



# Smart art or a quick buck?

**W**hen Paul Keating announced an \$82 million boost for the nascent multimedia industry last year, the small, radical group of artists working in the electronic art field in Australia took some heart. But it wasn't long before a 'return on the investment' became the program's guiding principle - leaving some wondering about the pursuit of artistic excellence.

Jon McCormack is one of Australia's top computer animation artists. Last month he won a prestigious, international electronic art award for his work, *Turbulence* - an interactive installation which explores the virtual world of computer-created imaginary life forms.

The prize, New Voices/New Visions sponsored by Interval Research and the Voyager Company, puts him among the top artists of his type in the world. McCormack has exhibited at Paris's Pompidou Centre, New York's Museum of Modern Art and at electronic art events in Japan and Europe.

He is one of a very small community of electronic artists which is already recognised overseas for its strength of ideas and radicalism. It's that creative edge which US and European computer design labs and companies are looking for. McCormack is being pursued by a number of research outfits in the US and says eventually, he will have to go overseas since the environment in Australia is so small and undeveloped.

*Turbulence* took three and a half years to complete and the bulk of the work was done in McCormack's spare bedroom in suburban Melbourne. The Australian Film Commission funded the project in 1990 - well ahead of *Creative Nation*.

McCormack says while he welcomes the support and recognition which *Creative Nation* has brought to the field of multimedia, he is concerned that overall, the funds are being targeted at 'low level, superficial business' aimed at producing a 'quick buck'.

When he attended one of the first Co-operative Multimedia Centre meetings - a major plank of *Creative Nation's* new media allocation - he left feeling depressed about the anti-creative, business-like approach.

## **We can have the best and break new ground at the same time.**

'The aims of *Creative Nation* are admirable,' he says 'but the emphasis has been misdirected.' The pressure for a fast return limits creativity since quality multimedia takes a long time to produce, he says.

But Tony Blackie, the newly appointed marketing manager for the Australian Multimedia Enterprise (AME) - the body which has received the lion's share of *Creative Nation's* multimedia budget - says 'commercial' doesn't necessarily mean 'lowest common denominator'.

'We can have the best and break new ground at the same time,' he says.

AME makes no apologies for its commercial approach to multimedia. 'It might not sit well with some people but if we're going to do this job properly and become a country that pursues excellence, then [what AME does] has to be commercial.' Blackie warns that AME will not be allocating funds just to sustain an artistic lifestyle. 'It's not a gravy train. This is about serious development of an industry.'

AME was allocated \$45.2 million under *Creative Nation* to establish a wholly-owned government company to encourage investment in Australian multimedia products and services. It is headed by media lawyer Martin Cooper who says AME will work towards 'an international marketplace but retain the individuality that makes Australia different.'

Troy Innocent, a 24-year-old electronic artist from Melbourne, says the small boost of funds to the Australian Film Commission under *Creative Nation* will do more for Australian electronic art and multimedia than the millions allocated to the AME.

'Australia could end up being a mere production facility for overseas companies,' he says. □

## **Multimedia matters**

According to the Australian Multimedia Enterprise's corporate plan, the local multimedia market is valued at around \$60 million but it is so small that even breaking even for the new industry will require international market penetration. The plan lists a number of facts about the Australian market:

- nearly 50 per cent of Australian homes have PCs with around half of those having a CD ROM;
- hit CD ROM titles sell between 10-20,000 units with most selling less than 1,000 at retail prices up to \$120;
- Australia was estimated to have about 30 CD ROM publishers in 1994 out of 1,300 worldwide;
- there are known to be around 30 multimedia firms and up to 1,000 individual developers/authors operating in Australia but AME believes there is interest from many more.