TONY ALBERT  BROTHERS
MAY 26 - AUGUST 9

OPENING RECEPTION
FRIDAY, MAY 29, 2015  5:30 - 7:30 PM

NAIDOC CELEBRATIONS WITH THE ARTIST
JULY 8 - 11, 2015

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Tony Albert  Carriageworks
Liz Nowell  Debra and Dennis Scholl
Franklin Sirmans  Sullivan + Strumpf, Sydney

Colette Blount  Charlene Green
Lora Henderson  Joanna Williams
Holly Zajur

Film: Tony Albert and Stephen Page, Moving Targets, 2015.

This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body.

KLUGE-RUHE ABORIGINAL ART COLLECTION
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Tony Albert, Brothers, 2013. All images courtesy the artist.
TONY ALBERT: HEAR AND NOW

FRANKLIN SIRMANS

The focal point of the discussion on the art of Aboriginal artists in Australia has, until recently, focused almost exclusively on the art of abstraction. Yet, artists like Tracey Moffatt and Gordon Bennett have been working with conceptualist practices in photography and video for quite some time. A generation younger than Moffatt and Bennett, Tony Albert has continuously sought to disrupt the perception of Aboriginal art with his conceptual and highly representational art and a spirit of collaboration that has been as potent to the discourse as his works of art.

Speaking to Maura Reilly about his foundation and beginnings as an artist Albert says of Moffatt and Bennett, “They also expressed stories that were familiar to me—there was a shared history that I really related to.” Seeing Bennett’s 1999 exhibition—Albert’s first museum experience—at the Brisbane Museum “changed my life forever. It completely changed the way I thought about art.” Albert has had the benefit of close ties to not only more experienced artists like Moffatt and Bennett but in school at Queensland College of the Arts from 2000 to 2004, he also created important conversations with Vernon Ah Kee, Richard Bell and Fiona Foley with Bell becoming a mentor. Recognizing the importance of guidance and his teachers, Albert was avid for dialogue with likeminded artists. In 2003, he became a part of the collective proppeNOW, which further augmented his position as a vocal artist in the growing discussion of contemporary art in Brisbane. Being part of the collective led to opportunities that weren’t happening in any of their individual practices. In addition to giving a sense of community and mentorship, the collective supported artists in varied ways, most especially challenging an entire system of thought around contemporary Aboriginal art. “We were not getting accepted into shows and our work seemed to be ignored. Together, as a collective, we became a force to be reckoned with. We could fight as a team, as a united voice, and this gave us much more traction as artists. The older members of proppeNOW really helped my career as an artist by advocating for my work.”

Those ties to a relatively new but vital history have given Albert the unique position from which to participate in an important conversation pertaining to Aboriginal art in Australia but perhaps more importantly they have provided a foundation to become a confident international voice in contemporary art; one who speaks the language of contemporary art but also his own mother tongue. His knowledge of

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His work is held in numerous public and private collections internationally, including the National Gallery of Australia, the Australian War Memorial, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the Art Gallery of Western Australia and Brisbane’s Gallery of Modern Art—Queensland Art Gallery. In 2014 he won both the $100,000 Basil Sellers Art Prize and the prestigious $60,000 Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award. Most recently, he unveiled a major commission in Sydney’s Hyde Park, a monument dedicated to Australia’s Indigenous military service men and women. He lives and works in Sydney, and is represented there by Sullivan + Strumpf gallery.

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and background in the meeting point between traditional practices in Aboriginal art and a more internationally recognized conceptual practice are the perfect tools for the creation of significant contemporary art in the twenty-first century.

That combined ability is rare and reminds me of the words of Edward Behr’s memoir *Anyone Here Been Raped and Speaks English?* I came to Behr through the curator Francesco Bonami who invoked the phrase in his end of the millennium exhibition *Unfinished History* (1999). A cold calculated call for information, Behr heard the words yelled to European survivors of a siege in (“Belgian”) Congo in 1960 by a British reporter. At the end of the last decade of the twentieth century, Bonami pointed towards the growing discourse of internationalism in the art world at that moment. While certainly productive in inviting more voices to the table throughout the 1990s, by 1999, the curator rightly pointed to a commodification of geopolitics that sought facile packages of culture, sometimes ahead of great works of art. He also pointedly directed us to the collision of representation as being the easily commodified brand and abstraction being the less easily commodifiable and thus less discussed.

Regardless of the fact that one woman’s abstraction is another man’s representational figure, let us say that Aboriginal Australian artists—along with some Ndebele house painters in South Africa and some Navajo weavers in the southwest United States—have made some of the most ‘beautiful’ abstract paintings known to human eyes. So, while the hard-edged geometric lines or multiple meandering dots in these works may outline communicative symbols to those who know their language intimately as their own, they also play richly into narratives of abstraction that come from the Western canon, from which I speak. As Jens Hoffmann posits in *No Boundaries: Aboriginal Australian Contemporary Abstract*...
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Painting, “Speaking in a visual language of abstraction that is familiar to Western audiences, these artists have succeeded in calling across these cultural lines even as their exact symbologies remain occluded.” Knowing of these pasts in abstract and representative, or more conceptually based practices, Albert seized upon the image and the word early on in defining his practice. He gravitated particularly toward those images of bodies from the archive of collective memory that resonate in mass reproductions and has uncompromisingly skewered them with panache and intelligence since 2002, the year he began his History Trilogy, a series of three works that each include several pieces of Aboriginalia—dehumanizing caricatures of Aborigines made for the souvenir market between the 1940s and 70s.

