



Rosemary Petyarre, "Medicine Leaves".



Anna Petyarre, "My Country in the Flood 2016".

The art that opened Enrico's eyes

By Helen Musa

"WHEN the penny drops, it drops," retired public servant and art collector Enrico Saccardo says of his passion for Australian Aboriginal art.

He's been collecting for around 35 years, starting with the "bright, striking" pictures of Pro Hart, then moving to general Australian art, with a few Archibald finalists under his belt, with a firm view that "European art is pretty well uncollectible now, and if you happen to own a Picasso print, you'd best send it to London, Paris or New York".

But Aboriginal art, which he now regards as one of the glories of Australian culture, that's a different matter altogether.

Right now he's showing off the very tip of his collection at Kyeema Gallery in an eclectic mix of the art he loves most by Australia's Aboriginal artists.

Not surprisingly, the exhibition is called "An Eclectic View" and, with an exceptional range of artists and prices ranging from under \$100 into the thousands, he's hoping that Canberrans who come to see the show will also "get it" when it comes to our indigenous art.

Saccardo's arm was twisted by the co-owner of Capital Wines, Bill Mason, to exhibit at Kyeema, normally the home of local landscape art, and now they're looking forward to staging at least two more shows this year.

Born in Rome and as a young child surrounded by

art, even in small churches that boasted Caravaggios on their walls, Saccardo emigrated with his family aged nine in 1971, coming directly to Canberra because his mum had a sister here.

He was schooled at Hackett Primary and Copland College in the late 1980s, before joining the public service, from which he has now retired.

All the while, Saccardo was collecting Australian art, but early on he didn't "get" Aboriginal art, putting it in the too-hard basket culturally.

That was until noted collector Michael Eather of FireWorks Gallery in Bowen Hills, Brisbane, and the late Judith Behan of Chapman Gallery in Manuka, began to educate him, to train his eye.

"Judy began trying to get me in, to guide me, but I couldn't see it," he says.

But eventually the penny dropped and he's never looked back and continues to travel Australia looking for art works, admitting that his search sometimes drives his family up the wall.

Through Eather, he was to befriend the celebrated Papunya artist Michael Nelson Tjakamarra while he was here to execute his mosaic in the forecourt of Parliament House. Nelson is represented in the Kyeema show.

"I'm showing lots of paintings in a decent price range

and it's an 'eclectic' collection representing not just different parts of Australia but different eras," he says.

Saccardo's knowledge shines out in the walkthrough as he shows me works by Nelson, devout Catholic artist from the Kimberley, Shirley Purdie, and Gloria Petyarre, exponent of the healing yam leaf imagery that permeates her work and that of her descendants such as Rosemary and Anna Petyarre, also on show.

Then there's the work of Marlene Young Nungurrayi, a Pintupi woman strongly influenced by the late Emily Kame Kngwarreye, of whose work he says: "I love the way people explore different media... it used to be just ochres and acrylics but now everything is in the mix, I love it".

One of the most exciting components of this exhibition, to him, is work by a group of young artists working west of Maningrida in Arnhem Land, whose recent paintings he bought through a friend. These are the lowest priced paintings, but he predicts a bright future for the artists.

Saccardo is not buying so much work now, saying, "my main problem is letting go of things... some paintings will have to go into the coffin with me".

"As a collector I'm filling in the holes," he says. "I'm not an academic but I know what I need for my collection. Although I hope I never complete it. I always like to push forward."

"An Eclectic View, Australian Aboriginal Art: Exploring 50 Years of Modern Indigenous Art From Papunya to Now", Kyeema Gallery, at Capital Wines 13 Gladstone Street, Hall, Thursday-Monday until August 30.



Enrico Saccardo.