

Crossing cultural borders

Christophe Stibio finds his artistic muse in China, writes ALISON BARCLAY

WHEN a Frenchman speaks English, most ears — especially female ones — tune in with rapture.

Now give the Frenchman a mouthful of choppy Chinese dialect. See him plod to school under a dull Shanghai sky. He has inks and pens; he will master the squiggles of calligraphy as well as any native.

But during his four years as an art student in China, Christophe Stibio and his charming accent got used to being objects of suspicion.

“There is a strong idea in Chinese art schools that foreigners can’t learn Chinese painting; they are just there to play,” says the Bordeaux-bred artist, who took a degree in Chinese

from my window in France three years ago. There are links between the three places I have been visiting and staying.”

Fed up with French art schools’ focus on theories and concepts, Stibio hit a dead end at 25. If ever he was to express himself, he needed to learn how to paint.

In 1989 he left for Beijing, having won a National Academy of Fine Arts scholarship. But his scholarship was frozen by the Tiananmen massacre. Stibio was diverted to Shanghai, where no one spoke the Mandarin he had strived so hard to learn.

“For four or five months, I could not understand a thing,” he recalls.

“But at the same time, I was in China studying what I wanted to study, and that was more overwhelmingly exciting than the stress of not being able to understand everything I was hearing.”

In 1993 Stibio and his Australian wife moved to Melbourne and had the first of two children. It was not a happy time.

“Compared with the thrill of the



Global mix: Christophe Stibio combines Chinese calligraphy with the colours of the Australian outback. Picture: LUCY SWINSTEAD

before he even took a step out of France.

Now Stibio has become that modern global mixture of the exotic and the local.

His vast paintings, sprawled over rice paper on the walls of Footscray’s Gabriel Gallery, owe their water-

decision for me to go to China, coming to Australia was far from it,” he admits. “It was most un-wanted for me to come here.”

THEN he went bush. His art was never the same again.

“When I went to the Flinders Ranges, I was gobsmacked. That’s when I started injecting colour into my paintings. Before that, I used black, white and grey.

“I use the paint as I use ink. If you put more or less water with it, you can get these millions of variations of the medium, which relates to the topic that you choose to talk about.”

And Stibio has not forgotten what he was taught. Before picking up a brush, he assumes a Sinitic serenity. “My Chinese training has taught me that you have to practise a lot to find the treeness in the tree,” he says.

Mapping The Landscape, Footscray Community Arts Centre, until next Sunday.