

Instagram is bringing the studio to you

Artists and gallery directors are embracing the power of social media

ASHLEIGH WILSON
ARTS EDITOR

On October 20, Michael Zavros posted a photo on Instagram, just as he does every couple of days. It showed a hand, presumably his hand, putting the final touches on a painting of a Greek column in his customary hyper-real style. Four days later, he posted another photo. In this one, the Brisbane artist is standing with his back to the camera, facing the painting and making changes. It's the same picture in both photos, but the image has been zoomed out in the second to show the column framed against a series of black horizontal lines.

There was a point to all of this. In both posts, Zavros said the painting was destined for a new exhibition opening soon in New Zealand. Each post was liked more than 2000 times. "My artist account is really simple," Zavros tells *The Australian*. "I just post an image of what I'm working on, and then a little bit of process. People seem to enjoy process. I think that's the thing about social media, good or bad. It's about letting people into your studio."

It's simple enough, but Zavros must be doing something right. On Instagram, the photo-sharing application bought five years ago by Facebook, he boasts more than 100,000 followers, considerably more than any other fine artist in Australia. It's also 20,000 more than the number of people who follow Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art, 80,000 more than the Art Gallery of South Australia, more than double the number for Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, and four times the number who follow this newspaper on Instagram.

It's an impressive reach. And while Zavros is still a long way from the pop music world (Beyonce, for instance, has more than 100 million followers), no other

artist in Australia comes close. British artist Damien Hirst, meanwhile, has a global profile but only 300,000 followers. There must be millions of social media posts that feature the work of Anish Kapoor, but the artist himself manages only 41,000 followers.

So is Zavros Australia's most popular artist? It depends, of course, on how much weight we put on social media. But one thing is certain: more artists are starting to incorporate the business of Instagram into their broader practice. Even the directors of major galleries have got in on the act.

'In the old days the only access to an artist's working background was in the press'

LUKE SCIBERRAS
ARTIST

Zavros, a painter with a keen interest in luxury goods, sees parallels with the fashion industry. But fashion insiders, he says, have been quicker to embrace the possibilities of social media than their counterparts in the visual arts. He has a theory, saying the fashion industry is more comfortable advancing commercial interests than artists. Whatever the reason, artists are quickly catching up.

"I think the art world is very slow to pick up on social media generally, but now it has become a very important tool," Zavros says. "People feel invested in something they're following, whether it's a museum, seeing the back room or the installation or the way a painting is developing."

It doesn't hurt that artists are posting images of, well, art. Many of the nation's most prominent

artists on Instagram regularly share photos featuring work at various levels of completion, as well as sketches or ideas that may never see a gallery wall. Their followers are also taken behind the scenes to paint-splattered studios and moments of inspiration outdoors. And since artists have a flair for the visual, these posts stand out in a social media universe of selfies and cats and plates of food. In other words, artists are well suited to Instagram, and vice versa.

The big picture is clear, too. No longer are artists reliant on galleries alone to promote their work. Instagram is an active extension of their brand, one that allows them to communicate directly with admirers in whatever way they like. And if they want to retain some kind of personal life, then they can always set up a private account, as Zavros and others have done.

Luke Sciberras, a painter based in Hill End, near Bathurst in the NSW central tablelands, fills his account with images of artworks and scenes from his world. He has almost 12,000 followers, more than most of his peers. "The thing about Instagram in relation to an artist's work in the studio," he says, "is that you can gauge the evolution of your own work through the eyes of other people in that they have intimate access (as much as one allows) to your studio, works in progress, road trips, the source of the material you're observing, and all the processes in capsule form."

"In the old days the only access the public had to an artist's working background was in the press, filtered and often tinted by the journalist, or at a noisy opening if you got a glimpse of the artist among the wine-soakers and hand-shakers. Now we can be invited into a realm of observation and acquire a deeper understanding of the meaning behind the artists' finished products. The preliminary works, travels, studio moments, triumphs and even portals into an artist's private life flesh out a very colourful and most often favourable picture of what makes them tick."

