Canberra's twice-hidden culture

Nobody outside Canberra knows that Canberra has a culture. It's hidden. Journalists come from all over Australia to report on *their* politicians in The House on the Hill. There's nothing new in that. But it gets more complicated…

Nobody knows what Canberra's second language is. It's hidden. It has four names. Even people who speak the language don't know its unique significance to Canberra. Now, Tim Brook and Ruth Hingston, two Canberra artists are discovering the fascination of this language and the culture that surrounds it. They call it 'our twice-hidden culture'. 'It's not ours, but it *is* ours! We have no family ties with these people, but the more we find out about their lives, the more we find out about ourselves as Canberrans.'

This story begins in 1949 at the start of the Snowy Mountains Scheme, an enormous feat of engineering that required the work of thousands of labourers and technicians who arrived from all over the world. Eventually more than 100 000 people arrived in the mountains. It was no surprise that large numbers of these people came from the area that was then called Yugoslavia. Many Yugoslavs were already familiar with contemporary methods in engineering and construction, and they had a long history of coping with the hardships of living and working in harsh mountain terrain.

In the decades that followed, Canberra was growing, and people were drawn from the Snowys to Canberra's gentler environment and wider opportunities. Canberra became a multicultural city and workers from the Snowy Mountains Scheme ensured that a significant contribution to Canberra's culture came from Yugoslavia. Of the many Yugoslavs who had arrived in Kalgoorlie in the early 1900s, most had lost their language after a couple of generations; in contrast, their language and culture have remained alive in Canberra. The painful dissolution of the former Yugoslavia and its painful transition to capitalism have both contributed to a flow of new arrivals in Canberra. According to the 2006 ABS figures, Canberra is the only major city in Australia where their language is spoken in more homes than any language other than English.

Tim Brook and Ruth Hingston began to stumble on parts of this story in the early 1990s. Eventually, in 2007, they managed to organise a trip to Montenegro to spend two months as artists-in-residence at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Cetinje. One result of this residency is a collaborative work about Montenegro called *Nije Crna*, which is on show at the Huw Davies Gallery in the Manuka Arts Centre until 15 July 2008. Another result of their residency is an ongoing commitment to fostering cultural links between Canberra and the countries of the former Yugoslavia.

As Tim explains it, 'We want to start by bringing Montenegrin contemporary art to Canberra. Montenegro doesn't usually appear on our radar—the population of the whole country is only twice the population of Canberra—but their art is fascinating. We have so much to learn from each other. I know I'm oversimplifying but I think *we* understand sunlight and *they* understand black—both literally and metaphorically"

And the name of the language? Well, there are many languages in the former Yugoslavia. The main language used to be called Serbo-Croatian; now it's Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian or Montenegrin, depending on who you ask.

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