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# Tony Albert



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Although Tony Albert knows what it means to be an outsider, he does not let the past define his future. The artist synthesizes symbols of the modern world, from Mickey Mouse to Santa Claus, with the problematic imagery that has historically surrounded the aboriginal experience in Australia, in order to effect change in the world.

Tony is a believer in the power of art. Below, he explains the motivations and methods that undergird his relationship to craft.

There are moments when art sustains you beyond eating or going to the bathroom. You just go "Man I've been here for 24 hours, I need to go home". There's something that art does to you which provides some kind of nourishment.

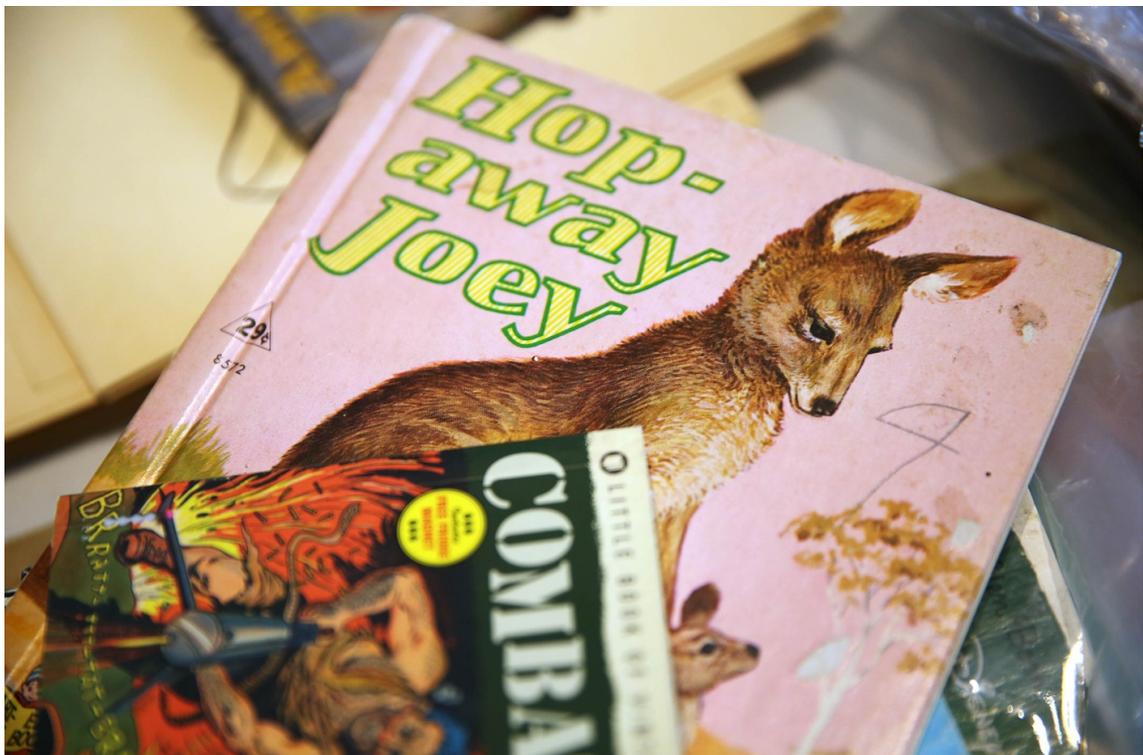
I have a very simplistic underlying philosophy to my practice: art can change the world. I use my own experience to validate that statement. Art has taken me from feeling invisible in a small community, feeling like I was an outsider, like I didn't belong, to really giving me a voice.

First and foremost, I consider myself an artist and that's separate from my aboriginality. In Australia, in the context of art you're considered an aboriginal artist, and aboriginal art falls under the larger grouping of Australian art, so aboriginal art isn't autonomous as an entity in itself. There are special dedicated galleries to showing your work.

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This does us great injustice as people. For us to get anywhere as people our work as to sit alongside our work has to sit on a parallel with contemporary art. We have to sit alongside our contemporaries no matter what race or religion or ethnicity they come from. This is a global problem, it's something where the framework of institutions that were set up by white people for white people and the work i'm doing or the philosophy behind an aboriginal way of being doesn't fit within that western framework of institutions that were set up by white people for white people.

Growing up, I started to collect what I call Aboriginalia. Coming from quite a poor family and going to a lot of second hand shops to buy clothes, I came across these images of aboriginal people on plates and cups and all different types of tourist objects. As I grew up, I started to really understand the social and implications of the objects and what they represented. A majority of Australians and the world understood aboriginal people through these objects.

