

# Saleroom

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## Unpacking the painted library

Brook Turner

It's enormous, two metres by seven metres, and by far the most expensive painting in the show at \$70,000, even without the purpose-built \$20,000-plus gilt frame.

In fact, the only mystery about James McGrath's monumental *Ex libris*, the central work in his new show opening at the Tim Olsen Gallery in Sydney today, is who has a wall big enough to hang it.

Someone does: an anonymous patron secured the work before brush had even hit canvas, also commissioning the hand-gilded frame which, like the painting, had to be completed in sections and assembled on site for the first time on Tuesday.

BHP Billiton bought a large McGrath in 2005. This time round speculation has ranged from Mark Bouris, a known fan, to James Packer, also said to be a long-term McGrath patron.

The smart money is on the latter, given the artist's brother Anthony is a Packer friend, and that close friend Matthew Csidei and John Alexander are also understood to have been on the guest list for a small private dinner at Olsen's cooked by Guillaume Brahimi on Tuesday night. Packer would presumably also have the wall space, given the \$41 million renovation under way at his 3345 square metre Vaucluse compound (talk about buying books by the metre).



Booked ... artist James McGrath with his monumental painting *Ex libris* at the Tim Olsen gallery.

Photo: Michele Mossop

No one at Olsen's was in a naming mood when Saleroom took a constitutional in the neighbourhood this week, however, least of all the artist, who was charmingly frank on just about everything else to do the show and its centrepiece, which commands a whole wall of the gallery. "It's funny, the bigger the commission the more relaxed the clients, the smaller, the greater the interference," is as close as he goes.

The son of art critic Sandra McGrath and banker Tony McGrath, who (with Sydney art dealer Frank McDonald) owned Bundanon near Nowra on the NSW south coast, James McGrath started his career as assistant to the painter Arthur Boyd, to whom Bundanon was eventually sold, and who in turn donated it to the public.

It was his older brother, Anthony, who was always meant to be the

artist, James says. In fact, at one point Brett Whiteley, Boyd and the young Anthony McGrath submitted works anonymously to a local art competition while staying at Bundanon. McGrath's won. "I got \$25," he says, when he drops in to see the masterwork. "They were really annoyed," James adds.

As for *Ex libris*, "it's total short-man syndrome," the 1.7 metres James McGrath quips as he surveys the

paintings, on which he worked 10 hours a day for three months. The dimensions and frame were actually part of the commission; the gilt, too, is picked up in the highlights on the 10,000 books he painted from sketches and photos taken during a four-day visit to the library of Prague's Strahov Monastery.

The original inspiration for the series (half of which had been snagged by opening night) was the artist's five-year-old twin daughters. "I realised my children were not going to have a library like mine, so I painted them one," he says.

That began a worldwide search; in addition to the web, McGrath paid German students to scout locales. The Strahov's "ghost books" were the clincher. "They're so old they're all white," he says. "They're on vellum and they rubbed lime and chalk into the surfaces to preserve them, so you get this fantastic flakey whiteness."

Against that timeless backdrop, McGrath has set the paintings' recurring flora-and-fauna motifs: a cornered rabbit (himself in the library) flowers in free fall (the thoughts and memories that drifted through his head). It's the fixed and the fleeting, the books paradoxically now among the latter.

"I was just reading that IKEA has modified its Billy bookcase because people are no longer putting books in them. This project has coincided with the end of the book," says McGrath, who recently bought himself a Kindle, purely by coincidence.