A Collected History (2002-2010) includes reworked objects, sculptures and paintings of Aboriginalia, original paintings and the work of three peers. Like its list of items describing its media, it’s an exhaustive and heavy work made up of approximately one hundred items. Crowded together the work hung salon style is claustrophobic in its presentation, and reflective of the subject matter at play. It is a visual encyclopedia of mediated images of Aborigines over the last seventy years. Invariably filled with negative stereotypes, the work begs for a reconsideration of how humans treat one another. Rearranging Our History (2002-2011) takes a singular form of Aboriginalia in velvet paintings. Common in the 1970s, these paintings were sold as both finished products for tourists and paint-by-numbers kits for consumers and enthusiasts. The paintings on velvet are countered by thickly painted texts in white paint by the artist. The texts bring to bare some of the artist’s concerns and worldviews such as using language as a vehicle for deeper understanding. At times the words are appropriated from existing song lyrics or original commentary that seeks to make connections between black peoples around the world. “Fullblood/half caste/quadroon/octaroon/coon” for example takes those terms from different places but by putting them all together suggests a broader collective than only that of the Aboriginal Australian, as is made elsewhere in a painting with the words “blak like me.” Elsewhere the suggestion of outer space conjures a universal afrofuturism as speculated by the likes of Sun Ra. Projecting Our Future (2002-2013) is similar

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While occupying its own clear voice and vantage point, Albert’s work is in conversation with a host of other internationally known artists in addition to Moffatt and Bennett. His use of the figurines recalls several black artists in the United States such as Fred Wilson who has made several works using caricaturistic black figurines. He has also made several works regarding sport that aim to elevate that discourse, as has Gary Simmons. And, Albert’s text-based works are in discussion with works by Glenn Ligon, Bruce Nauman and Jane Holzer among others. Any other talk about art by those of certain education levels the world over who fancy themselves part of the international art world? Like English, that language is disappearing, making those mother tongues all the more important.

Other recent bodies of work find the artist making paintings as in 108 (99 mixed media collages and 9 houses of cards) 2011-2013, Gangurru Camouflage (2012-2013) and Green Skins (2014). Along with the velvet paintings, comparisons abound to other painters working in a figurative or representational mode, especially those dealing with history such as Kerry James Marshall, Marlene Dumas and Luc Tuymans.

Although it has linkages to the early velvet paintings and other elements of Albert’s work, Brothers (2013), the exhibition presented at Kluge-Ruhe, combines photography and overlay painting with the archive of collective memory determined by the bodies of young black men often projected in the news media. Like past pieces it is displayed salon style to suggest multiple elements. Presented in Virginia, the work eerily converses not only

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with the event that precipitated its making—the 2012 shooting of two young Aboriginal men by police in Sydney—but the entire last year of police shootings of black people in the United States of America. Albert was an artist in residence at Artspace at the time and attended the protests in the aftermath where some of the friends and supporters of the boys took off their shirts to reveal targets on their chests. The target was already a symbol that turns up in Albert's work. But Brothers is a new way of dealing with the subject matter. Albert sees Brothers as "using a new media to convey the message [in my work]. I really wanted to step away from the Aboriginality in my work which was more common or known to a broader art audience." IV While those readings were already there, Brothers brings it home so to speak. Originally shown in Sydney in 2013, the work is comprised of twenty-five pictures of bare-chested torques of Aboriginal boys and young men he met through the residency. In addition to cartoon characters, UFOs and some of the geometric patterns that the artist has used elsewhere, the defining motif is a red target at the center of each chest. One pictures the words "we come in peace," and another says "our future."

"If you show this work internationally they would very much just be considered brown people in the photos and not necessarily Aboriginal people. But in the process of leading up to the show and seeing the Trayvon Martin case it really brought some of the issues to the forefront. Looking at it in a much more broader social and political level."

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Making explicit the ties that bind rather than separate, Albert is a fresh voice in the contemporary conversation. Having created an original and highly moving body of work early in his career, building on a foundation of knowledge and study, Albert's work is a thorn in the side of easy art consumption. While deeply indebted to a personal and cultural history, Albert is obviously a child of the world and his work gives us a voice in the twenty-first century that was unheard of in the 20th. Recognizing the historical war between abstraction and representation allows the artist to concentrate on the here and now.

I Maura Reilly, "I Am Important: an Interview with Tony Albert," in Tony Albert (Sydney: Art and Australia, 2015).
II Ibid.
IV https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xt2zqesP5Ve
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