Sciberras says the image-based



Selections from the Instagram accounts of Australian artists and gallery directors, clockwise from top left, Michael Zavros, Luke Sciberras, Ben Quilty, Michael Brand, Alexie Glass-Kantor, Bill Henson, Tim Olsen, Nick Mitzevich and, centre, Elizabeth Ann Macgregor

nature of Instagram and the positive spirit of followers mean artists can approach broad audiences "with a sense of trust and bonhomie". It also offers some kind of respite from the "aggression and political rancour" seen elsewhere in the media. "It is heartening to see crucibles of creativity, a sense of real productiveness as it happens," he says. "Artists expressing their thoughts and ideas from grand statements to the most whimsical gestures seem to really touch people and they appreciate being able to see all that in a very direct way, like postcards sent personally from the studio."

It's a similar business for gallery directors. In Australia, the leading institutional figures on social media include MCA director Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, Art Gallery of NSW's Michael Brand, Art

space's Alexie Glass-Kantor and Art Gallery of South Australia's Nick Mitzevich. Tony Ellwood runs the nation's most visited museum, the National Gallery of Victoria, but keeps only a private account. (That said, the NGV has 164,000 followers, the most of any Australian gallery.) Some gallery executives are careful to steer clear of any perceived hazards, albeit will hesitate to like a photo from an artist, for example, if that implied institutional endorsement.

As a general rule, more people follow the accounts of galleries than directors. Brand has 5507 followers compared with 118,000 for the AGNSW, while Macgregor has 10,500 compared with the 81,800 who follow the MCA. It's a similar story overseas, albeit with bigger numbers: 3.3 million people follow New York's Museum of

Modern Art, 2.2 million follow the Met, 1.9 million follow the Tate, 1.4 million follow the Louvre and so on. One exception to the gallery-director ratio is Hans Ulrich Obrist, who boasts 205,000 followers, 4000 more than the Serpentine Galleries, where he is artistic director, while Klaus Biesenbach, with 247,000 followers, is not far behind the 460,000 that follow his gallery, the MoMA PSI.

In Adelaide, Mitzevich says he applies the same rigour on Instagram as he does to "real-time interactions". He uses the platform to connect to a more flexible and agile audience, saying many of his followers don't read newspapers. His posts are all about art and the operations of the gallery he runs. (Happy snaps from the beach are reserved for a private account.)

"It's an extension of my insti-

tutional role," he says. "It's important that people have an insight into how I see art. And I think that brings people closer to the institutions themselves. I do it because I want to bring people closer to how we do business and the things that are important to the institution. We have an institutional account but I see my role as enhancing it and working to nurture a greater sense of intimacy."

Many of the high-profile artists who steer clear of Instagram, at least in public, come from an older generation. John Olsen seems to be absent (though his son, gallerist Tim, is there), as does Tim Storrier (though he's represented by a gallery with a solid following). Sydney artist Del Kathryn Barton is younger than Olsen and Storrier but she appears content to let her art do the talking as well.

PROMINENT ARTIST ACCOUNTS, AUSTRALIA

Followers *	
Michael Zavros	100,000
Anthony Lister	61,500
Ben Quilty	30,700
Luke Sciberras	11,800
Guy Maestri	9845
Abdul Abdullah	8923
Bill Henson	2700

PROMINENT DIRECTOR ACCOUNTS, AUSTRALIA

Alexie Glass-Kantor	12,100
Elizabeth Ann Macgregor ..	10,500
Nick Mitzevich	8450
Michael Brand	5512
Tim Olsen	5161
Angus Trumble	713

PROMINENT ARTIST ACCOUNTS, INTERNATIONAL

Banksy	1.9 million
Shepard Fairey	1 million
Ai Weiwei	373,000
Damien Hirst	301,000
Jeff Koons	285,000
Cindy Sherman	157,000
Anish Kapoor	41,800

PROMINENT DIRECTOR ACCOUNTS, INTERNATIONAL

Klaus Biesenbach, MoMA PSI	247,000
Hans Ulrich Obrist, Serpentine	205,000
Nancy Spector, Guggenheim	119,000
Thomas P. Campbell	39,200

* numbers correct as of 4pm yesterday

When Bill Henson turned up on Instagram a few months ago, some of his admirers might have looked twice to make sure it was really him. He's a photographer, sure, but social media is known for its speed and transience, not the kind of qualities that ordinarily apply to Henson's work. Yet there it is, an official account with photo after photo, complete with hashtags and geotags.

