



object lesson

IN OP SHOPS AND DUSTY ATTICS AROUND THE COUNTRY LIE PILES OF 'ABORIGINALIA': KITSCH HOUSEHOLD OBJECTS DECORATED WITH INDIGENOUS-LIKE DESIGNS AND FACES. TONY ALBERT SPENT HIS CHILDHOOD COLLECTING THESE CRINGEWORTHY ITEMS. NOW HE MAKES SUBVERSIVE ART OUT OF THEM.

As told to Chris Harrigan

I COME FROM A VERY MODEST FAMILY IN FAR NORTH QUEENSLAND AND BRISBANE, AND WHEN I WAS GROWING UP, NEARLY EVERYTHING WE BOUGHT WAS FROM SECOND-HAND SHOPS. THAT'S WHERE I FIRST CAME ACROSS WHAT I CALL 'ABORIGINALIA': ASHTRAYS, COASTERS, TEA TOWELS AND OTHER OBJECTS WITH IMAGES OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE ON THEM.

As an Indigenous person who'd never seen images of Aboriginal people anywhere else, these objects really captivated me. I assumed the people on them were famous; surely having your face emblazoned on something meant you were special? I started collecting Aboriginalia when I was about six, and over time the collection grew to over 3,000 items. There's still a part of me that looks at these objects and sees what made me fall in love with them as a child. But during high school I started to understand the politics behind them. It didn't stop me collecting them; it just gave me an alternate point of view.

By the time I graduated from art school, the collection was so big I had to rehouse it in my painting studio. After a while, I realised it was actually a work in itself. I began manipulating the objects, cutting them up and painting over them. I'm a pop culture junkie, so I incorporated iconography that might be familiar to people – Pac-Man and Mickey Mouse, for example. It helps attract people, and subtly opens them up to the deeper issues embedded in the work. These pieces became part of *Visible*, my first institutional show. It's about the fact that Aboriginal people have not only been written out of history, but also written *into* it by a victor.

There's obviously a cultural cringe attached to Aboriginalia; seeing all these items together can be confronting. But it's important. Aboriginalia isn't collected institutionally, and there isn't even any academic writing about it. Which is interesting, considering that these objects were how a whole generation identified with Aboriginal people. Everyone had these items, but it's all been swept under the rug. Some of it wasn't even made for Australians: the pinball machine, for instance, was made in America, but only ever distributed in Germany. It's not until you see Aboriginalia on this mass scale that you start to understand how pollinated Australia was by these images, how they were used to sell a country. Part of this work is about rescuing these objects, and giving them a life they weren't able to have originally.

Visible is showing at the Queensland Art Gallery until October 7.

'Moving the Line', Tony Albert, 2018. Vintage playing cards mounted on board. The Queensland Art Gallery.

