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In his ivory tower: (above) with his chaotic collection of some 20,000 reference books, John McDonald's writing studio is as eclectic as any artist's space.

the ridiculous John Nixon. I wrote a scathing review of him once, when he was doing brown monochromes – before he moved to orange rollers – and got a dead cockroach and a manifesto in the mail, addressed to 'The Blind Man of Art'.

"Several people on the famous petition told me they'd been dragooned onto it; and others – who must be shameless or cretinous – wrote me letters saying they were excited about my appointment and were applying for jobs!"

In defence of his credentials, McDonald claims: "I'd only written more about Australian art than anyone else in the country for the previous two decades. True, I only had a bare BA. I used to think it was a drawback not having a fine arts degree, till I met people who had them, and taught them, then I was glad I didn't." Robert Hughes, arguably the world's pre-eminent critic, was a drop-out architecture student, he adds.

McDonald was in the gallery job for three weeks before he realised, "Kennedy was not the man he purported to be. I was hired by Dr Jekyll, but working for Mr Hyde. Kennedy wanted 327 meetings a day, and had a mania for paper-

work. I was to mount a big Australian art show,

Federation, a three-year project with one year to do it, meanwhile shocking amounts of time and money were wasted in mindless bureaucratic nonsense."

McDonald finished *Federation*, which was well received as it toured the country in the celebratory Olympic year. After 15 months in the job, he quit to lick his wounds, on his own, as his marriage had also collapsed.

He began writing again for various catalogues, magazines, papers, ran the New Contemporaries Gallery in Sydney's Queen Victoria Building for two years. He returned to the *SMH* in 2005. "What you need to be a critic is a lot of persistence and bloody-mindedness, and a real love of art," he says.

To those who feel McDonald is dismissive towards avant-garde and alternative art, he replies: "That's nonsense. I'm always interested in everything of integrity. My criterion is not whether something is contemporary or avant-garde, but whether it's good or not. What's sad is that so much so-called avant-garde art is shallow, crappy stuff you've seen a thousand times before, that's making the most obvious and tedious political points, and some people want to claim it's a big deal."

It doesn't worry him that people hate him, though he thinks he's become less combative as he grows older. "If I were to be easily hurt, I'd be a basket case," he observes. "One reason there aren't more art critics of quality is that people are made socially uncomfortable by the job. Writing reviews week after week, you are going to put a lot of noses out of joint."

McDonald gets about 80 gallery invitations each week. He's selective about what he reviews, and will pass on a message to a young artist if he thinks their work is good but can't fit in a review. If a show is bad, he'll often avoid reviewing it, rather than damn it.

As for the power of a critic, "it's an overrated notion", says McDonald. "I'm told a good review increases attendances by one-third. But whether those people buy or not is another thing. If they don't feel passionate about they won't buy it." **GW**

Painters on the Nature of Creativity, by John McDonald and R. Ian Lloyd, and Productions and distributed by Tower Books; rrp \$80.

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