

## Bridges across the cultural time zone

ROBERT CAMPBELL JNR  
Rebecca Hossack Gallery

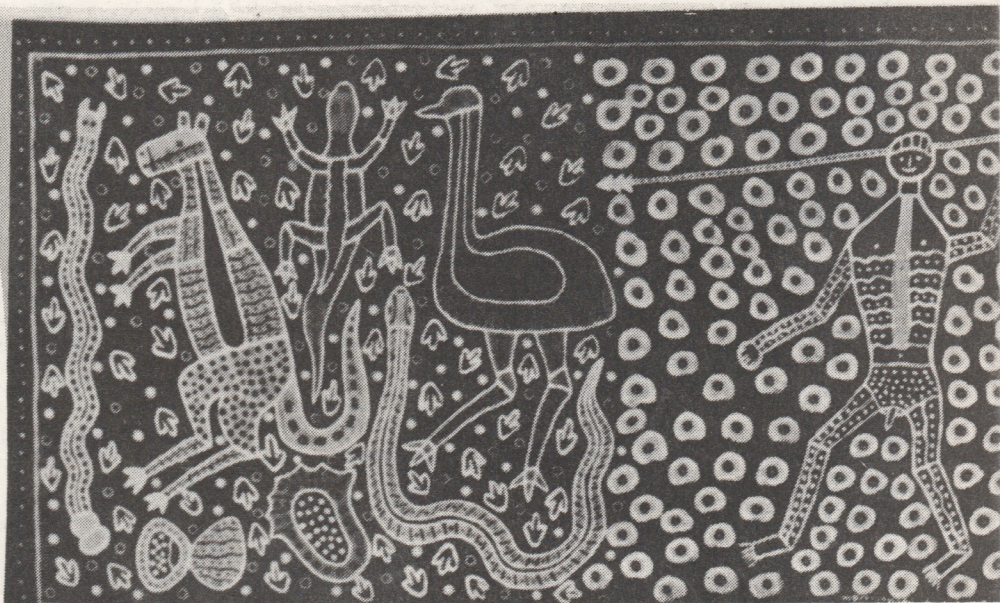
Having successfully incorporated South African and Latin American rhythms into his music, it can only be a matter of time before Paul Simon gets his hands on a didgeridoo. But if he's proved that Western ears can be receptive to the music of other, different cultures, when it comes to expanding the vision of Western eyes, a different set of problems arise.

Painting and the other visual arts seem to be based on a more complicated language than music. And this language of mutually accepted codes and references, specific to the society and the time from which it comes, cannot be just instinctively understood and read by outsiders. While all the world's feet may tap in time to the same tune, people from different cultural backgrounds look at the same picture and all see different things.

Having said that, those who have influence in the world of modern art deny the existence of any such problems. In recent years there's been a growing trend toward staging shows of the contemporary art from non-Western societies and treating it as if it were just another new fashion in 20th century modern art. Proponents of such exhibitions would argue the benefits of pluralism and claim to be performing a valuable service in treating these arts (typically from third world countries) with a respect denied in the past. Cynics, on the other hand, might imagine that the whole process has more to do with crafty marketing and financial exploitation of unworldly artists and gullible buyers.

The classic case of this whole phenomenon has been the sudden enormous interest shown by Western galleries over the past couple of years in the dot paintings of Aboriginal artists. No one would deny that these paintings are often very beautiful to look at and no one would dispute the integrity of the artists producing them. But a Western audience can have no real comprehension of what they are admiring beyond the unusually pretty configuration of patterns. To reset the watch dial from Greenwich mean time to dreamtime would take a generation and, since the West is currently running on the sight and sound bites of a three minute culture, pretty patterns are all that are ever going to be seen here.

Times may change, however, and the Aboriginal artist Robert Campbell Jnr presents a compromise that could bridge the cultural gap across the time zones. Born and educated in Kempsey, New South Wales, he is a so-called urban Aboriginal who is, as the title of his exhibition at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery puts it, *Living Between Cultures*.



His paintings are full of dots but unlike the more familiar Aboriginal paintings he uses primary colours of glaring brightness. And instead of retelling tradition tales of ancient times, his eyes are set on the present. With a schematic, simple cartooning style that ignores perspective and logic, he produces beguiling paintings that blend narrative, landscape and fantasy.

Every inch of every canvas is packed with people and animals wondering about, while every gap is plugged by little circles and pointless little arrows. Sometimes the cartoon characters just form a line and shake their spears, while at other times, back in the world of grim reality, they shake their arms in anger. The poignantly titled *Welfare Taking Children Away* says it all. After the recent scandals in this country, Campbell has found a subject here that certainly has cross-cultural resonance.

**Arthur Berman**

*Campbell's paintings are at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery, 35 Windmill street W1 until June 15, Mon - Sat 10.00am - 6.00pm.*

## Uncle Joe and his unhappy family

REALITY AND DREAMS  
Offstage Downstairs

He may have been one of the most powerful men in history and certainly one of the greatest mass-murderers of modern times, but what was he like as a father and husband? Comparatively little has been written about the domestic life of Joseph Stalin but by drawing on what few facts are available the playwright Olga Kuchkina has managed to construct a fascinating psychological drama in two acts.

*Reality and Dreams* tells the story of Stalin's relationship with his second wife

Nadezhda Allilueva. The daughter of an old friend and party colleague, when they married in 1919 she was just 18 while he was 40. But it wasn't just age that separated them. He was alcoholic, workaholic megalomaniac trying to modernise a crippled feudal state that had been through revolution, world war and civil war, while she was an honest but simple secretary. It was hardly the perfect computer match.

In the first half of the play we see them meeting in Stalin's Kremlin office just prior to their marriage. By the second act, a decade later, the gulf that originally existed between them has only widened. And if he is unchanged, her youthful naivety and optimism has darkened into despair. A black mourning dress has replaced her white, spring one and the red of Stalin's office appears to have acquired a bloodier hue.

In the course of their early playing and flirting, and later fights and recriminations, Kuchkina weaves in a good deal of her historical research. We learn of Stalin's affairs with other women, his decision to have Nadezhda's brother shot, and of their son's attempted suicide — clearly, Stalin wasn't much of a family man. But there's a strong suggestion that what really made the magic go out of the marriage was her becoming aware of the terrible truth of what dictatorship actually means. For when she in turn reveals this to Stalin, she becomes his guilty conscience. It's a weight that even he cannot bear and one he sheds with typical ruthlessness.

Using this domestic hell as a reflection of the turmoil of the whole Soviet Union is an ambitious theatrical ploy, especially when just two actors must carry all the action. That it succeeds so well is due to the impressive performances of Kate Isitt and especially Paul Arlington as a very convincing paranoid, by turns cunning and charismatic, charming and violent.

**Arthur Berman**