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ART

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## PORTRAITS OF POWER

Ralph Heimans, an Australian artist known for his high society paintings, recently moved to London for the job of a lifetime – a sitting with the Queen. By Lucy Davies

**B**ehind closed doors on a quiet residential street in Herne Hill, south London, the Australian artist Ralph Heimans is hard at work. On the morning I visit it's close to 30 degrees outside, the birds chirruping, the sky cerulean blue, but I'm not sure Heimans has noticed. He emerges smiling but distinctly wan, eyes ringed bruise-grey. With his dark clothes, thick eyebrows and black curls, he's the picture of a Byronic artist, but without the temper to match. In a gentle Antipodean lilt, he offers me coffee – he's having another, he insists – before we discuss the elephant in the room.

At 2.5m high by 3.5m wide, propped on an easel, the canvas grazes the ceiling. I can only see its perfectly taut, oatmeal back, and purposely so. The other, more colourful, side is strictly under wraps. It will only emerge once the work has made a long journey by plane to Canberra for its grand unveiling, on October 5.

Heimans, 42, was at Windsor station when he got the call saying he'd won the Diamond Jubilee commission to paint the Queen. "I was overjoyed," he says, "but I instantly switched gears. It was more a case of picking up a pencil than a beer." He had arrived in London just a few days before – he and his wife and two children under two hadn't yet found a home, but he'd had an inkling the job was his: "I'd had an email: 'Would Mr Heimans be available in

Portrait by Lydia Goldblatt



March?" and it was late February, so I thought this is encouraging, better get over." He suited up for his appointment at the Palace – "one of the only times I've worn a tie in my life" – and arrived to tea and cucumber sandwiches in the Yellow Drawing Room, where the Queen always poses. He had asked for specific robes, but was told the time required to don them might preclude it. None the less, she arrived wearing them. "At first it was this tiny speck approaching along a corridor with lights streaming through the windows. Every time she came closer, the light would shine on her and her entourage. She was wearing Queen Victoria's jewels, and just shimmering. It was jaw-dropping. I was very nervous."

Heimans had been fully briefed: "After all," he says, referring to former prime minister Paul Keating's hands-on faux pas in 1992, and current PM Julia Gillard's failure to curtsy last year. "Australians have had track records!... If she offers her hand you shake it, otherwise you don't offer yours, and I had to walk in front to lead her into the room. I'd been told to say 'may I take control now ma'am' when I wanted to direct her, but I couldn't bring myself to say it, I couldn't tell the monarch I wanted to 'take control'."

With only one hour, he took photographs rather than sketched. "I described to her the reflective mood I wanted the painting to convey; I wanted her to have it in her mind, so it was visible on her face. She was a fantastic sitter, she knew what I wanted, and she's actually very beautiful to

paint – I hadn't expected that." As a setting, Buckingham Palace didn't appeal. "I felt [it] was limited in terms of telling real stories. I had three locations in mind, but the one I really wished for came through." He won't be drawn on which, save to say it's "an obvious choice, very fitting. It's laden with extraordinary power – there isn't a place more beautiful in this country."

Heimans, who has a portfolio of paintings reaching back nearly 25 years, is renowned for portraits that integrate subject and context. When he painted Princess Mary of Denmark in 2005, he set her in the Garden Room of the Frederiksberg Palace rather than the formal state rooms, and included a nod to her home town of Hobart, Australia, in the form of a painting of its city hall reflected in the mirror.

He grew up in Cremorne and Mosman, middle-class suburbs on Sydney's North Shore. "Even as a child I had a confidence in myself artistically," he says. It took his parents time to come around. "As soon as they saw I could earn a living they felt slightly reassured." By the late Nineties, he had established himself as one of Australia's foremost young portraitists. Several of his works from this period, when he was only in his twenties, now hang in the National Portrait Gallery of Australia.

Since then, commissions have included Dame Elisabeth Murdoch, former Australian prime minister Paul Keating, an

1 Radical Restraint: Portrait of Justice Michael Kirby, 2002 2 Paula, 2006 3 The Badminton Club, 2003 4 The Boyers, 2009 5 Crown Princess Mary of Denmark, 2005

English QC, even the French rugby team. He is also a favourite with bankers in New York and London.

Last year he painted the legendary Russian conductor Vladimir Ashkenazy at Sydney Opera House. The portrait was lauded internationally for its unusual perspective, where Ashkenazy is positioned amongst a riot of architectural detail. It's a clever piece, a sort of visual fugue, held together by light, reflection and geometry.

When I visit, Heimans is weeks from his Royal deadline, and feeling the pressure. His portraits usually take 12 months; this must be completed in six.

He works 10 hours a day, every day. "You can't do it in little chunks. If you're writing an email here and picking up the phone there, you're screwed." He listens to classical music "the romantics, a lot of chamber music". Recently, he's developed a taste for lectures on the kings and queens of England – "all that history is feeding into the painting".

Meanwhile, the commissions are rolling in: "A couple in Australia, one for a medical research team, a series of private commissions for Hong Kong, and a UK-based family, very high profile." He looks so tired that I ask him if the painting is keeping him awake at night. It is. As are his two small babies. "I think I'll follow the painting to Australia when it goes," he says. "I'll have a break there. That's one of the things I look forward to – the simple pleasure of lying on a beach."

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