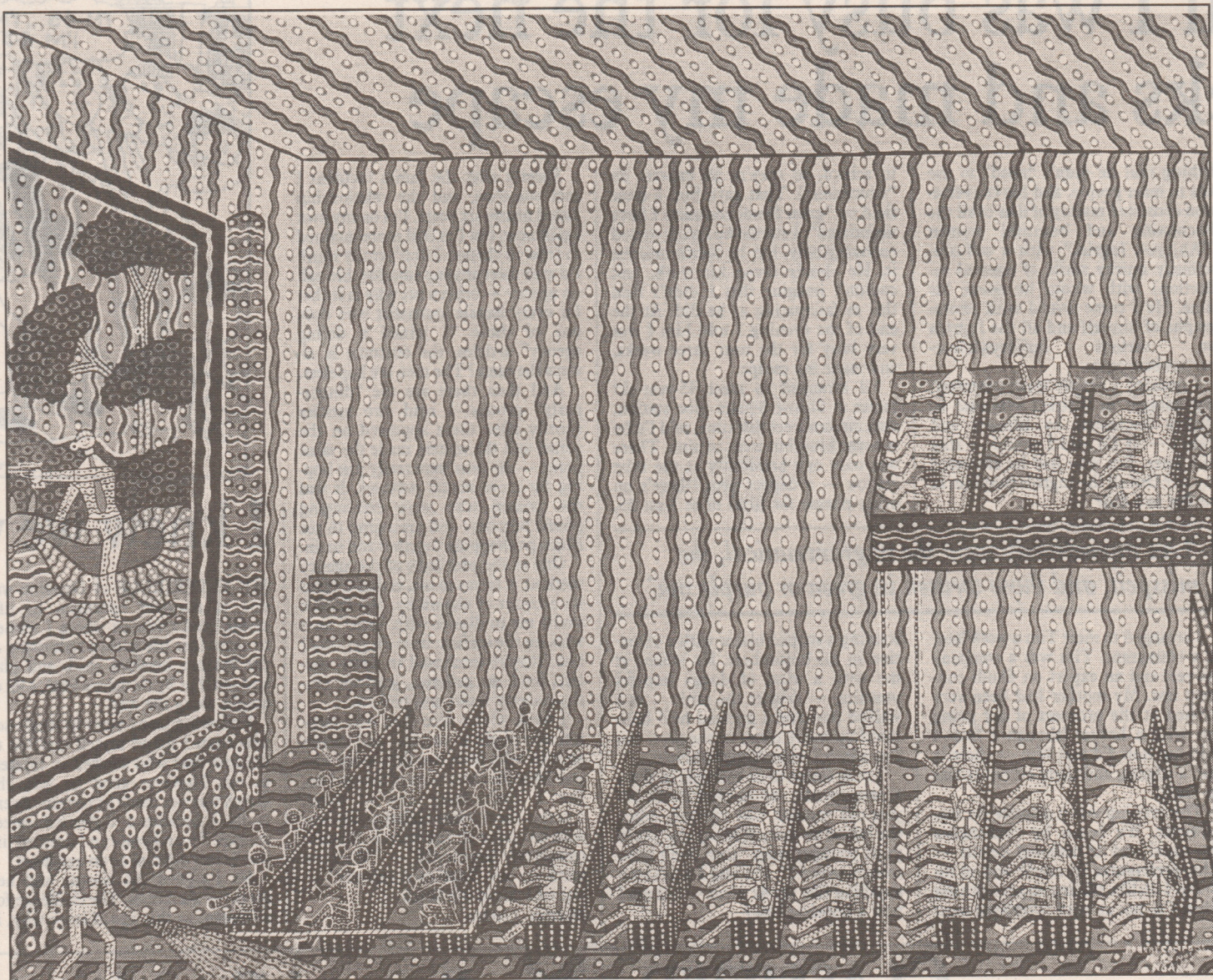




# OBITUARIES



Campbell's *Roped off at the Pictures II* (1987), showing segregation in old Australian cinemas, with Aboriginals confined to the front three rows

## Robert Campbell Jnr

ROBERT CAMPBELL Jnr was one of the first generation of urban Aboriginal artists, and perhaps the finest. He stood between Aboriginal and modern Australian culture and drew on both to create art of extraordinary freshness, courage and wit.

Campbell was born in 1944 in Kempsey, a small town in northern New South Wales. His family belonged to the Ngaku people but the traditions of their ancestors were dying rapidly in the face of white rule and culture. The old people were not even allowed to talk the "lingo" or teach the old stories. Nevertheless there was still some continuity of life. Robert Campbell's father, Thomas W. Campbell, was a noted boomerang-maker and would take his son off into the bush searching for suitable cuts of wattle or mangrove.

Robert Campbell's first artistic work, done while he was still at primary school, was drawing designs of

kangaroos, birds and other animals, which his father would then trace on to the boomerang's surface with a red-hot wire.

Leaving school at 14, Campbell continued to develop his gift. Using gloss paint and cardboard he began to express his bold, naïve visions of the local landscape, and even to sell them to passing tourists. He worked for a time in a series of menial jobs, as a factory hand in Sydney, as a labourer, as a pea-picker; work, as he put it, "that was not good enough for white people". But he eventually returned to Kempsey and to painting, starting to use canvas and artist's board for his works for the first time. He began to record with sparkling vividness the scenes which he saw about him or that he remembered from his childhood. He was, as he put it, "searching for the Aboriginal identity that I've lost". These works combine an uncompromising directness with a rich-

ness of colour and cartoon-like simplicity that recall Hockney, Hergé and Haring.

"I paint," he once said, "about things that touch me personally, whatever has happened to me personally." And it is this sense of personal experience that gives his paintings a power unsullied by either sentimentality or sloganeering. There are arcadian scenes of camp life, of food-gathering and unspoilt nature. And there are frank representations of the darker side of 20th-century Aboriginal life, of alcoholism, of police brutality and racism. One marvellous painting, *Roped off at the Pictures II*, depicts the perfunctory segregation practised in the old Australian cinemas, with Aboriginals separated from the rest of the audience by a rope.

Campbell painted his pictures in an *al fresco* "studio" — a table set up under two trees in his backyard at Kempsey. As the day progressed he

could move the studio to keep in the shade.

A series of shows in the late Eighties, both in Sydney and Melbourne brought him the beginnings of the critical recognition he deserved. And he has since been shown in London. He has done much to encourage — and to influence — other, younger Aboriginal artists, both in Kempsey and beyond. And his place in the canon of Aboriginal art is assured.

Even this week I heard from a leading British museum that they wanted to acquire an important work by him. I rang Robert with the good news, only to be told by his wife, Eileen, that he had died just half an hour before. He had been ill for some time.

Rebecca Hossack

*Robert Jake Campbell Jnr, artist: born Kempsey New South Wales 1944; married (two sons, two daughters); died Kempsey 13 July 1993.*