



Objects from the Tony Albert collection of Aboriginalia | Photograph: Natasha Harth, QAGOMA

TONY ALBERT VISIBLE

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FEATURES

TONY ALBERT

VISIBLE

In June, Tony Albert's largest ever solo exhibition will open at QAG. Through his practice, writes **Coby Edgar**, Albert uses familiar objects and humour to render visible Australia's uneasy colonial history.





‘The kitsch ashtrays and decorative boomerangs that feature in Albert’s works also float in our collective subconscious, like fragments in a vast psychological universe, discarded, until now’

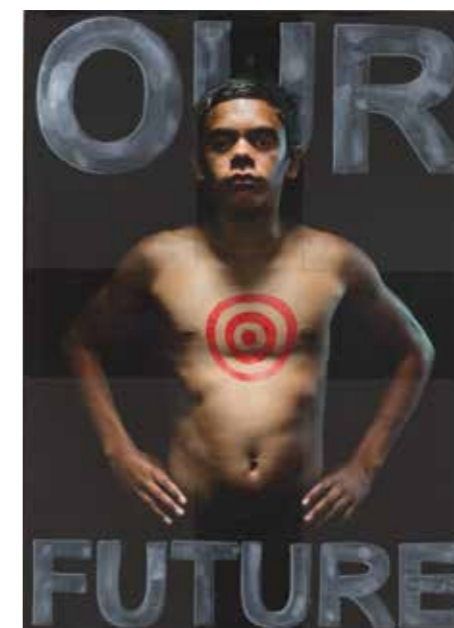
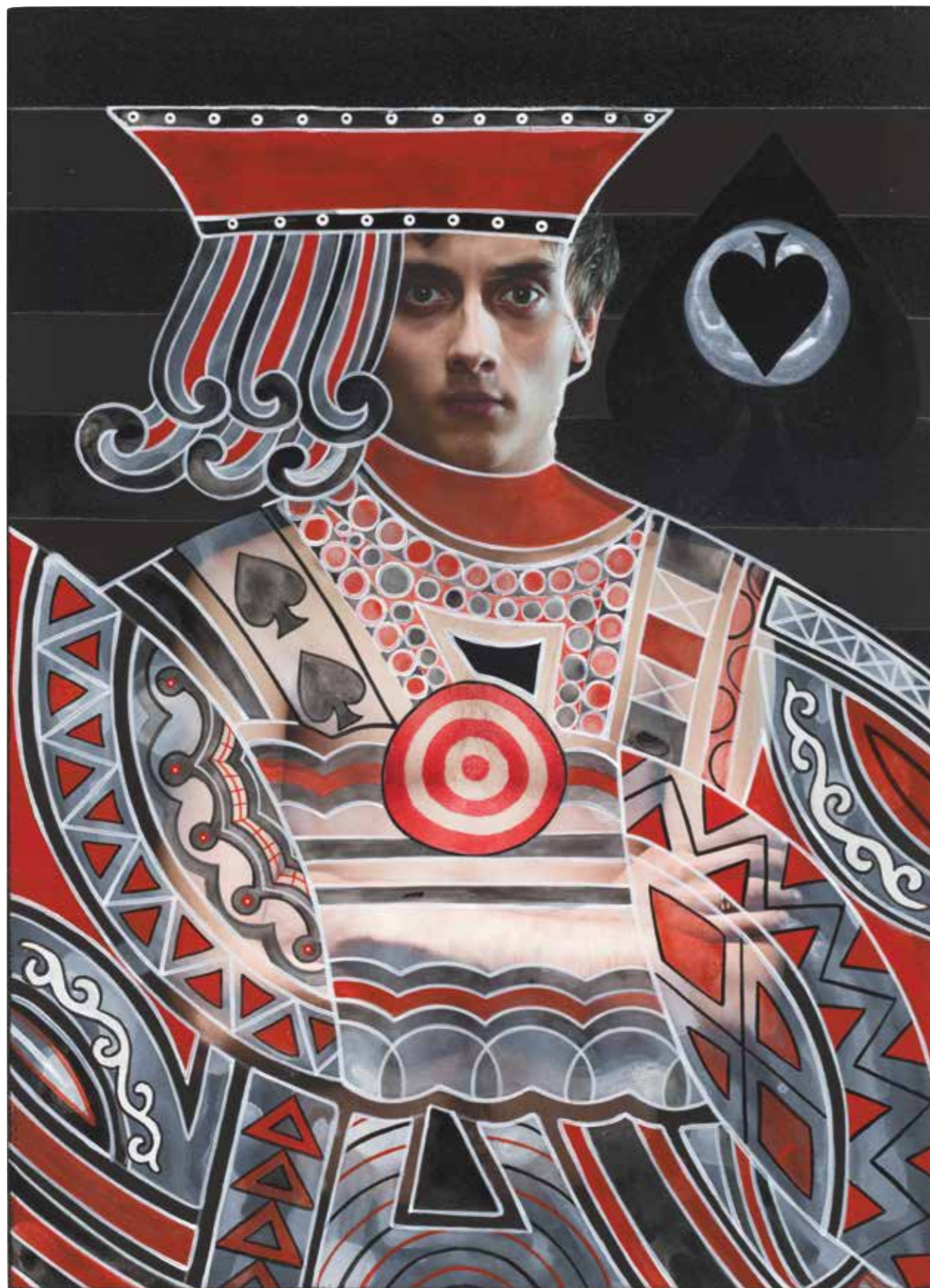
Tony Albert has obsessively collected what he calls ‘Aboriginalia’ since his childhood. His artistic practice involves collaborating, repurposing and reimagining popular culture paraphernalia, social and political movements, in order to tell the stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Recognisable to an Australian society of the not-so-distant past, and drawn from the trinket cabinets of many white Australian households of the 1950s and 60s, the kitsch ashtrays and decorative boomerangs that feature in Albert’s works also float in our collective subconscious, like fragments in a vast psychological universe, discarded, until now: Albert, an empathetic, opportunistic thrift-store shopper, rescues them. Unearthed and re-contextualised, he renders them strange and reveals the uneasiness behind their existence.

