

Jon Campbell

Jon Campbell's art is built from snippets of suburban life. Songs half-heard on the radio, signs glimpsed from a car and voices echoing round a backyard are transferred into works that can seem more like posters, lists or banners than paintings. But Campbell is looking for something fundamental in these fragments. 'She'll be right' is no throwaway phrase. In it Campbell identifies the national ethos expressed in Australia's idiomatic fatalism: 'No worries', 'Yeah', 'Maaate, it's all good'.

The best word to describe Campbell's art is 'demotic', stemming from the Greek words *dēmos* (meaning 'the people') and *dēmotikós* ('common' or 'popular'). It fits an art that has its foundations in Melbourne's inner-western suburbs, one that speaks the languages of colloquial Australian English, street signage and popular music. Campbell's territory – Flemington, Kensington and Footscray – is gentrifying now but still reveals its roots in struggle town: noxious industries, freight yards and a population mixing old-school Anglo working-class with migrants from Asia, South America and Africa.

A demotic art signals a remarkable historical shift in the relationship between formal and informal culture, between high art and vernacular style. In his ground breaking book *The Long Revolution* (1961), the English cultural theorist Raymond Williams proposed 'a redefinition of the status of art and the finding of a means to link it with our ordinary social life.' This wasn't a matter of dumbing down art and elevating the everyday but rather of recognising that 'there are, essentially, no "ordinary" activities'.² In this 'social' definition, Williams suggested, 'culture is a description of a particular way of life'³ and 'art is ratified, in the end, by the fact of creativity in all our living'.⁴

At its heart, Campbell's art is an intuitive and thoughtful application of these principles. Everyday life provides the script: street slang, commercial signage and pop songs. Ordinary materials support its production, including enamel house paint, coloured pencils and permanent markers. The artist's sustained attention to suburban shopping strips, barbecue conversations and pub-rock gigs charts what Williams called the 'pattern of culture',⁵ making for an art that is

Born 1961, Belfast, Northern Ireland. Lives and works Melbourne.

a 'study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life'.⁶ Campbell's art is unpretentious, even humble. It is as if he has taken his lead from the American country singer Waylon Jennings, who celebrated the stoicism of the rural poor 'livin' in the love of the common people', warmed by 'smiles from the heart of the family man'. But the common people can do it hard in the western suburbs, as paintings titled *Diesel Fumes* (2005) and *Insufficient Funds* (2009) suggest. Like Jarvis Cocker singing Pulp's anthemic 'Common People', Campbell is suspicious of people who 'sing along with the common people ... because you think that poor is cool'.

Dr Chris McAuliffe

- Notes**
- 1 Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1961 p.37.
 - 2 Ibid., p.37.
 - 3 Ibid., p.41.
 - 4 Ibid., p.37.
 - 5 Ibid., p.47.
 - 6 Ibid., p.46.

Stacks On 2010
12 lightboxes in 3 stacks,
aluminium, 2 pac enamel spray
paint, acrylic, vinyl faces, 12
screenprinted, hand-stitched
banners, water-based printing ink,
cotton, linen, damask and towelling
stacks: each 400 cm approx.
lightboxes: each between 60 x 40 x
20 cm and 200 x 100 x 90 cm
banners: each between 300 x 100
cm and 200 x 120 cm
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