

JENNY ZIMMER meets the rag and bone man of Australian art, Murray Walker

Flotsam art turns tide of junk cult

JUNK is a problem for most people but a source of inspiration for Murray Walker. No council collector will capture the fascinating heap inside his front door; a mountain of home-made model boats and planes, plastic containers, axe handles, artificial flowers, an aqualung and a set of instructions for teacup fortune-telling.

Like Picasso, who hoarded flotsam and jetsam that could come in handy in making art, Walker needs several studios for storage. Picasso would fill one house, lock it up and buy another.

The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) is taking some off his hands for an exhibition, *Murray Walker: The River, the Port, the Journey*. It features three years' work using things washed up on the shore between Williamstown and the mouth of the Yarra.

Walker regards the installation as the outcome of a multi-layered journey. Brought up in the post-Depression "waste not, want not" school of life, he has always saved string, silver paper, buttons and bottle tops. In his family it was a moral imperative.

Today, the problem of pollution is also part of the brief. The port has turned up everything from home-made toys to sawn-off shotguns. "You can't keep sport and violence out of anything!" said Walker.

The "found" materials of his collages and constructions began their journeys at sea or up the river. Some come from distant continents, others via the gutters and creeks of suburban Melbourne. They are pounded by ocean and bleached by pollution. Walker pounces on beautifully weathered driftwood, but is equally fascinated by faded plastic containers and discarded cigarette lighters, which he uses as funnels on his driftwood ocean steamers.

Walker's boats, of all 40 types

that enter the Port of Melbourne but inspired by a toy boat found three years ago, signify the necessity of journeying over water to arrive in Australia. Their mode of manufacture — playfully glued and tacked from slabs of wood and decorated with miscellanea — suggests the journey from childhood to maturity. A whole flotilla is assembled at ACCA.

The weekly collection method started with "finding" receptacles — old sacks, nets, boxes and containers. These were then filled, and left at set points for retrieval.

But there were mysterious disappearances. He later learned that artists Bill Hay and Cathy Drummond could not believe their luck when, doing a similar walk, they "found" the interesting bundles. Walker was forgiving; he claims much of his support comes from younger artists.

Back in the studio, the odds and ends are assembled into free-standing sculptures or wall pieces. Many are reminiscent of the tribal arts of Oceania. It is no accident several mask-like personages of weathered marine-ply hang fetish-like, in close proximity to near a genuine tribal mask with cowrie-shell eyes acquired on a field trip to the Trobriand Islands in 1980. Walker drilled holes for eyes and mouths and added faded fibres, strips of rusted metal and fragments of plastic.

A special collection of stirring-sticks and paint-encrusted scraps of marine-ply comes from Williamstown boat harbour.

"I play, make do, recycle. My materials have no intrinsic value except that they offer imaginative possibilities. I transform them into symbols of survival. As fetishes, they recall the past, but prevail over the

future," he said. "My activity is shamanistic, I deal in the magic of art and depend on the stimulation of the unexpected. First, I like to connect. Later I start to unfold the meaning of what has attracted me in the beginning."

Although Walker frequently applies paint, he does not feel the need to paint on stretched canvas. "I'm against style and codified art. I use paint to complete the ideas triggered by the associations emanating from 'found' objects.

"The associations of Belgian linen are restricted to the history of Western art and my sources are wider than that. They include the cultures of Asia and the Pacific, and the early history of survival in Australia as it is documented by our arts and crafts.

"Some see it as their life's journey to become sophisticated. It is quite another to

become aware of the simplest things," Walker said.

Ironically, to best appreciate Walker's work it helps to be sophisticated. The theme of this year's Sydney Biennale was the "Readymade", or the manufactured object recycled as art. This process entered 20th century art under the title Dada — or "nonsense" — formerly intended to take the mickey out of serious art, but now highly serious.

Walker's work falls into this tradition. The mundane and prosaic is transformed into visual poetry.

