

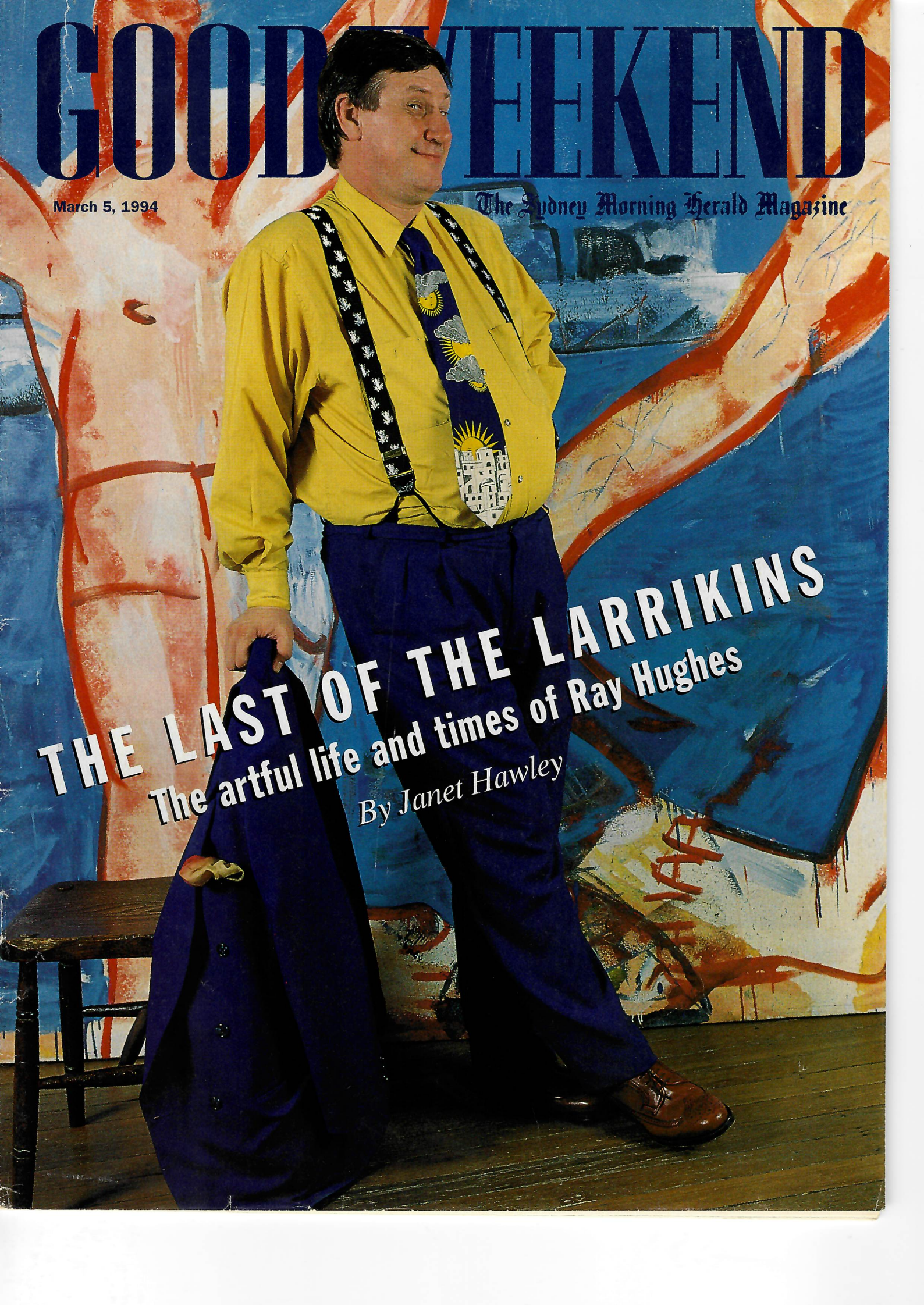
GOOD WEEKEND

March 5, 1994

The Sydney Morning Herald Magazine

THE LAST OF THE LARRIKINS

The artful life and times of Ray Hughes
By Janet Hawley



HE IS THE ENFANT TERRIBLE OF THE ART WORLD WITH A FLAMBOYANT STYLE THAT CURLS CURATORS' LIPS AND MAKES CRITICS CRINGE. BUT OTHERS BUY RAY HUGHES'S UNORTHODOX APPROACH.

"I say to my artists: I want to work with Picasso, Braque, Léger and Matisse. Work out which one you are, and let's go full-on doing great things together.

