The focal point of the discussion of the art of Aboriginal artists in Australia has, until recently, focused almost exclusively on the art of abstraction. 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 Tracey Moffatt and Gordon Bennett — who have been working with conceptualist practices in photography, installation and video for quite some time — ‘They also expressed stories that were familiar to me — there was a shared history that I really related to.’ Seeing Bennett’s 1999 exhibition ‘History and Memory in the Art of Gordon Bennett’ — Albert’s first museum experience — at Brisbane City Gallery ‘changed my life forever. It completely transformed 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 Art from 2000 to 2004, he also created important conversations with Vernon Ah Kee, Richard Bell and Fiona Foley, with Bell becoming a mentor. Recognising the importance of guidance and his teachers, Albert was avid for dialogue with likeminded artists. In 2003, he became a part of the collective proppaNOW, 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.

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 and background in the meeting point between traditional practices in Aboriginal art and a more internationally recognised 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 south-west 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 as 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 Painting:

Speaking in a visual language of abstraction that is familiar to Western audiences, these artists have succeeded in crossing across these cultural lines even as their exact symbologies remain occluded.5

Knowing of these pasts in abstract and representative or more conceptual based practices, Albert seized upon the image. Albert’s text-based works are in discussion with works by Glenn Brown, 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 pre- sented 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 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 708 (99 mixed media collages and 9 houses of cards) 2011–13, Gangurru Camouflage 2012–13 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. 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 2002–13 is similar in format to A Collected History, combining reworked objects along with original works by Albert and others.

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 Jenny Holzer among others. Anyone here been raped and speaks English? Perhaps the language of international contemporary art, like that of English, has come to be a lingua franca spoken by those of certain education
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 Aboriginalia in my work which was more common or known to a broader art audience.7

While those readings were already there, Brothers brings it home, so to speak. Originally shown in Sydney in 2013, the work is comprised of 25 pictures of bare-chested torsos 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 centre of each chest. One pictures the words ‘we come in peace’, and another says ‘our future’. Albert has said:

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 on a much more broader social and political level.8

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 twentieth. Recognising the historical war between abstraction and representation allows the artist to concentrate on the hear and now.

This essay was originally published in Tony Albert: Brothers (exhibition brochure), Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, 2015.

Endnotes
2 Albert quoted in Reilly, p.17.
3 Albert quoted in Reilly, p.18.