

BE

DEADLY



TONY ALBERT says BE DEADLY!

An artist and community project by Griffith Artworks
supported by Peggy Scott and David Tepitzky.

 **Griffith** UNIVERSITY
Queensland College of Art



**CAIRNS
INDIGENOUS
ART FAIR
2011**

18-21 August



When 'Tony Albert says BE DEADLY', BE DEADLY!

A personal response by Terri Janke

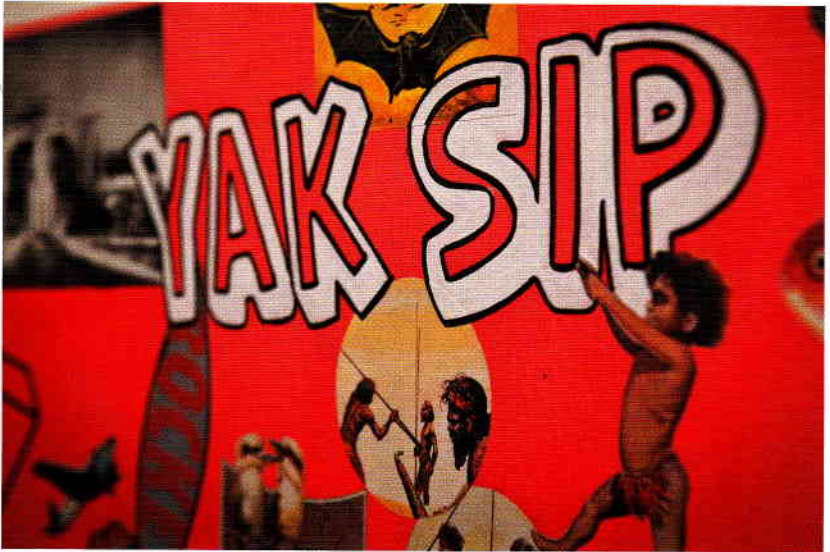
The three children in Tony Albert's *Be Deadly* are all smiles. Like heroes with the power to prevail against all evil, they stand together, strong, healthy, happy and proud. These Aboriginal kids are the poster pinups of a new generation, poised to deliver a defiant and positive message. BE DEADLY!

Representation in art is a powerful weapon. Art and images can shape how we feel about ourselves, and mould how others see us or do not see us. I visited Tony's studio in Brisbane in June. He was in the middle of completing his painting, *Be Deadly*. The three heroes had been placed in the centre of the canvas. The montage surrounding them was yet to come. Clippings of Tony's previous works and other empowering imagery were ready to be affixed. There were also positive messages in other languages, drawn from countries and communities around the world. Tony wanted this work to be an inspirational call for action utilising Aboriginal lingo with a message for all. There were not a lot of positive images for us when we were kids, Tony said. So, when he was growing up, he became fascinated by the Aboriginal kitsch sold at souvenir shops and opportunity stores. He showed me his extensive collection, although still not all back in place due to the Brisbane floods. It contained playing cards, an old can of Piccaninny floor wash, coasters with Aboriginal people, ornamental

bowls featuring Aboriginal women, velvet paintings of Indigenous children, matches, ashtrays, the board game Corroboree and a child's activity set where you can join the dots to create your own real authentic Aboriginal art. Tony has collected these things for his art, taking derogatory and kitsch representations of Aboriginal people and repositioning them into his own political and social statements:

The words emblazoned on the velvet painting of an Aboriginal girl become a strong message, *Invisible is my favourite colour*. Out of vintage playing cards, Tony has created the message *I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear*. Five cut out letters filled with kitsch items make up another work, *Sorry*. *Ash on me* is three words affixed with ceramic and metal ashtrays bearing images of Aboriginal people. As caricatures, the hunter gatherer and tribal leader are etched. What does it mean to have an image of a respected elder on an ashtray where a cigarette could be butted out on his face? Through all this there is an optimism within the work.