"I want people around me to ask the hard questions, not easy ones. I don't want a cosy art world where painters are mere decorators.

"The function of the artist is to be that irritant under the skin of complacency. If artists are not doing that, we'll have a big blancmange world, and I might as well be selling shoes.

"I want to live an exciting life, where I am surrounded by masterpieces and constantly surprised. Maybe that's why I'm prone to depression."

RAY HUGHES, the passionate, maverick art dealer, possessed with a mad belief in art and artists, this month celebrates 25 years of his tumultuous love affair as an art dealer. The only child of a corner grocer in Brisbane, Hughes grew up "in the 'burbs, helping Mum and Dad in the shop, where the most exotic thing we sold was a cauliflower. Neither my parents nor I knew anything about art. The strongest images from my childhood are from

reading Little Golden Books." At 17, and "a bit of a lair", Hughes attended Brisbane Teachers' College, intending to become a primary-school teacher, but his life soared to new dimensions when two art lecturers, William Robinson and Merv Muhling (now artists in his stable), opened his eyes to art.

With an instinctive lust for artistic creativity, restless energy and a voracious brain, Hughes plunged in to discover the world of art, and enjoy life to the full along the way. Hughes wanted to be an art dealer in the style of his early mentor, the legendary, Czech-born Rudy Komon, who revelled in the company of his top team of artists, running a salon, wining, dining and travelling with them.

Hughes's golden bucket of good fortune came two years after Komon's death, on the eve of the '80s art boom, when Komon's widow sold their large, splendid stock of paintings and drawings, stockroom warehouse and Sydney gallery lease to the eager young Brisbane dealer who was determined to carry on the Komon tradition in his own way, up and down the east coast and internationally.

Hughes, now 47, is recognised as having one of the best eyes, "and snouts" for

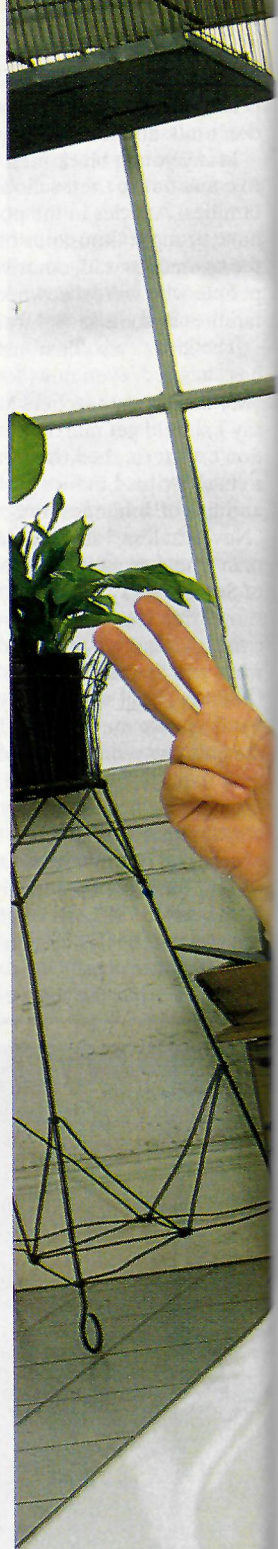
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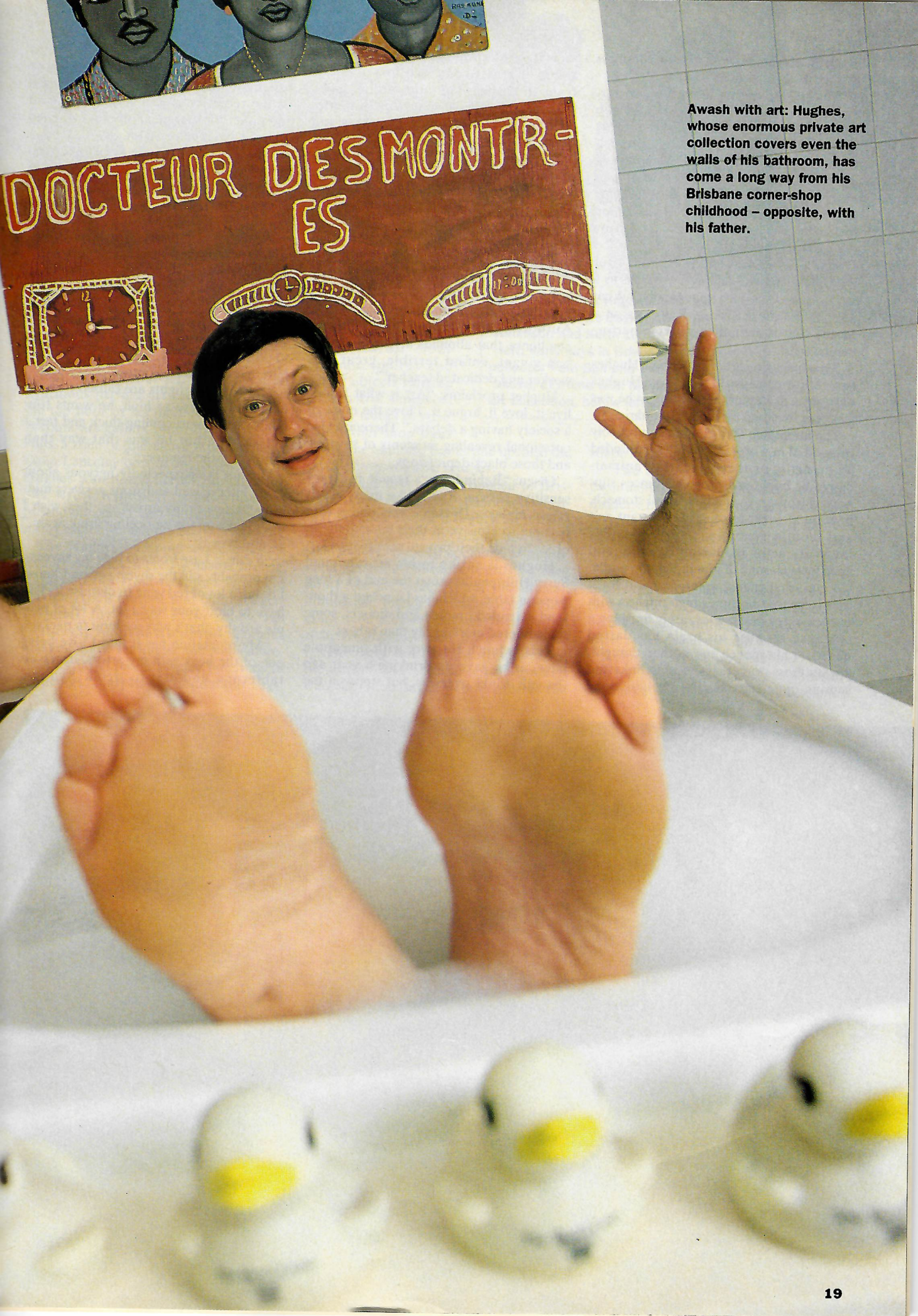
OF THE

