

A Dark Heart with a difference: Tony Albert

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FRIDAY 14 FEBRUARY, 2014

artsHub speaks to Tony Albert on the eve of Adelaide Biennale and the unveiling of his installation 108.



Image courtesy Tony Albert

With the [13th Adelaide Biennale of Australia Art: Dark Heart](#) nearly upon us, we thought we'd sit down with artist Tony Albert and ask him about his installation, *108*, the culmination of three years' work.

'It was a mammoth undertaking', said Albert. 'My plan was to do 500 things to get 108 but the reality is it was probably closer to 600 or 700.'

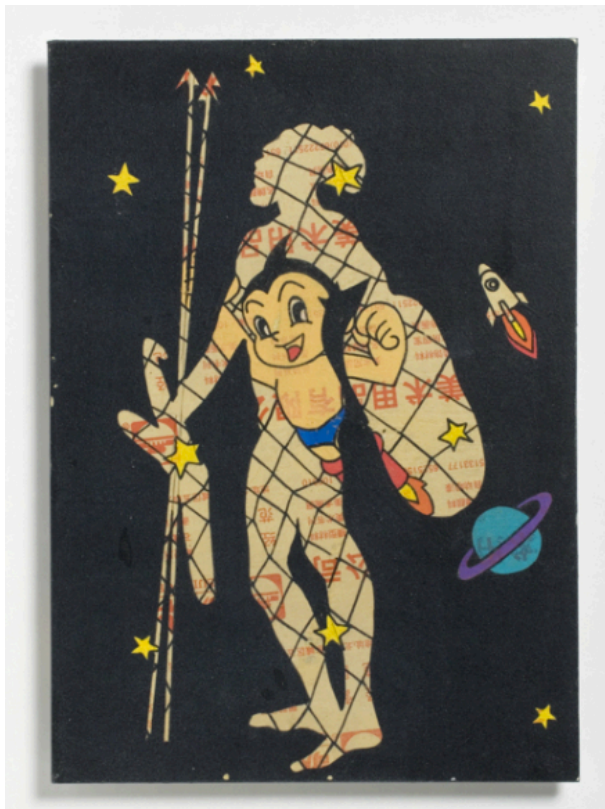
While we can be assured the scale of this work is impressive, one might wonder why such dedication to the number 108, and what indeed has it to do with Nick Mitzevich's theme for the Biennale?

Commissioned in 2010 by the private philanthropic Hong Kong collection, Conceptio Unlimited, Albert was one among several artists for this project, each approaching the number from a very individual perspective. Albert's interpretation has never been shown and has only recently completed.

'The number is very significant in non-Western terms – the number of beads on mandala, 108 element of life, the numbers themselves symbolise wholeness and infinity', explained Albert, 'What is interesting about that project, is that you can take idea that and make it your own. For me, the significance of the numbers breaking down to really simple elements was something that attracted me at the start.

'I was interested in the idea of dark heart as this pulsation or heartbeat that comes from the earth and within the context of Australia, so it is this life even though it is buried or under the surface. If you are quiet enough and understand it enough you can hear it, so I thought *108* was a good project for *Dark Heart*.'

The result is nine groups of 11 works accompanied by nine towers of playing cards each standing 108cm tall. The individual artworks have been mounted on aluminium and float slightly off the wall.



108 (detail). 2011-2013. Private collection Hong Kong. Photo Greg Piper

Sally Brand of Conceptio said, 'Albert's *108* continues to use Aboriginalia (a term Albert uses to describe objects that depict naïve images of Aboriginal people and their culture). What marks the *108* as a departure, however, is that it not only seeks to return power to the voiceless but also imagine a world free of power imbalance.

'It is a remarkable mash-up where any sense of hierarchy is difficult to perceive. With all 99 collages gathered, a visual landscape emerges where equality and acceptance are the norm, rather than the ideal', Brand added.

The installation, while grouped, will have an organic feel, each 'theme' taking on a character; for example the grouping Albert has titled *Beyond belief* is about police violence and brutality and has been hung in a very regimented way. It seems Mitzevich's Biennale will continue to probe the difficult questions.



108 (detail), 2011-2013; Private collection Honk Kong

Albert said, 'If you are doing 108 things not every one has to scream for attention. The most successful thing on that volume is a current or wave.

'The card towers have this idea of fragility so whilst seemingly structural, they could fall any minute. I think within the Australian landscape, not only politically but also environmentally, that was something that really interested me. There is also that element of chance and luck attached to the cards.'



I Am, You Are, We Are (2013), vintage playing cards. Courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf

While many of the cards are vintage Aboriginal playing cards sourced on eBay, there is a raft of imagery that captures Albert's desire to collect. He said, 'So many cards were made with the most bizarre images, thousands of images that make no sense at all. There is so much to engage with and look at.'

To coincide with the Adelaide Biennale, Albert's Sydney gallery, Sullivan + Strumpf, will show a small exhibition of his card towers opening 4 March.

And the surprises viewers can expect? Albert said: 'I think the painted elements, which always surprises people with my work as my background is fine art with oils. When I was at high school I spent one day a week in art college so my background is very traditionally trained.'

He added, 'It picks from the history of Tony Albert.'

'I think this piece *108*, more so than anything, is like the full stop or the bookmark. I feel it will change my practice.' He added, 'When you get a project like this you have a responsibility to push yourself further. I always believe your next work is your best.'

'These works have been put in storage the last three years as the groups have been finished, so it was a bit like Christmas unwrapping them and seeing them for the first time together.'

After the Adelaide Biennale *108* will be shipped off-shore to the Conceptio Collection. This is one of those rare moments to see this significant work in Albert's career.

The 13th Adelaide Biennale of Australian Art: Dark Heart is on show from 1 March to 11 May 2014 at the Art Gallery of South Australia. After the Biennale, Albert will focus on the construction of the first [Indigenous War Memorial](#) commissioned by the City of Sydney and due to be completed in 2015.