By themselves, these items are simply fragments of an ignorant past; en masse, however, Albert sees them as the remnants of a much larger historical meteor, with the

power to change the landscape of our own personal planets. The objects commonly depict naked children playing with animals; bearded men — naked or with a loincloth — often wearing a headband and holding a tool of some description (usually a boomerang or spear); or young women with bared breasts. The figures are set within a landscape — the ubiquitous xanthorrhoea or eucalypt nearby — or dancing around a fire. Sometimes their bodies are painted, or there are patterns painted on their tools. Perhaps it was a way for white Australia to connect indirectly with Aboriginal culture without having to interact with any individuals; hence, the proliferation of tea towels, plates, paintings on black velvet backgrounds, ashtrays, coasters, playing cards and small sculptures — cultural collateral that captured only the vaguest likeness of Aboriginal peoples. Albert uses these same objects to tell the stories of the people they replaced. He gives them back their dignity, while bringing to light the contemporary issues that stem from our unresolved history. Through his practice, Albert says what we already know in a way that we can process, using objects familiar to us — using humour to depict the brutal truth. Sometimes, the poison is also the antidote.

Pages 16-17 An arrangement of Tony Albert’s collection of ‘Aboriginalia’, 2018 / Photograph: Natasha Harth

Left Tony Albert / Giramay/Yidinji/Kuku/Yalanji peoples / *Headhunter* (installation view) 2007 / Purchased with funds provided by the Aboriginal Collection Benefactors’ Group 2007 / Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney



‘[Tony Albert] reframes his subject in a way that is true to his lived experience ... By reclaiming the dispossessed and misrepresented in history ... he hopes that there will be real change’

Opposite and above Tony Albert / *Girramay/Yidinji/Kuku/Yalanji peoples / Brothers (details) 2013 / Collection: The artist*

Albert's works, which are culturally and historically educational, and created with an optimistic stance, make our unsettling past seem almost palatable — at least, at first. The history is uncomfortable; he merely asks us to remember it, and to guard against its repetition, offering a way forward so that the cycle can be broken. Artists such as Destiny Deacon, Daniel Boyd, Brook Andrew and Vernon Ah Kee also repurpose and reclaim objects and imagery of Aboriginal people. More often than not, the images these artists rework were originally taken by ethnographers or anthropologists, and without the permission of those depicted. These artists highlight the stereotypes and misrepresentation of an entire country of sovereign First Nations peoples, and bring them back into our living, breathing society. The works remind the viewer that living descendants of these same misrepresented subjects are able to tell their own stories, and tell them truthfully.