DEALER

**STORY BY JANET HAWLEY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRENDAN READ**



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Awash with art: Hughes, whose enormous private art collection covers even the walls of his bathroom, has come a long way from his Brisbane corner-shop childhood – opposite, with his father.

art in the business, and to be a ceaseless worker for his artists.

This tribute comes from the two fervently opposed Hughes camps: those with a loyal affection for him, and those whose lips curl, finding him “uncouth ... a repulsive male chauvinist ... a gross embarrassment”. Even artists and gallery staff who have crossed swords with him, felt his pique and fury and frankly dislike him, feel compelled to say, “You cannot deny the bastard is good.”

Artist John Olsen, who one hung-over morning sketched Hughes in pyjamas as a trademark Olsen frog, says fondly: “What people should realise is, Ray puts on a facade that is actually a walking performance artist.”

Time magazine art critic Robert Hughes (no relation) says: “I met Ray Hughes only once, in Venice, and I thought he was a puppet invented by Barry Humphries.”

The inimitable Ray Hughes can reliably be spotted in a crowd, usually surrounded by an artist or three, wearing animal-design or bright red fireman’s braces supporting trousers over a beach-ball stomach, bow tie at neck, big hat, flamboyant gait and mobile gestures, slanty grin. His favourite actor is Marlon Brando, and anecdotes abound of him in Brando mode.

Loud, challenging opinions spout forth in a voice that becomes high-pitched with excitement, with Hughes rarely finishing a sentence because his brain has darted ahead of his speech to another thought, always cross-referencing, seeing links and sensing opportunities. The swelling wave

of a Hughesian laugh is familiar to his stable of artists and cross-flow of guests from all branches of cultural life, as he plays convivial host with wife Annette, enjoying stimulating conversations and arguments at his well-crafted parties.

