

Examining both sides

In studying slave history, Charles Campbell has unearthed a dual nature to suffering

By Searlina Bodden

Every time Charles Campbell surveys his work *but these bodies...*, exhibiting now at *Rousings* at the National Gallery – he sees not only a poignant discussion of intimacy and slavery, he sees his own face staring back at him.

Campbell painted an inverted self-portrait into the four-canvas piece. On the first: an abstract interpretation of sea and sky. On the second: the words “but their bodies actually touch each other”. On the third: a disturbing image of bodies laying side by side. On the fourth: bodies hang, almost as if from gallows but upside down. And this is where the viewer would see Campbell’s self-portrait.

The piece, states the Canadian-based artist, discusses the “appalling” conditions under which slaves were sent from point-of-sale to place of work. During the cargo and “within that hardship”, Campbell is investigating, through his art, the possibility for intimacy.

“It’s not just about dehumanisation or the appalling circumstances. It is also the way the situation virtually creates the condition for intimacy,” he says.

Out of this, Campbell –



Charles Campbell searches for a resolution in *but these bodies...* on display now at the National Gallery. Photo: Supplied

who trained at Concordia University in Canada, as well as University of London, has hypothesized one positive outcome in his work – that perhaps a feeling of solidarity was borne of these gruesome experiences – one that may have provided temporary solace at the time and unity for generations afterwards.

He does not feel that his interpretation is controversial.

“It’s mentioning historical events and looking at the kind of contemporary residue they left behind. I’m not telling anyone to think in any particular way,” he says.

Campbell feels there is a survival mechanism in searching for meaning

behind the past plight of his people.

“You have to have a strategy for getting through this and taking it somewhere else,” he says. “It doesn’t justify it, but there is some release in it.”

Charles Campbell not only paints, but also works in installation, art critique and curation. He operates a small art gallery in Canada.