

# PICTURE *this...*

*How a local creative collective is redrawing the art world*

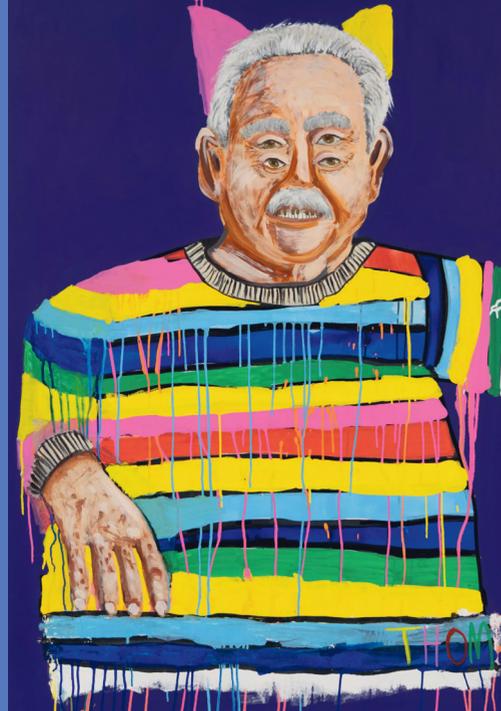
**S**t Leonards based creative collective, Studio A, is once again painting on to the national art scene with member Thom Roberts' first solo exhibition opening at the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra this April.

A vibrant showcase of Roberts' signature style, where intricate cityscapes, bold colours and larger-than-life portraits transport viewers into his dynamic mind, *The Immersive World of Thom Roberts*, contains 100 works which span his prolific, decade-long career to date. Visitors will discover a wall of emotion cards, sculptural cityscapes, a performative work of a ping pong game that examines the power dynamics of the courtroom, and a major new work that invites the audience to consider the world through the artist's eyes. Included in the show is one of Roberts' favourite works, a special portrait of his mentor and friend, lawyer Shane Simpson AM, the former Chair of Studio A, who Thom calls Adam. "He is my big brother, my friend Adam," Thom says of the >>

**"MAKING ART MAKES ME FEEL HAPPY AND PROUD AND TERRIFIC"**



Studio A artist, Thom Roberts



## LOCAL LEGENDS

Clockwise from left: Thom Roberts with Shane Simpson; 'Dinkie Duck', Thom's Sulman portrait; 'Big Bamm Bamm' Archibald portrait of Ken Done; Thom with Studio A artists at the 2024 Archibald. In the last five years, Studio A artists have been finalists in the Archibald and Sulman prizes 18 times; Studio A CEO and Creative Director, Gabrielle Mordy, with Thom.

piece, which he originally created for the 2021 Archibald Prize.

### Brushing aside barriers

Studio A was established in 2014 as a subsidiary of Studio ARTES, a not-for-profit organisation that provides creative programs for adults with disabilities. Under the leadership of CEO and Artistic Director Gabrielle Mordy, the northside studio helps talented artists with intellectual disabilities gain public recognition, secure mentorships and commercialise their work. "The biggest obstacle we have is the perception that artists with disability can only do art therapy,"

**"WE WORK TO ENSURE OUR CULTURE AND CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS INCLUDE THE VOICE OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY"**

says Gabrielle. "When people buy work from our artists, they're not making a donation - they're investing in a valuable, collectible piece."

The team also manages the artists' resumes, applies for awards and grants on their behalf and organises commissions. Over the years, their work has included large scale corporate installations and urban art projects, coffee cup artworks for Biopak, tableware for MUD Australia, fabric design for fashion label Romance Was Born and public hoardings throughout Sydney.

"We work hard to ensure our culture and cultural institutions include the voice of people with disability," Gabrielle continues.

"Making art makes me feel happy and proud and terrific," Thom adds. "I like being an artist, until I become a very old man in the future."

### Portrait of an artist

Roberts' practice is a sustained act of world building and storytelling. In his work, and in

his life, people are bestowed new identities and exist as multiple personas. Roberts himself identifies as the Country Link Express train and the Burj Khalifa tower in Dubai. His portraits don't just depict faces, they reveal identities - often layering subjects with extra eyes, noses, and his signature, piano teeth. Animals, cities, Sesame Street characters and references to fast food chains feature in his imagery, as do Roberts' personal experiences, such as managing anxiety.

His distinctive paintings have been widely exhibited, from appearing at Carriageworks, which Thom calls his "Giant Castle", where his work made up a major part of *The National: New Australian Art* in 2019, to the Archibald Prize, where his portraits have been shortlisted as finalists for four consecutive years. His most recent entry featured fellow northside artist, Ken Done, or "Big Bamm Bamm," as Thom calls him. Roberts was also a finalist in the 2024

Sulman Prize for a portrait of his friend Subita, Studio A's cleaner, known to him as "Dinkie Duck."

### The art of inclusion

As well as Studio A's ongoing commissions, a range of new design collabs and public artworks is being sketched out for 2025. An education program designed to connect primary school students with Studio A will also launch soon, providing a chance for young creatives to draw inspiration from Thom and his fellow artists.

"We are beyond proud to see Thom's talent recognised at the National Portrait Gallery," Gabrielle says. "Studio A is all about supporting artists with intellectual disability to reach their potential as creative leaders and ensuring the art world includes diverse voices," she concludes. "We exist because these artists make great art." ●

**The Immersive World of Thom Roberts runs from 12 April-20 July 2025 at the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra [studioa.org.au](http://studioa.org.au)**

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