Publisher Hilary McPhee, who with husband Don Watson (Prime Minister Keating’s speech writer) is a Hughes-gallery regular, says, “What I love about Ray is he doesn’t just hang the pictures on the walls and work the clients, but gets a real buzz going. Ray works his butt off for his artists all the time; he moves extremely fast and is always on the job.”

Brian Johns, Australian Broadcasting Authority chief, enjoys “the youthful ebullience that abounds at Ray’s. He’s a bon vivant, enfant terrible, great networker and dedicated teacher.”

Hughes proclaims: “Art is what I do. I live it, love it, argue it. I love the noise of a society having a debate.” There are also occasional revealing moments of shyness, and those black depressions.

Olsen: “Behind Ray’s facade is a very sensitive person. Ray is like many Australian males – Drysdale was one – who become so effusive in their masculinity in order to hide their private sensitivities.”

Hughes is sitting in his art-crammed Surry Hills penthouse at the end of a long wooden table, which has launched a thousand extended lunches and dinners, some remembered more hazily than others.

This is lunch for two, with pineapple juice, as he gave up drinking a year ago (he still drinks overseas, but stops on the

plane home at Singapore – that’s Hughesian style). “The depressions were becoming so bad, on top of financial difficulties caused by the recession; I was getting paranoid and rather too argumentative so I stopped the grog and it helped a lot.

“The trouble is, I always expect too much of people – myself, my artists, museum directors and curators, my family ...”

Ian Smith, who has shown with Hughes for 22 years (“we also play that dangerous game of mixing friendship with business”) says the main complaint from the artists’ side is that “Ray is always so ambitious for the next art project or the next journey, he does play king of the castle and try to write the script for you. And if you don’t want to do it right now or want to do something else, he gets very touchy, hurt, nervous and strikes out.

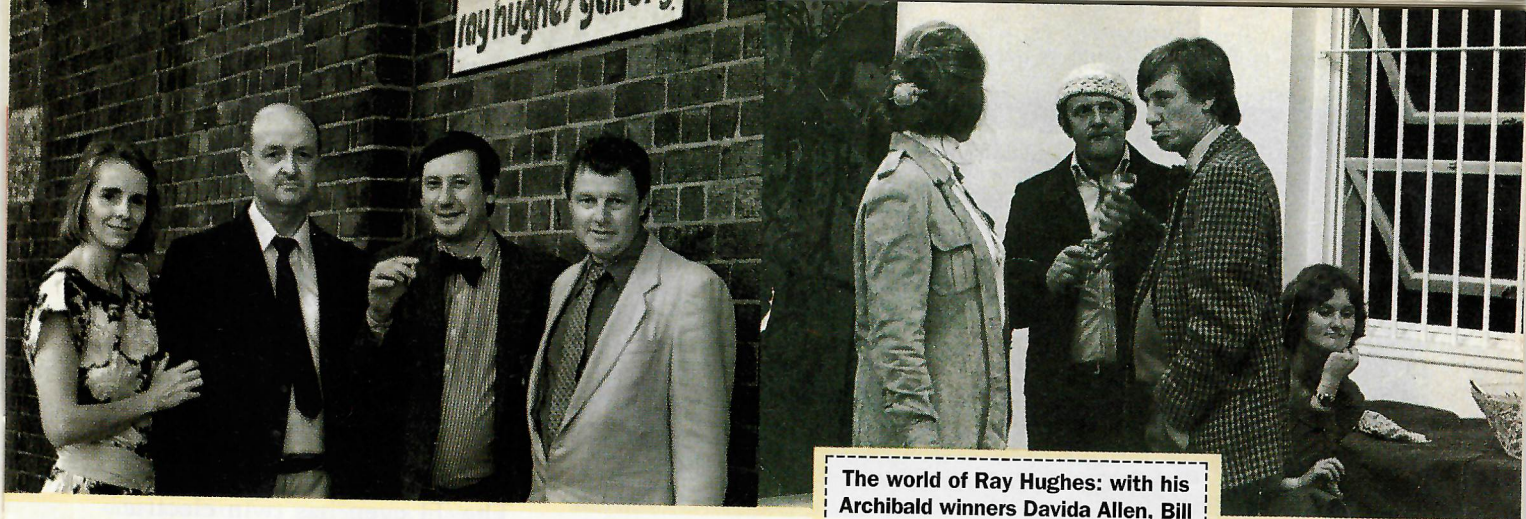
“A lot of Ray’s fights are caused because his standards are so high, he wants top-quality sensations coming thick and fast – but we’d rather he was that way than settling for the mediocre.”

