

The uncompromising art of Australia's Richard Bell: 'There's got to be a day of reckoning'

For 30 years Bell has deployed his canvas for bold activism, which takes over the Museum of Contemporary Art in his biggest solo show to date



Richard Bell: 'We have to overcome the systemic racism in this country.'

Steve Dow
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Seated at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art while his huge, brilliantly coloured canvases and video works are being installed for the biggest solo exhibition of his career, Richard Bell, 68, packs a rhetorical punch both in paint and in persona.

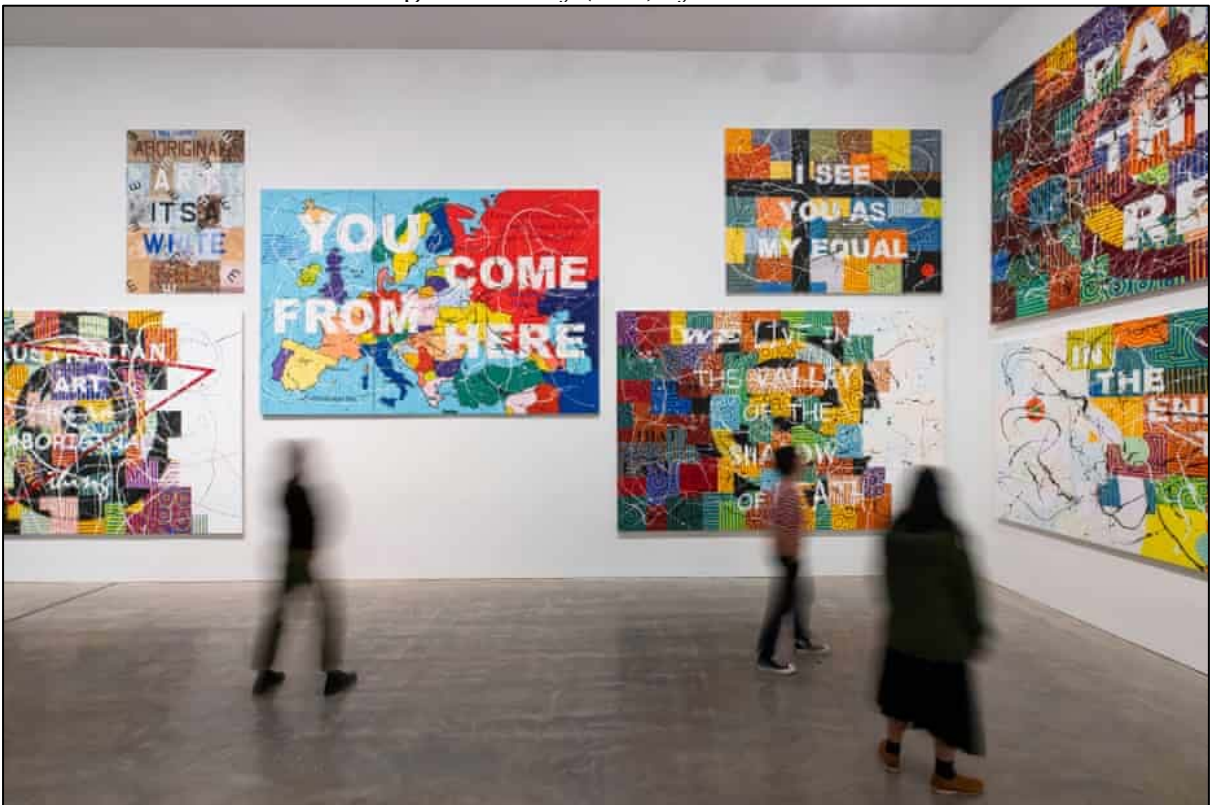
His 2017 painting *Immigration Policy* reads "YOU CAN GO NOW!" in large earth-toned uppercase letters on a map of Australia, confronting all visitors the moment they walk into the first floor southern gallery. It is also the title of this retrospective.

Does he mean Europeans can go? "What do you reckon?" says Bell, who wears an unbuttoned, purple collared shirt over a black T-shirt showing another map of Australia behind bars.

"I didn't say Europeans. I said 'you' can go. It's a saying I use: somebody announces they're going and they get near the door; 'Ay', you call their name, and they turn around. 'You can go now!'" He laughs.



Immigration Policy (2017) by Richard Bell.



Installation view of You Can Go Now, a Richard Bell retrospective at the MCA in Sydney.

For some 30 years, the Kamilaroi, Kooma, Jiman and Gurang Gurang man has deployed his canvas for bold activism. Speaking with the Guardian, he says Australia

needs a fundamental “reset” to embed the rights of Indigenous people as the country’s “traditional and continuing owners”.

“We need a new constitution for a new republic,” he says. But what would that mean practically? “There’s got to be a day of reckoning. There has to be exchanges of money and land. That cannot be avoided. Until then, we’re never going to say that you [non-Indigenous people] belong here. You won’t be able to say that until we say you can.”

On the far northern gallery wall in the painting *Poor/Lean* (2017), the phrase YOU COME FROM HERE is daubed in white over a map of Europe, and in smaller text: “Europeans living in exotic places are not expats. They are immigrants ...”

The room’s centre is occupied by a large khaki tent, Embassy: an homage to the ongoing Aboriginal tent embassy first erected opposite the old Parliament House in Canberra in 1972 to protest the McMahon Liberal government’s rejection of Aboriginal land rights.



Richard Bell invites local Aboriginal activists to discuss Indigenous issues in Embassy: a touring homage to the ongoing tent embassy outside Parliament House.

