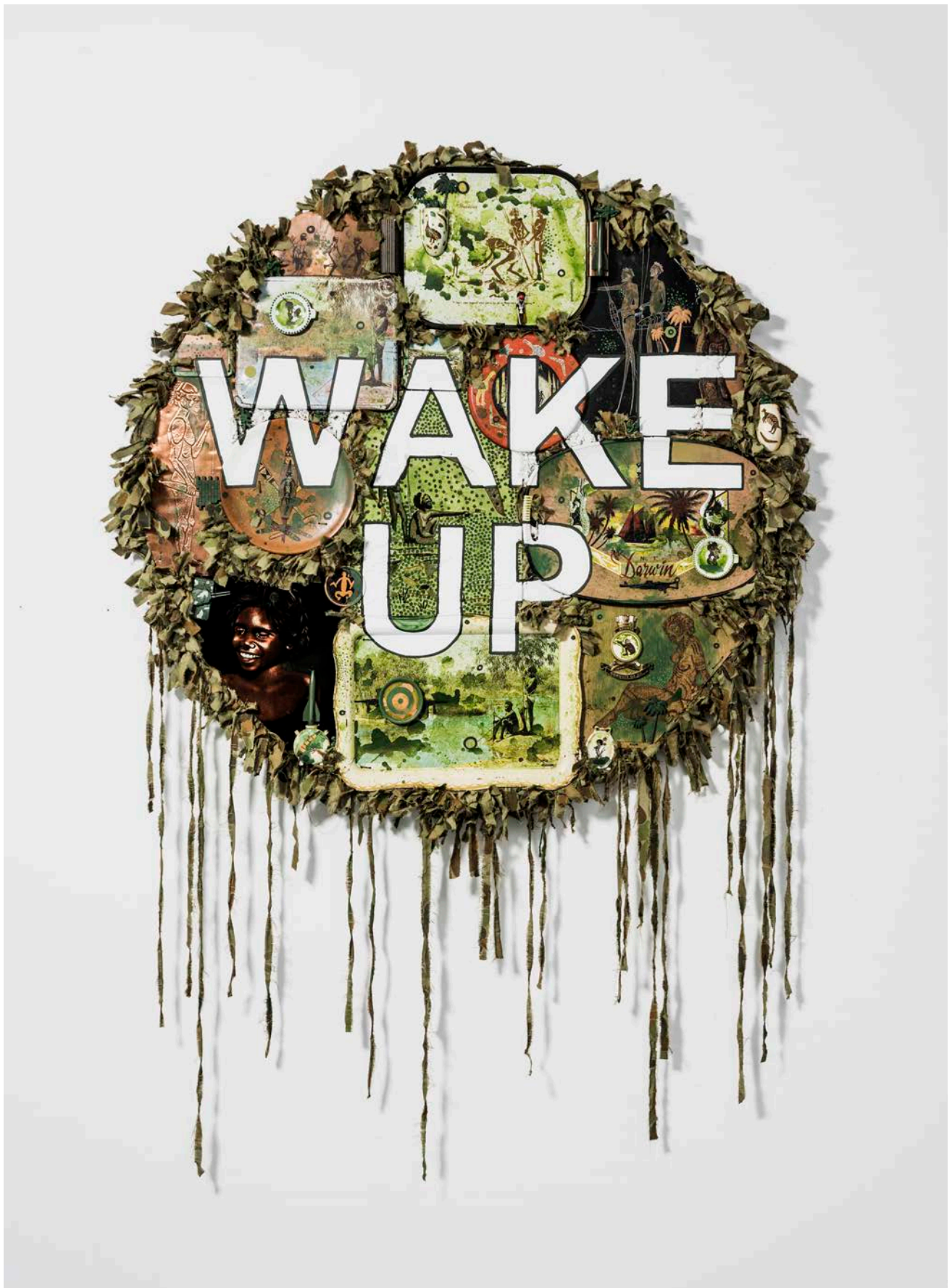


Art Monthly *AUSTRALIA*

APRIL 2015 NUMBER 278 AU\$12.95



Tony Albert's untold stories | 'do it' in Adelaide | State focus on Western Australia



Tony Albert, Thou didst let fall, 2014, detail view, assemblage made of reworked objects, fabric and twine, 161 x 550 x 11cm (dimensions variable); image courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney

