

Sinister truth behind the bikini

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Richard Bell challenges with art that is both fierce and funny.

Richard Bell's 'Lessons on Etiquette and Manners'

Aboriginal activist and artist Richard Bell brings his latest exhibition to the Monash University Museum of Art.

THANKS to Richard Bell, the gold bikini has at last taken its place in the pantheon of Australian art.

In Queensland where the indigenous artist lives, inspiration is everywhere as shiny young people adorn the beach - but in his first major Melbourne exhibition, the sinister truth behind the bikini emerges.

"For a video installation I wanted to create stereotypical Australians, the beautiful, blonde Aryan-looking ones, and they also refer to the beach and the Cronulla riots," he says. "I put them in bikinis and budgie smugglers. Then I added two black men in intellectual positions, which you never see on TV."



A still from artist Richard Bell's video *Scratch an Aussie*.

Bell's skewering of our national identity has lost none of its heat since his political awakening in the 1970s. Amid the anguished history of race relations Bell creates art that's as fierce as it is funny.

The two intellectuals in the *Scratch an Aussie* video are Bell himself, on a psychiatrist's couch, and his friend Gary Foley as the learned shrink, in a mock-therapy session interrupted by the girls in gold bikinis.

Watching the video for the umpteenth time, Bell cackles at Foley's po-faced acting then marches off to inspect the rest of his show at Monash University Museum of Art (MUMA).



Richard Bell with one of his Lichtenstein-inspired artworks. *Photo: Ken Irwin*

Titled *Lessons on Etiquette and Manners*, it brings together some of the most ill-mannered art in the nation. Bell is an activist of the old school, a man reared in the Black Panther-inspired politics of the 1970s and the Redfern community that defined indigenous identity for many of his peers.

His first major exhibition in Melbourne foregrounds his provocative paintings, writings, videos and installations. The large canvases are bold and colourful, often scattered with text. One outlines a fake university degree in "de-colonisation" for those who've forgotten their roots.

They make their point powerfully, but Bell's seen-it-all cackle is never far away. "The subject matter is sometimes less than pleasant, so if you want to communicate ideas, humour is a great tool."

He talks about his public persona as an alter ego, Richie, "a magnificent black hero".

"Ducking and weaving and bobbing", is how he described Richie to Hettie Perkins, daughter of the Freedom Ride pioneer Charles Perkins. "If people stop talking about me I'll do something stupid."

Asked about his most shocking public act, he nominates the T-shirt he wore to an awards event in 2003: it read "White girls can't hump".

"Shock jocks rang me up wanting to talk, there were letters to the editor, it went on for six weeks. It highlighted a great strategy - create havoc and then leave. I was out of the country within two weeks!"

The media also took note when, in 2011, he tossed a coin to choose the winner of an illustrious art prize.

Given the liberties he takes, the art world has served Bell's political purposes well - and he appropriates at will, particularly the pop art of Roy Lichtenstein and his ilk.

The contrast is devastating. In Bell's work, a wholesome all-American gal swoons, as though waiting for a frat-boy's kiss. It never comes. Instead, she gasps: "Thank Christ I don't live on Palm Island".

For Bell, Australia has a "white problem", not the black problem perceived by governments since 1788. "I'm bemused by the term reconciliation because to have a reconciliation you first need to have a conciliation. Of course that hasn't occurred."

Within the university gallery, he has also recreated the 1972 Tent Embassy. While Bell wasn't involved, he says its incendiary activism underpins all his work.

"My research is my experience. I came from the country and became politicised in the city - and truth is my weapon of choice."

***Lessons on Etiquette and Manners* is at Monash University Museum of Art until April 13.**