INTRODUCING...

sam leach

Meet the Adelaide Hills-raised artist being hailed Australia's Next Big Thing.

A mysterious fusion of Dutch still-life painting, dead birds, skulls, albinos and dark backgrounds has escalated SA artist Sam Leach into celebrated art circles. Sam bagged the Metro 5 and Fletcher Jones art prizes last year, won $25,000 in the Geelong Art Prize for Peacock Going Up, and was recently announced an Archibald Finalist for A Bird Flies Past Jeff Kennett.

"He's won fairly major prizes rapidly. Everyone in Melbourne is talking about how good he is," says local art dealer Peter Walker, adding that serious art collectors have been "blown away". "I've had an interstate dealer offer to buy the whole show off me. For someone at Sam's level to be getting such interest is exceptional."

The 34-year-old artist, whose previous life in the Tax Office shows through his art via spotlessly clean, clinical backgrounds, says "when I am creating a picture, I'm thinking about having a conversation with the person who's looking at it". "There's a totalitarianism in corporate culture that is fairly unappealing," he says.

This loathing for bureaucracy, combined with confronting themes of mortality, results in sombre oil paintings reminiscent of classical Dutch works from the 17th century, layered with copper and resin. Corpses of ducks, starlings and hares are bathed in a strange luminescent glow, awkwardly posed against backdrops of cold, red blinking digital lights. Each painting comprises 'hidden' elements for the viewer, such as the reflection of text in an animal's eye.

Sam moved to Melbourne in 1996 and paints for more than 50 hours each week in his Brunswick home studio, but it's his parents' farm in Hahndorf where locally gathered dead animals lay quietly in a freezer, waiting to be collected and painted.

Sam's Unnatural Selection show from November 22 to December 8 at Peter Walker Fine Art, 101 Walkerville Terrace, Walkerville, 8344 4607.