

Tony Albert

"When I was young, the media was barren of Aboriginal imagery ... so when I saw these images of black people, mostly in second-hand shops, I really related. Only later did I appreciate them on a political level."

Tony Albert, 2012¹

Tony Albert, (b.1981), Circle.

Short Biography

Born, 1981, Townsville, Qld.

Language Groups: Girramay/Yidinji/Kuku-Yalanji

Lives and works in Brisbane, Qld.

Major exhibits Australia and overseas.

About the artist

Tony Albert was born in 1981 in Brisbane, Queensland and is a descendant of the Girramay and Kuku Yalanji people of East Cape region North Queensland. His creative practice is based on political, social and misled narratives of Aboriginal people and colonial histories. From a broad array of media including paint, sculpture, photography and installation, Albert forms ideas and discussions that attempt to define his cultural identity and what Aboriginality means today in contemporary society.

Albert enrolled into the Queensland College of Art in Griffith University, Brisbane and completed a degree in Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art in 2004. Albert was one of the first Indigenous students to complete the degree and while also undertaking a traineeship at the Queensland Art Gallery. After a few years continuing as a trainee, he later left the Queensland Art Gallery to focus on producing artworks.

Albert has exhibited nationally and internationally in group and solo exhibitions including Singapore Art Museum (2013), National Museum of China, Beijing (2013), and the Musée d'Aquitaine, Bordeaux in France (2014). His works have also been included in the 10th Havana Biennial in Cuba (2009) and the Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art (2014). One of his permanent commissioned artworks is placed in Sydney Hyde Park as the War Memorial that commemorates the Indigenous soldiers, titled *YININMADYEMI Thou didst let fall* (2015).

¹ Elliott, T. Out of the Corner (2012). SMH. [Online] Available at: <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/out-of-the-corner-20120815-249lb.html>

Albert is also a founding member of proppaNOW – a Brisbane-based Indigenous art collective which includes Vernon Ah Kee, Richard Bell and Gordon Hookey. The Indigenous art collective had established in 2006 which gave support to emerging Indigenous artists and to give them a voice to produce work and share their culture and stories.

About the artwork: critical statement

Tony Albert's art practice interrogates contemporary legacies of colonialism in a way that prompts the audience to contemplate elemental aspects of the human condition. Mining imagery and source material from across the globe and drawing upon personal and collective histories, Albert questions how we understand, imagine and construct difference. Certain political themes and visual motifs resurface across his oeuvre, including thematic representations of the 'outsider' and Aboriginalia (a term the artist coined to describe kitschy objects and images that feature naive portrayals of Aboriginality).

Albert's technique and imagery is distinctly contemporary, displacing traditional Australian Aboriginal aesthetics with a kind of urban conceptuality. Weaving together text appropriated from popular music, film, fiction, and art history, the artist presents a tapestry of ideas that makes us question the flimsy line that inscribes and ascribes 'difference.'²

ASH on me2008 is a juxtaposition of old found 'opportunity shop' ceramic and metal ashtrays, which are decorated with kitsch images of Aboriginal people and culture. Each ashtray brings a different perspective of how Aboriginal people are depicted, some as caricatures, some realistically. Albert's clever use of these objects crammed on to the word 'ASH' emphasises their original intent: for cigarette butts to be stubbed out on the faces of the Aboriginal men, women and children. These seemingly innocuous ashtrays transform into menacing symbols of racism. Although such objects belong to a different era, their contemporary relevance is found in the mass production and use (or mis-use) of images of Aboriginal people and cultural objects as icons of Australia today.³

*"Ash on me is about having a cigarette put out on you. It's politically charged and everything ... There was something so sinister about an ashtray that I felt needed a work of its own. I put all my ashtrays aside and thought, 'I'll just keep collecting ashtrays'. I was saving them up for something special ..."*⁴

Art Critique

D Dumbar Critique: 2013 Tony Albert⁵

When it comes to discourse on the topic of politics or racial politics, I tend to leave my voice out, so the analysis of the work of Tony Albert is particularly difficult. I suppose if I was to tread lightly through the minefield of racial politics in art, my route would be in the guise of whether political racial art is successful in changing the way the community thinks.

If we take Albert's work "Moving Targets" (2013), which came as a response to the shooting of an indigenous teenager in Kings Cross. One must ask who the intended audience of the work is? Surely this work being a gallery situation would not reach the intended target. One might assume that those who frequent galleries are somewhat learned folk who may or may not hold any angst towards the indigenous community (I feel that they would most likely lean towards not

² Sullivan & Strumpf. Tony Albert Bio (2017). [Online] Available at: <https://sullivanstrumpf.com/artists/tony-albert/bio>

³ Tony Albert, interviewed by Odette Kelada, Art Monthly, no 218, April 2009, pp 15–18. [online] Available at: https://artsearch.nga.gov.au/Detail.cfm?IRN=190246#_edn1

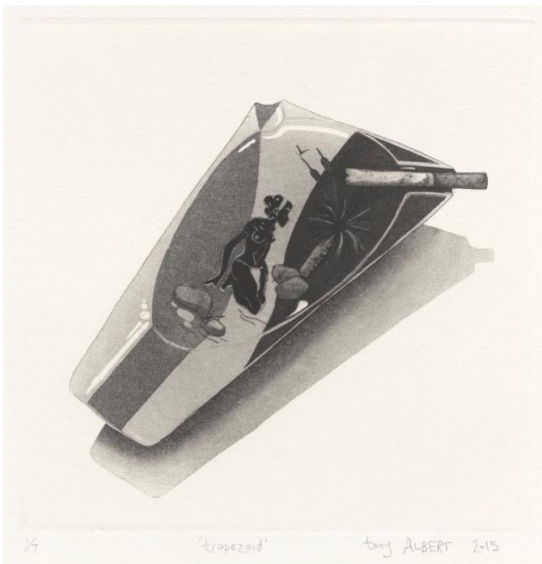
⁴ Tony Albert, interviewed by Odette Kelada, Art Monthly, no 218, April 2009, pp 15–18. [online] Available at: https://artsearch.nga.gov.au/Detail.cfm?IRN=190246#_edn1

⁵ Dumbar, D. Tony Albert Art Critique. 2013. [online] Available at: <http://ddunbarcritique.tumblr.com/post/48022997589/tony-albert>

holding). In this case, these individuals probably already agree with the work and there is not much it can do to change their minds. As a result, perhaps a work such as this, or indeed any political work might best serve its purpose in the location from which the idea was spawned. I feel that this work would be more successful (at hitting the target audience) if it existed as a public art project (or even as street art) in King's Cross itself. The work in my mind would be doubly effective because the images of young indigenous men with crosshairs on their chests, hold such a powerful message, but also their locative message would continually link to the events that took place which inspired the creation of the work.

When looking at the artworks of someone who identifies with a minority group in society, it often occurs that we feel morally obligated to embrace and to look upon it with reflection on our own actions, those who speak against the work may be deemed racist or un-accepting. When looking at any work however it is important to first consider who the intended audience is before we embrace it or tear it apart.

Other relevant works



Tony Albert. 2012 Trapezoid.



Tony Albert. 2008. Ash on me.



Tony Albert. 2015. Moving Targets.



Tony Albert. 2014. Frontier Wars. Flying Fox Story Place