



To me he was just DAD

David Hart bares his soul each time he turns a blank canvas into a work of art, but a new biography of father Pro offers the most revealing insights yet into their relationship

Words GREGORY STANTON



The legend of Pro Hart is immortalised on canvas. The thick brush strokes embody his passion for art. Bright colours are reminiscent of his irrepressible humour.

Careful sketching illustrates Pro's perceptive eye for detail and into the everyday spectacle of Australian life. His art captures our imagination. Pro's work was never still life – the figures breathe, the trees move and the land is real.

His life was never static, either. And now, in an extraordinary and personable account of an unconventional artist and loving father, his youngest child, David, has put pen to paper to craft the biography *Dying to be heard*. It's a journey through his father's successful times and confessions, of the white-hot highlights, his undying faith, love, integrity and generosity.

The man behind the easel was never one to shy away from innovative art techniques and experimentation. At times he employed machine gun to create unusual metal patterns for sculptures. Nor was he one to refuse help to any individual, organisation or charity in doing so. Pro has become immortalised in our hearts.

"It didn't matter who you were, he was always approachable," explains David, himself an acclaimed artist who lives at Tanawha.

Born in 1926, the boy from Broken Hill never left his outback home for the grandeur of the city, preferring instead to remain bound to the Australian landscape and the characters that enrich our history and traditions.

"What was great about Dad was that he remained himself," David recalls. "He was such an Aussie ocker. Fame didn't go to his head. The guys he worked with from the mines remained his friends."

From the unique perspective of a son, David has created an emotional and inspirational story, despite his sometimes obstinate subject. Much of Pro's reflections were gleaned from late-night conversations they shared during the last few years of his life.

"Some days he would talk, but other days I had to wait around until he was ready to chat," his son recalls of his painstaking research process. "He was a very complicated man."

"Dad called me over to hold his hand and he whispered in my ear that he loved me and that he was really proud of me."

David firmly believes no one, apart from family, could have done justice to Pro's life. He has read sections of the book to mum Raylene and siblings Kevin John (known as John), Kim, Raylene Marie (known as Marie) and Julie, who have endorsed the work.

David paints a portrait of his dad as a gruff and eccentric, yet humorous, artist. Pro loved his children very much, but found it difficult to express his emotions in words.

In fact, David wrongly believed for many years his father didn't love him. It wasn't until the final year of Pro's life that he was finally able to verbalise his feelings.

"It was the night of the last exhibition of

Dad's work," David remembers. "I left the gallery in Broken Hill and went next door to the house where Dad was. He was sitting there with his best mate, Gary Rawson. Dad called me over to hold his hand and he whispered in my ear that he loved me and that he was really proud of me."

David then bursts into laughter. "And Gary was rolling his eyes, thinking I've you hearing what I'm hearing!"

Pro spent a lot of time mentoring his youngest son, cultivating a deep understanding and relationship. But there was a time when David was "going off the rails" and the father son bond was severely strained.

When David was attending high school in Broken Hill, drugs and alcohol proved an irresistible temptation. The effects on the junior Hart's schooling, friendships and, ultimately, Pro, became a major cause of conflict.

"I remember getting home one day and Dad pushed me up against the wall, slumping his finger on my chest. Don't bring Fleming drugs into this house!" The tension resulted in David moving out of the family home, but he was not forsaken by his father.

Instead, Pro offered him a job, continuing the love he felt for his troubled son. Soon enough, David rediscovered his Christian faith and noticed a lovely girl named Christine who would ultimately become his wife and mother of his three children.

Just as Pro was influenced and inspired by the great artists, David was nurtured by his father to explore and challenge the boundaries of creativity. David is adamant Pro was not a teacher in a strict sense, but rather a guide and an inspiration.



In the twilight years of his life, Pro captured on video the methods behind his painting madness to stir David's imagination and demonstrate the ways in which his artistry came alive on a blank canvas. David remains grateful for these hours of painting demonstrations pieced together like a jigsaw over several weeks. "Dad entrusted me with a lot of stuff."

Reminiscent of the phrase standing on giant's shoulders, David honed his craft from his father and other greats. "Pro was prolific, but so was Arthur Boyd and Robert Dickenson," he says.

Pro was moulded by Rembrandt, Sidney Nolan and Monet. The very first painting he bought for his collection, back in the 1960s, was a Sir William Dobell water colour, *The Lavender Seller*. But the inspiration didn't end there.

David recalls precious moments when the two of them would learn and further enrich past techniques. "When we were in Melbourne or Sydney, Dad would take me to the State Gallery and get out books on artists to study. "I didn't mind, but I preferred to be at the pinball parlour," David grins. However, he mellowed now that, with the gift of hindsight, he can appreciate the fatherly advice: "Otherwise, it can be just gone in a flash."

Do you REALLY want to be WEALTHY? We'll show you how!

More than 80% of people say they would like to be financially independent but 90% of people fail to achieve even modest wealth! If you want to be in the 10% who achieve wealth don't miss our free "Pathway to Wealth" Seminar.

You will learn:

- The 7 steps to achieving wealth • The 4 keys to a successful wealth management plan
- Why property, shares and superannuation are all important
- How saving for can help fund your wealth creation

You should attend only if:

- You are a homeowner who has built up some equity, but not quite sure what to do next
- You are yet to accumulate \$300,000 of net assets (not counting your home)
- You have the potential to save more than \$100 a week
- You are between 28 and 55, or you have more than 10 years until you will retire

Phone 5430 5400, email your contact details to: info@holmans.com.au or book online at www.holmans.com.au/events3.html

Seats are limited - BOOK NOW • Tuesday October 23 - Roosa • Tuesday November 20 - Marpothydore Sessions 5.30pm for 6.00pm

SLEEP CITY up to 40% Off!