Hughes is unexpectedly nervous about being interviewed and stops answers midway. “A few of my artists say they wish I would take up the lubricating drink again,” he observes.

“Yeah ... I use fronts to hide my shyness. I’m probably still the shyest person I know. I drank a lot of red wine to disguise it. You have to bluff your way a lot. A lot of people are shy, that’s why we hunt in packs.

“My reputation has it that I love being one of the boys with my artists, dance on tabletops and try to drink Sydney,





The world of Ray Hughes: with his Archibald winners Davida Allen, Bill Robinson and Keith Looby, above left; early days in Brisbane with collector Pam Bell and John Olsen, above; at home with his personal art collection, below left and right.

Melbourne, Brisbane and the world dry, but it might be exaggerated.”

Ray, Annette, son Evan, 8, and an enormous private art collection occupy the top floor of his three-storey, factory-become-art-gallery-and-offices in Surry Hills, a zone of impressive artists' abodes. Colin Lanceley bought and converted the Hughes warehouse across the lane, the late Brett Whiteley's studio-home is around the corner, and Tim Storrier's four-storey establishment is a few blocks away.

The Hughes bedroom alone boasts a John Brack nude, a Fred Williams, Molvig, Baldessin (all from Komon's stock), a Davida Allen mother and child, Léger, Dubuffet, Joy Hester, Keith Looby, Jan Senbergs, William Robinson, Charles Blackman, Joe Furlonger and many more.

Other large rooms display hundreds of paintings, sculptures, handmade rugs,

pots, tribal art, erotic ceramic figures and funky objects ranging from native slingshots and toy trucks to African barber-shop signs above the bathtub. Books pile up, also the cryptic crosswords he relishes.

From his first gallery, opened in Brisbane at age 22 after he abandoned teaching, Hughes struck a highly individual tone. Not for him the silent, mortuary-style gallery, socialite openings, establishment clients, establishment artists (“they don't like me either”); nor the clinical, minimalist, highly abstract codes (“they don't need a dealer because their patron is the Australia Council”).

“The pictures I like are strong images; the artists I like are one-offs, individuals who run at an angle, people outside the

mainstream.” (Joe Furlonger, an artist and mate of Hughes, says Hughes loves “the odd

shape in the chocolate box”.)

“The danger is that good outsiders eventually get so accepted, they become insiders. In 1988, my artists had won three Archibalds in a row – Keith Looby, Davida Allen and Bill Robinson. Young Timmy [Tim Storrier] put a stop to that!”

Bill Robinson is the grand old man of the Hughes stable, the biggest earner (his last two exhibitions sold out before he'd finished painting them), and THE artist other dealers would love to steal.

Robinson strolls on his cloudy mountain top in southern Queensland and says with a knowing smile, “It is an important ▷



part of Ray's psychological make-up to identify and challenge the enemy."

Hughes's enemy hit-list includes what he calls, "public-gallery arts commissars, little Caesars who bring us the mere Mantovanis of art; the pernicious influence of emeritus curators, twits who capriciously dub favourites with fairy wands; the Australia Council which rarely gets value for money; the uninteresting artist Jenny Watson, chosen to represent Australia at the last Venice Biennale – my pirate Venice Biennale show of my artists was far superior – and Young Timmy".

"Young Timmy" is an artist Hughes does not care for. Tim Storrier is also a trustee of the Art Gallery of NSW and therefore becomes one of the judges for the Archibald and Wynne prizes. In past years, when a Hughes-stable artist has failed to win a major prize after being considered a frontrunner, Hughes has lashed out, citing Storrier as the problem. (It should be pointed out that Storrier is only one of the panel of nine judges, and the vote remains secret.)

Some years ago, Hughes and his beloved, tricky, troublesome artist Keith Looby conspired on an exhibition called *Arthole Gazers and Art Eaters*, attacking art bureaucrats, the curator as hero and similar ilk, along with thinly disguised art-world figures including Timmy Money.

Tim Storrier says he was "bemused and hurt by the attack".

"Ray Hughes has some ludicrous, paranoid idea that I vote against his artists, and has invented this vendetta, but it's a waste of time thinking about it.

"We both live in the same suburb, and it's a bit like living next to a tannery – you get used to it. Quote me on that," added Storrier, freshly created a Member of the Order of Australia.

THE ROLE of an art dealer remains a mystery to the general public. It involves far more than hanging pictures on the gallery wall, giving an artist an exhibition every couple of years and taking a one-third commission on sales. A good dealer nurtures the whole career, and life, of his or her artists.

