

Paris flat's window into Aboriginal art

Australia's love affair with Aboriginal art is cramping the plans of Paris-based art dealer Stephane Jacob, writes **Bill Pheasant**.

Stephane Jacob holds regular "information nights" in his flat near the Arc de Triomphe in Paris where potential art buyers come to view a range of works and hear about the contemporary Australian art scene.

Jacob, who studied art history and fell for Australia, admits his gallery Arts D'Australie is unorthodox, but he has a marketing man's keen eye for novelty and a passion for Australia's art.

"They come at 8 o'clock. They sit down on the couch and I talk about the works for an hour or so. People usually stay until midnight!" Jacob said at the end of a recent trip to Australia.

"It has got a lot of attention in Paris. When you work from a flat, it is very atypical — it can be viewed as amateurish — but I have developed a very strong database of clients. And also it allows me to develop a certain intimacy with people."

Jacob returned to Paris this week to prepare for a new show through Art Paris, a collection of 85 galleries exhibiting at the Carrousel du Louvre next month.

His six-week buying tour through outback Australia included an \$80,000 series of works for the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, a branch of the Louvre that focuses on Africa and the Pacific.

He says knowledge of contemporary Australian art in Europe is scant, and serious arguments still need to be raised to have Aboriginal art considered part of the contemporary genre beside Western artists he stocks such as Rosalie Gascoigne, Georges Raftopoulos and Rick Amor.

So Europeans are wary of the prices being achieved for Australian works. "Anything above \$15,000 to \$20,000 is considered quite expensive," Jacob said.

"I try to maintain my prices as low as possible. I have just spent several weeks on a trip around Australia, and one of the big issues I had was being able to find works of high quality at reasonable prices. It is very hard for me to get people in Europe to follow that structure."

His art fair exhibition is dedicated to Geoffrey Bardon, the art teacher — who died in May — credited with introducing acrylics and canvases to the central Australian community at Papunya in 1971, sparking the massive growth of Aboriginal art.

Jacob's recent tour of outback communities — he has formed links with groups of artists in regions such as Haast's Bluff and Kintore — will



Stephane Jacob says Europeans have little knowledge of contemporary Australian art.

Photo: PATRICK CUMMIN

take his stock of works to 1100. Over seven years, Arts D'Australie has sold more than 600 works to collectors, whom Jacob describes as largely individuals passionate about art rather than corporations dedicated to investment.

Since opening his business in 1996 after a year living in Australia, Jacob has attracted more than his fair slice of attention. France's prominent daily *Le Monde* has featured Jacob's venture on its front page; the Louvre magazine splashed its cover with a work he sold to the

renowned gallery in 1998; and in 2000, Parisians and tourists were bemused by a black-and-white John Kelly special — a suspended cow — in a tree on the Champs Elysée.

The 34-year-old puts his *Australien* connection down to his best friend — his father had been France's ambassador to Australia — and to his year-long antipodean sojourn in 1995.

A link through painter Betty Churcher brought him into contact with Aboriginal art along with other contemporary works. "I realised

how little knowledge we had of Australian art in Europe, particularly Aboriginal art," Jacob said. His study major, symbolist art of the late 19th century, gave him an instant link.

"I was quite interested by their relationship to the land, to the environment," he said. "I was quite shocked by the number of works around, and by the discrepancy between the good and poor quality art."

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