Shifting meaning and memory: Tony Albert in conversation

IVAN MUÑIZ REED

Tony Albert's work reveals that it is the things we can't see or touch that can often carry the most weight. The Queensland-born conceptual artist uses the hidden tonnage of the words and images that form our identity as his medium, giving us an opportunity to reflect on both our personal and collective past. In recent weeks Sydney-based Albert has been filming episodes for NITV's *Colour Theory* series, preparing for an upcoming residency at ISCP (International Studio & Curatorial Program) in Brooklyn, New York, participating in a print workshop and, in between, developing new work (and a publication) for a solo exhibition at Sullivan + Strumpf in Sydney. At the same time, Albert's ambitious new memorial in the city's Hyde Park – a public artwork to honour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women who have served their country – is being unveiled. This is testament to the critical acclaim and recognition he has earned as an artist, with work that has the potential to not only bring forth the voices of Indigenous Australians, but to rewrite and reaffirm our history as a nation. On the eve of the official opening of *Yininmadyemi – Thou didst let fall* (2015) in Hyde Park, the artist spoke about the public and private strands of his practice, the power of untold stories to transform history, and the duality of meaning within his work.¹

Ivan Muñiz Reed: From an early age you started collecting 'Aboriginalia', or Aboriginal kitsch, and it wasn't until later that you realised the derogatory nature of many of these representations and their potency as signifiers. These objects have now become an important part of your work. Can you take me through this process?

Tony Albert: My collection of Aboriginalia started as a young child and initially stemmed from something very innocent. I genuinely loved the iconography and imagery, particularly the faces, which reminded me of my family. When I was in high school I became much more aware of

Indigenous issues – economically, socially and politically speaking – and found myself studying our history and leaders wherever possible. It was through this that I discovered the work of contemporary Aboriginal artists such as Tracey Moffatt and Gordon Bennett. I think being confronted by their work really forced me to look at these objects in a new light. It was towards the end of high school that I really began to see these faces as problematic representations of my identity.

IMR: The way you dissect and present elements from your surroundings can appear to be museological or even anthropological in nature, which reminds me of the African-American artist Fred Wilson. He's equally interested in social justice, and through the medium of museology he exposes latent racist structures that would otherwise go unnoticed. You also worked at a museum for many years. How has your exposure to institutional modes of collecting and display influenced your practice?

TA: My time at the Queensland Art Gallery has had a huge impact on my artistic practice. I was part of the exhibition design team, and as a result I am always mindful about the installation of my work – everything from fixing devices to crating. I also think very carefully about how the work can be presented in a space and the way in which the audience may interact with it. When I'm making work I often consider and reflect on the institutional aesthetic, something I really came to understand after working with so many incredible artists I met at the gallery. I often ask myself: 'Is this aesthetic something I want to use to my advantage or work in opposition to?'

IMR: Another parallel between your and Wilson's work is that you both lead viewers to recognise that a shift in context can create a shift in meaning. In your 'History' trilogy series (2002–13), for example, a large collection of reworked kitsch 'Aboriginalia' is brought together in an

attempt to rearrange or transform history. How has this notion of transformation been important to your work and do you feel you have been able to affect change?

TA: When you take any historical or anthropological object and turn it on its head by presenting it outside of its original context, it instantaneously changes the way in which it is read. It's important that I not only challenge their utilitarian purpose, but also physically alter the objects by working into the surface. That is exactly what I am trying to achieve when I work with this ephemera.

IMR: There often seem to be opposing forces within your work. An example is the photographic series 'We Can be Heroes', for which you were awarded the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award in 2014. Although inspired by a tragedy (the controversial police shooting of two Aboriginal teenage boys), the series carries a positive message of pride, strength and resilience. Do you ever struggle to achieve a balance between the serious and adverse nature of the subject matter you deal with and the message of optimism you want to portray? Is this tension calculated?

TA: Very much so, it is very much calculated. However, in some instances the tension may not be visually articulated in the artwork and as a result it's less obvious to the viewer. Optimism is my underlying philosophy in life and therefore it is something that underpins all of my work, whether it be defined or subtle. I like to think there is a duality in the reading of my work, and that the message of hope is really uncovered through the viewer's interpretation, rather than by me being overly preachy.

IMR: You are in the process of unveiling an ambitious new work, a memorial in Hyde Park entitled *Yininmadyemi – Thou didst let fall* (2015). You have mentioned that this is a monument for the forgotten heroes of Australia, a tribute to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander military servicemen and women. What can you tell us about the ideas behind this project and how it came to be?