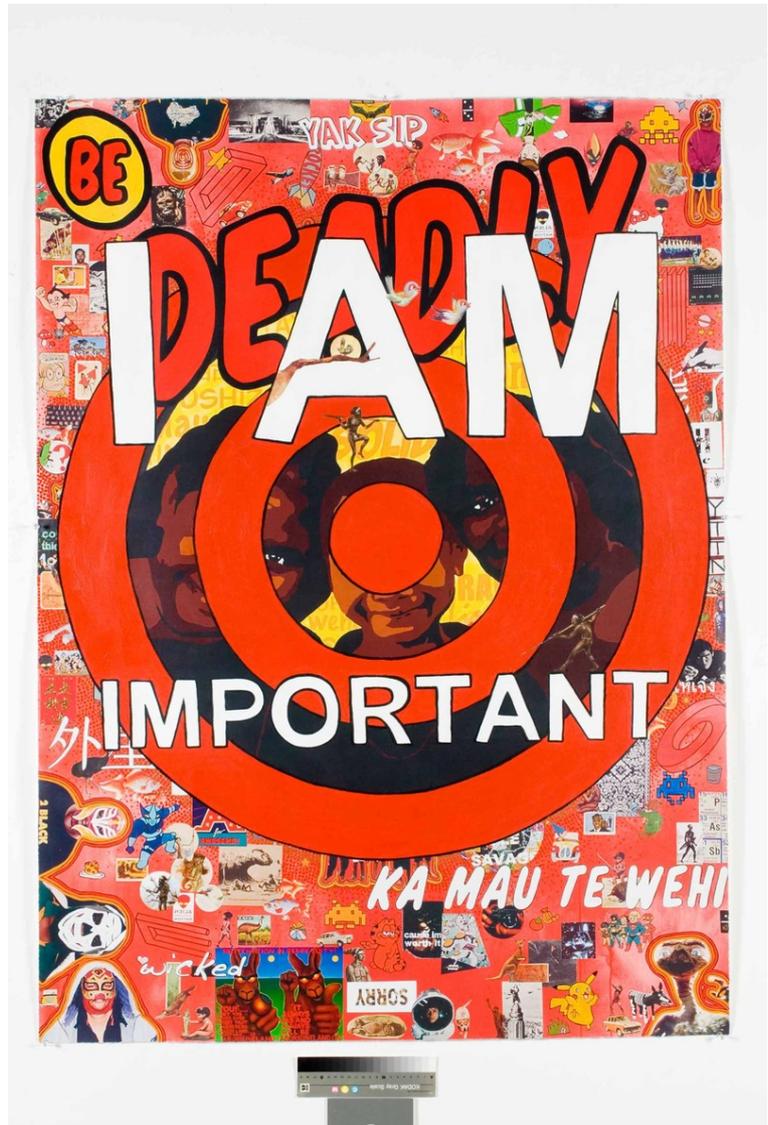


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I think the importance of them is now kind of undervalued. Given now that these objects are completely what I like to say "uncollectible" you can't almost give them away, no one wants this imagery, yet it makes up such an important part of the social fabrication of Australia. I started to use reference points from the objects in my work itself. Whether it be painting symbols or images in the work I was doing to a point where I started to use the objects in my work. It started off very simple-just doing things at the studio like dividing the collection up. Putting all velvet paintings together, putting all the plates together.

That started off the idea of the collection: how objects relate to each other and they would be represented by putting them on the wall in different shapes and through language, symbols and that kind of thing.

Now it's really nice to know all those objects have been reintroduced to society with a completely different meaning and completely different language behind them.



By doing more research and having more opportunity to travel, I realise that what I am looking at is not just an Aboriginal issue. It's about people who live on the periphery of society and the minority groups.

It's heartening to come to New York and understand that similar things are happening to different groups of people, and have a look at the way in which a country with a much longer colonial history has responded and deals with those things.

I'm a big believer in historical truth. As young Australians we weren't privileged to this within our education system. My sister and I were the only aboriginal children in our school in fact the only people of color. There is still a lot of problematic information that we are fed about the history of Australia and how Aboriginal fit within that history. It wasn't until high school that I became aware of contemporary artists, and indeed Aboriginal artists people like Tracey Moffat and Gordon Bennett They became real heroes of mine.

I'm a very quiet and shy person. I am a very anxious and nervous person too. The big factor I've had to deal with is not letting those things control me as a person. So when I do get any opportunity, I take it on board and know that I am going to have to deal with things.

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I am going to be outside of my comfort zone. I don't want to be the person that lets those fears and lets that inner core of me dictate who I am going to be as a person. So when I do decide what I really want to do, for me and my people, it is going to be the best thing ever.

The conditions that my people live in are still really bad. For me, success will come when the way aboriginal people live and exist within Australia changes. I'll look at my practice in a different way, or a successful way. That's what I want: a better future for my children or the children of the country where I am from or the children of the world.

In terms of activism, in terms of social change, art can give people the opportunity to greater understand issues. When people look at my work, they understand that they had that imagery growing, something from their grandma or grandpa's wall. Even as Aboriginal people we had these objects in our homes. The fact that I can re-work them and give them a positive voice is a really important element of my practice.



Rather than pointing a finger and screaming kind of political activist style, my practice is to subtly introduce motifs, images and ideas into my works. Humor is really important in art. I like to use humor as almost a guerilla tactic or way of getting the audience much closer through humor and making them laugh. Poking fun at yourself or other people is a really successful tool for conveying a message that could be quite strong or have some really heavy political issues attached to it.

It might not necessarily when you are standing in front of a painting that you get the point. It might be later in the day, or later that week or through a conversation where you think 'maybe that's what that artist was talking about in that work.' That's where the success of work happens-when it has the opportunity to translate ideas and change peoples minds and opinions or at least educate on facet or area of society.

I am a strong believer that things can get better. I want things to get better both in a Aboriginal and non-aboriginal part of Australia. Positivity in the face of adversity is the undercurrent of my practice.