AUSTRALIA

SYDNEY ARTIST TONY ALBERT WINS BASIL SELLERS ART PRIZE FOR HIS ATTACK ON RACISM IN SPORTS

BY THE EDITORS

Tony Albert at the ANZAC War Memorial in Hyde Park, Sydney, 2013. Courtesy City of Sydney.

The Basil Sellers Art Prize 2014, aimed at encouraging artists to help promote Australia's sporting culture, has announced Sydney's Tony Albert as the winner of its AUD 100,000 (USD 94,000) prize on July 25.

Born in 1981 in Townsville, Queensland, Albert is best known for his works that combine text, drawing, painting and three-dimensional objects, and examine the legacy of racial stereotyping and the cultural misrepresentation of Aboriginal culture. His works are widely collected by galleries and museums in Australia, including Brisbane's Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art and Sydney's National Gallery of Australia.

When asked about his submission to the Basil Sellers Art Prize, Albert said to *ArtAsiaPacific*: "Sport has been one of the few mainstream activities where Aboriginal people have been celebrated for their achievements. Aboriginal sportsmen

and sportswomen, however, regularly have to deal with racist abuse, both on and off the field."

Albert's entry referenced two major incidents involving Indigenous players from the Australian Football League—the unforgettable moment in 1993 when St. Kilda's Nicky Winmar stood up against racist supporters, and the crowd abuse of Sydney Swan's Adam Goodes. Albert elaborates thusly:

"My application coincided with the 20th anniversary of Aboriginal football player Nicky Winmar making the cover of Melbourne's Sunday Herald *under the headline 'I'm black and proud of it.' The accompanying image of Winmar victoriously lifting up his shirt to point at his black skin after he'd been the target of incredible racist abuse throughout the game is now an iconic image in Australian sport and culture. This moment has been hailed as a watershed moment for Australians tackling the problem of racism in sport; however, I really had to question how far we have come in removing racism from sport, as just one month before I entered the application, a young girl called the prominent Aboriginal footballer Adam Goodes an 'ape' during a game. My final work looks at this incident and the following media coverage with the hope that these racist incidents will become stories of the past—that we'll tell them to our children by starting with the line 'Once upon a time.'"*

Selected from a field of over 300 entrants, Albert's winning project,*Once Upon A Time* (2013–14), is a collage of 23 framed paintings and found objects, hung in a rhombus-like formation over a big, red target sign—an arrangement that the artist had previously used in another work, entitled *Brothers* (2013). *Once Upon A Time*demonstrates the artist's cautiously optimistic attitude toward the resolving of racial discrimination, while the repeated motifs of gorillas, building blocks and toys give the work a sense of playfulness and accessibility that invites viewers to have a closer look at the solemn but urgent subject matter. Included in this work is also a letter from Albert to Gordon Bennett, which acts as a tribute to the recently deceased artist and toward his fight for Indigenous rights: "In my personal life and as an artist, Gordon Bennett has been deeply influential. The first time I saw his incredible paintings they opened up a whole new world of possibilities for me. In many of his works Gordon powerfully illustrates the cycle of racism and how it is handed down and taught from one generation to the next."

As a former player of Rugby League and an avid football fan, Albert recognizes the role sports plays in contemporary culture. He adds,"it creates a forum that many people can relate [to] and attracts a wide and varied audience. By talking about these issues, and bringing them into a space where we can discuss [them], we can make the world a better place."

Tony Albert's winning piece, and works by 15 other artists shortlisted for the prize, are currently being exhibited at the University of Melbourne's Ian Potter Museum of Art until October 26.