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## In Conversation With: Tony Albert

Tony Albert is an award-winning Indigenous Australian visual artist, famous for his examination of cultural misrepresentation. Albert's work has been recognised on a local and international level. In 2014, he was awarded the Basil Sellars Art Prize and the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award. During the same year, he was awarded an art residency at the International Studio & Curatorial Program in New York. More recently, in 2016, Albert was awarded the Fleurieu Art Prize, and in 2017 he was declared a finalist for the Archibald Prize.



Tony Albert Self-portrait (ash on me) acrylic on linen, 102 x 102 cm. © the artist Photo: Jenni Carter, AGNSW

### How did you get into art?

I was really interested in art in high school, and it was there that I got to go into an advanced program. I spent four days a week in regular high school and then I spent one day a week at a special art college. My interest in art was from a very early age, but it wasn't until I finished

than just a pretty picture, I started looking at it more conceptually. People like Gordon Bennett have really inspired me to further continue with art at a university level.

### **Do you ever feel as though your work is pigeon-holed into the Indigenous Australian genre?**

Where I come from in Far North Queensland our traditional style of painting is very different from a dot style painting, but I still feel that the stigma attached to Aboriginal art and what it is, is very much dot-painting, and Western-desert style, so being from Northern Queensland and even in a place like Cairns in the tourist industry, you still see lots of Aboriginal paintings and imagery which is related to a really different area. I think there is still a stigma attached to what Aboriginal art is and what it should look like but I don't know if I've ever felt pressured to do that kind of art. I really feel that my art expresses the here and now social and political issues... and even though that is tough and challenging as an artist, I don't feel pressured to shun away from that at all.

### **How was the experience of being a finalist in the Archibald Prize?**

I've always been interested in participating in something like the Archibald, I think it's such a massive prize in its own right. But there's so many things I see as problematic in prizes and things like the Archibald, and I thought why throw rocks from the outside when you can just participate in it and be the change that you want to see? The kind of work I did for the Archibald is the kind of work I want to see when I see a portrait prize, so I thought well why not enter?

### **Could you explain your piece *Self-Portrait (Ash on Me)*?**

This year's entry in the Archibald was the second time I've entered, and the *Ash on Me* portrait is about a continuation of work I've been doing based on souvenir objects with Aboriginal imagery on them, particularly the idea of ashing out a cigarette onto someone's culture, or in this case onto someone's face. I think it's kind of ironic in a way that it's hanging in this prize which is symbolic of a privileged white system, where the majority of sitters are predominantly white men, so it was kind of a play on that whole idea as well but also often how I feel as an Aboriginal person in general society, and the guarantee that everyday there is an article about Aboriginal people and you know that that article will be negative. It's playing on those but also putting it into a forum where portraiture of Aboriginal people by Aboriginal people is seldom accepted or seen.

### **What experiences have most significantly inspired your work?**

For me at the heart of it is family and culture, but more recently the opportunity to travel, and to look at my work in a much more international context, and when you do that you realise that these are universal issues that we are talking about. It's often about the people of the minority, or in the peripheries, and while I think there is something more local that grounds my work, I think that opening up the ideas and possibilities of it being much broader has been something that has been really inspiring for me most recently.

### **Have you encountered any challenges as an artist?**

I think the challenge is that being an artist is exceptionally hard and very misunderstood, even in the position that I am in now. From the outside looking my life may seem like something that is very successful... It's really tough because when you look at these issues it's much harder than people's perceptions. It's a real struggle working and living in a place like Sydney, but it's equally as rewarding.

### **What advice would you have for aspiring artists?**

I think people don't realise or understand how hard people work as artists. There's a perception that it's very creative and very sporadic, but the truth is that you work harder than anyone in any other industry or area of work. You not only work full-time in a job that pays the rent but also have to try and do the artist job on top of that. Don't think that you're not working hard enough, remain really positive and go and see what's happening, go to openings and know what people are doing in your area of interest. I think it's really rewarding that if you want to be an artist, you do things that are artistic and you hang out with artistic people and that you listen and challenge yourself, and be part of the industry that you want to be involved in.