Henson is unique for another reason: his account is handled by an assistant. (This helps to explain the number of Instagram accounts he follows: zero). Henson says he's certainly no Luddite, that he loves technology. But social media is another question.

"I don't have the time to engage in Snapchat, Instagram, Vine, Twitter etc," he says. "There are too many books I want to read, too much music I want to listen to (not recreationally) and too much art I want to look at and, of course, I'm mostly preoccupied with my own stuff."

He continues: "But we all have choices and I'd rather get up in the morning and listen to Michelangelo playing Debussy than *Sunrise*, shock jocks (talking) about what's happening on the roads or who's had a bad coffee."

"This is where social media can make off with all your personal space. Michelangelo's the healthier option."

YOUR NATIONAL CULTURE GUIDE



NEW RELEASES

Call Me By Your Name (M)
Call Me By Your Name is an Italian film made in English and it's the latest to come from Luca Guadagnino. Based on a 2007 novel by Andre Aciman, the film takes place in the summer of 1983 in a small town in Lombardy in the north of Italy. In a cool, gracious villa on the edge of town, archaeologist Professor Perlman (Michael Stuhlbarg) is deeply engaged in his research work as his French wife, Annella (Amira Casar), and their 17-year-old son, Elio (Timothee Chalamet), while away the lazy days. Every summer the professor invites a promising doctoral student to assist him in his research and this summer that role has fallen to an American named Oliver (Armie Hammer). Oliver is given a bedroom next to the room in which Elio sleeps and they share a bathroom. Gradually, Elio draws closer to Oliver, though the American at first pushes him away — realising, no doubt, that the youth is vulnerable and impressionable. But as one hot summer day follows another, the friendship between the

American and the Italian youth grows visibly more intimate. Guadagnino's film was adapted for the screen by James Ivory, who was always attracted to this kind of story in which love and passion simmer just beneath an elegantly depicted surface. You may need a little patience because Guadagnino is in no hurry to tell the story. He's more interested in assembling a wealth of small details and incidents that very gradually evolve into something deep and profound.

DAVID STRATTON ★★★★★

Paddington 2 (G)
One of the pleasures of children's films is seeing well-known actors strut their stuff for younger viewers. The cast of *Paddington 2* includes Julie Walters, Hugh Grant, Hugh Bonneville, Jim Broadbent, Joanna Lumley, Tom Conti and Ben Whishaw as the voice of the Peruvian bear living in London. That's a passenger list that rivals the one in Kenneth Branagh's *Murder on the Orient Express* and, as it happens, the rollicking climax to this sweet-hearted movie takes place on trains. Every one of these actors can steal a scene at will, but I've saved the best for last: Brendan Gleeson as Knuckles, a safecracker who has become a tough, touchy prison cook. We meet Knuckles because Paddington is doing porridge for a crime he did not commit: the theft of an antique pop-up book he was saving up to buy his aunt for her 100th birthday. The scenes in which the gentle, honest Paddington reforms the prison are terrific. Australia's Noah Taylor pops up as an inmate. The bandit was in fact Phoenix Buchanan (a spot-on Grant), a West End actor who has been reduced to making dog-f commercial. A cutaway to



Call Me By Your Name starring, from left, Michael Stuhlbarg, Timothee Chalamet and Armie Hammer

one of the ads on television is hilarious. All of this happens early on. We then go into the main story: Paddington, his London family and their neighbours trying to prove his innocence and discover the identity of the real culprit. Director Paul King, who made *Paddington* in 2014, returns to deliver a wonderful film for the young and the young-at-heart. Paddington's rarest quality is his ability to look for the good in everyone. That's a way of thinking we all could take on board.

