

hart to hart

|| words jessica jane sammut

TO BE ABLE TO PAINT IS A GIFT, TO BE ABLE TO DRAW IS A GIFT, TO BE LOVED BY MANY IS A GIFT – THESE ARE TALENTS THAT CANNOT BE LEARNT, THEY EXIST OR THEY DON'T. AND THE ENIGMA OF THESE SKILLS MAKES THEM ALL THE MORE FASCINATING. AS WE APPROACH THE FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF PRO HART'S DEATH, PROFILE MAGAZINE'S JESSICA JANE SAMMUT TALKS TO DAVID HART ABOUT LIFE, SUCCESS AND HIS FAMOUS FATHER, PRO.

DAVID HART

In a game of 20 questions, if you had to guess the name of a man who used to be in the public eye, who was loved by all, who was supremely talented in the art world (yet extremely modest), and who was a real Aussie 'good bloke' through and through, many wouldn't hesitate to say this man's name ... Pro Hart (who remembers the ad "Oh Mr Hart, what a mess"?). So it is my absolute honour to attend his son's art studio in Tanawha to meet one of the chips off the old block, his son, David Hart.

What the Hart family has achieved for Australia with regard to art is a phenomenon, and the talent that seems to quietly bubble and simmer through the core of each and every Hart member is truly inspirational.

As I approach David Hart's studio, I can already feel the energy and creativity pulse, and on entering the hub of this artist's lair, I can certainly view the manifested form of these forces at work. For in front of me, covering all aspects of the studio, are pieces of intense beauty, character, style, and expression with such original uses of colour, texture and technique that one could be mistaken for thinking he or she is walking the halls of an art museum (or the halls of David Hart's galleries on the Sunshine Coast, for that matter).

And then David walks towards me, hand outstretched, his polo t-shirt and casual shorts covered in oil paint, a warm smile as wide as his easel and with the peaceful demeanour of a contented man. I admire David's art and question him about the beautiful Hart art empire. David smiles as he talks of Pro.

"Dad inspired us all," David remembers. "As a kid, Pro – whose real name is Kevin – grew up in Broken Hill with a fairly tough sheep shearing childhood. He finally ended up in the mines, operating underground loco trains and it was a hard life. But Pro was always drawing and painting. As a boy, he would illustrate his school lessons and he once drew a comic book which was passed

from station to station for everyone to enjoy. Even in the mines he would draw on the walls. He also loved to invent things – new engines, new appliances – he loved new ideas, and was very creative. Thus he was nicknamed 'The Professor'. In this way, Pro was born.

"When Dad was 34, he put some of his paintings in the local service station to exhibit them, and from that he was discovered. He was taken to Adelaide for his first exhibition and he never looked back. The rest is history."

It is true that Pro was the lucky owner of a very special talent. He loved to depict Australian landscapes, people and scenes – his passion for Australia running through each and every stroke of his brush, causing his pictures to burst with life. And in all his success, Pro never moved from Broken Hill. David and his two brothers and two sisters all grew up in the bush just like their Dad, except with a few differences ...

"I grew up in a home adorned with original Picassos and Rembrandt etchings, a steady stream of A-list celebs and politicians trickling in and out of the house, Rolls Royces covered in paint and dust, film crews around at least once a month making documentaries, the CEOs of charities appearing to thank Pro for his latest donation (Pro helped many charities and poured a lot into the town of Broken Hill), and his mates from the mines popping in for a beer!"

What a wonderfully different childhood David experienced. And interestingly, David tells me Pro did not force or coach him or any of his brothers or sisters (he has four siblings) to paint or draw. They all naturally picked it up when they wanted to. David in fact does not believe you can

PICTURED FROM TOP: HARRY HART, JACOB HART, CHLOE HART, PRO HART WITH YOUNG CHLOE



'learn' art – "you either have it or you don't", he says. "I left school at 15 and I didn't start painting until I was 17. I remember selling my first painting for \$90 and it went from there."

David married his lovely wife, Christine, at the age of 19 and went on to have his first child at 21, Jacob, and soon after, his daughter, Chloé. It was then that Christine and David moved to Brisbane to help with a Christian Youth Group while David continued to paint. And in that time they also had their third child, Harrison.

"We loved Brisbane and we were there for seven years, but then the youth group closed down we saw a great opportunity to live on the beautiful Sunshine Coast. Juniper was just developing Mooloolaba and we snatched up premises for me to finally have my own gallery. We have now been on the Coast for 10 years and have another gallery in Noosa. We love the Sunshine Coast."

And not only has David managed to follow his father into the magnificent world of artistic creation, he is also becoming a sought-after personality too, much like his famous Pa. Brands want to work with him (David has been the ambassador of BMW, has exhibited for the Sheraton Group of hotels, Porsche Australia and is currently in partnership with Maxwell & Williams having produced a designer range of homewares that is selling internationally), people want to meet him, the media wants to write about him, art-lovers want to own his art. He is a very humble man in person with not one ounce of inflated ego, and yet in my eyes he has 'made it'.

"I don't think of myself like that," David chirps up when I congratulate him on his success. "You have always got to appreciate you are very lucky. Dad never lost sight of his roots and who he was. I think success can only be measured when you have crossed the finishing line. It is all about what you leave behind and how people remember you. Everyone achieves different things at different stages in life so you can never compare like with like until the race has been run."

"When Dad passed away five years ago of motor neurone disease at 78, he was given a state funeral usually reserved for war heroes and politicians. And not only that, the state funeral was brought to Broken Hill in an unprecedented move [profile – state funerals always occur in the capital of the state]. Thousands of people attended his funeral (not to mention the film crews and media), and the streets were lined deep for 15 kilometres from the civic centre to the cemetery. I remember one little old lady standing on a street corner holding up a piece of his work as the procession went by. Pro's art was an amazing achievement, but it was what he left behind which was the success."

And I am in awe. In awe of David's words, of the love Pro generated, and of the raw talent that abounds at planet Hart. David's children, Jacob, Harry and Chloé, are already involved with the arts – Jacob, 18, a very talented musician and graphic designer; Chloé – a painter who has already sold 27 paintings at the age of 16 (with her latest three having sold within an hour of going up on the gallery website); and Harry, 11 – already a collaborator with his daddy and the star of the new Stainmaster carpet commercial (taking over from where his grandad left off).

Yes David is right, you can't 'become' artistic, you either have it or you don't. But you can certainly learn humility, kindness, patience, acceptance, determination, and thankfulness. And David Hart had the greatest teacher of all. ■

The Hart family has decided that the last of the major works by Pro Hart from the Pro Hart estate will be released for sale.

Pro Hart died in 2006 and five years later the Hart family want to create an exhibition at a time which would of been his 83rd birthday to honour him and show Australia his iconic works that have made him one of Australia's most loved and collected artists. They have saved some of the best works until last with the exhibition valuing at over \$400,000. This is an exhibition never to be repeated and not to be missed!

PRO HART EXHIBITION

28 May to 13 June

David Hart Galleries, Mooloolaba Esplanade, Mooloolaba

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