



'Killing Me Softly' 122 x 180cm oil on canvas by Joel Rea 2007 ▲

# THE BUSINESS OF ART

**28**-year-old Gold Coast photorealist Joel Rea is doing his bit to dispel the stereotype of the starving artist. Graduating from the Queensland College of Art in 2003, Joel has since completed a mentorship program at Paddington's Lethbridge gallery and been selected as a finalist in numerous local and national art awards.

Every painting from his first solo exhibition in 2006 was snapped up by an international collector before the show even opened, and his 2007 piece "Killing Me Softly" sold for a staggering \$30,000, and now in 2011 Joel has sold a painting, currently unfinished, to an eager private collector for a record price of \$50,000. So how did Joel achieve such success in such an unforgiving industry?

The answer lies within Joel's body of work, which often depicts the interplay between creative individuality and professional conformism. His paintings reflect his outlook and work ethic: although he is a creative type at heart, he knows that he needs to be disciplined and business-minded in order to succeed – just like any other business owner. He calls it his "business suit versus skater boy" conflict.

Joel is fairly unique among his peers in that he is fortunate enough to enjoy both creative freedom and commercial success. He explains "Some artists like to paint things that are really graphic or negative, that most people don't want to hang up or live with..."

**...FORTUNATELY FOR ME,  
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APPROACHABLE"**

"You can always rack your brain as to what's going to be the best seller, but that's just pandering to a market, and it's not really what being an artist is all about. It's just a great coincidence that what I paint by choice – what I like painting – is what people want to buy." Although all of Joel's paintings successfully "leave him" as he puts it, some do so faster than others. "You notice which ones sell better, and that always affects you. You can't help but notice, whether you like it or not."

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'Direct Ambition' 70x140cm oil on canvas by Joel Rea 2011 ▲

- Once again, the internal push and pull of being a working artist comes to the surface. "In the end, everyone wants to live comfortably. No one likes to say it, but the fact is that it's a case of who-sells-wins. You have to shake off the 'starving artist' shackle. I am so happy to be doing what I love for a living, but if you're not getting the money you deserve for the time you're putting in, you can't survive. You have to be the calculative, strategic business guy, which is not really what artists wake up and want to do."

"I do my best work with my large paintings, where my creativity can run wild. If I didn't have to sell paintings to survive, I could easily spend a year on one painting. But that's too much time to go without getting any return on my time. I need to limit the time taken on my paintings to keep them affordable for the market."

Although the sheer aesthetic appeal of his work is a large factor, Joel's professional approach evidently contributes to his success. He puts in long hours, invests in his business and keeps a keen eye on opportunities to expand. "I'm always looking to grow in terms of exhibitions and submissions for art awards – getting the right blend of public and media attention. I'm trying to

lift my participation in the kind of things that will elevate my career."

This professional approach is most evident in Joel's work ethic. Like most business owners, he is constantly switched on and thinking about his work, regularly doing twelve-hour days and working through the weekend. "When you're putting your name on something, you tend to put in a lot more time than if you're working for someone else," he explains. Joel's workload is likely to increase once his studio extension is complete and he has the space to work on many more pieces simultaneously.

When it comes to actually selling paintings, Joel recognises that art is a luxury item that most people cannot afford. As his profile grows, his accessibility to the general public becomes more limited. Although his affiliated galleries are responsible for selling his art, he has his own ideas for generating liveable, sustainable revenue. "You want to make commodities that can be snapped up by people that can't afford your original paintings. I'm interested in doing books or prints to make my work accessible to a much broader range of consumers, even by teenagers. You can be in so many more households that way."





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Joel refrains from blindly following trends or jumping on transient bandwagons for fear of diluting his style or identity, which are his livelihood. “Clarity and detail have always been appreciated and have never gone out of vogue. Trends come and go, so you hope your work isn’t trendy in a way, because what goes up must come down. I don’t do stuff because I think it’s hot – I try to keep the level of finish to a high quality. Throughout history, quality and technical skill have usually prevailed over trends.”

Technology plays a large role in Joel’s art, from cameras and Photoshop to social media. The internet plays a large part in the promotions and networking, but he does not see the internet becoming the standard marketplace for art.

“I think Facebook and keeping your website up to date are important. It’s great to have that kind of immediate coverage – it’s crucial. If you deny using the internet as a tool, you’re letting yourself down, but it’s never going to rule the world in



terms of buying and selling art. You want to see a painting in the flesh before you buy it.”

For those with dreams of quitting their day job and pursuing a career in the creative arts, Joel’s advice is to submerge yourself in it. “Don’t just bite around the edges, or you’ll never get a full meal. If you’re stuck on something, go out and do it. There are always people out there who have been through what you’re going through, and they’ll usually be empathetic. Seek them out and ask them. That’s what I did. It doesn’t cost much to do 1 painting that displays your skills and shows your potential to galleries and other artists. Knock on some doors and find out what you need to do, and show others what you can do. As Salvador Dali said, ‘If you act the genius, you will be one.’”. “That approach sounds unrealistic for most industries, but working as an artist is not regulated by official qualifications, anyone can be a good artist they just have to make good art, then comes the harder part- the business side”.

To view all of Joel’s paintings from 2005 to present see his website - [www.joelrea.com.au](http://www.joelrea.com.au).