STEPHEN ROMELI ★★★★★

NSW

MUSIC

The National
The National (pictured, left) is bringing its brooding

ACT

STAGE

The Gruffalo
The Gruffalo comes to Canberra as a new musical production based on Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler's award-winning picture book of the same name. Journey through the dark and

menacing woods with Mouse, who meets a variety of hungry woodland animals. Will the fabled story of the Gruffalo save Mouse from ending up as the creatures' dinner?
Canberra Theatre Centre, Civic Square, London Circuit, January 26, 11am and 1.30pm; January 27, 11am. Tickets: \$29-\$39. Bookings: (02) 6275 2700 or online.

QUEENSLAND

THEATRE

Fleabag
Following the BAFTA award-winning BBC series, DryWrite and Soho Theatre present their stage adaptation of Phoebe Waller-Bridge's cult hit, *Fleabag*. Maddie Rice stars as the woman attempting to traverse a tense family life and friendships, combined with a cafe about to go

under, while navigating through her own maze of social anxiety, terrible job interviews and meaningless sex.
Brisbane Powerhouse, 119 Lamington Street, New Farm. Tickets: \$45. Bookings: 132 849. February 8-10.

VICTORIA

MUSICAL

Dream Lover: The Bobby Darin Musical
Journey through the glamorous and passionate era of Las Vegas big bands and the golden age of Hollywood in *Dream Lover: The Bobby Darin Musical*. *Dream Lover* follows the story of singer-songwriter and actor Bobby Darin, played by David Campbell, with Hannah Frederickson as Sandra Dee. The performance features hits from the 1950s and 60s including

Mack the Knife, *Beyond the Sea* and *Dream Lover*.
Arts Centre Melbourne, State Theatre, 100 St Kilda Road. Tonight, 1pm and 7.30pm. Tickets: \$69.90-\$139.90. Bookings: 1300 182 183 or online. Until February 18.

TASMANIA

THEATRE

I Am a Lake
Set on Tasmania's rugged west coast, *I Am a Lake* is a coming-of-age story exploring the inextricably linked lives of Alice, Mum and Nugget. Alice is an inquisitive young girl attempting to determine what her family's deeply entrenched secret is — something that haunts her nights and threatens to quash her dreams. Presented by Mudlark Theatre.
Theatre Royal, 28 Campbell Street, Hobart. Tickets: \$39. Bookings: (03) 6233 2299 or online. March 16 and 17.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

MUSIC

Francois & the Atlas Mountains
French-British pop group Francois & the Atlas Mountains, who combine traditional French melodies, African rhythm and indie-pop quirk, come to Dunstan Playhouse as part of Adelaide's inaugural French Festival, So Frenchy So Chic.
Adelaide Festival Centre, Dunstan Playhouse, Festival Drive, January 13, 8pm. Tickets: \$50. Bookings: 131 246.

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

THEATRE

The Wind in the Underground
The Wind in the Underground is inspired by playwright Sam O'Sullivan's journeys, family experiences and the houses he remembers growing up in Perth's eastern hills. The production follows four siblings as they



return to their roots but faced with the decision of whether to sell their father's house, their old home. Childhood dynamics and memories re-emerge, while the complexities of family bonds are exposed and examined. *The Wind in the Underground* is directed by New Ghosts Theatre Company artistic director Lucy Clements and stars Michael Abercromby, Rowan Davie (pictured, above), Whitney Richards and Bishanyia Vincent.
State Theatre Centre of Western Australia, 174-176 William Street, Perth. Tickets: \$29. Bookings: (08) 9292 9292 or online. January 27-February 3.

NORTHERN TERRITORY

EXHIBITION

A Ticket to Paradise?
This exhibition depicts the lives of 20th-century immigrants to Australia, through archival film footage, audio recordings and photographs.
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, 19 Conacher Street, Darwin. Inquiries: (08) 8999 8264. Until Feb. 4.

Edited by Sofia Gronbeck Wright
Full reviews of new films will appear in *The Weekend Australian* on Saturday

Send event information to listsings@theaustralian.com.au

