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Picture: John Appleyard

## Inside

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Studio A artist Thom Roberts with ceramist Shelley Simpson and some of the paintings of her he is preparing for the Archibald Prize. Picture: John Appleyard

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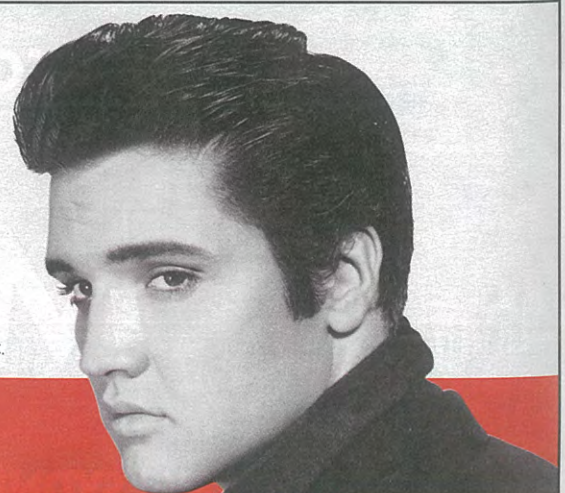
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# The A team

Studio for artists with intellectual disabilities enjoys mainstream success, writes Elizabeth Fortescue

If the famous Archibald Prize for portraiture was awarded for a happy studio sitting, artist Thom Roberts and his subject Shelley Simpson would be top contenders this year.

The banter begins as soon as the owner of ceramics company Mud Australia gets to Roberts' Crows Nest studio, a large fourth-floor space where numerous other artists are engrossed with paint or iPads and Apple pencils.

Simpson's arrival triggers lots of noise, with everyone wanting to say hello.

She has never been painted before and is "flattered" that Roberts has asked her to be his subject.

"He's one of my favourite artists," she says.

Roberts, however, is an old hand at the Archibald Prize. His entry hung last year alongside 51 other finalists selected from 938 submissions.

Roberts, who met Simpson at her company's Marrickville studio, invents a name for everyone he meets and Simpson is "Rachey".

Roberts shows "Rachey" the portrait studies he's already done on both sides of porcelain discs from Mud Australia. Simpson is thrilled with the result.

Roberts settles behind his easel and the sitting goes quietly for 90 minutes. Simpson's features come alive in the long sweeps of his pencil on paper.

And that's how an Archi-

bald Prize sitting takes place at Studio A, a centre of artistic excellence where a group of about 20 talented artists with intellectual disabilities are supported to enter the mainstream art world and flourish there.

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We're about making high-quality art and ensuring that this community of artists has a voice

Artists Gabrielle Mordy and Emma Johnston were pioneers when they co-founded Studio A in 2017, where their respective roles are chief executive/artistic director and principal artist.

"We're the only studio of our kind in NSW," Mordy says. "We specifically provide professional development for artists with intellectual disability. So we're about making high-quality art and ensuring that this community of artists has a voice in Australian contemporary cultural life."

A decade ago, when Mordy and Johnston were working at Studio ARTES Northside, where people with intellectual disability

create art with a recreational focus, they recognised enormous talent among some of the artists.

"I thought, 'why aren't broader audiences getting the opportunity to experience this?'" Mordy says.

While remaining under the umbrella of Hornsby-based Studio ARTES, Studio A was established to bring especially gifted artists into the mainstream art ecosystem.

The artists were familiarised with galleries, their art-making was fostered, and links were established with movers and shakers.

One of these was Maud Page, deputy director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Page had noticed Studio A's activities and contacted Mordy to discuss a possible collaboration.

That's how Studio A artists created a vibrant mural on-site in the gallery's entrance court in 2020. Titled Love Owls and Mermaids Singing in the Rainbow Pop, the mural brought the artists into close contact with the gallery's curators as well as the public.

"I just remember the absolute energy of the seven artists, and visitors stopping constantly [to talk to them]," Page says.

"It's one of the most successful projects that we've



Studio A artists Meagan Pelham, Thom Roberts, Damian Showyin, Victoria Atkinson, and Catherine McGuinness, above; and Studio A CEO Gabrielle Mordy, left. Pictures: John Appleyard

Colin Rhodes, former dean of Sydney College of the Arts, was also pivotal to Studio A's establishment, says Mordy, who had been Rhodes' research assistant. "When we were nobodies he really had faith in us and was incredibly generous with his time and expertise," Mordy says.

Rhodes is an expert in outsider art, the art produced by people working beyond the margins of the orthodox art world. But Mordy dispels any perception of Studio A artists as "outsiders".

"I don't think our artists are outsiders. I think they are people who are incredibly involved in culture and the world," Mordy says.

That immersion is set to continue. The AGNSW recently acquired a work by Mathew Calandra, and Page is keen for another collaboration with Studio A.

"Their work just keeps going from strength to strength," Page says.

"I just find a lot of joy in what they do."

ever done in the entrance court. People were in awe."

Studio A's many other collaborations include Meagan Pelham's work with hip Sydney fashion label Romance Was Born, which splashes her designs on its Valentine's Day range.

Studio A artists have enjoyed mentorships by contemporary artists including Rosie Deacon, Katy Plummer and Greg Warburton.

Studio A's work has been shown at leading venues including the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia and Carriageworks in Eveleigh.

Studio A artist Skye

Saxon's vibrant pictures are on view in the inaugural exhibition at Bundanon, artist Arthur Boyd's gift to the nation on the South Coast.

You only need to stroll through Sydney's CBD to come across hoardings commissioned from Studio A by the City of Sydney. New projects in development include a mural for the Sydney office of design company Canva.

Guiding the growth in Studio A's success is its board, chaired by prominent lawyer and arts patron Shane Simpson AM, the subject of Roberts' portrait in the Archibald last year.

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