

Artist Sam Leach seeks fair deal and a not-fair deal with mash-up of styles



Kylie Northover

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Acclaimed artist Sam Leach will unveil his new body of work at this year's Melbourne Art Fair, opening Wednesday. In an unusual move, Leach's Sydney gallery Sullivan and Strumpf will show an entire suite of Leach's work for this year's Fair - more typically a gallery will showcase one or two works of their artists.

"For me, it's the equivalent of having a normal solo gallery show," says Leach; it will serve as his first solo show in Melbourne for five years.

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Sam Leach, pictured in his Brunswick studio, supports art fairs despite reservations. Photo: Justin McManus

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The Archibald prize-winning and Wynne prize-winning artist says for

But, like many, the art fair model can be a touch contentious.

“Sometimes going to an art fair can feel a little soul-destroying; you can feel like you’re participating in what is essentially a trade fair,” he says. “But all of the curators come to these shows; collectors, people come in from overseas – it’s a huge audience. And all your peers are showing as well. So there’s a serious and legitimate side to it.”



Sam Leach draws from 17th-century to mid-20th century traditions and styles. Photo: Justin McManus

And, he concedes, usually lots of sales.

“It’s quite a buoyant environment for putting work in, which is always very pleasing when you’re trying to make a living from it!”

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The Art Fair is also incredible exposure.

“Over that four-day period, tens of thousands of people come through – that’s many, many times more than you’d get at any gallery show, and even then, unless you’re showing in one of the state institutions, it’s more than you would get going through any regional or university gallery,” says Leach.

Leach will present a number of large-scale, multi-panelled paintings that marry his familiar touchstone of 17th century painting with mid-20th century abstraction and animals and landscapes. It’s a development, he says, of the works he produced in 2012 for a commission in which he was “challenged” to create works that

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referenced the circular registration targets used by American contemporary artist Jasper Johns.

“It’s a move from there into an exploration ... I’m using elements of formalist painting from the ’60s and ’70s – Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly – and using that in conjunction with the animals and landscapes,” says Leach.

A “mash-up” of styles?

“That’s an apt description. In a way it’s all representative painting. I think of those geometric shapes as being related to the charts and graphs you find in scientific presentation or data analysis. That’s the connection for me: it’s all about how we understand and depict the world around us. You can look at it in terms of images or in terms of data then there’s this idea of a combination of the two: data visualisation.”

His new body of work also features sculpture, which is a new direction for him.

Using brass and nickel and gold-plated metal, Leach describes the sculptural work as a component of his practice.

“I’m not going to abandon painting; the objects come from the painting, it’s a two-way thing. Putting sculpture into a space is an interesting way of changing the way the viewer relates to the whole gallery,” he says. “As opposed to having the pictures up on the wall and looking at them and maybe entering an illusionistic space, there’s a thing there that is physically occupying the space that you can walk around. It changes the dynamic and that inter-relation. It’s a bit corny, but adds a different dimension. Literally!”

Leach might be one of the star names at the Fair, but he still runs his “satellite” event, NotFair, which he, fellow artist Tony Lloyd and art critic Ashley Crawford established in 2010.

Despite the name, the event was never intended as an “anti”-art fair model.

“The name does sound a little bit ‘anti’, but actually it came up because we were running the website artinfo, and ‘not fair’ is an anagram of ‘art info’. I did a bit of reviewing and profiling on the site and my involvement in NotFair is curatorial,” he says.

“Our intention was to show artists who are at a point in their career where they’re not going to be presented in that big art-fair model, and take advantage that there’s all these people around looking at art. There’s a lot of people in town specifically for the Fair – and we hope to get them to pop over and have a look at our show as well. We think it’s quite complementary.”

It’s a chance to give a “leg-up” to artists in the early stages of their career, he says.

“We get to know the practice of various artists whom other people might not see because they’re just in their studios, and it seemed like we see this great work being produced at this early stage and it’s really rewarding when you see them go on to achieve great things.”

Melbourne Art Fair, Royal Exhibition Building, August 13-17.

melbourneartfair.com.au

NotFair is at 12 Peel Street, Collingwood and the Grace Darling

Hotel, 114 Smith Street, Collingwood, August 14-17. notfair.com.au

To see a video of Sam Leach discussing his latest show, [click here](#).

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