

Tony Albert: Family Man

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Family, Tony Albert's first commercial exhibition in three years, presented a selection of new works, drawing upon the artist's recent global adventures and his ever-growing family, both in Australia and abroad.

Since 2009, Queensland-born artist Tony Albert has been building an international profile, completing large-scale commissions and exhibiting overseas. During this time Albert's family has grown to include artists and friends reaching across the globe. These new additions are not necessarily bound by blood, borders or even language but by an authentic and unique connection to the artist. Traces of Albert's family were manifest throughout the exhibition, in every work; biological and adopted, Albert's family are collaborators, mentors, cousins and friends. By drawing upon his connection to the people closest to him, Albert conveys a sense of positivity and optimism throughout his work despite the adversity he and members of his family often face.

The exhibition began with an impressive installation of oil-on-velvet paintings. Depicting Aboriginal Australians as belonging to a primitive and extinct people, these velvets in their original context reinforce the notion of the 'noble savage' and induce cultural cringe. Oil-on-velvets have long been sold as paint-by-number kits for the tourist market, its origins stemming from the 19th century. Often paired with images of native flora and fauna, these representations of Aboriginal people enforce a formulaic archetype, disregarding the diversity in languages and culture, indeed the very humanity of Indigenous Australia. Albert has been reclaiming velvet paintings since adolescence, and they have been a recurring motif (or 'anti-trope') in

his art (in some works arranged to spell large-scale words such as *Sorry* and *Exotic*). As a young man, Albert was fascinated with, if not thrilled, to see images of his family depicted in mainstream culture. 'When I saw these images of black people, mostly in second-hand shops, I really related. Only later did I appreciate them on a political level.' What started out as an innocent hobby soon turned into an obsession, with Albert accumulating thousands of kitsch objects, which he dubs 'Aboriginalia'.

Rearranging Our History is an ambitious installation of many of the velvets Albert collected between 2002 and 2011. As the title suggests, the installation reclaims this 'Aboriginalia' through overlaying the images with witty quips, motifs and aphorisms in red-and-white paint. As a member of the Internet-literate and knowledge-hungry Generation Y, Albert borrows text from popular culture, political discourse, world leaders and social media, effectively giving these unknown faces a 21st-century voice. This recalls earlier work by Albert, such as his 2007 photograph *Hey ya! (Shake it like a Polaroid picture)* which quotes American hip-hop duo OutKast. Also quoted in *Rearranging our History*, Albert recontextualises these lyrics to convey a much deeper message about (post/)colonial portrayals of Aboriginal people.

On the wall opposite *Rearranging Our History* hung a large four-metre-long painting in ochres of rust, black and white. Seemingly at odds with the rest of the exhibition, the work is part of a monumental collaboration between Albert and the late Aurukun artist Arthur Pambejan Jr. Albert met Pambejan Jr in 2002 when he was working at the Queensland Art Gallery. The gallery was presenting the first major public museum exhibition of Far North



Rearranging Our History (detail), 2002-2012, installation comprising 97 reworked velvet paintings; dimensions variable, approx 200 x 1150cm. All images this article of work by Tony Albert; images courtesy the artist and Sullivan + Strumpf, Sydney



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Daddy's little girl (after Gordon Bennett), 2010, watercolor and pencil on paper with mixed-media sculpture; 3 parts, various dimensions

Queensland Indigenous art, *Story Place: Indigenous Art of Cape York and the Rainforest* (26 July to 9 November 2003). Pambejan Jnr was called in to the gallery to repair some of the objects on display and it was here that he first met Albert. The two men developed instant rapport and Pambejan Jnr entrusted the restoration of these sacred objects to Albert. This initial meeting soon grew into a close bond and both Pambejan Jnr and the Aurukun community adopted Albert soon after. Shortly before his passing in 2010 Pambejan Jnr began work on this important collaboration that would tell both his and Albert's stories across twenty-two large-scale canvases. Albert is due to complete eleven of the panels over the coming year, and the inclusion of *Ngamp yptam ma kee antan* (*Working together to achieve a common goal*) in this exhibition reaffirmed Albert's commitment to his family. In this particular case, Pambejan Jnr is an important member of Albert's adopted family bound by trust, respect and connection rather than genealogy.

To the right was a brightly wallpapered installation of Albert's *Be Deadly* posters with two similar framed works layered over the top. The *Be Deadly* project was launched at the 2011 Cairns Indigenous Art Fair (CIAF). Albert designed the posters as a community initiative, with all proceeds from the sale of posters going directly to the Cathy Freeman Foundation. Mimicking the graphic political posters of Redback Graphix and incorporating the colours closely associated with Aboriginal Australia, the poster features three young Aboriginal girls (Albert's cousins) framed within a golden sun and placed under the words 'Be Deadly'. In Aboriginal culture the term 'deadly' communicates a positive sentiment used to describe anything that is impressive. Albert's message is clear; be strong, be healthy, be proud, and be happy. The artist's cousins are literally the poster girls for the next generation of educated, empowered and proud Aboriginal people.

However, despite this positive message *Be Deadly* highlights a more sobering truth. At the opening of *Family* and CIAF respectively, the limited edition posters were available for the general public to purchase: \$5 to Aboriginal people and \$10 for non-Aboriginal people. These two different rates reflect the economic, social and health disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia or, put more bluntly, the extreme disadvantage experienced by Indigenous Australians. This ongoing project is an example of how Albert tackles contentious issues in a positive and constructive light.

Extending on his *Be Deadly* posters, Albert began working on a series of customised posters, of which two were exhibited here. In these works Albert has enlarged the poster and collaged over the original design with stickers, photos, paint, symbols and text. The incorporation of several languages in these works emphasises Albert's interest in communicating to an international audience.

