

Art Collector



Q&A WITH TONY ALBERT: THE TRUTH OF YININMADYEMI (THOU DIDST LET FALL)

We spoke to artist Tony Albert on his latest Sullivan+Strumpf exhibition YININMADYEMI: Thou didst let fall, which finishes on May 16.

***Thou didst let fall* features installations, paintings and sculptures- how do these different mediums enable you to explore your subject matter?**

I consider my work to be conceptually based, so usually when I know what it is I want to say I pick the best media to portray my idea. This is probably one of my most diverse exhibitions to date and I think that is partly because Indigenous military history is a subject matter I have been exploring for quite a number of years now. The works in the exhibition evolved very organically over a long period of time, and I think throughout the process I was drawn to different mediums at different points.

The exhibition explores the many hidden histories and stories of war, which aligns with your core belief that ‘the greatest gift we can give our children is historical truth’. How does your use of camouflage play in to this?

Previously, I have used a lot of targets in my work to draw attention to certain issues, for example, police brutality directed towards young black men. In a sense, camouflage is the complete opposite of a target – it speaks to ideas of concealment, erasure and eradication. In these new works I wanted to create a tension between the Aboriginalia and camouflage. Despite being almost suffocated by this overgrown, weed-like fabric, the faces and voices of Aboriginal people still burst through the surface.

You were commissioned by the City of Sydney to create a major monument honouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service personnel. *YININMADYEMI Thou didst let fall* comprises of four impressive seven-metre tall bullets and three fallen shells sculpted from steel, corten and black marble. What was your intention here?

Despite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service men and women having served in every war since the Boer War, their efforts have been largely unrecognised. This monument is part of a growing movement to change this misrecognition.

When Indigenous veterans returned from war, they faced abhorrent racism on all fronts. For example, unlike other service personnel, Indigenous soldiers were not given land settlements. In fact, they were still having their own land taken away from them. I wanted to shine light on this history, and I wanted to do so in a way that was confronting.

The work itself is inspired by my grandfather’s amazing story of survival, where during World War II he was captured and made a prisoner of war. The standing bullets represent those who returned home from war and the fallen shells honour those who did not.

What has been the response to this sculpture so far?

Overwhelming. Many people in the Indigenous community feel that this monument was long overdue and I'm proud to have been a part of reinstating our rightful place in history. The monument has empowered people and I've been really heartened by all the people coming forward to share their own military stories. *YININMADYEMI* doesn't shy away from the horror of war, nor does it sugar coat our history. The broader public have found the work both confronting and moving, which is what I had hoped to achieve.

You made history in 2011 when you became the first Aboriginal person to be selected as an Official War Artist by the Australian War Memorial. How did this experience affect the direction of your current works?

Undertaking a tour of duty with NORFORCE was such an incredible experience and a privilege. My family has over 80 years of combined military service, and so many of the issues that came up during my time with the Australian War Memorial were already somewhat familiar.

I think the experience really just galvanised my commitment to writing Indigenous service men and women into history. NORFORCE is made up of over 60 per cent Indigenous men and women. These people are responsible for protecting Australia's most vulnerable border, yet most Australians would have never even heard of them. I want to change this through my artwork, and have devoted the last two years of my practice to changing the dialogue around Indigenous military contribution.

At the core of your work is recognition of a very violent and oppressive history, but you explore this through an altruistic perspective that stresses positivity in the face of adversity. Can you discuss the positive aspects have you chosen to focus on in these works?

For me, optimism and positivity is a state of being. The altruism in my work is simply an extension of my disposition and worldview. Despite the subject matter being quite grim, I think there are a lot of positives to take away from these works. That Indigenous diggers fought so hard for recognition and continue to do so, despite the constant discrimination they face, is a testament to the resilience, pride and strength of our community.

Emily Cones-Browne
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