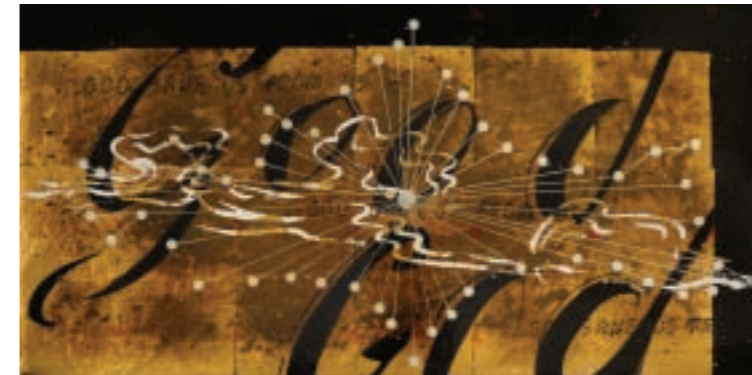




# Quiet achiever

Graphic, abstract and with a defiant prod at our colonial past, artist Constantine Nicholas' work is steeped in Western Australia's cultural landscape. **WORDS SIAN BRIGGS**



Google search the name Constantine Nicholas and, from 354,000 world-wide matches, including an actor, a doctor, a reverend, a mathematician and a Nancy Drew sleuth character, it's a Perth-born artist that appears at the top of the search engine. The same Constantine Nicholas also appears as number four, six and seven in the top 10 matches – not bad for a self-confessed late artistic bloomer.

"I could always draw when I was at school," Constantine explains, as we stroll around his 15th solo exhibition *Untitled Transactions*. "But it didn't seem like a vocation that was optional. I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life until I started doing it."

His latest work, rich in his characteristic blend of graphic talent and history, explores colonisation and the issue of cultural identity in Australia. It features an exquisite, multi-layered amalgamation of materials he considers "infused with the content of imperial culture and high capitalism" – gold and silver metal leaf, oil, ink, felt pen and varnish.

Constantine, who is now based in Sydney, raises issues such as our ideas of assimilation and possession of land by combining these materials with historical fragments, taken from maps, illustrations and observations as well as botanic, trade and astronomic influences. According to the 44-year-old artist, the work contains a variety of extraordinary objects – "from eyelets and upholstery nails to batteries and a circuit board" – that helps each piece tell a unique historical tale. But, he stresses, "I try not to comment. I just want to raise questions."

He doesn't shirk when asked his personal opinion on Australia's cultural identity. "This country could have been colonised by any number of cultures,"

LEFT: *Untitled (goodgod)*. ABOVE: *Untitled (twomoongenie)*.



Untitled (jamescook3000).



“It could be coined as graphic, as abstract, or as post-colonial expressionism but I don’t want to call it anything, to be honest. It’s up to the viewer or curator to decide what it is.”

## FROM THE ARTIST’S MOUTH

Constantine Nicholas reveals his favourite pieces from *Untitled Transactions*.

### Untitled (jamescook3000)

2004 Oil, ink, vinyl, enamel, eyelets and metal leaf on canvas  
75 x 150cm

“This work is the amalgamation of documents from Cook’s voyages, one being from a map of the Endeavour River (present day Cooktown) where his ship, the *Endeavour*, was damaged and repaired, plus images based on Cook’s illustrations and observations of the Transit of Venus in Tahiti in 1769. The central text is James Cook’s actual signature in metal leaf. For me, this work is a battleground where the different forces collide to shape the

future. I attempt to get into the imagination of the navigator, being aware of his historic importance and how influential he would be to shaping our future world.”

### Untitled (twomoongenie)

2004 Oil, ink, upholstery nails, joss paper and metal leaf on canvas  
30 x 40cm

“In this work you will notice Aboriginal place names, delicate swirls of gold and silver leaf wearing tiny black dots, a Chinese seal stamped in red ink, one black and two pale silver circles. This is a mini creation story, where the formations of life are beginning.

