Like a punch in the guts

As a child, Tony Albert loved his collection of cringingly racist Aboriginalia. As a man, he’s made a confronting career out of it.

By Jane Albert
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Meeting Tony Albert can be a slightly mystifying experience. The visual artist is softly spoken, thoughtful and gentle. His work, on the other hand, can punch you in the guts.

Albert is adept at a broad range of mediums, from installation and sculpture to painting; while he is best known for his deceptively playful collations of what he calls “Aboriginalia” — kitsch Aboriginal-themed objects including ashtrays, painted boomerangs and coasters — he has collected obsessively since he was a child.

At 37 he is still young, yet already he has a swag of exhibitions, awards, residencies and commissions to his name: the Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award,
the Basil Sellers and Fleurieu art prizes, the New York International Studio and Curatorial Program residency; and the 7m-tall permanent sculpture YININMADYEMI Thou didst let fall in Sydney’s Hyde Park commemorating the indigenous war effort.

Next month he is being honoured with a solo show, Visible, at the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane. It is Albert’s first solo show at a major institution or gallery, and a fitting gallery at that, given it was here his career began, albeit in a very different guise, 17 years ago.

Today Albert lives and works in Sydney but he was born in Townsville, north Queensland. His father was a warrant officer with the army and the family was constantly on the move — younger sister Tina was born in Wagga Wagga in NSW and Albert’s preschool years were spent in Canberra during his father’s posting to Duntroon. His mother worked various jobs, acrylic nail artist among them, and Albert has fond memories of getting into her bottles of nail polish with Tina. “One day Mum found us behind the couch covered in nail polish, she wasn’t very happy at all,” Albert says, chuckling.

His mother is non-Aboriginal while his father is a Girramay/Kuku Yalanji man from far north Queensland. The marriage was controversial in both families, despite each of his father’s eight siblings marrying non-indigenous partners. “I know from some of the other siblings that was kind of frowned upon in an Aboriginal family,” he says. “I think we’re still grappling in this country with interracial relationships and the story of mothers of children of colour hasn’t really emerged. But those stories will come out.”

When the children reached school age, the decision was made to move to Brisbane, where they would remain. Albert doesn’t have great memories of school — being one of only two indigenous children there left him feeling like an outsider and his mother was regularly mistaken for the nanny — but he wishes he had taken advantage of the education on offer.

“If I went back I’d be front of the class, my thirst for knowledge and learning is so incredible. But at the time, feeling outsider-ish, I kind of stuck to myself and never really studied, just got by.”
Although his parents separated when he was in high school, Albert says their support for their children and for his burgeoning creativity was unwavering. “I’ve been drawing my whole life: comic-book things, celebrity pictures, and my parents always nurtured that, giving me art-materials and letting us be creative,” Albert says. “I can’t help but think Dad kind of wanted an army son but [despite] the problematic nature of their relationship I still don’t believe my parents passed on anything negative or the way they would have felt about things.”

It was also in high school that Albert’s art teacher recognised his talent, arranging for him to spend a day a week at art college, where he learnt the foundations of art and painting, skills for which he will be forever grateful. That teacher managed to source newly released art books on two indigenous artists whose work would have a profound influence on Albert’s life: Gordon Bennett and Tracey Moffatt, artists who fought to be recognised as contemporary artists and not pigeonholed by their racial background.

The humanity of Moffatt’s Something More series left Albert feeling as if she had reached in and grabbed his own thoughts right out of his head; while Bennett’s representations of growing up in a mixed-race family equally felt like they’d been created for him. “He’d talk about being at the backyard barbecue and the topic of Aboriginals always coming up and he’d sit there thinking: ‘I hope no one notices my broad nose or my olive skin.’ It was really profound because you’ve been in that situation but for someone to articulate it in such an amazing way...”

Albert would later pay tribute to this seminal artist in Once Upon a Time ..., his Basil Sellers-award winning artwork.

After completing a bachelor of visual arts at Griffith University, Albert began working as an exhibitions program officer at QAG, where he would remain for eight years, a key member
of a group of creatives who worked hard and partied even harder. “The Brisbane art scene was fantastic and we were a part of it: Richard Bell, Grant Stevens, Sally Brand, Natalya Hughes and Bruce McLean (the curator of Visible). We were so involved in the art community, making opportunities for ourselves, living, working and partying together.”

