
Curios of the contemporary

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JUST when Tony Albert was ready to move on, a big commission from the Queensland Art Gallery forced him to take what he saw as a small backwards step. His *Sorry* is a work made up of big letters spelling out the word, with each letter covered in what he calls **Aboriginalia**: stereotyped and kitsch portraits of Aborigines from a time it was considered quaint to beat into copper an image of a man standing on one leg with a boomerang or to paint an idealised bare-bosomed maiden on to black velvet.

Sorry was a feature work in the summer exhibition at QAG's Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane, its ambiguity part of the stimulating tone gallery director Tony Ellwood wanted for this, his first all-Australian summer curated show. QAG has now acquired Albert's *Sorry* for its collection.

Albert, 28, has made something of a name for himself during the past few years by recontextualising the bric-a-brac he has collected since he was a boy living in Cardwell in north Queensland. His recent show at Jan Manton Gallery in South Brisbane features a large text-based work called *ASH on me*, the words spelled out with **Aboriginalia**, this time exclusively depicted on ashtrays. As Albert says, the idea of putting out a cigarette on a face is disturbing, and equally disturbing is just how many of these odd objects Albert has been able to gather through the years.

"I call these uncollectables and they play such an important role," he says.

"As much as no one wants to own it any more, or even to put their name to it, I think they're incredibly important in our history as a country. So much of it is still available, you realise everyone must have had one such item on their walls. Even in my family, we had this stuff, too, so there are generations of people who understand the iconography."

As successful as he has been in using his **Aboriginalia** collection to inform, as he puts it, his artworks, that phase is coming to an end. He says his heart sank when he was first invited to take part in the summer *Optimism* show because it was precisely a text-based work using **Aboriginalia** the curators wanted.

A gently spoken young man who has only recently begun to lose his shyness about explaining his art and ambitions, Albert says he brushed aside his disappointment and produced his *Sorry*, which he now sees as representing a comforting part of his life.

"My work is always about appropriation, that's why it exists," Albert says. "The Sorry work is about my personal collection which, in a way, was always a comfort to me. There were images of Aboriginal people around me and my collecting these objects was my way of marking my respect."

When Albert began a course at the Queensland College of Art in 2000, he brought his Aboriginalia collection with him to Brisbane. But gradually it became too big to fit comfortably into his living space, so he had to move it into his studio. "Surrounding me there as I worked, it started to inform what I was doing, and those objects became the work. Recontextualising them changed their meaning, gave them voice, bringing them back in a black, empowering way.

"I never look at these works as just mine. The movement and energy that comes back with them belongs to us all."

Albert, unashamedly political as an artist, is a member of Brisbane collective ProppaNow, which includes Fiona Foley, Gordon Hookey and Richard Bell, whom he describes as a great friend and mentor. His cousin Vernon Ah Kee also is part of the group, although that artist works out of a studio on the other side of the river while Albert shares a space with Foley and Bell just a few blocks away from QAG.

Albert has worked part time with QAG since 2002, when he became an exhibitions project officer under an indigenous internship scheme. Expecting to be there only one year, he is surprised to find himself still working there. One of his tasks is to find ways that the gallery can go out to the people, rather than expecting people to always come to the gallery. "So many of our people don't even know the gallery exists," Albert says.

He has been working with the community in the Cardwell region, the country of his father's people, to develop a new cultural centre, which now has a "keeping place" for objects significant to the community. Albert, with his museum expertise, is able to meet the strict guidelines for installation and handling required for such places to build their collections. "Now our children are going to grow up with objects even our old people haven't seen around them," he says.

Working with the gallery has given Albert much-needed confidence, changing him from the "shy boy" he imagined he'd always be to someone who welcomes the attention his sometimes provocative work invites. He admits he's still learning to stand up for himself in public discussions.

Soon after his photographic series 50perCENT won the Sunshine Coast Art Prize in 2007, Albert found himself on a panel talking about how he had created a persona of a powerful, sexually aggressive Aboriginal rapper named 50perCENT (Albert has a white mother) to produce his glossy, fun but politically bold images specifically for young Aborigines. (Bell has a cameo appearance in the series as "The Notorious B.E.L.L.", gesturing towards the

camera in one of those characteristic stiff-finger salutes so beloved of rap culture.)

An audience member tackled him, saying it was all very well to call this fun, but wasn't he just creating images of "bling and butt"?

"I thought that was an uneducated sort of response," Albert says now.

"It reduced the effects of American hip-hop and the way it's translated worldwide, as a really strong way of communicating. What's interested me is the lyrical content of that hip-hop scene, the stuff our youth is talking and singing about because it's what we don't, as a society, talk about, things like youth suicide and extreme poverty and lack of education. I was blown away at that, these 15-year-olds tapping into such potent issues."

None of that, however, went into his answer that day on the public panel, although he's glad now to have had the chance to articulate his responses more deeply.

"I went completely out of my comfort zone creating 50perCENT," Albert says, referring to the way the man in the photographs is, in so many respects, an alter ego of himself. Where Albert favours busy T-shirts, his curls stylishly cut, his movements graceful and contained, 50perCENT wears unsubtle jewellery and gangster hats, draping himself in scantily clad young women, snarling aggressively at the camera.

"When we created him, it was just a great day, and somehow everything seemed to work," Albert says.

He is a little scared by what he's created, this rapper who exists only in nine large glossy photographs, because it seems to have hit a chord internationally. At the end of the month, Albert will head off to Havana, where his 50perCENT series will be shown as part of the 10th Havana Biennial, which has as its theme "integration and resistance in the global age". But now Albert says he doesn't really find him an "absorbing character"; "I've had enough of that one."

What comes next in the young artist's output is, for the moment, under wraps, although he does hint that he's talking to "some major players overseas" about the opportunity to work with "fabrication houses" on a project.

"That's a new realisation in my work," he says. "I've always thought of myself as an Aboriginal artist, now I'm an Aboriginal person and a contemporary artist."

"It's like Richard Bell says, we won't ever be with the real players in the art world unless we start to think like that, and unless our work is viewed on that same platform as everyone else."