

# Lester's Black Swan vision takes flight

■ Sean Smith

The family firm behind WA's portraiture prize has launched a funding drive to expand the competition's profile and reach.

Property investment company Lester Group has steadily increased its support for the Black Swan Prize since becoming involved seven years ago and now solely funds the \$50,000 award to the winning artist.

Its backing, together with support from the likes of Brookfield and Perth City Council, has ensured the Black Swan is now one of the country's richest portraiture prizes, behind the Archibald and Doug Moran in NSW.

Lester Group is now leading an ambitious bid to attract new corporate sponsorship to expand the WA prize's total funding to \$500,000 a year.

"We want to re-engineer the prize and take it to a new level," Lester Group non-executive chairman and Perth business identity Dick Lester said.

"We want to achieve a broadening of the funding base and an increase in the prize pool, probably to about \$150,000 over time."

He said increased funding would expose the competing artists to a bigger audience, and potentially commissions, by extending the viewing period for the competition at the Lynton & Kaye Gallery in Perth and travelling the Black Swan exhibition to

regional centres and other States.

The competition has a strong following among Australia's portraiture artists, attracting 250 entrants last year, two-thirds from interstate.

But organisers and sponsors are keen to not only generate more interest from artists but raise the public profile of the Black Swan in its home State.

Mr Lester, a former director of Wesfarmers and himself an art collector, was persuaded to back the Black Swan after being cold-called by Tina Wilson, the executive director of the organising body ARTrinsic, which was set up in 2007 to promote visual arts.

His family have since also embraced the competition.

Son and Lester Group executive director Russell Lester, who with Ms Wilson has been pounding the pavement sounding out potential new sponsors, said a vibrant arts scene was an important element of any community.

"We want to live in a great environment and vibrant community, so you have to help build that, you just can't sit back and let others do it," he said.

The younger Lester said competition for WA sponsorship dollars was particularly intense given the tougher economic environment.

But he said he and Ms Wilson had been encouraged by the feedback from those businesses approached.



Encouraging feedback: The Lester Group's Russell and Dick Lester want to expand WA's Black Swan art portraiture prize. Picture: Simon Santi