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Portrait of an artist as an angry man

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Arts reporter

Richard Bell has some regrets but he is in no hurry to make excuses or apologies, writes Andrew Taylor.



Provocative: Richard Bell, in *Scratch an Aussie*, says he has mellowed but he likes to cause a stir.

There's never a dull moment with indigenous artist and professional provocateur Richard Bell. No sooner has he sat down with his beer outside the Tilbury Hotel in Woolloomooloo, close to the gallery hosting his coming exhibition, than he is accosted by an elderly woman who demands he vacates the table because she has parked her Zimmer frame next to it.

Bell eventually moves, observing later: "I'm a pussy nowadays, a toothless tiger.

"Years ago, I'd tell her to just go f--- herself."

He is not lying, if his career is any guide.

The 59-year-old Brisbane artist came to national attention after his painting *Scientia E Metaphysica (Bell's Theorem)*, featuring the words "Aboriginal art - It's a white thing", won the 2003 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award.

He caused a furore when he turned up to the award ceremony in Darwin wearing a T-shirt that read "White girls can't hump", which he says he had worn at countless other public events.

Bell stirred up controversy in 2011 when he revealed that he had tossed a coin to choose the winner of the Sulman Art Prize, prompting then director of the Art Gallery of NSW Edmund Capon to offer more guidance in future to judges of the \$20,000 award.

However, Bell's stature in contemporary art circles continues to grow.

He was one of five artists awarded a \$100,000 Australia Council fellowship last month, and a mid-career survey of his work, *Uz vs. Them*, recently finished a two-year tour of US galleries.

Bell says he has mellowed in the years since it was suggested he take up art in the late 1980s at the end of the Bjelke-Petersen era.

"And I said: 'Bullshit. That stuff is for girls and gays'," he says.

But Bell's mentor persisted, telling him: "You can say whatever you like and you won't get arrested."

"If I did that, I'd tell these white f---ers exactly what I think of them," Bell replied.

More than two decades later, Bell's *Imagining Victory*, an exhibition of three video works including the premiere of *The Dinner Party*, is no less confrontational in its examination of Australia's racial relations.

The Dinner Party takes place in a plush riverside mansion where a group of white Australians offer their perspective on Aboriginal people.

"This is where the stereotypes are introduced or reinforced," Bell says.

"We're lazy, we get a million-dollar payout from the government, we get everything paid for us."

It is the final instalment in Bell's film trilogy that began with 2008's *Scratch an Aussie*, a Freudian therapy session featuring the artist as patient opening up to a therapist played by indigenous activist Gary Foley. Bell also played a therapist in the film, urging a group of young white Australians to air their appalling attitudes about indigenous people.

The following year he focused on Aboriginal politics in *Broken English*, which featured an Australia Day re-enactment of Captain Cook's landing.

The films make for uncomfortable viewing and Bell says it is up to the viewer to decide whether the racist attitudes depicted in *Imagining Victory* are a relic of the past or still colour Australian society.

Curator Mark Feary says Bell's trilogy highlights the divide between publicly stated and privately held opinions on race relations. The films are confrontational, Feary says, but

"every movement requires an aspect of radicalism to uncomfortably push an agenda and you could suggest that this is a role that Richard has assumed.

"For him, art is a vehicle for him to integrate the politics of Aboriginal representation in a broad sense of political, social and economic realms but specifically how that might be represented culturally."

Bell makes no apology for his confrontational approach to art, which appropriates the art of others, especially pop art pioneer Roy Lichtenstein, to make strong political comments.

His 2007 painting *The Peckin' Order* depicts an anguished young woman, with a thought bubble hovering next to her blonde hair that reads: "Thank Christ I'm not Aboriginal."

"I've seen lots of artists who present arguments in subtle ways and through metaphor and it's kind of wasted," he says.

"It is as a mark of respect for those artists that I don't sully their name by being included in their ranks."

However, he says he is willing to make a fool out of himself, pointing to his appearance as a crucified Jesus in Luke Roberts' *Three figures at the bases of crucifixions*, which was a finalist in the 2011 Blake Prize for religious art.

As humorous as he is confrontational, Bell says there are "probably lots of things" he regrets.

"When I'm feeling down and weak, I'd probably feel that way," he says. "When I'm buoyant and brazen, I don't give a f---. It goes up and down.

"I have to wear everything I've done. That doesn't mean to say I have to embrace it."

Richard Bell's *Imagining Victory* is on at Artspace in Woolloomooloo from June 26 to August 11.