The dealer rides with the artists when they're on a high, props them up during a low, talks them through painter's block, facilitates painting trips, films and publications, arranges commissions, representation in various exhibitions, keeps archival records, advances money to buy materials or pay tax, helps with family problems, jealousies, relationship splits.

The dealer strokes battered egos after bad reviews, brings inflated egos back to earth, eliminates the "dogs" (bad paintings) in the studio while selecting works to bring in to mount an exhibition, prices the work, and is always trying to please the minefield of the artist's spouse/companion/widow. The dealer arranges lunches and dinners and, if needed, doctors, priests, drug and alcohol therapists, financial and legal advice.

The artist-dealer relationship is also a two-way street. When a gallery is in financial difficulties, loyal artists will often help keep it afloat by lending back money from sales. (This is very different from galleries in difficulties that stall or avoid payments to artists.)

When the dealer gets depressed and threatens to throw it all in – as happened often during the recession – it's the artist's turn to emotionally support the dealer. Hughes's artists have helped him through many negative, black holes.

The Hughes style demands such intense loyalty that it is like marriage and family, with the best and worst aspects of both.

Ian Smith says Hughes was an only child, and his artists have become his family. "He claims you as a brother, but he doesn't become your brother."

Olsen: "Ray has the closest relationship with his artists of

"MANY IMPORTANT ARTISTS HAVE LEFT HIM BECAUSE THEY COULDN'T COPE WITH THE INTENSITY OF THE RELATIONSHIP HE DEMANDS."

any dealer – probably too close, too intense for my liking. (Olsen was with Australian Galleries, and is now with Sherman.)

"But this is very good for young artists, who are insecure and need a lot of stroking and reassurance. Lots of other art dealers don't like artists around them; they prefer the clients, and could as easily be in the stock exchange or selling real estate."

Some artists find the relationship too claustrophobic, too controlling, and need to break free. The most famous and bitter split was that involving Davida Allen, two years ago. After 18 obsessive, impassioned years of the Ray and Davida success team, Davida left the dealer she dubbed her "art husband" and went to Australian Galleries. The relationship had been so full-on that so was the

split, which is still unhealed, and hurts both deeply to discuss.

Davida Allen, a woman as strong-minded as Hughes, doubts that she'll talk about it for another 10 years.

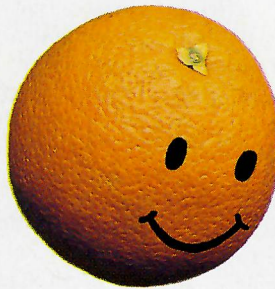
"It's like scratching scar tissue. We were so close, there was so much love there. Ray and Davida were a formidable team, our careers were intertwined for 18 years. I still live with his image every day, and will to the grave. The artist-dealer relationship is a unique relationship, that you both thrive on. Picasso had it with his dealer, and I had it with Ray."

I asked if I could quote part of an interview she gave to *Good Weekend* writer Nikki Barrowclough in 1988, and read it aloud:

"Ray is absolutely equal to the artist, or to me as an artist, because he has that same OBSESSION. The compulsion that I have to make images – he has exactly that same compulsion to WANT that image.