Alongside Tony's new painting the *Be Deadly* poster will be spectacularly released at the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair in 2011. The artwork's three heroes, invited celebrities from around the globe and the artist, will be there to share their strength, sign the posters and promote positive messages of



Aboriginality. The posters will be offered for sale at two different prices, depending on who buys. There is one price for the Indigenous buyer and a higher price for the non-Indigenous buyer. What is this all about? Well, the price variation aims to highlight the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in vital health, social and economic indicators. For example, the current gap in life expectancy is estimated at 11.5 years for males and 9.7 years for females. The non-Indigenous purchaser's higher price will ultimately pay for another poster to be rolled and packed in a postage cylinder ready to be sent into Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and other communities around Queensland. It's a helping hand model to show that black and white Australians can all work together to "Close the Gap". It will take positive measures, such as this, which give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people a go, to break new ground in education, business and in public life. Government departments and corporate office walls are often covered with Indigenous art, and so are their reconciliation action plans. But if we are to move forward we will all need to become part of the picture. It starts with empowering youth. A poster funded by a non-Indigenous buyer might end up on the walls of Aboriginal homework centre, a youth detention centre or the Aboriginal Medical Services, a hostel, a school or sports club. This aspect of

the project introduces a social commentary that underlies all of Tony's works — fair or unfair? Can we afford to ignore the glaring figures of disparity?

Cairns is an interesting choice as the launch venue. The exhibition *Copyrites: Aboriginal Art in the Age of Reproductive Technologies* was also launched in Cairns in 1996.² That exhibition aimed to raise public awareness about copyright theft and to inform the consumer to take care when buying so called 'Aboriginal' products. Original Aboriginal artworks were displayed alongside their copyright infringing items such as carpets, sarongs and t-shirts. For example, the Australian one dollar note, now out of circulation, which copied David Malangi's work, *The Hunter* was included. The organisers of the exhibition, National Indigenous Arts Advocacy Association (NIAAA), an organisation set up to advocate for the recognition of the rights of Indigenous artists (no longer operating), picked Cairns because of the high number of complaints their hotline received about fake Aboriginal art sold in the tourism oriented town. Fooled tourists were being sold didgeridoos painted by backpackers and bamboo craft imported from Asia was sold as 'authentic' despite being non-Indigenous stylised versions of Aboriginal x-ray and dot art.

Faux folklore en mass including the souvenirs, the copyright infringing pens, t-shirts and CDs were



considered a problem. Not only did this rip-off art alter and mash up sacred images, and take work out of context, they also affected the commercial opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Wandjuk Marika, the first Chair of the Aboriginal Arts Board, was reported to have found his sacred art sold on a tea towel. Shocked at seeing his sacred dreaming denigrated, he put the copyright protection for Aboriginal art on the reform agenda. The Carpets Case in 1994, *Milpururru v Indofurn*² was included in the Copyrites Exhibition. It was the first case that Aboriginal artists took legal action for copyright infringement. Significantly, part of the damages awarded included a component for the shame the artists had to live with, to see their cultural clan owned designs walked upon, and treated disrespectfully. Whilst there has been greater use of copyright by Indigenous artists, there is still no protection for clan owned designs, and knowledge.

Against this background, the launch at CIAF is making a further statement about representation at a venue where the focus is art produced by Queensland's Indigenous makers. A space where the representation of Aboriginality and Torres Strait Islander identity in art is in the hands of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander creators. CIAF is not only for the exchange of Indigenous art, but

the exchange of ideas, life stories, friendships and yarns. In this way, I find the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair is an interesting space for promoting empowerment. The message Tony Albert wants to tell is — you are deadly, you always have been deadly, you always will be deadly, just by being you.

We can take those steps for change. We need to have positive messages in our heads, messages that break open the stereotypes. The posters can speak to from the walls of bedrooms, the classroom, the library and the community hall. There's a ten year old child in me that remembers wishing that I had a hero. Now, my inner ten year old has found three, plus one artist. So, when Tony Albert tells you to BE DEADLY, you better believe it, and be deadly.

