, or the red in a stop sign. This is accompanied by stencilled numbers and lettering, and transfers of photographs of more urban organization. "I sort of want to make something beautiful out of it," he says, "I don't know if it's my way of staying sane in the city."

Taking each paint skin, Jeffery moves them around on the canvas until he finds a combination he likes, before attaching them to the canvas. It's his own commentary on urbanization. "I don't want to sound too negative or anything, but I'm a nature freak. I'd really like people to ask what are we achieving. What is our landscape becoming?"

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