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Flattering the sponsor? No, he just likes planes

TOM MULLER is fascinated by aviation: he once created a passport for a borderless globe, and his next project will document aeroplane runways.

So when the judges for an art prize sponsored by Qantas were considering the artist's work, they paused to consider whether it would look like a publicity stunt for the airline.

"We did have a bit of a chat about that one," said the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, one of the judges for the inaugural Qantas Foundation Encouragement of Australian Contemporary Art Award. "But Qantas made it very clear they weren't looking for that. He won because his body of work is very interesting."

Eight artists - one from each state and territory - received the award at the Museum of Contemporary Art yesterday. Swiss-born Muller is from Western Australia.

The NSW winner was Alex Davies, from Sydney. Davies, a graduate of the College of Fine Arts who creates interactive installations, is in Europe working on a project.

The award recognises the work of promising artists who use a diverse range of media. Each prize comprises \$20,000 cash and \$10,000 worth of air travel. It has been largely financed by the sale of works from the Qantas art collection. Muller, 33, said that he would use the prize to fund his new documentary.

He developed a love for the appearance of airstrips as a child while flying in light planes with his father, who was a pilot.

"I'm really fascinated by having these visual incisions in the land," he said. "I did quite a bit of flying when I was young. I just love landscape, aerial perspective, the big picture."

Last year Qantas sold 22 works from its major collection, yielding \$3.4 million to put towards the new prize.

Its chief executive, Geoff Dixon, said creating an award that invested in young artists was the best possible use for the company's valuable collection. "There are a lot of other prizes like the Archibald which tend to reward more established people," he said. "We wanted to find a niche that was a bit different."

Dixon said he was no expert on art but had utmost faith in his judging panel, which also included the director of the Art Gallery of NSW, Edmund Capon, and the director of Visual Arts at the Australia Council, Anna Waldmann.

The award differs from most other prizes in that it recognises a body of work, rather than just a single piece, and it is targeted at artists who are in the middle of their careers who have demonstrated promise.
