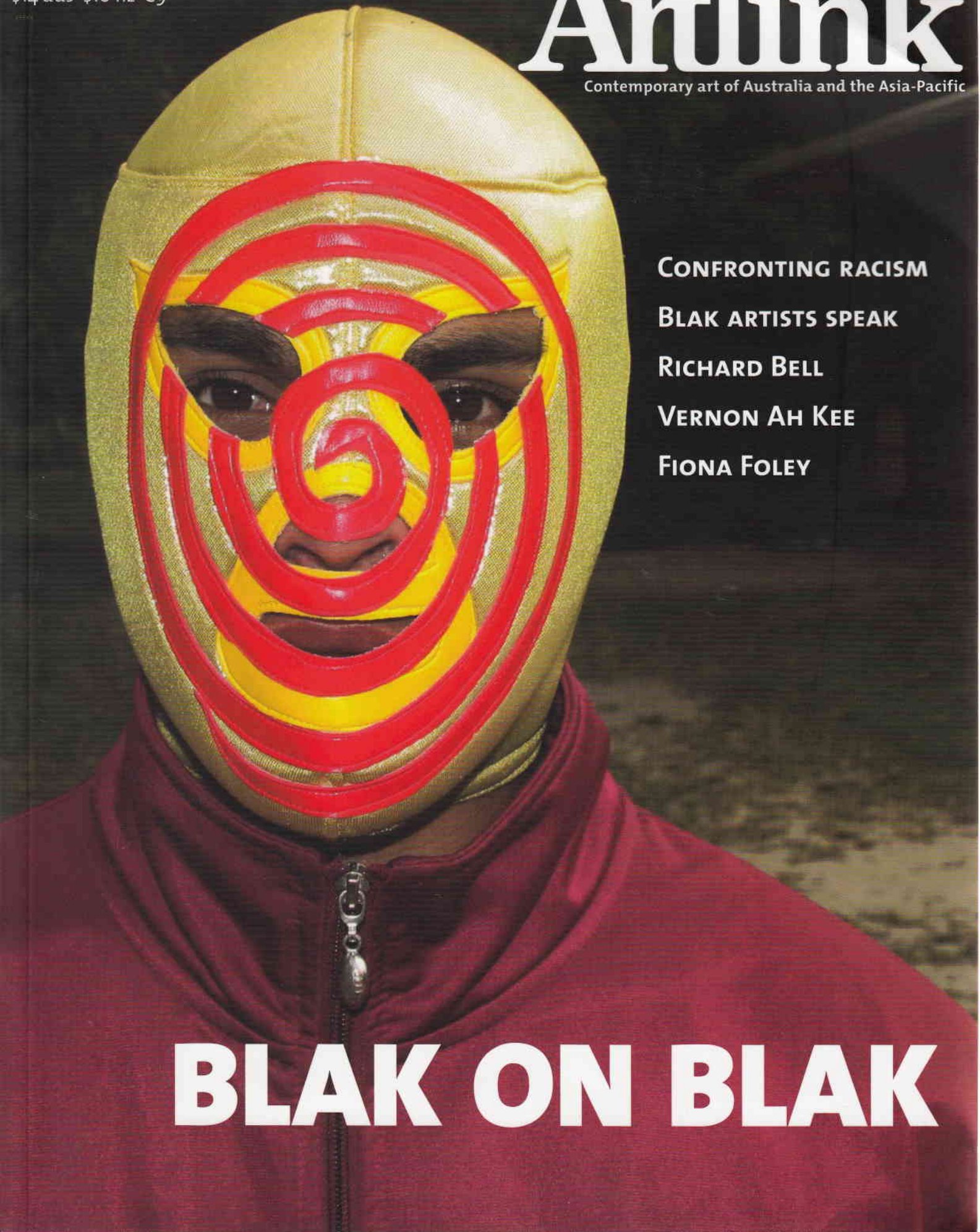


Vol 30 no 1
\$14 aus \$16 nz €9

Artlink

Contemporary art of Australia and the Asia-Pacific



CONFRONTING RACISM

BLAK ARTISTS SPEAK

RICHARD BELL

VERNON AH KEE

FIONA FOLEY

BLAK ON BLAK



Tony Albert *No Place 1* 2009, Type C photograph, 100 x 100 cm, edition of 5, courtesy the artist, Gallerysmith, Melbourne and Jan Manton Art, Brisbane.

There's no place

LIKE HOME

■ Bruce McLean



Tony Albert *No Place* 2009, Type C photograph, 100 x 100 cm, edition of 5, courtesy the artist, Gallerysmith, Melbourne and Jan Manton Art, Brisbane.