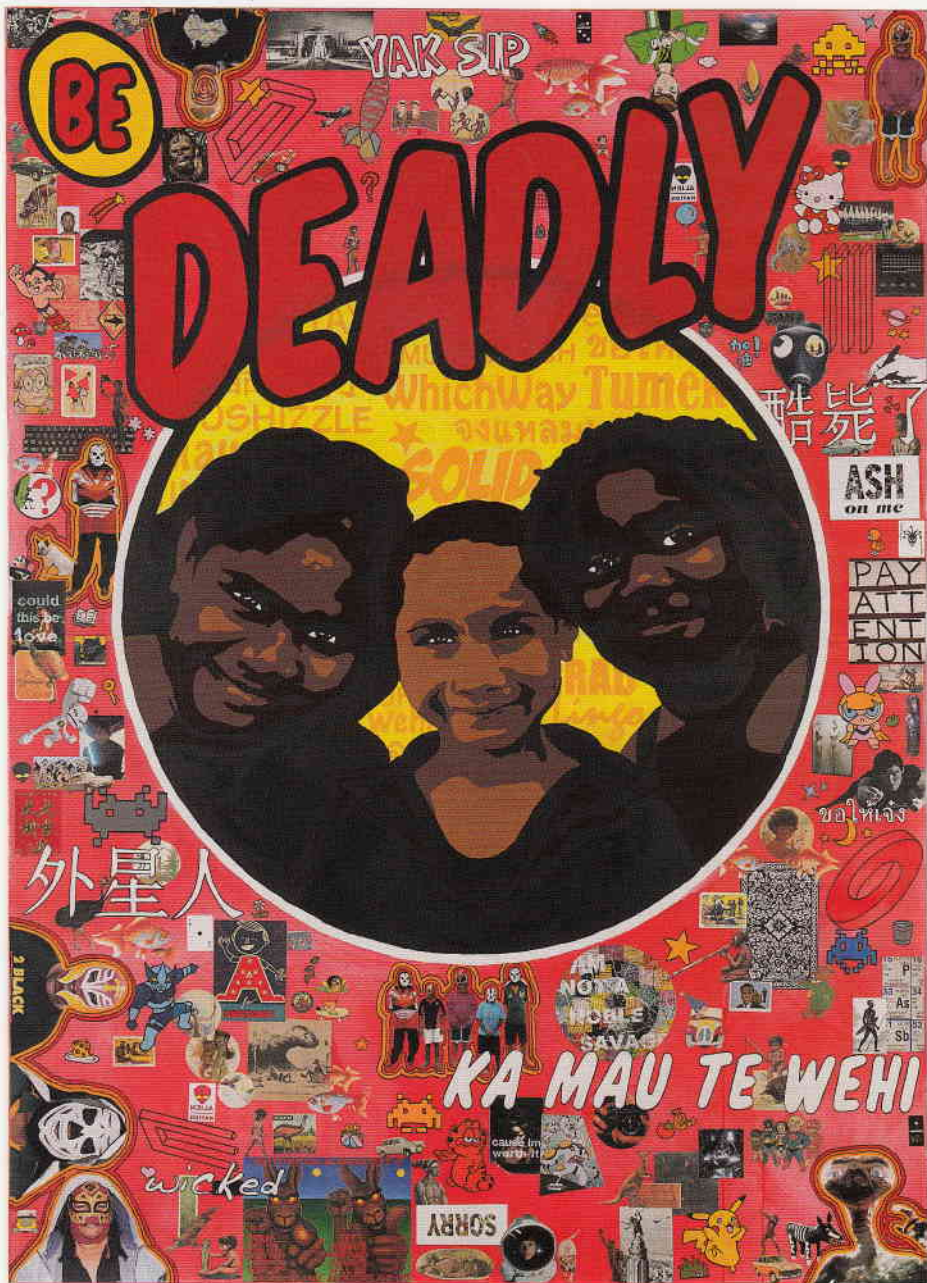
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ENDNOTES:

¹ Vivien Johnson, *Copyrites, Aboriginal Art in the Age of Reproductive Technologies, Touring Exhibition 1996 Catalogue*, National Indigenous Arts Advocacy Association, Sydney, 1996.

² *Milpururru v Indofurn Pty Ltd* (1995) 30 IPR 209

Terri Janke is Solicitor Director of Terri Janke and Company, a law firm and consultancy in Sydney. In 2011 Terri gave *The Mabo Oration*, an annual lecture at The State Library of Queensland and in July received the 'NAIDOC Person of the Year' Award.



Above: 'Be Deadly' 2011, mixed media on canvas, 213 x 152cm. Private Collection.



BE DEADLY: Tony Albert

SP Wright, Griffith Artworks/Griffith University Art Gallery

Alongside the image of confident young children and the positive reinforcement of Tony Albert's message lay an inconvenient universal truth, brought to the fore in this project by its location within a commercial enterprise — an Art Fair — and the pricing policy for each limited edition.

