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## Review: Tony Albert – Re-writing History

Sasanki Tennakoon on *Thou didst let fall*, Tony Albert's latest exhibition at Sullivan + Strumpf



Tony Albert, *'Thou didst let fall'* Installation View 2015, Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney.  
Photography: Mark Pokorny

It was a history making moment when Tony Albert became the first Aboriginal person selected as an Official War Artist by the Australian War Memorial, and history is exactly what Albert's solo show at Sullivan + Strumpf is all about.

Grounded in a practice that challenges and subverts mainstream and traditional portrayals of Australian Aboriginal culture and people, *Thou didst let fall* addresses Australia's documented history of conflict, highlighting the largely omitted contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service men and women.

Before one even steps foot inside the gallery, the works beyond the giant window-front are unmistakably confronting: a larger than life soldier carrying a fallen comrade; a massive camouflage rifle; a bronze maquette featuring standing bullets and fallen shells. This latter work is a scaled-down version of the recently unveiled monument, *Yininmadyemi*, commissioned by City of Sydney and situated opposite the War Memorial in Hyde Park.



Tony Albert, '*Thou didst let fall*', 2014, objects, fabrics and twine, 161 x 550 x 11 cm

This exhibition coincides with the centenary of the ANZAC landing, a celebration of the sacrifice and service of Australian and New Zealand forces in World War I. Albert has created an accessible reinterpretation of the dominant narrative of Australia in conflict, a timely address of a silent history that runs parallel and relatively unacknowledged. Both educational and at times irreverent, the works in *Thou didst let fall* all echo the sentiment of a history misrepresented for too long.

Albert trades his use of the target motif, featured in previous works, for camouflage, which he likens in the exhibition catalogue to "... a disease, creeping over our histories." Both the title work and *Universal Soldier* are peppered with 'Aboriginalia' – a term coined by Albert to describe the kitschy paraphernalia that depicts stereotypical Aboriginality from a colonial ethnographic perspective. These items are almost overtaken by shredded camouflage fabric, at once evoking the invisibility of Aboriginality, and suggesting a reclamation of sorts – an erasing of out-dated perceptions.



Tony Albert, *Nice Work, Jackie!*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 102 x 122.5 cm

Albert's *Green Skins* paintings, presented on both levels of the gallery, are clever and thought provoking appropriations of vintage war comics. These subversive caricatures are juxtaposed with the green silhouettes of larger, nondescript military personnel that loom in an almost sinister manner over the scenes. The shadowy figures are evocative of the name "Green Skin" given to the Aboriginal men and women in service where Albert was deployed as an Official War Artist in Northern Australia.

Ascending to the second floor, the text *Wake Up* registers the visual equivalent of being shaken by the shoulders. Most resonant in this room is Albert's *Yininmadyemi – Artist Diary*. Housed in a purpose-built wooden display stand with bullets for legs, the diary is presented like a museum artefact and acts as a timeline for the development of Albert's large-scale memorial commission. A collection of his thoughts and reference material, including a nod to the 80 years of collective military service in Albert's own family, the diary is a reminder that these artworks represent histories that are linked to real people, with real legacies that are worthy of equal remembrance.

*Tony Albert: Thou didst let fall*, Tues to Sat 10am-5pm until 16 May; *Sullivan + Strumpf*, 799 Elizabeth Street, Zetland; (02) 9698 4696, [www.sullivanstrumpf.com](http://www.sullivanstrumpf.com)