The rainforest region of far north Queensland is an amazing country. It is a place of many small communities, a number of Aboriginal communities and larger mixed settlements, although sometimes with noticeable white enclaves. It is also home to one of Australia's most unusual Indigenous cultures. This is a place where warriors armed with an arsenal of giant wooden swords and shields protected their densely vegetated home from many external influences. This fighting spirit was also evident when repeated European efforts to colonise the area were repelled, and it can still be seen today in the strength and pride of people in their unique culture.

Tony Albert comes from this warrior history. A Girramay rainforest man from the Cardwell area, he now lives and works in Brisbane. Underlying each of his works is a strong connection to his Aboriginal heritage, but more importantly, to his Girramay inheritance. In previous works Albert

referenced his important cultural icons, such as the *jawun* (lawyer cane woven baskets) and shield designs which anchor unlikely or alien scenarios back within his culture. He continues this in *No Place*, which makes reference to the scene in *The Wizard of Oz* where Dorothy wishes herself home from a frightful world of make-believe by repeating the phrase 'there's no place like home'. Interestingly, this somewhat echoes Albert's life; his burgeoning art career sees him keep a hectic schedule of travel, social and work commitments, while he often yearns to step outside of this and return 'home'.

Returning home however, does not mean escaping to his tropical paradise for rest, relaxation and fishing. Albert always takes from his travels and experiences and gives back to his otherwise quite insular community. One of the more intriguing objects he has taken back to his community is his most recent photographic series – a group of *lucha libre*² wrestling masks (*mascaras*) from Mexico, acquired en route

from the *Havana Biennale* in Cuba. Something inexplicable immediately drew Albert to the masks and he decided to bring them home.

No Place sees Albert's countrymen don these masks in their lush rainforest country. A strong current of the sublime and fantastical flows through the work, but a poignant subject quickly rises to the surface. Albert's countrymen again become warriors, *luchadores* of lore, protecting their paradise. Here in a kayfabe² elaborately engineered by Tony Albert, himself a young rainforest warrior who has taken his cultural battle to the urban centre of Brisbane, young rainforest people are dressed in new regalia, preparing to enter the battle they have inherited from their forebears. In the tradition of *lucha libre* a legendary *luchas de apuestas* (matched with an added wager) is played out. At stake here is ultimately the fate of a culture. These brave warriors continue in the tradition of those who have gone before, battling to retain what is theirs – language, culture and land.

Each of these *luchadores* wears a mask to alter their identity. Each individual has a unique identity informed by their upbringing and experience, but once they adorn the *mascara*, they become their mask. Here, each mask is in the simple red, yellow and black tricolour of the Aboriginal flag, the first and most obvious allure for Albert.

In the world of *lucha libre*, *mascaras* themselves reveal patterns derived from traditional masks made by Aztecs. These continue the centuries-old traditional practice of abstract representations of an animal god or spirit being. These seemingly playful masks share much with Aboriginal – and particularly rainforest – culture.

Body and shield designs from this area are representative of an animal god or spirit being and have been abstracted through millennia of reinterpretation and individualisation of the 'totemic' design. In each case, the shield design or mask reflects the identity of the warrior; a totem design related to place and ceremony or a 'personal' totem, the visualisation of individual characteristics – indeed, each subject chose their own mask as a reflection of their own personality. The use of these masks is not merely a flippant impulse by Albert, but a prescient new layer of armour for a new generation of warrior.

The colour scheme of solid blocks of red, black and yellow also speaks especially to traditional rainforest aesthetics. The shields of the area, the most well-preserved and easily accessible of the Girramay artistic traditions, feature designs similar to the masks, where bold and solid blocks of a single pigment appear to float upon another as if the two pieces of fabric are sewn together creating a skin to cover the body.

The stance of each of the *luchadores* is quite neutral, or reserved. This creates an apparent tension between the warrior mask and the wearer. However this is reflective of the disposition of rainforest people, and Aboriginal people more broadly, who are thick-skinned and happy to live life, but with the knowledge that the tipping point lies just beneath the surface.

Location is important within these images; each is taken at iconic locations within Girramay country. These *luchadores* make a claim over these places, rural and urban, occupied and

vacant, populated and bushland. Here, Aboriginal people are still spread throughout the landscape, in the regional centres, the tiny 'blink and you'll miss it' towns, farming properties, and small Aboriginal communities – the Aboriginal presence clearly visible.

After travelling with Albert it became apparent that the process is as important as place, as the two become intimately linked in his small home town. The shoot itself was a 4-day process, half of which entailed visiting family and negotiating times for the upcoming shoot, something which couldn't be done without being there. Often negotiations included an exchange of gifts as enticement to cousins to appear in the photos – although Albert always brings plenty of gifts for family when he does travel back home. The downtime between negotiations and the shoots themselves was spent doing reconnaissance – scouting for ideal places and times of day for each of the shoots.

Viewing images of Aboriginal people in iconic north Queensland locales masked in Mexican wrestling paraphernalia carries more than a hint of the surreal and absurd. These people are obviously not part of some underground wrestling circuit, but the reasons they don these masks is relevant and poignant.

