Artist Tony Albert had just moved to Sydney from Brisbane six years ago when police officers shot and wounded two Aboriginal teenagers who were driving a stolen car in Kings Cross.

The shooting took place just around the corner from Albert’s new studio and he decided to join protesters.

“[I] did go to a protest outside of Government House and young boys who were friends of the victims had taken their shirts off during the protest and drawn targets over their bodies,” Albert says.

“I just thought it was an incredibly profound thing from these young men about violence and brutality towards, in particular, Aboriginal men.”
The image of the young protesters stayed with Albert and led him to produce a series of striking photographic images called ‘Brothers’, which feature in his first major solo exhibition — *Visible* — which opens at the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane on June 2.

The exhibition will include 12 works spanning Albert’s career and ranging from installations to photography, paintings and prints.

His collection of kitsch tourist collectibles, or ‘Aboriginalia’, will also be on show.

Albert, 37, says he began collecting souvenirs depicting Aboriginal people quite innocently when he was a young boy growing up the son of a Girramay/Kuku Yalanji man from far north Queensland and a non-Indigenous mother.

He has incorporated some into his artwork, laying them over an “I Love Australia” tea-towel or showing cigarette butts stubbed out in an Aboriginalia ashtray.

“I still find them so intriguing and in a lot of ways I love the imagery attached to them,” he says.

“But now I have a greater understanding of the images and why they were presented in this way and what meaning was meant behind it.
“They kind of go from very innocent children in the images, very cute innocent children, to the image of the noble savage.

“It never ceases to amaze me what these images were printed on.”

Placed in a social context Albert says the Aboriginalia, which was at a peak in the ‘70s and ‘80s, was “degrading” and “problematic”.

The Aboriginalia has travelled from Sydney to Brisbane with Albert, while some of the artwork in the exhibition has been loaned from galleries and collections.

Albert is back in Brisbane in the lead-up to opening night.

It’s something of a homecoming for the graduate of the Griffith University’s Queensland College of Art and former Art Gallery of Queensland employee who is now considered one of Australia’s brightest contemporary Indigenous artists.

Not only is Albert’s work in international, national and private collections, but in 2014 he was awarded the Basil Sellers Art Prize and the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award.

He has also spent time in New York after winning the Fleurieu Art Prize.

His other works include a public artwork, ‘YININMADYEMI Thou didst let fall’, in Sydney’s Hyde Park that commemorates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who served in the military.

Tony Albert: Visible runs at the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, from June 2 to October 7. Entry is free.