

Tony Albert wins Basil Sellers Art Prize

July 25, 2014

When Tony Albert spoke to “his team of people” about his planned entry for the sport-themed Basil Sellers Art Prize, he was met with a bit of resistance.

Albert’s manager and the commercial gallery that looks after his work were worried that his polemical piece, *Once Upon a Time...* would be rejected.

“They said if you do racism in sport you won’t get into Basil Sellers, it’s too confrontational, it’s too much of an issue, people aren’t going to like it, but I thought I would rather put this forward and be told no than not do it at all.”



Tony Albert Photo: Penny Stephens

Albert wasn’t told no; in fact, the judges responded with an emphatic ‘yes’, naming the Sydney artist the winner of the \$100,000 prize on Friday morning.

“It’s very difficult for artists to deal with loaded and topical political issues without being heavy-handed,” said judge and director of the Ian Potter Museum, Kelly Gellatly. “It’s always the sign of a great work, when you can look at it time and time again as an artwork, even when the issues it’s dealing with can make you a bit uncomfortable,” Gellatly said.

The prize, held every two years since 2008, attracted over 300 entrants this year; *Once Upon A Time* now hangs at the Ian Potter Centre at the University of Melbourne alongside the 15 other shortlisted artworks. The winning work comprises 23 small framed watercolours, photographs and collages and found objects including toys and figurines, all set against a painted target backdrop. It references indigenous footballers Adam Goodes and Nicky Winmar and includes two letters that Albert wrote to the late Aboriginal artist Gordon Bennett, a major influence on Albert’s work.



"It had its roots in what I do as a collector and someone who kind of dissects things rather than finely executes paintings," said Albert, who worked on the piece for two years.

Cherry-picked elements from popular culture including Disney characters and children's storybooks added to the piece's sense of whimsy.

Fortuitously, the patron of the prize is a mad Sydney Swans fan, and good friend of Adam Goodes.

"No one's going to believe me, I know this, but I'm not allowed to vote, it's an acquisitive prize, there would be a conflict of interest," said Sellers.

Albert's piece might be a bit big to fit in Sellers' house, but he has an idea of who he could lend it to.

"I'd give it to the Swans first, put it in their foyer."