

## Tony Albert: *Brother (I am)*: politics of defiance

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In April 2012 Tony Albert attended a protest rally in Sydney that so affected him he decided to create several series of photographs, one of which, *We Can be Heroes*, won the respected National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award.

At the protest rally, Albert had noticed a group of boys who'd taken off their shirts to reveal targets drawn on their bodies. The targets were a response to the shooting and wounding of two Aboriginal teenagers, aged 14 and 17, by police in Sydney's Kings Cross.

Albert has said he was inspired by the political defiance of the boys at the rally. As a tribute to those boys, he decided to photograph portraits of indigenous young men with red targets painted on their bare chests. Albert says Aboriginal men and boys are "walking targets ... through police violence or being followed around in shops".

Speaking about the young men in his photographs, he has stated: "I wanted this look that they were coming out of the photograph in this act of defiance or strength, that they were going to wear this target but they were going to own it. We are constantly wearing a target as people but I guess there's also an optimistic twist about how, and why, and where, and when we wear it or change it."

To produce his portraits, Albert sought the help of some young men from Kirinari Hostel, which provides accommodation for Aboriginal young men and boys from regional NSW who are studying at secondary school in Sydney.

One of the portraits, *Brother (I am)*, is on display at Darwin's Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory in its exhibition *Hot! Highlights from the MAGNT Art Collection*.

*Brother (I am)*, a large-scale work, is from the first series of photographs that Albert took in response to the protest rally.

He later expanded this Brothers series into the *We Can be Heroes* series.

Wendy Garden, the gallery's curator of Australian art, says what is striking about this work is having an Aboriginal boy standing there, partially naked with a red target, staring straight out at the viewer. "The simple composition is reminiscent of police mug shots and 19th-century anthropological portraits that attempted to define racial characteristics by appearance," she says. "By depicting the boy facing the camera proud and defiant, Albert creates an image of resilience. You are just forced to confront the person and the red target, of course, gets you wondering what that is about. There was that whole notion of the readiness of police to shoot first and ask questions later.

"The question also needs to be asked that if they were non-indigenous boys would the police have been so ready to shoot, and that whole feeling of being moving targets. So, I think, looking at this image, it's encouraging you to see things from their perspective and having empathy and understanding."

Garden says Albert, who was born in 1981 in Townsville, Queensland, is a fascinating artist because he works across a range of media and aims to encourage people to be aware of everyday racism.

"I have looked at a lot of photographs over the years and personally I think this is a powerful work," says Garden. "It is so simple but it is so arresting. Tony Albert is always looking at angles which encourage people to view attitudes they may not even be aware of, and I think that is always the sign of really strong art."

***Tony Albert, Brother (I am) (2013)***. Collection of the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory. Donated through the Australian government's Cultural Gifts Program by Tony Albert, 2014. On display in exhibition *Hot! Highlights from the MAGNT Art Collection*, MAGNT, Darwin, until August 13.