TA: When the tender came out for this monument I had already spent several years beforehand researching Aboriginal military service within my own family, who have collectively served over 80 years in the Army, Navy and Air Force. It was around the same time that the Australian War Memorial invited me to undertake a tour of duty as an Official War Artist. I was deployed to the North West Mobile Force (NORFORCE), which is based in the Top End of Australia. Indigenous servicemen and women account for over 60 per cent of NORFORCE personnel and they are responsible for protecting our country's most vulnerable border. My time spent with them is something I will never forget.

As I began working through ideas during the tender process, I quickly realised that my grandfather Eddie Albert's remarkable story of survival really encapsulated the struggles that other Indigenous servicemen and women faced. During his service, Eddie was captured as a prisoner of war in Germany. However, he escaped and crossed the border into Italy, only to be captured again by Italian soldiers. Not realising that the men were Allied troops and should be returned to Germany as POWs, Eddie and his six fellow soldiers were sentenced to death and lined up, side-by-side, to be shot one at a time. After the execution of three men,

an officer-in-charge discovered their mistake and released Eddie and the three other surviving men back into Germany. At the end of the war, Eddie was released and returned to Australia. Unlike other servicemen and women who were given land in recognition of their service, Eddie was not. In fact, his family's land was still being taken away. While this is a personal story, I feel that it is emblematic of all untold war stories.

IMR: You've spoken of a desire, or even a necessity to resist historical amnesia through your work. What are the obliterated stories you are bringing forth in *Yininmadyemi*?

TA: All of us as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have stories. It is a fundamental part of our culture. This work is as much about individual stories as it is about a collected history, which this country continues to deny. Indigenous soldiers were not paid for their services, nor were they given land grants. Some of our relatives were buried overseas, because after serving in the military they were not allowed back into Australia under the White Australia policy. These are things the Australian public need to know and need to reconcile.

IMR: Although the piece's heart is your grandfather's story, there are many other layers and conceptual considerations within the work. The memorial has multiple elements – 7-metre-tall bullets, a base shaped in the form of a boomerang, a garden with native plants that can be used for ceremony ... Each of them has been carefully considered in consultation with several key community members. Can you tell us more about these elements and their significance?

TA: This is a war memorial for all our soldiers, to acknowledge their struggle and honour, their perseverance. It is not a monument that in any way glorifies war, and I really feel that the most successful war memorials are those that use bold and evocative imagery to stir strong emotions in visitors. *Yininmadyemi* was inspired by a number of memorials internationally, including the 'Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe' and Jonas Dahlberg's forthcoming monument that honours the victims of the 2011 Utöya massacre.

I chose to represent my grandfather's story through four upstanding bullets and three fallen shells, each representing a soldier. Bullets are not only a universal signifier of conflict, but they are also metaphorical of human existence: before they are fired they are 'live', afterwards they become shells – as though they are lifeless. Each bullet is made from a combination of painted aluminium, black marble and Corten steel, and installed on a raised bed of crushed granite in the shape of a boomerang. Interestingly, when soldiers left Australian soil, some families gave them a souvenir boomerang to symbolise and ensure a safe homecoming. The boomerang base in this work represents a kind of final resting place for not only those still standing, but the spirits of those who never returned. It is also an acknowledgment of Hyde Park's history as an important contest ground for local Gadigal people. I felt it was incredibly important to take into account this rich and well-documented local history. In fact, I engaged Anita Heiss, respected Sydney writer, Wiradjuri woman and previous chair of the Gadigal Information Services, to write the memorial's text inscriptions, as I wanted the text to resonate with the local and broader community.



Tony Albert, We Can be Heroes, 2014, pigment on paper, 124 x 115 x 2cm; image courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney

All of us as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have stories. It is a fundamental part of our culture. This work is as much about individual stories as it is about a collected history, which this country continues to deny.

I also worked closely with a local Aboriginal botanist to identify native plants that may be used for ceremonial purposes. I anticipate a lot of people who visit the memorial will be travelling from different parts of the country, and I want them to have easy access to traditional plants used in smoking ceremonies.

IMR: How do you see this monument and Eddie Albert's story speaking to a broader public? What is the message you want people to walk away with?

TA: The Anzac legend is a potent and powerful figure in our national cultural identity. Wouldn't it be amazing if Indigenous servicemen and women were a part of that spirit?

IMR: In 2011 you spent some time with NORFORCE, a predominantly Indigenous regiment of the Australian Army Reserve that protects remote areas of Northern Australia. How has your time there impacted on the memorial and other recent work?