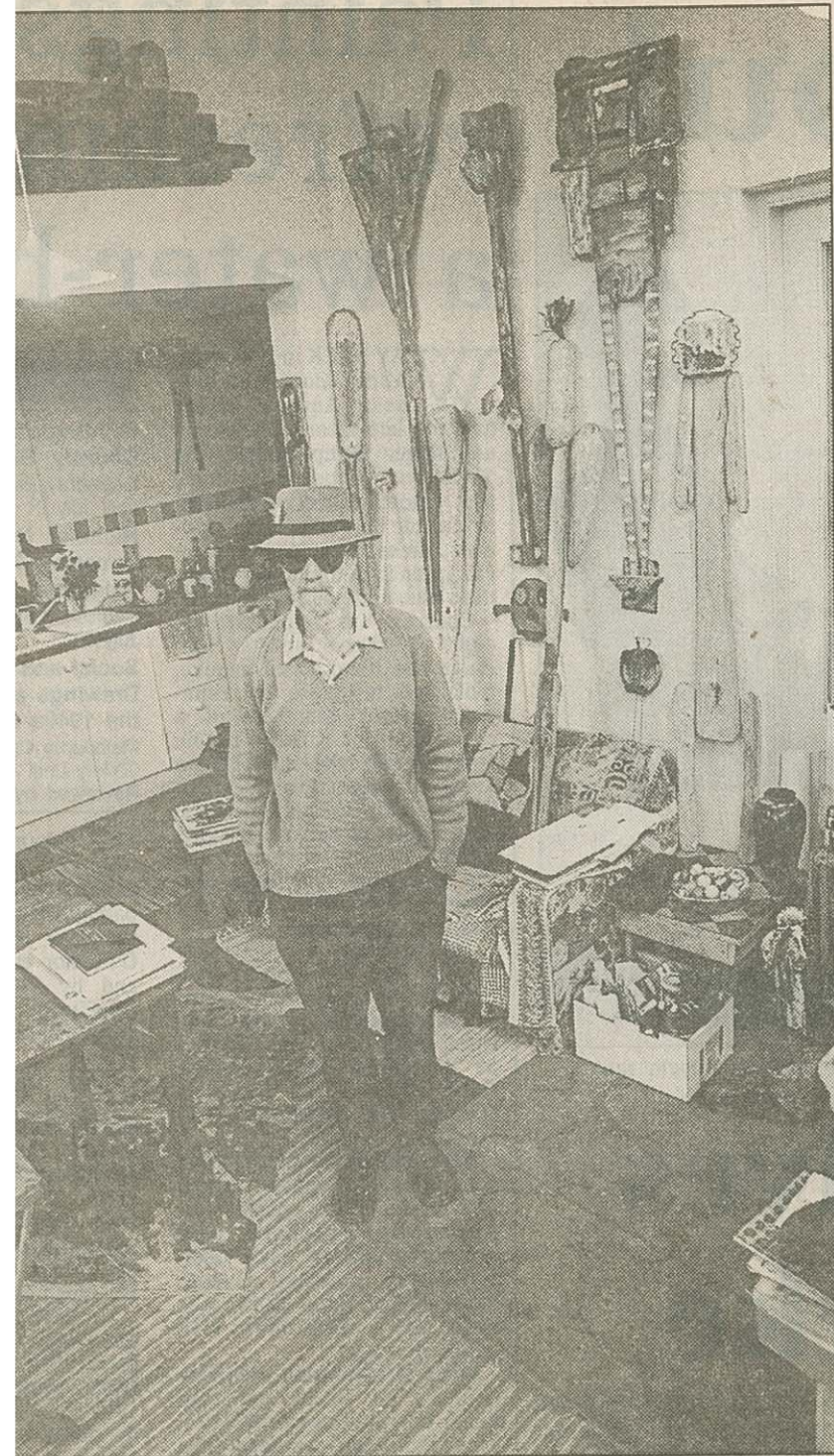
He said: "We all need to carve out a piece of life which isn't manipulated by others, that reflects decisions based on how one thinks, sees and feels. This is a primal need, one that ensures survival in a culture that is no longer reinforced by religion or true human interaction."

Returning from Papua New Guinea in 1980, Walker became obsessed with what he regarded as a failure of nerve in Australian culture. He could not discern the renewing forces or informed criticism needed to meet new challenges which were, in their own way, greater than those faced by the first settlers.

Walker thinks we do not show enough faith in our past culture, which has been cast aside for a world culture determined by electronic transmission.

"We seemed like the loneliest people on earth, sheltering from the blast of a great land of which we know, or care, little," he said. "Such traditions as we had seemed buried in history books. I wanted to bring the strands together so all Australians, from whichever migration, would know what a vital culture we had, and could have again."

■ *Murray Walker: The River, the Port, the Journey* is at ACCA, Dallas Brooks Drive, until August 12.



of his storerooms, surrounded by well-ordered junk.

Picture: David Highet

SUNDAY HERALD
July 15, 1990