

Artist Tony Albert focuses on issues of Indigenous visibility in his first major solo exhibition

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By Patrick Carey



Albert's first major institutional solo show displays work dating from 2007 to 2018. Supplied: Tony Albert, David C Collins & Kieran Smythe-Jackson

At 37, Tony Albert is the youngest person to have a major solo exhibition at the Queensland Art Gallery. But the Girramay, Yidinji, and Kuku Yalanji man sees his work less as a celebration of individual achievement and more as a reflection of community. Four of the 13 pieces presented in *Visible*, which opened this month, are collaborations between Albert and a mixture of artists and community groups.

Albert says of the collaborative process: "[It's] such an important foundation for me, and there is a responsibility — artistically and culturally — to share.

"There's different kinds of ownership within Aboriginal communities ... it doesn't work within a Western sense of copyright or art legality. Things are shared within a greater group of people."

The most recent collaborative work in the show is the photo series Warakurna — The Force is With Us (2017), in which children dressed in homemade Star Wars costumes pose in dramatic outback landscapes. There is a cardboard R2D2 and a Darth Vader whose cloak is fashioned from black plastic.

The series is the product of a recent collaboration between Albert and the remote community of Warakurna in Western Australia, near the Northern Territory border. The Townsville-born Sydney-based artist made the long journey (a three-hour drive from Ayers Rock Airport) on the invitation of the town's arts centre.

Albert says an open mind is key to making collaborations of this kind work: "You can never go with a plan because, for example, if there's good fishing that day, no-one is going to be in town, no matter how special a guest you are — it's quite ego deflating." Albert made himself available to the townspeople generally, not just the artists. "Anyone who wanted a chance to work or to speak or to engage with me had that opportunity," he says. "So I was organising things through the community centre, outside of art centre hours, to engage."

The result was a lot of bingo.

"I know how big bingo is in communities and so I thought, 'Of course! That would be a great way of breaking the ice'. We did a bingo night every week, which had every single person in town there."

When a number of the works from the Warakurna collaboration recently sold at an exhibition in Sydney, Albert split the proceeds equally with the kids who had collaborated on the images.



PHOTO: Albert's practice takes in photography, assemblage, installation, video, and sculpture. (Supplied: Mark Pokorny)

"They're co-authors and owners in the work as well," Albert says.

"From any sale, the people I collaborate with get equally as much as I do. It's just making sure that [the process] is non-abusive."

Community has been at the forefront of Albert's practice from the get-go. In 2003, his final year at the Queensland College of Art in Brisbane, he became a founding member of the urban Aboriginal art collective proppaNOW, which includes Richard Bell, Jennifer Herd and Vernon Ah Kee.

Longtime mentor and friend Hetti Perkins remembers first meeting Albert on a visit to the proppaNOW studios: "I was just really struck by his energy, enthusiasm, and his kindness. I think he was the only one at proppaNOW that day and he really showed me everyone's work and talked about all the other artists in such a wonderfully collegiate and enthusiastic way."

Albert collaborated with a number of proppaNOW artists to produce one of his most famous pieces: Pay Attention (2009–10).

The work saw 25 Indigenous artists produce a letter each which, when collated by Albert, come together to spell 'PAY ATTENTION MOTHERF**ERS' in a panoply of prints and textures.



PHOTO: Albert's work often combines kitsch aesthetics with overt political statements. (Supplied: Joe Ruckli/QAGOMA)

In 2012, when Albert came down to Sydney for an residency at Artspace in Woolloomooloo, he turned to collaboration again, this time to make sense of a tragedy within the local community.

"The week of my arrival that there was a shooting in Kings Cross," Albert recalls.

"It was a car full of young [Indigenous] boys and there was very strong evidence of police violence and brutality.

"I did go along to an event at Government House where very young boys, teenagers, were at the protest and they were obviously very angry ... [t]here was a moment where they took their shirts off and had drawn targets all over their bodies."

The spectacle affected Albert deeply and led him to work with the Kirinari Hostel (a Sydney youth hostel for Aboriginal boys and men) to produce the Brothers series (2013).

The photographic portraits show a number of young Aboriginal men from the hostel with targets painted on their chests.

"As sinister as the ideas or the photos are ... the boys are very powerful, they stand very resolute, they're bathed in this really lovely, warm piece of light," Albert says.

