

Dispatches

Andrew Stephens



Tony Albert, *exotic OTHER*, 2009/2018, installation view,
'Tony Albert: Visible', Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA), Brisbane, 2018; photo: Joe Ruckli, QAGOMA

Visibility clear

Tony Albert's relentless acquisition of 'Aboriginalia' – kitsch objects ranging from velvet paintings and ashtrays to saucers, tea towels, ceramic sculptures and myriad trinkets – is impressive and extensive. He has been collecting since he was a child when the modest means of his family, living in regional Queensland and then suburban Brisbane, entailed many visits to second-hand shops. There he would uncover these treasures which he innocently loved: 'I had an affinity with the imagery, seeing people like myself and my family represented in this stuff.'

It wasn't until he was a teenager that he began to scrutinise their implicit meanings more curiously – and these days he is pleased to see that Aboriginalia is starting to be taken seriously in academic circles. He is disappointed, though, that this ephemera is now so 'hipster' it is out of his budget.

Albert's use of these objects in his art installations is cleverly political, strategically deploying them in unexpected configurations or using them alongside other Aboriginal motifs to spell out provocative words and phrases such as 'hunter', 'pay attention motherfuckers' or 'exotic other'. In his first solo show at the Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA), titled 'Visible' (until 7 October), it is clear these manufactured objects now transcend mere kitsch and the simple utilitarian or decorative functions for which they were intended.

'When you pull them apart, they have real strength,' says Albert, whose best-known works include *SORRY*, emerging out of the momentous 2008 Kevin Rudd apology to Aboriginal people that seemed so meaningful at the time. As QAGOMA Curator Bruce McLean observes in the catalogue for Albert's new exhibition, thousands of Aboriginal people directly affected by the government policies that produced the Stolen Generations were symbolically 'brought home' by the apology, and *SORRY* is spelt out using dozens of representations of Aboriginal faces.

Recently, though, Albert reversed the letters to spell *YRROS*, which is how it appears in this show. It reflects the dominant view that the promise of the apology has never been backed up with action; things may even have gone backwards. Albert says he doesn't think people will feel confronted by his work – rather, they will find an opportunity to understand more deeply the issues at play. Seeing many of his older works being reinstalled has been exciting and moving for him too.

'These opportunities [for a solo show] are really rare for Australian artists, to be strongly supported by an Australian institution,' he says. 'It is something that should happen much more frequently.'