

# Book reviews

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Exhibition: Tony Albert, *Visible*, Queensland Art Gallery, 2 June to 7 October 2018

I cannot help but be overwhelmed by a sense of pride and awe for the exceptional list of Tony Albert's achievements. I have known Tony personally throughout his career as a graduate from the Bachelor of Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art degree at the Queensland College of Art. As the youngest artist to have a survey show in a state institution in Australia, *Visible* is clearly one of his most significant triumphs to date. What makes this achievement even more significant is the fact that he is Aboriginal. This is especially pertinent given that Albert's practice blatantly confronts the tenuous postcolonial relationships between museums, galleries and Aboriginal communities in Australia.

At first, I was a little perplexed by the title of the exhibition. Upon arriving on opening night, it slowly began to dawn on me that I had also become blindsided by the rhetoric pertaining to the invisibility of the 'Aboriginal voice' in Australian society and history. As I explored the exhibition further, it became apparent that Albert was 'flipping the narrative' by reinserting the Aboriginal voice into the racist dialogue of Australian colonial history. Chris Saines, the director of the Queensland Art Gallery (Gallery of Modern Art) states that, 'It counterpoises the absence of Aboriginal people from Australian public life by inserting them into a narrative of non-Aboriginal construction.<sup>1</sup> This notion echoed through Albert's decolonising treatment of his extensive collection of Aboriginalia,<sup>2</sup> which is now seen as discarded trophies of Australia's racist past. These objects highlight the commodification of Aboriginal culture and the Western exoticisation of Aboriginal people. Albert uses the Aboriginalia objects to create assemblages spelling out historically loaded words such as 'exotic other', 'Head Hunter' and 'Sorry/YRROS' (Sorry backwards, which subverts an idea, reflecting the way Albert felt about the National Apology two years later),<sup>3</sup> aiming to shift the power balance that exists in language and using it to control cultural alienation (Figure 1).

Albert started collecting 'Aboriginalia' during his childhood, growing up in suburban Brisbane. He explains that he felt a connection to these objects, as they were his only access to black faces outside of his family.<sup>4</sup> He determined these objects were the means by which many Aboriginal Australian people gained an understanding of themselves. Initially, with the innocence of childhood, he did not understand that the ephemera he was collecting was not celebratory in the sense in which he understood it; rather, these objects were objectifying and exoticising Aboriginal people. In this exhibition, Albert goes so far as to make his own oversized pieces of Aboriginalia in the form of playing cards. These cards (shown in Figure 2) appear



Figure 1  
Tony Albert, 'Exotic other', 2009/2018. Photo Bianca Beetson. © Tony Albert.



Figure 2  
Tony Albert, 'Playing Card Sculptures',  
2018. Photo Bianca Beetson © Tony Albert.

half-shredded, emphasising Albert's need to place a cultural sense of value on these once-discarded pieces of ephemera.<sup>5</sup>

Albert is probably best known for the use of Aboriginalia in his practice, and this exhibition features the imagery and symbolism Alberts has used throughout his entire career. Aliens, UFOs, space invaders, targets and bullets are represented



Figure 3

Tony Albert, 'Brothers' (detail), 2013. Photo Bianca Beetson © Tony Albert.

alongside superheroes and other characters from popular culture. The Alien has become Albert's signature reference image, acting as a metaphor for otherness, cultural alienation and the displacement of Aboriginal people. The image of a target has also become a reoccurring theme, and is a powerful motif in this exhibition. This is particularly so in the 'Brothers' series (Figure 3), which depicts several young Aboriginal men with targets painted on their chests.

While Albert is clearly making a statement about Aboriginal people being targeted, the artist adds an empowering twist to this dialogue with his statement, 'We don't make any excuses for the targets we wear, it's how we choose to live with the targets we wear.'<sup>6</sup>

This exhibition also features several collaborative works undertaken by Albert with several other artists and Aboriginal communities. Albert's meritorious approach to collaboration further critiques colonial rhetoric by empowering the voice of the collaborator, assuring that an equal balance of power exists at all levels of the collaborative process. In the 'We Can Be Heroes' series, Albert empowers and gives agency to the young people depicted (also the collaborators), endowing them with the ability to 'shape shift' and transform into superheroes. In doing so, Albert is releasing them — albeit briefly — from their present-day existence, growing up in remote Aboriginal communities. They too can be heroes.

This exhibition truly pays homage to the invisible: the everyday Aboriginal heroes. It aims to inspire and empower future generations of Aboriginal youth to become culture warriors, just as Albert himself has done.

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## Notes

- 1 Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art 2018. *Tony Albert: Visible*. Brisbane, QAG, p. 10.
  - 2 Objects from Aboriginal culture used as decorations, especially when they produce a distorted, sentimental view of Aborigines and Aboriginal history. See <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/aboriginalia>.
  - 3 In conversation with the Artist at the Queensland Art Gallery, 28 August 2018.
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