The location of this is uncertain and the genie symbolised by the swirls and smoke has disappeared after performing his magic, leaving Aboriginal place names, traces of matter and the words ‘you wish you could do this’.”

### Untitled (goodgod)

2005 Diptych - Oil, ink, enamel and metal leaf on canvas  
50 x 200cm

“This work is inspired by the sense of grandeur of early exploration to new lands. The golden ground (new lands) hosts silver lines that radiate from one circle to connect it with others. These lines refer to mapping

coordinates and discovered points on the compass. The left panel being Rottneest Island and the right panel the society islands, with Tahiti being in the centre. Floating under it all are the words ‘Good God’ painted in large black script. Two electronic text messages are included. One reads ‘What a feeling’ while the other states ‘God save us from us’. As an explorer, it’s really about coming across something new and being aghast with wonderment or fear as in ‘Good God!’ However, as this is a diptych, the reverse expression ‘God Good’ is revealed. We believe that God is good, but we’re left with uncertainty.”

he points out. “And we’ve completely denied the original landowners. As a nation, I also think we’re part Asian whether we like it or not.” He pauses, before adding: “But I do think we’re learning to assimilate better.”

Constantine grew up in Wembley, the only son of Australian-Greek parents, and attended the Claremont School of Art two years after graduating from City Beach High School. “A friend of mine enrolled there; I thought I’d give it a go too, and it evolved from there.” A Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Canberra School of Art, and a Graduate Diploma in Professional Art Studies from the University of New South Wales followed. “In the early days, my work was diverse and could have gone in any direction,” he says. “But I ended up focusing on history and became interested in the process of creating it.”

Although his work is renowned for being steeped in historical importance, Constantine admits that he was no buff in the early years. “It gradually came together when I started questioning my own identity and what it means to be Australian,” he says. “In art, you discover a medium and where it’s going to go. Then you need to work out what you want to say and to do that you need to discover a lot about yourself – who you are, what your background is and how you fit in with everyone else.”

“In art, you discover a medium and where it’s going to go. Then you need to work out what you want to say and to do that you need to discover a lot about yourself.”

His parents were born in Australia but he says his Greek heritage has definitely helped define his artistic style. “A lot of my work deals with my ethnic background and where it is placed in this society,” he says.

Despite his hard-earned success, including 15 solo exhibitions, 17 group exhibitions, a New York-based residency and inclusion in more than 12 prestigious collections, Constantine still has a day job teaching digital art at TAFE. Like many artists, his goal is to concentrate on his art full-time. “I contemplated leaving it at one point but I couldn’t,” he sighs. “But doing this full-time is a realistic goal. You have to look at it long-term and be patient.”

His modesty isn’t surprising when you meet Constantine in the flesh. He seems unflappable, and is down-to-earth and softly spoken, the antithesis of the oft-pretentious artiste. Even his weighty moniker, with its Mediterranean resonance, implies a sense of tortured genius and paint-spattered palettes. But contrary to stereotypes, he’s an unassuming chap, conservatively dressed and blessed with impeccable manners and a quiet demeanour. When asked to describe his style, he says humbly: “It’s hard for me to describe. It could be coined as graphic, as abstract, or as post-colonial expressionism but I don’t want to call it anything, to be honest. It’s up to the viewer or curator to decide what it is.” Then he asks earnestly: “How would you describe it?”

What he does declare with resolute determination is this: “In five years’ time, I’d like to be away from the rat race, living in quiet isolation and concentrating on my work. I want to create pieces that work on lots and lots of levels, the kind that blow people away when they look at them.”

So, any plans to return to his hometown to do that? After all, his parents and sister are still in WA and there’s a plethora of remote locations for him to call home. He smiles in a non-committal way, but does admit to a “never say never”.

“The lifestyle and the beaches here are fantastic. I’m continually referencing places like Rottneest in my work. It’s such a special place to me.”

Suddenly, the artist within reignites as he remembers a creative windfall. “Plus,” he adds excitedly, “the maritime history is just fascinating.” ■