In Albert's 2010 reworking of *Daddy's Little Girl 2* 1994 by Gordon Bennett (one of his greatest artistic influences), he addresses Bennett directly, saying that: 'The cycle of racism is ever present. We must hope that it will be broken'.¹ The production of culturally problematic mass media, the derogatory items

in tourist shops, and the social stereotyping of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, can't be changed overnight, but, in the name of breaking the cycle, Albert takes items that are typically belittling — be they media stories, objects or historical events — and shows the individualism behind them. He reframes his chosen subject in a way that is true to his lived experience and the experiences of those around him. By reclaiming the dispossessed and misrepresented in history, and instilling the truths, or perceived truths, he hopes that there will be real change in our world.

Tony Albert has spent a lot of time supporting other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in their careers. He inspires and encourages curators, artists, art workers, community members and elders to tell their stories, and he works in many different corners of the art world — as a mentor, board member, collaborator, judge, panellist, collector, donor. In 2003, Albert and a group of artists established the proppaNOW collective, to challenge an art market that expected them to produce 'dot' paintings, and to create a network of conceptually like-minded artists. proppaNOW provided mentorships and encouragement — a mode of practice that he continues in his solo career, by facilitating



workshops and collaborations all over the country. For *Warakurna – The force is with us* 2017, he worked with 40 artists from the Warakurna community; *Pay attention* 2009–10 involved 25 artists, including Richard Bell, Vernon Ah Kee, Archie Moore, Judy Watson, Judith Inkamala and others; and he worked on *Frontier wars (Flying Fox Story Place)* 2014 with Alair Pambegan, just to name a few. It seems fitting that Albert's first major solo exhibition, 'Visible', curated by Bruce Johnson McLean, is being staged in Queensland — it's the home of his ancestors, it's where he was born, and it is where his career as an artist was first realised and continues to be fostered.

In our globalised world, it is increasingly easy to connect with others and share our stories, while referencing the many social, political and historical happenings that influence our lives and culture. Albert taps into the use of social media, popular culture and familiar objects, such as refuse from fast food giant McDonald's, the Star Wars movie franchise, and superheroes Spider-Man, Superman and the Hulk, to

connect with, give power to and inject love and appreciation into people who feel forgotten by the rest of Australia. By using the familiar, and encouraging Aboriginal people to insert themselves into the picture, Albert gives many people and communities the tools to write themselves into the Australia we live in today.

Tony Albert is successful as an artist in part because he listens to history, and to the community. He believes we are ready, as a nation, to rewrite history and, this time, to include the stories of First Peoples (alongside the many races and religions we have shared this country with for over 230 years). This is not the reality of a distant future in a faraway time and place, but something that is already happening: we are collaborating, colliding, and our personal planets are undergoing their 'big bang' transformations. Albert is helping us to communicate across time and space.

Coby Edgar is a Larakia, Jingili, Filipino and English woman from the Northern Territory. She is the Assistant Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

'Tony Albert: Visible' is in Gallery 4, QAG, from 2 June to 7 October 2018. The Children's Art Centre project 'Tony Albert: We Can Be Heroes' is at GOMA from 19 May to 7 October 2018.

G M F C A

Endnote

1 The artist, quoted in *Daddy's Little Girl (after Gordon Bennett)* 2010 (Watercolour and pencil on paper, printed ink on paper, painted timber blocks / Dimensions variable / Private collection, Israel), as noted in Hetti Perkins and Maura Riley, *Tony Albert*, Dot Publishing (an imprint of Art & Australia Pty Ltd), Paddington, New South Wales, 2015, pp.50–1.

Opposite Tony Albert / *Girramay/Yidinji/Kuku/Yalanji peoples / Warakurna Superheroes #6* 2017 / Collection: The artist

Above The artist, Carriageworks Studio, 2018 / Photograph: Mark Pokorny