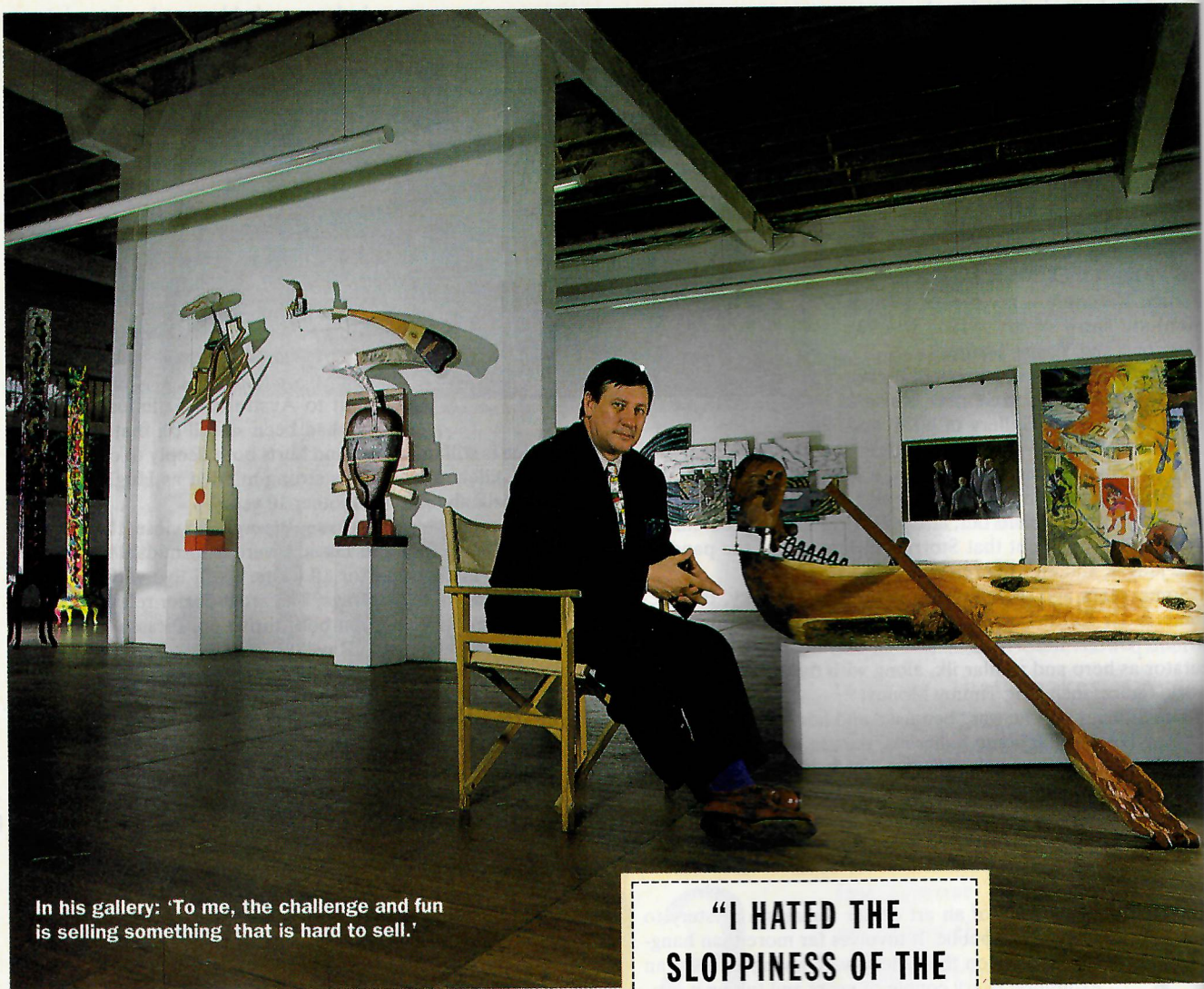
"It's addictive in the sense that, as soon as a painting is finished, ▷

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In his gallery: 'To me, the challenge and fun is selling something that is hard to sell.'

Ray is one of my thoughts. It's as if I'm painting it for him, although I'm not aware of those feelings while I'm painting.

"I'm addicted to Ray, and I'm addicted to his obsessive enthusiasm.

"Sometimes I think, 'My God, there's a part of me that I don't own any more.' This worries me sometimes, but there's nothing I can do about it. I mean, what do you say to a heroin addict? Is heroin good for you? But if you're addicted, what do you do?"

Davida remarks this day in 1994: "Well – there are a few heroin addicts who decide to get out! Everything I have to say about Ray is in my book, *Close to the Bone*. I didn't know I was going to split from Ray when I wrote the book, but it happened on publication two years ago. It marked the finish of an era."

In the book, feelings bared, Allen's alter ego Vicki Myers discusses the effort required to juggle the facets of her life as the mother of four young children, the artist desperate for time to paint, and the different relationships with her "lover husband" (a kindly, wise and supportive country GP) and her "art husband", "Barry" the dealer.

Hughes disliked the book, loathed the portrait of Barry, and blamed the influence

of Allen's editor.

Davida: "I was working on a creative project with someone else, so Ray saw my association with my editor as adultery."

Hughes says, finally: "I miss Davida, I miss her adding to the collective energy of those surrounding me."

SELLING IS a most important part of the dealer's job, and Hughes is known as an honest broker who pays his artists. There are numerous styles of selling art. Bill Wright, director of Sherman Galleries, recalls: "Rudy Komon had a wonderful technique of saying, 'No, you cannot have this painting, you are not ready for it yet.' After that, he had that client in his palm."

Hughes adds his own Rudy anecdote: "When a client said he had no more room on his walls, Rudy would say, 'What are you, a decorator or a collector? The first decision of a serious collector is which

"I HATED THE SLOPPINESS OF THE ART BOOM; IT PROVIDED EVERY FORM OF BAD BEHAVIOUR HUMANS ARE CAPABLE OF."

room in his house will be designated the stockroom.'

