



TALL and elegant, with charmingly formal manners and a devastating sense of humour, Stephane Jacob is quintessentially Parisian. In the bourgeois environment of a fashionable cafe on the Avenue de la Grande Armee, he arrives for lunch with the easy confidence of a man born to privilege. And yet, 12 months later, he appears equally comfortable in a rickety bistro in Sydney's Potts Point, shouting above the noise to joke about New Zealanders and sheep.

At Delmore Downs station in the Northern Territory, where the atmosphere is an unsettling mix of mind-bending remoteness and serious money, he is quietly watchful as canvas after dazzling canvas is rolled out before him — by Emily Kngwarreye, Kathleen Petyarre, Gloria Petyarre and other Anmatyerre-speaking stars of the indigenous art renaissance. And in Ampilatwatja, a tentatively burgeoning art centre nearby, he squats easily on a dusty veranda, waiting for the local artists to arrive for a cup of tea and a chat.

In July and August, Jacob made a heroic six-week tour of Australia — overland from Perth to Darwin, via Port Hedland and Alice Springs, with two weeks of flying between the state capitals to cap it off — calling on an exhaustive list of artists, dealers and institutions en route.

At just 34, he is already an established dealer of antipodean art in Europe. He has sold half a dozen contemporary Aboriginal works to the Musee National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie in Paris, as well as traditional artefacts to a handful of regional natural history museums. He was behind the internationally reported installation of John Kelly's iconic cow up a tree — a specially commissioned 4 tonne bronze version, 8m high — in the Champs d'Elysee in 2000, and curated the permanent travelling exhibition the Australian embassy tours around France. In 1999, he mounted an exhibition of Australian art in Brussels; this year he organised another one in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

In September, he took his usual booth at Art Paris, something like Sydney's Affordable

THE FACE

Miriam Cosic
meets

Stephane Jacob

ART DEALER

Art Fair, in the Carrousel du Louvre, this year dedicating it to Geoffrey Bardon, the pioneering Australian art teacher who died in May. He has also organised the Australian section of an international art exhibition on the theme of rugby being held in Paris to coincide with the World Cup. The Australian embassy in Paris will hold an auction of the exhibited work on November 27.

"In Europe, when you speak to an artist, they will say, 'I'm a painter', or 'I'm a sculptor'," says Jacob during a brief stop in Sydney. "When you speak to people here, they will say, 'I'm an artist.' I feel things are moving along in a very fresh way here. There is a feeling of

'Australia is not a country that you can read about, it's a country you've got to experience'

freedom and a very strong relationship with the land and the light, and an incredible way of working with different materials, different subjects, different traditions."

Jacob's metaphorical love affair with Australia began with an actual love affair with an Australian during a year-long sojourn in Italy when he was fresh out of school. The youngest of three sons, he comes from a family steeped in humanism. His paternal grandparents were lawyers, activists who sought to bring Christians and Jews to a closer understanding. His father, too, was a

lawyer, who wrestled with the ethical issues of his day. His mother's side of the family were industrialists.

Returning to Paris from Italy, he enrolled for a degree course at the Louvre's art school, where he specialised in decorative arts of the 17th and 18th centuries and in 19th-century symbolist art.

He made lots of Australian friends and, later, visited Australia with his partner. "Australia is not a country that you can read about, it's a country you've got to experience," he says. "There were things for me that were quite amazing — pavlova, finding an avocado tree, the smell of eucalypt." He grins: "We went to the RSL in Coffs Harbour ..."

He worked for three years at the Louvre before multiple personal crises hit. He separated from his partner, illness dogged him and another family member. He needed a break and Australia called to him. In September 1995, he arrived on a 12-month working visa. He drove from Sydney to Cooktown, stopping constantly along the way. His parents joined him for Christmas and they travelled to Tasmania, to Melbourne, to Adelaide. When they left, he decided to tackle the Australian art world.

His best friend's father was the French ambassador to Australia at the time and he introduced Jacob to Betty Churcher, then head of the National Gallery of Australia in

me at the time," Jacob recalls. "Michael [Carr] pushed me. He said, 'Go on, let's do it together.' I bought the painting and sold it a few weeks later in Sydney — with Michael — to a client from Singapore. I knew it was the start of something."

He rang his parents and told them he wanted to open a gallery when he returned to Paris. "I had to do it, like I had to go to Italy and I had to go to Australia. There are things like that in your life, things you are meant to do."

In Sydney, he met artists of the calibre of Rosalie Gascoigne and Ann Thomson, who gave him paintings to sell. Others followed suit. Another painting that Jacob had fallen for in Canberra — a portrayal of the Resurrection by Linda Syddick Napaltjarri — would eventually make the cover of the Louvre's art magazine.

In 1996, he returned to Paris with his cache. He decided against opening a gallery, which would have obliged him to mount solo exhibitions. He found an elegant apartment near the Arc de Triomphe and began the intimate evening viewings that remain his modus operandi. Inviting friends at first, and then friends of friends, he showed them the paintings and spoke about them. He served Australian wines and "nibbles" — his English is now liberally sprinkled with Australian colloquialisms. "There is a strong interest in Australian culture in France but they don't have anything to hook it on," he says. "What I try to do, in my own way, is to find a place for Australian art in art history and to show its unique identity."

The French media immediately took notice. The mass circulation newspaper *Liberation* ran a picture on page one during his first week of operation. The ultra-serious *Le Monde* sent a journalist to interview him.

Jacob is not operating in virgin territory. Elaine Lewis, who ran an Australian bookshop in Paris before returning to Melbourne, had been spreading the Australian message for years. A French entrepreneur, Bernard Boris, has been promoting Australian film. "Little by little," says Jacob, "things are happening."

Canberra, and to Marie-Helene Gilly, an expert networker who had been introducing French expatriates to each other for decades.

Gilly put him in touch with a friend of hers, Isabelle de Beaumont, who had a passion for Aboriginal art and who would become Jacob's business partner in Australia. He met Sydney art dealers Tim Olson and Michael Carr.

In Canberra, he saw a painting by Kngwarreye — an intensely blue work — that spoke to him insistently. "I can't remember the price of it, but it was a significant price for