To speak of one notion of inequality, let's say in Australia, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, is to identify 'gaps' of disadvantage between the two. A Productivity Commission federal submission tabled by the Rudd Government in 2009 coined the term 'gap' in referencing future plans for its narrowing within a generation. Its 'Closing the Gap Report' made international headlines when issued, just as 'intervention' policies began throughout Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, in tandem with news media coverage which also conflated other reports into child abuse and domestic violence. It was another attempt at a public policy response to gaps in life expectancy and health, employment and incomes, home ownership, incarceration rates, literacy and other educative outcomes.

There are lesser publicised gaps too, some of which are located in cultural and artistic realms. In Australian art, by example, there is still a perceived gap between 'aboriginal art' and 'contemporary art', as if one could not be the other. There are other obvious market-induced distances between work by city-based artists and desert painters, usually marked by non-Indigenous claims that one represents 'Aboriginality' less than the other, one is more 'authentic' than the other, or less desirable for non-indigenous buyers and public institutions.

The politicisation, commercialisation and personal misfortune in these gaps, and their mobilisation of well publicised opinion and media cycles, are readily deployed tactics. Some are aimed toward increased awareness and action, whilst attracting the ire of other elements in society. The 'Be Deadly' project crosses paths with each of these elements, but takes the 'issue' beyond Australia to speak of global currency. Tony Albert is a leading young artist and emerging community leader. He straddles extended family and community (Cardwell, North Queensland) obligations with a nationally significant visual arts



practice, steadily building an international following. This is less 'Aboriginal art' than it is a conceptual art practice that raises certain issues as central to its scope of investigation, using whatever medium, means and forums at his disposal. The painting Albert has made as a source image for the graphic, by example, utilises languages from around the world to universalise his sentiment that this is a borderless issue with a local variant. 'Glocalism' becomes deadly in so many expressions.

CIAF is appropriate for several reasons. His 'Be Deadly' work targets a multitude of communities, but instead of framing related issues in terms of disadvantage, the gap Albert promulgates is put as an advantage to spread positivity. The pricing mechanism, by example, is in contrast to an art market dominated by non-indigenous interests and margins, and makes a work of art more affordable to Indigenous people than it is to non-Indigenous buyers. In contrast to an art fair where most

works are priced for non-Indigenous consumption 'Be Deadly' targets the notion of reverse discrimination, with discounting for some and not others. Those who can afford more acknowledge a persistent gap and therefore activate advocacy for change.

The 'gap', or difference, in price initially forces a person to identify themselves in terms dictated by the artist — a rare thing in the market. Secondly, the benefit applied by the extra charge flows into wider communities. It will pay for the poster's message to be distributed freely to community groups and schools throughout Queensland. It's apparently divisive potential is rendered a positive force in awareness building and social activism, where difference can be celebrated and promoted as healthy for younger generations.

In itself, this is a process that highlights the long running gap between symbolic gesture and tangible effort. We should all be deadly now in response to the issues Albert uses as currency for his art, whoever and wherever we are.

Catalogue Title: BE DEADLY: Tony Albert @ CIAF

Texts by: Simon Wright (Curator)
and copyright Terri Janke

Editors: Tony Albert, Sally Brand, Simon Wright

Publisher: Griffith Artworks, Griffith University

Sewell House, Nathan Campus

Telephone: 07 3735 7414

ISBN: 978-1-921760-51-8

Griffith University ABN: 781 0609 4461

Description: Full colour illustrated exhibition
catalogue published on the occasion of the
3rd CIAF Cairns Indigenous Art Fair 2011.

THANKS FOR BEING SO DEADLY

Terri Janke (NAIDOC Person of the Year 2011); Peggy
Scott and David Teplitzky (benefactors), Ben Havenaar
(of team Tony Albert), Sally Brand and Pai-Warangoon
Paetrakul (project support), Avril Quail (CIAF
Director), and those artists whose advice was greatly
appreciated: Richard Bell, Shane Cotton, Gonkar
Gyatso, Gordon Hookey, Titus Kaphar, Craig Koomeeta,
Eko Nugroho, Tavares Strachan and Judy Watson.

IMAGE CREDITS

Front cover: 'Tony Albert says Be Deadly' 2011
offset edition, un-numbered. Courtesy the artist.

Tony Albert and Terri Janke in conversation, Proppa
NOW Studio, West End. Courtesy SP Wright.

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