The serious selling of an artist's exhibition is all done in private showings before the opening-night crush. Hughes admits: "How you sell a picture is a bit like 'How do you

finance a film?' – it's restricted only by how wide your imagination is. We are after all in the business of show business, and if nobody is looking at your show, you start to feel pretty vulnerable.

"I hated the sloppiness of the art boom: it provided every form of bad behaviour humans are capable of. The recession put a stop to that, and thank goodness, it is picking up now and enough pictures are selling again.

"To me the challenge and fun is selling something that is hard to sell – getting a collector who doesn't like a work to become absolutely addicted to that painter."

How many collectors to keep a gallery afloat? "I have a core group of 20 to 30, but the real core is smaller than that."

What does he think of collectors who buy art purely for investment? "Most of them give me the shits, so I don't see them here. Besides, collectors who have bought art from me over the years with their hearts have probably done better than collectors who have speculated elsewhere."

Do dealers get rich in Australia? "Only from investing in real estate, or from collecting - not from dealing."

BETTY CHURCHER, director of the National Gallery of Australia, has known Ray Hughes from their early days in Brisbane - "25 years of rumbustious behaviour," she says with a warm laugh. Her husband, artist and art teacher Roy Churcher, befriended Hughes when he attended Churcher's art classes in Brisbane, trying to become a painter himself.

Hughes: "I learned a lot from Roy and we became great carousing mates. Indeed, there is a certain Dizzy Gillespie record that we used to put on about 11 pm when Betty was trying to sleep, that I think she'd gladly crash over my head."

Betty Churcher: "There's several things I would have gladly crashed over his head! I remember one night, when Ray was staying at our house, we all went to the opening of the Brisbane Institute of Modern Art. I was exhausted afterwards and just wanted to get home and get myself and the four children to sleep, and as we drove towards our block, I said to my husband, 'Roy, what are all these cars doing parked here, where is that huge party noise coming from?'"

"It was from our house - Ray had invited the whole contingent from the opening back to our place. I could have crashed a wardrobe over his head that night."

Betty Churcher says Hughes is like the art he likes - "raw, blunt, but honest to the point. His great passion for the art that speaks to him is also one of his problems; because he is so wholeheartedly into what appeals to him, he is very dismissive of what doesn't."

"If he believes in an artist or a painting, he'll go to the line. If he doesn't, he'll demolish everything with a cutting wit. The enemy to him is anything that gets in the way of what he sees as the true art path."

"Most curators in public galleries regard him askance; they find his full-on personality difficult to cope with, and indeed many refuse to cope with it. I've always admired Ray because of his devotion to his artists. Indeed, he takes it as a personal offence if you don't like their work."

"He's been the champion of many very important Australian artists who have subsequently left him because they couldn't cope with the intensity of the relationship he demands. He almost wants the fidelity of a marriage, and any thoughts of doing something with someone else is seen as an affair, so some find they need a bit of space."

Hughes maintains: "Artists leave a

dealer when there is nothing going in their studio, they're not painting new, good pictures, they start imitating themselves, and the dealer is someone handy to blame. They usually throw a tantrum to disguise their own home-grown anxiety."

A writer once dubbed Hughes as a cross between Prospero and Fatty Finn.

Says Olsen: "No, Prospero is too elegant for Ray. He's more a cross between PUNCHINELLO and Damon Runyon. Ray is gutsy protein, rough chic, abrasive, jealous, courageous, defiant, the one the bureaucrats are frightened of, the scourge. Sadly,

every real city in the world is in danger of losing the fight of bureaucratic chic against rough chic. We need more Rays."

Hughes says philosophically: "We at this gallery have been called the last of the intellectual bohemians. What's happened today is that being an artist has become middle-class. There aren't so many bohemians around, because we all like our creature comforts."

"But you can have these, and keep the bohemian attitude. It's what's in the mind that counts." □

Janet Hawley is a staff writer.

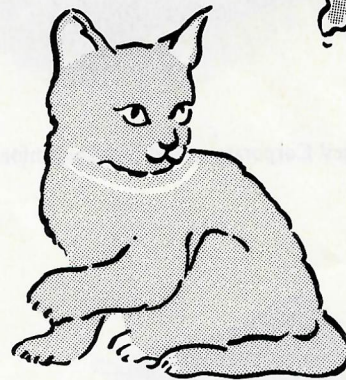
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