Albert would work full time during the day and paint at night, ultimately deciding to brave life as an artist. “I was very strategic, I still had another year before leaving the gallery and I had my show ready, so I knew financially I’d be able to at least get a few years in [if I failed and] before what I perceived to be rock bottom.”

‘Tinka paints me and I paint Tinka, it’s an act of reconciliation’: Archibald Prize finalist Tony Albert (after Brownie Downing), 2016

Of course he never did hit rock bottom. Rather, his career soared and countless accolades followed. To this day, Albert is driven to shed light on the glaring and ongoing oppression of indigenous people, and their inequality with non-indigenous Australians, but his work is often so colourfully put together it has the effect of being hit by an iron fist in a velvet glove.

Take Tony Albert (after Brownie Downing), Albert’s 2016 Archibald Prize finalist portrait in which he appropriates the superficially sweet fictional Aboriginal character Tinka, Downing’s “piccaninny” who is in reality a symbol of an oppressive and violent history. “Tinka paints me and I paint Tinka, it’s an act of reconciliation,” Albert wrote in his artist’s statement. “We cannot hide or destroy racist images. They are an important societal record that should not be forgotten and must be reconciled so our future can be better for our children.”

Visible brings together Albert’s entire collection of Aboriginalia, more than 3000 objects he has been collecting since he was a child, when his family would shop by necessity at thrift stores. “We loved it, we’d beg to go. We had all these people in our family who’d collect
things: Mum collected dolls, Dad bar paraphernalia, and I loved Aboriginalia,” he says of these objects, thankfully obsolete today given their cringingly racist overtones.

“I thought they were so beautiful. It came from a very, very innocent place. I kept them in little display cases in my room, always grouping and categorising things.”

Now forming the basis of many of his artworks, they question cultural-misrepresentation. A Visible commission, Boy and Girl, is a pair of 2m metal playing card sculptures featuring the grinning faces of an Aboriginal boy and girl, but Albert has cut off the lower part of their faces, leaving the viewer to gaze at their eyes but never to engage with their words.

Whitewash continues his ashtray series, in which the viewer is asked to contemplate the act of stubbing out a cigarette on an Aborigine’s cheerful face. This piece features 300 ashtrays; another work, owned by the National Gallery of Australia and touring internationally, contains 100 of them.

Others are more direct. Albert’s Brothers series (2013), for example, features several photographs of indigenous youths with red targets painted across their chests.

On the other hand, Pay Attention (2009-10), his take on Bruce Nauman’s print featuring the text “PAY ATTENTION MOTHER F. KERS” in reverse, is so much more than, in Albert’s words, “a grotesque one-liner”. Each letter is composed of art from one of 25 indigenous artists whose work Albert wishes to highlight.

Albert’s collaboration with David C. Collins and Brittany Malbunka Reid, Warakurna Superheroes #6 (2017)

Collaboration is often at the heart of Albert’s work. He has worked with Bangarra’s Stephen Page on the multimedia installation Moving Targets (2015) and with artists at Hermannsburg on his ashtray series; while in his brilliant Warakurna photographic series Albert not
only shared creative control with photographer David C. Collins and the children of this extremely remote West Australian community but made them co-collaborative authors as well, meaning they get an equal share of sales.

Inspired by Star Wars and superheroes, the concept was devised by the children, ranging in age from six to 15, who also made the sets and props. “It was about empowering children, giving those who had very little to no opportunity an understanding of being really special,” he says. “I said from the start they were my boss, they tell me what to do. For any child that’s a very rare opportunity to have, but particularly for these children who, because of location, are facing such different issues to the rest of Australia. I hope it’s going to be a real life-changing opportunity for them.”

Albert also has collaborated with his own community in far north Queensland, hoping to give the children there a sense of what’s possible. “I think you can feel so trapped and isolated and I know that because I’ve felt that way.”

Albert still finds his success a little hard to comprehend. There is one mantra he says has helped him get where he is today. “Don’t turn anything down because you never know what’s going to happen,” he says. “I’m a really nervous, anxious person and the best gift I think I’ve given myself is never letting that stop me from doing anything. I know so many people who do, it gets the better of them.

“And when things get too hard I always reflect: ‘My god, I went to New York by myself for six months, I can do this!’”

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