



Their message stick can be too hot to handle, but these local indigenous artists are creating a blaze of glory, igniting talent with passion, writes Phil Brown

After a busy week, the members of exciting Brisbane Aboriginal art group ProppaNOW down their paintbrushes and prepare to barbecue. In fact, the huge portable barbie, ready to be fired up outside the South Brisbane studio where some of them work, is the first thing I notice.

The artists were celebrating a hectic week leading up to a group appearance at the recent Cairns Indigenous Art Fair, where they were a star turn. Group member Tony Albert, a 30 year old with a growing international reputation, says the barbecue is an integral part of life in this art movement.

"We work together, we talk together ... we eat together," Tony says. "It's an amazing atmosphere. There's this great energy here, and as artists we are all working with a message, which is important."

The group pulls no punches, critiquing contemporary society and the injustices of Australia's colonial past. The artists have diverse backgrounds, from both near and far-flung regions of the state, and they are proud of that says ProppaNOW veteran, Laurie Nilsen.

"We've been accused of being elitist and we are, but we don't care," Laurie says. "To be in ProppaNOW, you have to be an Aboriginal artist and a Queenslander. That's the formula we work with and we know where we are heading."

That formula seems to be working because the group's seven members – Richard Bell, Laurie Nilsen, Vernon Ah Kee, Gordon Hookey, Jennifer Herd, Tony Albert and Megan Cope – are considered among Australia's most exciting artists, indigenous or otherwise.

Art dealer Josh Milani, director of Milani Gallery at Woolloongabba, represents several ProppaNOW artists and says the group, and the present Brisbane urban art scene in general, "will eventually be seen as, arguably, one of the key Australian art movements of this period".

"There's a strong sense of purpose and urgency in what they are doing," Josh says. "Most of them are making what could loosely be described as something that verges on activist art. There is so much art out there lacking in substance, caught up in aesthetic end games. This is art that has a reason for its existence."

ProppaNOW's resident bad boy Richard Bell is perhaps the most obvious activist, as shown by the confronting text that adorns his canvases. Bell, who burst on to the national scene in 2003,

winning the Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award, has famously declared "Aboriginal art – it's a white thing", and he has a seemingly endless supply of similarly thought-provoking statements at the ready. In one painting he asks: "Who made God?", while in another a woman declares "Thank Christ I'm not Aboriginal". The struggle of indigenous Australia both inspires and disturbs him.

"Certain growth industries are guaranteed to last forever, including funeral parlours and racism," Richard says. "There's an endless supply. I am provocative, I admit it. But I have mellowed over the years."

But not too much as his witty, acerbic edge has attracted international attention and a major survey exhibition of his work, Richard Bell: Uz Vs. Them, opens this week at Tufts University Art Museum in Boston, its first stop as a travelling exhibition in the US.

I ask Richard, who was there on a fellowship in 2010 and is about to jet out again, what sort of ambassador he will be for Australia. "A really good one, full of tact, stylish and very modest."

Richard was part of the innovative Brisbane Aboriginal art posse The Campfire Group in the early 1990s. Group godfather and pioneer of promoting indigenous art in Brisbane, artist and gallery director Michael Eather, recalls the spirit of that seminal band.

"Campfire played an early role in showing people what could happen when they worked together," he says. "It showed that rather than waving a lot of little flags, you can all wave one big flag. There was a lot of kitchen table politics talked in those days, where people would come and engage with art and artists. Occasionally, we would even sell artworks."

Michael's groundbreaking Fireworks Gallery, which began in Fortitude Valley but is now at Newstead, grew out of that movement and gave birth to NEWflames, a foundation to encourage new talent, co-founded by Brisbane art lover and philanthropist Ann Gamble Myer.

ProppaNOW's latest recruit, Megan Cope, is a product of that initiative. Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, also supplies new talent through its Bachelor of Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art degree program.

Program convener and ProppaNOW member Jennifer Herd says the course, which started in 1995, now has 25 students.

"It's a small course but we get results and former students like Vernon Ah Kee and



Tony Albert are good advertisements," she says.

Vernon Ah Kee represented Australia at the Venice Biennale 2009 and Tony Albert has, for the past year, been exclusively contracted to produce work for international art patron and philanthropist David Teplitzky, who is producing a book about Tony's work.

Another Brisbane artist with an international reputation who works in the studio with some of the ProppaNOW artists, but isn't a member of the group, is Judy Watson, who describes herself as "the improper one". Her designs feature on a CityCat ferry and a tilt train, and an exhibition of her works exploring historical and geographical themes will open at the Australian embassy in Washington DC later

this month. Brisbane-raised Judy says she enjoys the creative company of the ProppaNOW group.

"I like working here because it's a welcoming place. But there are also some tough conversations going on," she says. "People don't let each other off lightly. It's a gathering space too, and Richard has his barbecue, which gets a regular thrashing."

ProppaNOW artist Gordon Hookey is candid about the dialectic taking place at the South Brisbane studios. "We tell each other if the work is s--t," Gordon says. "These guys can be quite brutal, but in the end that improves the standard of the work."

Other Aboriginal artists working in Brisbane appreciate ProppaNOW's energy. New Farm-based Fiona Foley, a leading indigenous artist who is well represented in the collection at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, says what's happening here is "very dynamic".

"There's real camaraderie among the indigenous artists in Brisbane," Fiona says. "We're all working in different ways, but we talk about a commonality."

Fiona exhibits with Andrew Baker Art Dealer in Bowen Hills and Andrew describes her

SAY IT LOUD ... ProppaNOW members Richard Bell, opposite, and Tony Albert have attracted international attention; Judy Watson's designs can be seen on a CityCat and a tilt train; gallery director Josh Milani with a work by Vernon Ah Kee

as an artist who is "out there, way ahead of her audience".

"Her works are often controversial but also beautiful and full of meaning," he adds. A case in point: a series of staged photos showing indigenous people in Ku Klux Klan-style hoods, none of which sold at exhibition but were later snapped up by major museums and galleries.

Fiona's public art can be seen around the city, most notably at the State Library of Queensland, where her major work, *Black Opium*, is spread around the building, taking visitors on a

journey into the disturbing past of race relations in Queensland.

Bruce McLean, associate curator, Indigenous Australian Art at the Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art, says Fiona is an important artist and Brisbane is now front and centre of the national scene.

"With a group such as ProppaNOW, you have artists relating to contemporary Aboriginal existence," Bruce says. "Their close co-operation allows their messages to be projected that much further."

From November 12, GoMA will be featuring works by a number of the ProppaNOW artists from The James C. Sourris Collection of contemporary art. The wider GoMA collection includes a number of works by ProppaNOW artists, including Tony Albert's *SORRY*.

This major work marks Kevin Rudd's apology to the Stolen Generations. The word "sorry" is spelt out in letters made up of what Tony calls "Aboriginalia", kitsch retro items (paintings, ashtrays and so on) that demean Aboriginal people through condescending caricatures.

Richard Bell had his own response to the Prime Minister's apology and the title of his 2009 New York exhibition said it all: *I Am Not Sorry*. So there.

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