In addition to the *Be Deadly* works, fifteen smaller collages were also on display. Each piece takes on an almost sculptural form as Albert overlays the collaged surfaces with modular structures fashioned from vintage playing cards. It is these works that reveal Albert's many influences; here we see alien beings, references to fellow proppaNow artists Gordon Hookey and Richard Bell, Albert's family members, and cartoon superheroes. The admiration for Tibetan artist Gonkar Gyatso, whom Albert counts amongst his friends, is also evident in both the collaging of found images and use of stickers. Both artists belong to roundtable°, the

intriguing transcontinental model of collecting, curator- and dealer-ship run by Americans David Teplitzky and his partner, Peggy Scott.

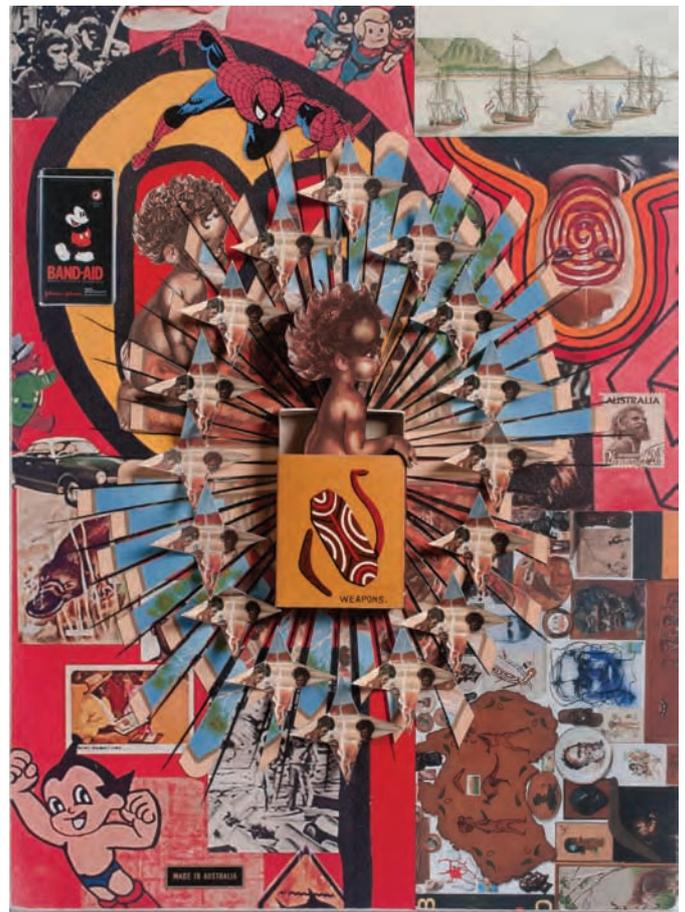
What is most refreshing about Albert's work is that it is inherently positive, despite its often bleak subject matter. More seasoned Aboriginal artists have long confessed to feeling angry about the position of Aboriginal Australians and whilst Albert is also in this camp (and rightly so), he is able to engage in this discourse in an affirmative manner. The *Be Deadly* project, and subsequent companion works, reflect Albert's abiding sense of hope and idealism.

The final work exhibited in *Family* pays tribute to one of Albert's great inspirations – fellow Murri (Queensland Indigenous) artist Gordon Bennett. In this earnest homage Albert has framed fan mail he wrote to Bennett in 2010. Hanging beside is a small watercolour depicting a young girl in her lounge room arranging toy blocks and spelling out the words 'black cunt'. Set against the backdrop of the Southern Cross, the young blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl looks on to her father, whose back is turned away from the viewer, to seek approval. On a plinth in front of these two works are the same toy blocks featured in the painting. As Albert explains in his letter, this work revisits and re-interprets Bennett's *Daddy's Little Girl 2* (1994). Albert goes on to write that he was inspired to carry on the message in Bennett's original painting after reading a newspaper article which described how a prominent football coach 'casually' referred to one of his players as a 'black cunt'. In some respects *Daddy's Little Girl (after Gordon Bennett)* links into the exhibition through the connection of family. Although we read that Albert has never met Bennett, he considers him a mentor, and so Bennett is part of Albert's extended family – more so in a creative, conceptual spirit than physical presence. Both artists highlight the engrained racism in the Australian psyche and the way in which it is passed down through language, and from generation to generation.

Despite the personal nature of much of the work in *Family* (and its essentially personal framework), Albert's message resonates universally, cutting across culture, language and religion. Although Albert is incredibly proud of his Aboriginal heritage he is adamant that his work is not solely read within this context. Even in 2012, Albert needs to remind his audience: 'I am a human being, an Aboriginal man, and a contemporary artist'; and in so doing, spells out the primary motives and mythologies with which his art contends.

Tony Albert: Family was shown at Sullivan + Strumpf, Sydney, 14 August to 8 September 2012: sullivanstrumpf.com

In January 2013, Albert shows alongside Gonkar Gyatso and other artists belonging to the roundtable collection, at the



above: *Callin' out around the world*, 2012, acrylic and collage elements on aluminium, 34 x 25cm

below: *Arthur Pambegan Jr. Ngamp yotam ma kee antan (Working together to achieve a common goal)*, 2010, ochre on canvas; 3 of 4 parts, each 200 x 150cm



Singapore Art Museum, from 24 January 2013, with artist talks 25 and 26 January: singaporeartmuseum.sg

Liz Nowell is a Sydney-based curator currently working at Hazelhurst Regional Gallery & Arts Centre.





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