During the 2016 Sydney biennale, Bell’s Embassy was pitched just outside at Circular Quay, and more recently it was displayed at the Brisbane festival. The pop-up embassy also travelled to the Venice biennale in 2019, where Bell provocatively wrapped a replica of the Australian pavilion in chains and sailed it on a barge down the canal, after being rejected as Australia’s official artist.

Now erected indoors at the MCA, local Aboriginal activists will again attend Embassy to discuss Indigenous issues, surrounded by works such as *From Little Things, Big Things Grow*, from 2020, depicting a crowd of protesters with placards calling January 26 Invasion Day and demanding the custodial deaths of black people end, the protesting figures at the back of the crowd melting into a brightly abstracted summer haze.



From Little Things, Big Things Grow (2020) by Richard Bell.

Will the activists who come to Embassy this winter discuss a treaty, and a constitutionally entrenched First Nations Voice to Parliament? “Yeah, possibly,” says Bell – but he dismisses as “fuckin’ ridiculous” the Voice to Parliament proposal, which was resolved by a majority of some 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders who met at Uluru in 2017.

“It’s just going to be a layer of bureaucracy filled by all these fuckin’ people pushing it, them and their minions will benefit, whereas nobody else will,” he says. “It’s just an advisory role. [Parliamentarians] can take it or leave it.”

Give us the deal you want the next coloniser of this country to give you

If there were a new constitution that empowers Aboriginal people, on the other hand, a treaty with Indigenous people would be “rendered virtually unnecessary”, Bell says. I mention that given what we know of Australia’s inclination for change, an entire new constitution seems unlikely: within months of being proposed, the then Turnbull government dismissed the Voice to Parliament as neither “desirable or capable of winning acceptance at referendum” – despite representing far less than Bell’s ambition of reckoning by way of exchange of money and land.

“We have to overcome the systemic racism in this country,” Bell replies, raising his voice, speaking faster. “It’s just so juvenile to think you can just get away with putting it off. Mate, when the Chinese [government] comes here and fuck youse over, you’ll be looking for compensation, OK – so give us the deal you want the next coloniser of this country to give you.”

The federal government does appear scared of China, I say. “Yes,” Bell laughs, continuing his pugilist performance: “With good reason. They need a [bigger] food bowl, OK? 1.4 billion people. They don’t even have to send warships down here. You know all they’ve got to do? Send a line of fuckin’ credit. They can buy everything from you. You people [Europeans] will sell your fucking grandmothers. And your mothers.”



Richard Bell says his best work is always the next one: 'I just can't stop myself experimenting.'

Born in Charleville in south-western Queensland in 1953, Bell grew up in “abject poverty”, living in a tent for his first two years on the Aboriginal reserve. “We had to wait for the white people to throw away enough corrugated iron to make a tin shack.” His late mother, Sarah Bell, a religious woman, raised Richard and his younger brother, Marshall, mostly on her own, taking a job in 1959 as a “house parent” at the infamous Retta Dixon Home in Darwin, which housed mainly Aboriginal children, many of whom were part of the stolen generations.

In 1968, eight months after a referendum gave the commonwealth power to make laws for Aboriginal people, the family, living on an Aboriginal reserve in Mitchell in Queensland, were woken one day at 7am by local authorities who had come to bulldoze their home.

“The local sergeant of police asked my mother if we had anywhere to go,” Bell recalls. “They went over to town to see if there were any vacant houses we could move into ... there were two condemned houses, and so they uncondemned one of them, and that’s where we went to live.”

Bell says the Joh Bjelke-Petersen state “regime” that came to power that year was “an oppressive time for most Queenslanders, particularly us”. But he only began to understand his family’s poverty was a result of “Australia’s systemic racism” when he moved to Sydney, in 1974.

Here, he became politicised, and over 10 years at Redfern befriended activists at the pioneering Aboriginal Legal Service, played for the Redfern All Blacks rugby league club, and forged relationships with the international Black Power movement,

later collaborating on artworks with Black Panther member Emory Douglas. Two such collaborations with Douglas are exhibited at the MCA, including the massive 300x1500cm *Peace Heals, War Kills (Big Ass Mutha Fuckin Mural)* from 2011, showing broken black bodies and nuclear warheads.

In 2002, Bell wrote *Bell's Theorem*, which postulated that Aboriginal art is a “white thing” – by which he meant key art industry players are mostly white people. “It’s still the truth,” he says. Conversely, a 2006 Bell painting declares: “AUSTRALIAN ART It’s An ABORIGINAL thing.”



Peace Heals, War Kills (Big Ass Mutha Fuckin Mural) (2011) by Richard Bell.

In 2003, Bell co-founded the Brisbane-based [proppaNOW](#) collective for Queensland Indigenous artists, calling on every major Australian gallery and museum to establish an autonomous Aboriginal art department. “We were so ballsy,” he says. “We set up proppaNOW to assert our Aboriginality and our relevance. There was hardly any representation of urban Aborigines.”

A younger member of proppaNOW, Tony Albert, told me recently that Bell is a “great artist” and a mentor: “His work almost has an aggression attached to it, and those [founding] artists really paved the way for the next generation. We have an opportunity to be a little more gentle or insert conversation into our work rather than pointing the finger or yelling and screaming, which was so important at the time that they did that.”

Bell has had six children: Adrian, who died in 2012, and Richard, Deborah, Marshall, Sissy and Sarah. His younger brother [Marshall](#) became an artist and activist, and died

in 2013. Bell, who is single, has worked since 2016 at an artist's studio in Yeronga, south of Brisbane.

His best work is “the next one. I just can't stop myself experimenting”. How does he want to be remembered? “Oh fuck. As a good storyteller?” He laughs, warming to his answer. “Yeah that'd be good, just being a good storyteller.”



'It's still the truth': Scientia E Metaphysica (Bell's Theorem) (2003) by Richard Bell.