Perkins says Albert's commitment to shared creation is down to his nature: "It is his very open spirit. He starts, and it sounds a bit cliché, at a point of love ... he gives his audience the benefit of the doubt and expects them to be like him: to be open, to listen, to hear and to be supportive."

Albert's urge to foster community through his work might also result from the isolation he felt growing up.

"We were the only [Aboriginal] children at the school, we didn't live in our community, we grew up in a suburb full of middle-to-upper class white people — so the brown face was not part of our daily routine."

In fact, Albert's only access to Aboriginal faces, outside those of his immediate family, was in the "Aboriginalia" he has compulsively collected since he was a six-year-old.

The term refers to kitsch household items and souvenirs, hugely popular in the 50s and 60s, that are decorated with sentimental, caricature-ish, and naive renderings of Indigenous people and art.

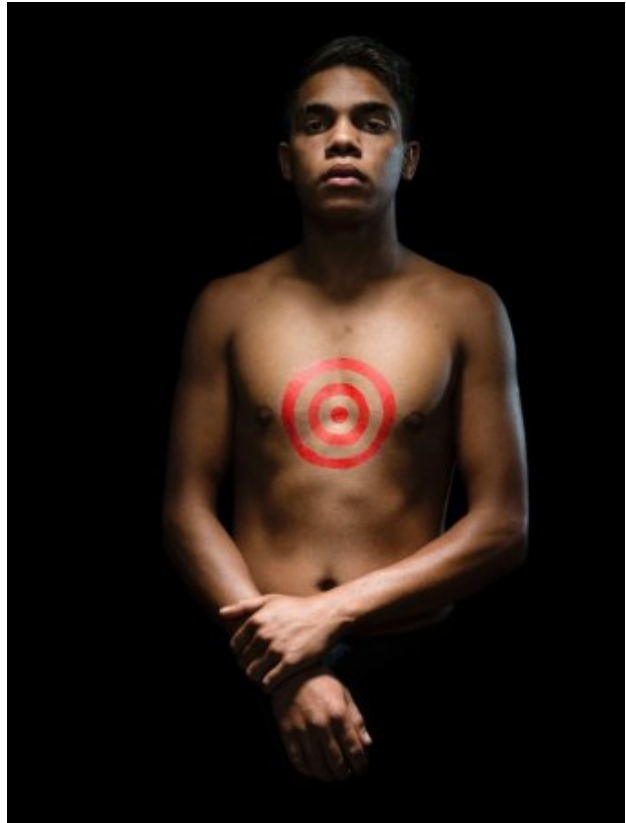


PHOTO: Albert's work considers the ways that Aboriginal bodies are perceived by society. (Supplied: Tony Albert/Sullivan+Strumpf)



PHOTO: 417 of Albert's Aboriginalia items are on display in Visible but his total collection numbers in the many thousands. (Supplied: Joe Ruckli/QAGOMA)

The entrance to Visible displays a small part of Albert's Aboriginalia collection — "the tip of the iceberg", at a mere 417 items, and installed in a clustered mass that covers an entire wall and overflows onto many of the available surfaces.

Within the busy assembly you can find everything from tea towels to commemorative plates, ashtrays, playing cards, and even a vintage pinball machine in a lurid (and period appropriate) palette of green, brown, orange, and yellow.

Many of Albert's works also integrate Aboriginalia.

The oldest piece in Visible, *Headhunter* (2007), has the word 'HUNTER' built out of wall hangings, plates, and figurines that all include the heads of Aboriginal people in one form or another.

Perkins suggests that Albert's use of Aboriginalia formulates a "persuasive" analysis of how "Aboriginal people have been dehumanised in various ways".

"He really shows you how that works, he doesn't just ask you to just accept it," she says. While Albert's use of these items has a critical thrust, his attachment to them is also sincere:

"[As a child] I thought it [Aboriginalia] was so beautiful, I couldn't believe there was someone who looked like my family emblazoned upon something," Albert says.

"We weren't on TV, in the shows that we were watching, we weren't in the paper, and if we were it was with a negative connotation. So it was something ... very innocent, something that I just loved."

When it is suggested that, perhaps, Albert's collecting habits prefigured his collectivist practice, he laughs:

"Maybe I'm just surrounding myself with black people."

Tony Albert: Visible runs until October 7 at the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane.