

# My art belongs to 1880

**E**NTER Barry Otto's old Sydney house through the curlicue gate and the heavy front door and you can't help noticing the drawings of actress Sarah Bernhardt hanging in the hallway. Hardly surprising. After all, Otto is an actor.

But these drawings, so delicate and accomplished, were actually done by Otto himself.

For the vast bulk of Otto's public, it probably comes as a surprise to learn that the man who starred in legendary Australian films such as *Strictly Ballroom* and *Bliss* as well as countless theatrical productions was an artist even before he was an actor.

Otto has been at home with a pencil or brush in his hand since he was a child. Now, at 70, he is often in his studio — the wood-panelled former coach-house at the rear of his home.

He is working towards his next exhibition, which opens on May 14 in Camperdown, and the paintings have migrated out of the studio and into the house, where they are stacked against the living and dining room walls, in the hall and even in the sunroom where Otto's paints lie about on the rugs near the cat's bowl.

It is, he admits, a bit of a nuisance having the house like this. He says his wife, Sue Hill, is looking forward to regaining ownership of some of her domestic space once the paintings are finished and shipped off to the Artsite gallery.

Except for some whimsical paintings of Cassie, the family cat, Otto's paintings are strongly influenced by the Pre-Raphaelite school of artists which emerged in



**Prolific:**  
Barry Otto  
and two of  
his pieces  
for the  
exhibition  
Main  
picture:  
John  
Fotiadis

England in the mid-1800s and whose leading lights included Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais, Edward Coley Burne-Jones and Frederic Leighton.

When Otto and Hill bought the rambling home 20 years ago, Otto took it as a good omen that the house was named Leighton, probably his favourite of the Pre-Raphaelites.

"I belong from around about 1880. That's my period," he says.

Otto and Hill share the home

with their adult children, the actress Gracie Otto and her older brother Eddie, a school teacher and talented sportsman.

Otto's elder daughter Miranda, from his first marriage, lives across town with actor husband Peter O'Brien and their six-year-old daughter Darcey.

Otto once painted Miranda for an Archibald Prize entry.

The Pre-Raphaelites were heavily influenced by the classical ideal as expressed by the ancient

Greeks and Romans. Their paintings were full of beautiful young things in flowing robes, their mouths fixed in a kind of serious pout, their brows seeming to pose an eternal question.

A self-confessed lover of beauty for its own sake, Otto is enraptured by the Pre-Raphaelites, claiming just as big a passion for them as that of friend John Schaeffer, whose world-class collection was shown at the Art Gallery of NSW last year in an exhibition titled *Victorian Visions*.

Otto also reveres Leonardo, Titian and Caravaggio. Some of the paintings in his forthcoming exhibition, *A Romantic Obsession*, are Otto's interpretations of work by some of these masters. Most, however, are Otto's original compositions.

How does a busy actor manage to paint so prolifically?

"When you do a play, your evenings are spent learning the text," he says. "You need six weeks of preparation for that, then when it opens you're free, only working at night and a matinee on Saturday. So that's my working time."

Otto exhibits his work every five years or so. Does he see himself as an actor or an artist?

"My career is in acting, but I'm a professional artist," he says.

After saying goodbye, he disappears through the curlicue gate, heading for the coach-house to finish those final paintings.

**Barry Otto: A Romantic Obsession; Artsite Gallery, 2-6 Probert St, Camperdown; May 14 to June 5, 8095 9678, [www.artsite.com.au](http://www.artsite.com.au)**