

Painting proud, bewildering pasts

By VIRGINIA TRIOLI

THE clues can be found, half buried like elusive nuggets, in the biography section of Stephen Bush's exhibition catalogue.

While the minutiae of this artist's life are printed with the usual sobriety and exactitude — the training, the exhibitions, the acquisitions, the press — bang in the middle of this seriousness, the careful reader will find a section, curiously named 'Selected Influences'.

It is here that 32-year-old Stephen Bush lists bands such as Captain Beefheart, The Gun Club, Tom Verlaine, the Moodists, Rose Maddox, REM and the Del Fuegos. Mention is made of his parent's Western District farm and Methodist upbringing. Stephen Bush lists — straight, no irony — his collection of 14 pairs of western boots, 27 western shirts and four western belts.

But describing all this as important influences comes as no surprise. Like the proud and

bewildered pioneers of his paintings, Bush himself has become something of a western hero. His installation of paintings at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 'Claiming', pitches him into the same bogus landscapes and fictional frontiers as his ghostly subjects.

Bush's painting has always lent weight and a kind of ironic "authenticity" to western, Australian and pastoral myths and legends. He has painted early explorers, frontiersmen, cowboys and heroes as sepia-colored ancestors from a heroic past.

Anachronistic figures such as Buffalo Bill and turn-of-the-century gold miners stand frozen in front of landscapes that look more like Victorian dioramas — the sort of mock background in front of which giggling tourists are photographed at Sovereign Hill. They look "real" and they seem so sternly painted: and yet all the figures, almost every one is of Stephen himself.

"Well, they could be me," says the oblique Bush, "but it's more significant that they are one particular person repeated over and over.

They are not just self-portraits."

Indeed they are not. Stephen Bush images himself as a massive Napoleon figure, an Aboriginal trooper, a luckless gold miner, and a female Victorian artist. Each time his lean and haunted face appears in a painting, the effect is less of an image of the artist in dress-up, than of a generic, floating historical figure. Bush takes the fabrication of history very seriously.

"The painting of Buffalo Bill Cody — 'Mythmaker', 1986, is a good example of that," Bush explains. "He fabricated his own history and the 'spirit' of the West; he elaborated on it in the same way we do now, but we treat Cody as real and authentic.

"I thought that painting was pretty over the top at the time," Bush smiles. "I would never want to paint a particular person like that anymore."

The monumental quality of 'Mythmaker' is noticeably absent in Bush's more recent work, where the subject is splintered into many separate and reduced parts. The stand-out painting of the show, 'Plains of Promise', represents five weary yet hopeful Bushes, one riding side-saddle in a blue gown, gazing out over a stony plain. Rigged out in finely detailed and too-neat-to-be-true western gear, the painting's grandeur is in its falsity and Bush's obvious love of the genre.

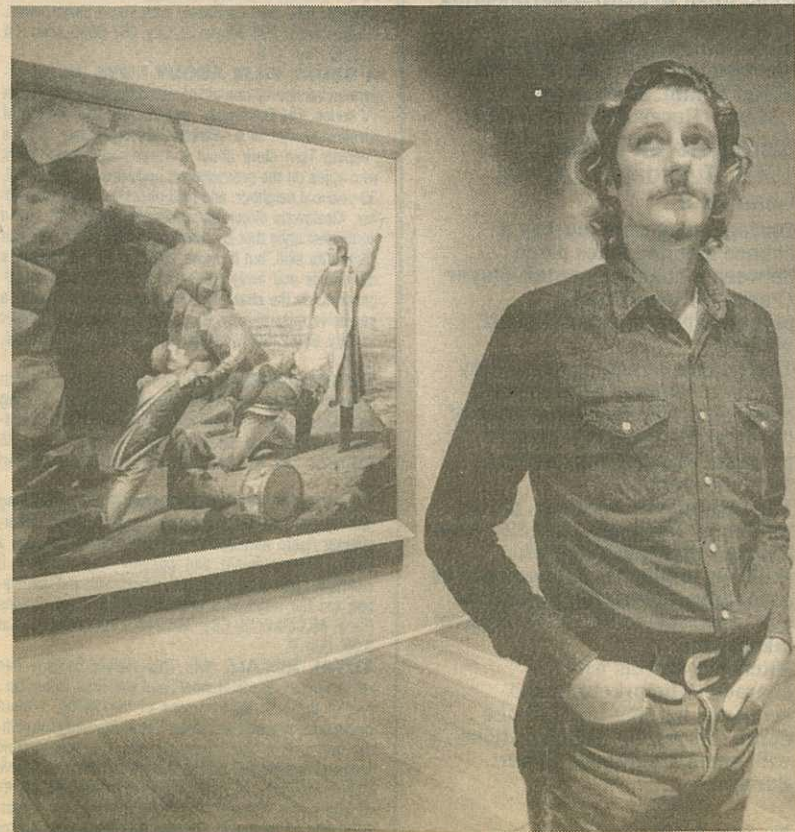
"I am trying to deal with issues of the use of the land, and ideas of imperialism and colonialism. That's why I paint myself as a black person in one painting and a woman in another. It's not as simple as saying that is actually me. It's about coming to terms with the different parts of yourself."

As extensions of Bush's declared "influences", the paintings work as homages to the western genre. His passion was made notorious by another Melbourne artist, John Campbell, in 1989 when Campbell painted a portrait of Bush surrounded by his collection of cowboy boots. As both a revelatory portrait, in the 19th Century sense of the term, and as a joke, it worked.

"The idea of history in these paintings cannot be trusted," says Bush. "You may believe it, and it may seem real, but I am giving it and taking it away at the same time."

► Stephen Bush's installation 'Claiming' is at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art until 17 March. Inquiries: 654 6422.

Picture: CATHRYN TREMAIN



Stephen Bush: takes the fabrication of history very seriously.