



Alister Simpson's paintings are almost as famous as the horses in them and, on the eve of his new book, Jessica Owers spent an afternoon with the artist to discover the man behind the canvas.



BRUSH WITH FAME

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CERTAIN ENGLISH PRIME minister once said that something about the outside of a horse is good for the inside of a man, and Alister Simpson would know all about that. This unassuming, gentleman of a man is an equine artist, but he's a little bit extraordinary. There is something about him that is good for the outside of a horse.

On a blustery Monday afternoon I went to meet him at his studio in Sydney's pretty, picket-fenced suburb of Mosman, and I just missed a portrait of Phelan Ready. "What a shame you couldn't have seen that one," Alister says to me. "We've just presented it to the STC," he adds.

By 'we' Alister means he and his wife, fellow artist Mary Simpson, and the painting was the 2009 commission of the Golden Slipper winner. Last

weekend it joined 37 of Simpson's other paintings on display at the Sydney Turf Club (STC) and this weekend, for the running of the Golden Rose, he has been invited back to Rosehill to sketch a horse in five mighty minutes. He and Mary banter over the composition.

Alister Simpson has been the commissioned painter for the STC since 1987, the year that Marauding won the Slipper by a nose. Since then he has painted Bint Marscay, Flying Spur, Miss Finland, Sebring and the 17 others to claim the famous shoe. But these alone don't measure the artist's sway. Since 1983 he has painted the Derby winner for the Australian Jockey Club (AJC), a prize that is presented to the winning connections six months down the line, and has nine-times painted the Victoria Racing Club Australia's Champion Racehorse. He has sweated over commissions for Sheikh Rashid Bin

Hamdan Al-Nayan and the late Queen Mother, shared space with Bonecrusher, Sunline and Saintly, and his work hangs on walls from London to Turkey and places not so in-between. But hovering over his studio floor in Mosman, shuffling sketches that could be as priceless as de Vinci drafts one day, Alister motions towards brushstrokes that define his work.

"The personality of the horse is very important to me," he says, "which is why I always start with the eye. I try to keep my paintings realistic and not photographic, because there is a difference. Photographic styles tend to go overboard with anatomy and while anatomy is important, it's equally important to bring out the characteristics of the horse."

The Alister Simpson painting can vary from light watercolour to bold-brass oil. It can move from the yard to the



THE BOOK SPILLS WITH ARRESTING ILLUSTRATIONS, DELICATE WATERCOLOUR SCENES FROM THE RACETRACK AND SOLID OILSCAPES, NOT ONE OF THEM LIKE THE ONE BEFORE IT.

left Alister and Mary Simpson with the 1958 Auckland Cup trophy won by Yeman, with Alister's early morning portrayal of Randwick trackwork on the wall behind them

right Alister leafs through the first copy of his new book *Brush With Horses*.

JESSICA OWERS

backstretch to the winning post, jockey up or jockey off, classic repose or heaving, heart-wrenching racing. “People hardly realize how much work goes into them,” Mary says, and I take her word for it. When the Slipper and Derby winners draw rein not even two and some minutes after starting, her husband’s months of work are just beginning.

The two artists live and work closely and their affection is soul deep and charming, and together Alister’s work has taken them around the world. But it’s not all in his talented hands. “My father owned Yeman,” Mary quips, “the Auckland Cup and Cox Plate winner of 1958.” Alister promptly collects the little Auckland trophy for me and I photograph them with it. Behind them, Mary’s favourite painting shares the fame.

But as the season rolls towards Spring Carnival, Alister Simpson prepares for his own busy schedule. This year sees the launch of his book *A Brush With Horses*, a magnificent hardcover collection of his finest paintings, and leafing through the very first copy – express posted to Mosman from the printers – Alister is in love with his work on the page. The book spills with arresting illustrations, delicate watercolour scenes from the racetrack and solid oilscapes, not one of them like the one before it. And suddenly I realize, as he turns each life like he’s compiling it all over again, that Alister’s gracious, unassuming character is exactly what horses are drawn to. This, more than extraordinary talent, may be why his work is so good.

“The publishers came around here a few years ago and were thrilled with the fact that I had [photographed] every horse I had painted over the years” Alister recalls. “I had these wonderful negatives, you know,” he recalls, showing his 75 years just a bit. His diligent archiving, the sort that takes up drawer space rather than hard-drive, has



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top This painting, an imagined portrayal of horses exercising on a beach south of Wollongong, will shortly be for sale at the Wentworth Gallery, Sydney

above A scene that Alister painted after visiting the barns at Newmarket racecourse in England

meant that at Rosehill on Golden Rose day, *A Brush With Horses* will officially be launched to race-going members. On Cox Plate day the same will happen in New Zealand.

The Dominion is where it all began for Alister and Mary as the two are Kiwi-born. There’s not much of an accent left, but there’s the quality you see in Kiwi racing folk. Many of Alister’s paintings feature the beautiful Ellerslie racecourse, and he remembers his attachment to Bonecrusher, one-time Australian Horse of the Year who features in his work. But that was more than 20 years ago. Since then, Alister has made money and earned laurels. He is an invited member of the illustrious

American Academy of Equine Art (AAEA) and exhibits at the Wentworth Gallery whose quarters in the heart of Blich Street, Sydney, are, incidentally, the old home of the AJC. “With his knowledge of anatomy and his own inimitable style,” the Wentworth states, “[Alister] has produced an outstanding collection of works.”

The artist, though, is unchanged by fame. He has had the best thoroughbreds of the last three decades paraded before him, rubbed shoulders with Nick Moraitis, Gai Waterhouse and Patrick Hogan, and still he is a polite character with a gentle sense of humour. In the hallway of his home we stop to admire a portrait of Sindebele, a gelding that belonged to the late Queen Mother. “I liked this one so much I sent a print to the Queen Mother and kept the canvas myself,” Alister states, and we giggle at the cheek of it. A man this pleasant could get away with anything. **RL**

RACINGLIFE readers can purchase ‘*A Brush With Horses*’ for the special price of just **\$65** for the hardback (RRP \$89.99) or **\$175** for the leatherbound edition (RRP \$225).

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