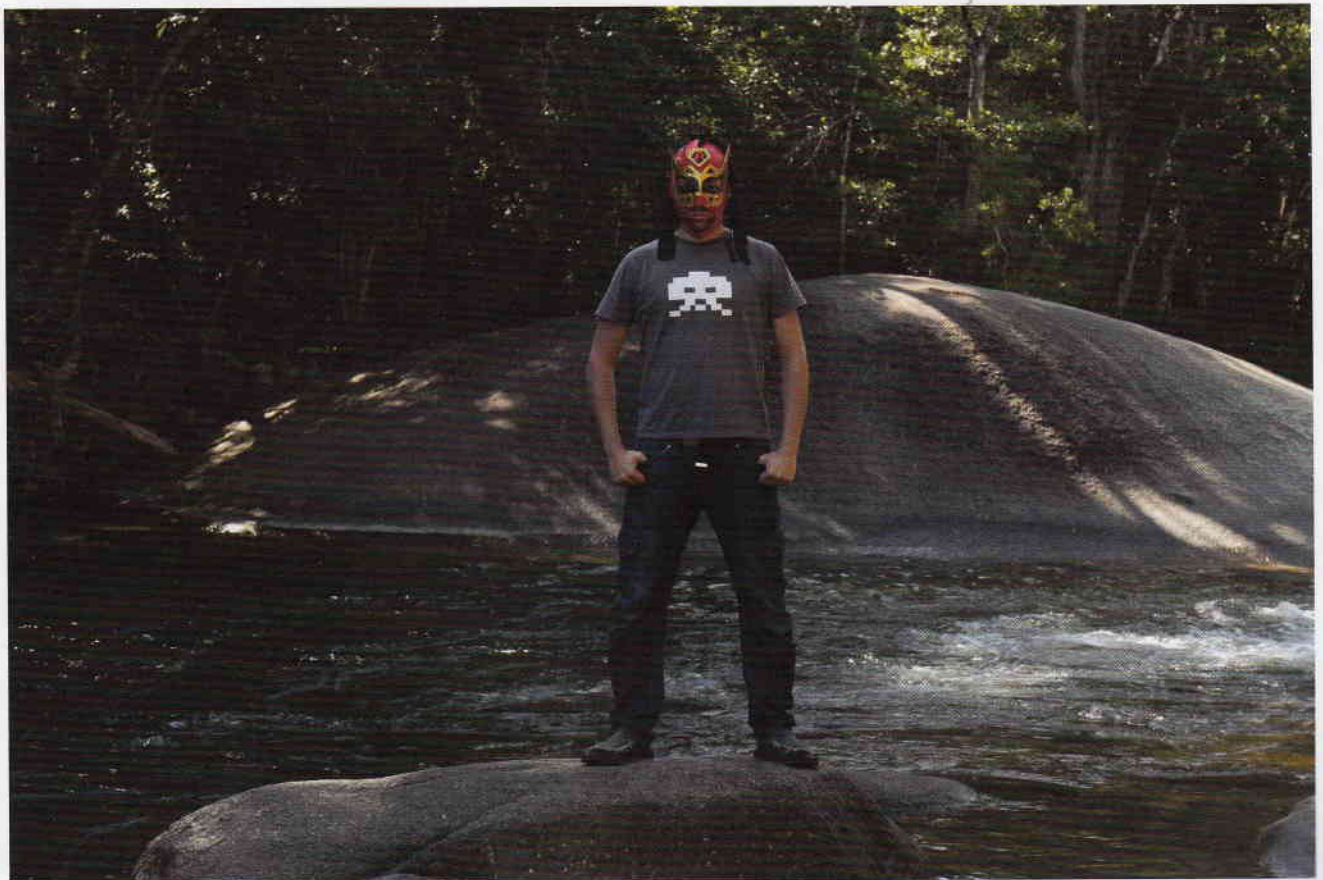
No Place is also about fun. Each of the participants in the shoot, some twenty-plus community members, genuinely had fun during the shoot. Most started, as I'm sure viewers will, slightly apprehensively, but warmed to the concept and the fun of being able to don the mask and a different personality and play. In engaging, each also revived a link to their warrior ancestry and recognised the need to keep this warrior spirit alive in their *luchas de apuestas* to ensure the protection of their country because there really is ... no place like home. ■

1 Free wrestling, or free fighting, a Mexican professional sport where players wear colourful masks (*mascaras*).

2 A kayfabe is an elaborate pretence or role play as practised in professional wrestling.



Tony Albert zooms in on a group of models for the photographic series *No Place* which he produced in his hometown of Cardwell in north Queensland in 2009.



Tony Albert wearing a Mexican *lucha libre* wrestling mask which he acquired en route to the Havana Biennial for the *No Place* series, Cardwell 2009.