TA: It reiterated the incredible work Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are doing for all Australians. Sea patrol, border security – these men and women are our first line of defence. I strongly believe that the recognition of this by a wider public can change perceptions. When I was working with NORFORCE, the men and women were unaware of a memorial that houses all of our military

history, and I really stressed to them that they should be a part of that. And so, what I decided to do was to literally write them into history through my artwork.

IMR: You are preparing for another solo exhibition at Sullivan+Strumpf opening in April this year. Can you give us a hint of what we might see there?

TA: The work I am presenting at Sullivan+Strumpf is really a culmination of this four-year journey. It includes a suite of new paintings that were directly inspired by my time as a war artist. NORFORCE personnel not only take leave from their cultural responsibilities to serve in the military, but also adopt the name 'Green Skin', a highly revered title that supersedes their familial skin name. In these paintings I have superimposed delicate green silhouettes over racist vintage comics. Also included are two large wall installations assembled from Aboriginalia and bound together with torn camouflage fabric and twine.

.....
1. This conversation was conducted over email during February 2015.

.....
Yininmadyemi – Thou didst let fall *was* officially opened in Sydney's Hyde Park on 31 March 2015; 'Tony Albert: Thou didst let fall' is at Sullivan + Strumpf, Sydney, from 16 April to 16 May 2015.



Tony Albert, Hello Blondie, I'm a bit colour blind!, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 152.5 x 122cm; image courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney

Honouring service and sacrifice: *Yininmadyemi – Thou didst let fall*

GARY OAKLEY

In 2006 Pastor Ray Minniecon and the Babana

Aboriginal Men's Group in conjunction with members of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Veterans and Services Association established the Coloured Diggers Project. Their aim was to honour, recognise and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander veterans and their families. On Anzac Day 2007 the group led a march of several hundred people along Redfern Street in Sydney to mark New South Wales's first commemorative ceremony for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander servicemen and women.

One of the aims of the Coloured Diggers Project was the creation of a permanent artwork in a prominent site within the city to commemorate their service. This wish came to fruition when, in June 2012, the Sydney City Council endorsed the development of a public artwork to honour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women who have served the country in the Australian Defence Force. At the southern end of Hyde Park and close to the ANZAC Memorial is situated a significant new artwork by Sydney-based Aboriginal Girramay artist Tony Albert.

It is not your run-of-the-mill memorial, and some will find it confronting. Nevertheless, through the use of Indigenous and non-Indigenous themes the artwork projects the strong message of service and sacrifice the First Peoples of this nation have had in the defence of Australia.

The artwork is composed of four standing .303 rounds and three fallen cartridge cases positioned on a base that reflects the shape of a boomerang. The .303 round – the standard small-arms ammunition used by the Australian military in the First and Second World Wars and the Korean War – is used by Albert as a universal signifier for conflict. The arrangement of the bullets – some standing and some having fallen – represents those who survived and those who paid the supreme sacrifice; they also represent a personal link for the artist with his grandfather who served during the Second World War.

Hyde Park South was chosen for the site of the memorial due to its status and historical significance to the Gadigal people, one of the clans that made up the Eora nation. The site was once a ritual contest ground, an important ceremony site, a crossroads for walking trails, and an area where the Aboriginal people of Sydney gathered and camped. The site, the artwork and its close proximity to the ANZAC Memorial gives the place a feeling of sacredness – at last a place, a memorial where Indigenous Australians can call their own to commemorate their people and be proud of their service.

The Anzac Centenary will be one of the most significant commemorative events this country will experience. This Anzac Day, a hundred years since that first landing on the shores of Gallipoli, we should remember the service and sacrifice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Although barred from military service by the *Defence Act* of 1903, over a thousand were to serve in the First World War – on the beaches of Gallipoli, in the mud and blood of France and Belgium, and the searing heat of Syria and Palestine. Though still under the same act, they answered the call to arms again in their thousands during the Second World War and, after the ban on race was finally removed, Indigenous Australians served in the Korean War and nearly every other conflict and peacekeeping operation that Australia has been involved in. Currently they serve in all three services (Army, Navy and Air Force), and form the backbone of the Regional Force Surveillance Units that today protect the northern coastline of Australia.

The Australian Defence Force has a rich history of service to the nation, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women have played an instrumental part in this history. They have served the nation and protected country with honour and dignity in the past, and will continue to do so into the future.



Clockwise from top left:
Tony Albert; image courtesy the artist

Eddie Albert; image courtesy of the artist

Yininmadyemi – Thou didst let fall, *artist illustration by Tony Albert; courtesy the artist*