

OPINION

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A capitalist will sell their grandmother.

It's been almost 20 years since I wrote "Bell's Theorem", an essay about Aboriginal art and the Western systems that make it a white business. The essay finished with a simple observation: "There is no hope."

Well, have a look around us. The planet has been brought to the edge of destruction. There's a pandemic going that sees no end. I still just don't have cause for hope when I look at it.

The world was doing fine until the invention of capitalism. You have settler-colonialism hand in hand with capitalism and it has taken less than 250 years to fuck the whole planet. Everything is for sale. A capitalist will sell their grandmother, their grandmother's dearest possessions. They'll sell everything, okay?

In that system, Aboriginal art has been positioned within and beneath Western art. And Western art has positioned itself on top of everything else.

"I'm seen as the angry black man. There's no spirituality attached to the angry black man. There's no humanity attached to the angry black man, okay?"

In this country, the experts are still all white. At the top of the field there's a distinct absence of Aboriginal people: Aboriginal gallery directors, Aboriginal curators. There's no infrastructure in place to deliver that kind of leadership. Without it, there will never be that kind of leadership. There's been tokenistic efforts at it, but there's been no follow-up to it.

Is that by design? Well, I'm not a paranoid person. My default position on this is that they're stupid.

Aboriginal art can feel like a dying, soon dead, culture being raked over. I don't think that's become any less true. There's almost 20 years gone past us and it's still pretty much what was happening back then.

There's the "real" Aborigines, and the "not real" Aborigines. Everybody knows it's there. Like an elephant, it fills the room. The strategy is divide and conquer: that keeps control in white hands.

For us to get justice, in this set of circumstances, we need to appeal to an authority that has been built and manned by the coloniser, by the people we are trying to appeal to justice for. Now, how could we ever get justice in that set of circumstances?

People feel really good when they buy a painting from an Aboriginal person, especially if that person is needy. It's not buying paintings; it's buying your way out of purgatory.

The settler-colonial problem is not an Aboriginal one. There is no Aboriginal problem. There's a huge problem with settler-colonialism. That's the problem that they should be looking at. There's been this cocoon built for white people to exist in. It's full of these lies – untruths – about the actual situation. And they believe this stuff. They're oblivious to the reality.

The system is built to protect them. They don't have to participate in any of this. There's a blue line, and it's not very thin, between us and them. They've got a lot of guns.

I'm seen as the angry black man. There's no spirituality attached to the angry black man. There's no humanity attached to the angry black man, okay?

The collector is asking me to perform the angry black man. I'm required to tell a truth, an Aboriginal truth. That's what I have to do. That's my job. And sometimes these truths are really painful, and that sort of thing. So I lighten the load for them with a bit of humour. But at the end of the day, that's the deal.

But these guys, they have to sit with these works. And they're wondering what the fuck is this black fucker saying here. And they have to expose themselves to these truths that are placed before them. So art does its job, part of which is to question their comfortability.

I started making art because I thought this was a way that blackfellas could record our stories, give our evidence, on a stage that wasn't just Australia. I wanted to let the world know what's happening, let Australians know what's happening, and let that knowledge withstand attempts to destroy it or hide it. This is oracle proof: the fact of that we survived, the fact that we're still here.

I think we need a reset. We need to go back and start again. We need to start a new republic. Fuck treaties and fuck a Voice to Parliament. We need our rights enshrined in the constitution of a new republic. Fuck everything else.

The underlying essence of land tenure in Australia is paternalism. I wrote that in my theorem and I added a list of questions. They still stand. Please circle "yes" or "no".

Do you believe, and I mean really believe, that Aboriginal people:

Once owned all of Australia?

Yes/No

Still own all of Australia?

Yes/No

Still have rights to land that have not been properly negotiated?

Yes/No

Had a recognisable form of land tenure?

Yes/No

Were “civilised”?

Yes/No

Are “civilised”?

Yes/No

Deserve to own all of Australia at any time?

Yes/No

Deserve to own all of Australia now?

Yes/No

Deserve to own any of Australia at any time?

Yes/No

Deserve to own any of Australia now?

Yes/No

Deserve to own any of the good parts of Australia?

Yes/No

Can manage their own affairs?

Yes/No

Should be thankful for everything you’ve done for us?

Yes/No

Should be thankful for some things you’ve done for us?

Yes/No

Now. Ask yourself what you believe. Then what you think the average punter believes. And don’t bullshit.

Having confirmed your paternalism, if not racism, consider your view and position in relation to Aboriginal art and indeed Australian society. Perhaps you should also consider that you are an uninvited guest behaving like a star boarder.