We make the beds so you'll make the savings

24 Months Interest Free! Low, Low Weekly Prices. **Package Sale!**

Madison Queen Bed + Slats; 2 X Bedside Cabinets; Tallboy ~~Was \$2247~~ **Now \$1345** Save 40%

\$12.93/week

Kawana Waters Home Central Kawana Ph 5437 8622

coverstory



These days, Pro's children and even grandchildren continue the family's artistic traditions. David's children, Jake, Chloe and Harrison Pro, spend time in their father's studios. "They stick to little canvasses," he explains.

The studio of David's hinterland home is a large cavernous space, ideal for the creation of grand works of art. Along one wall are large shelves containing numerous blank canvasses in an array of sizes. A guitar is propped up in one corner of the room. In another squats a paint-smeared desk swollen with history books and acoustic CDs.

The books come in handy because, just like his father, David is enamoured with the history of Australia. He is currently reconstructing the moments of the First Fleet's arrival in a painting series.

As we talk, David perches atop a silver step-ladder, gesturing widely and passionately. It's a move that emphasises the family's willingness to accommodate any visitor - I am given the comfortable desk chair.

There is also a moment in which David has to rush off to the house to change his paint-speckled T-shirt. Despite entreaties not to go, as it is raining, David is resolute to weather the storm under an enormous canvas - a valuable item which could have been used later for another of his successful paintings.

For David, to have his father's story told is important. However, he stresses it is not

another case of shameless promotion - an accusation once levelled against Pro.

"He never went looking for fame," David points out. "It was kind of a contradiction that fame found him, even though he didn't want it. The galleries said he was a self-promoter. But Dad always said 'Art is for the people'. The only thing he was interested in was expressing himself on canvas."

Indeed, the infamous advertisements where he used carpet as his canvas are embedded in the national psyche. David reveals the irony in the situation: Pro never wanted to do the ads. He hated acting. "Let me paint and I'll be myself," he laughs as he quotes his father. Indeed, it is poignant that David writes in the biography:

Dad was so passionate about painting that he would paint any chance he could and he never got bored or tired of doing it, even after 70 years. As a kid I remember Mum and Dad would get up at around 9am, have breakfast with each other and then Dad would start painting about 10am. Around 1pm he would head out of his studio and go inside the house for lunch, which was always a piece of toast covered in four cloves of garlic and melted cheese, and washed down with a cup of weak black tea and no sugar. After lunch and a bit of a chat with whatever visitors happened to be in the house at that time, he would go back to his studio and paint 'til around 4pm. He would then do a spot

of weightlifting in his private gym 'til 5pm and from there he would grab himself a handful of cashew nuts and another cup of tea and head into one of his many sheds. Here he would work on some of his inventions 'til about 6.30pm, then he would come back up to the house for dinner and watch the news and relax 'til 8pm. Then it was back to the studio until 11pm. After that he would grab another cup of tea and a magazine or book and relax in front of the television with Mum until 1am. As regular as clockwork, unless he was interrupted by having to go away or had meetings and other appointments. He did this day in and day out for as long as I can remember. Most people wouldn't want a lifestyle like that if they had the choice because it all seems like work, work, work. But for Dad it was his passion, it was all he wanted to do, and God help any one who tried to stop him.

Often, though, visitors, media or other distractions would get in the way, much to Pro's unending chagrin.

"Dad created a lot of his own chaos," David grins. Much of it arrived in the last few years of Pro's life. The 'art mafia' - a quip he created to describe ruthless art dealers and academics - hounded him all his life while tales of controversy involving betrayal, fraud, corruption and missing money abounded in the media and in whispers.

However, despite the stress and heartache they caused, David is now relaxed.

"The great thing about all the problems was the family got really close together," David recalls. "Crap happens in life and most people don't deserve it. But always remember 'Don't faint when you see wicked people flourish'. Their season comes about."

It is a fine achievement to document the life of one of Australia's iconic painters.

In a very humble style, the biography does not focus solely on Pro's art. Instead, David holds hopes the book will prove an inspiration for others.

"The good thing about this book is it's a book about Dad's life," David enthuses. "His was an incredible and inspirational story.

"I'm hoping that people will read it and think 'I'm not an accident and I have something tremendous inside of me.'"

This is the greatest gift Pro gave his children. "The most pivotal thing I've learnt from Dad is that everyone has greatness inside them and that recognising that is the challenge. But then you have to learn how to use it to benefit others."

The world will remember Pro as a great artist. So I am truly honoured when David shows me the last drawing he attempted: a colourful dragonfly drawn crudely by hands withered by debilitating motor neurone disease.

David recalls quietly the pain and shock that surfaced on Pro's face when looking at his rudimentary efforts. The awful realisation dawned that the talent that had once been as



A young and angelic-looking David Hart ready to create art in his father's Broken Hill studio

natural as breathing was no more.

It doesn't matter to David the drawing will never grace the walls of an art gallery. What does matter is that it was drawn by his father, Kevin Charles Hart.

The launch of *Dying to be Heard* is October 27-28 at David Hart Galleries in Noosa and Mooloolaba, where David will attend signing sessions. An exhibition of Pro's work will also run until November 4. Full details: 5476 7243 or www.davidhartgalleries.com.au