



TONY ALBERT VISIBLE

STUDENT RESOURCE

About the artist

Tony Albert (b.1981) was born in Townsville and raised in Brisbane; he currently lives in Sydney. He is a descendant of the Girramay, Yidinji and Kuku Yalanji peoples. One of the most exciting contemporary Australian artists working today, Albert interrogates the representation of Aboriginal people and culture through a mix of humour, darkness and poignancy.

Albert's works often recontextualise objects from his extensive collection of 'Aboriginalia', kitsch items featuring caricatured depictions of Aboriginal people and their culture. As a child, Albert began collecting these objects as a way of connecting with family.

My practice is about optimism in the face of adversity. I'd like to think there's an idea of planting a seed . . . that will bring people back to the work and give them a greater understanding of what is being said — that we are here, that we want to be heard. It's about engaging in a conversation about making this country a better place.¹

Albert completed a visual arts degree at Griffith University in Brisbane, majoring in Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art. He worked as an intern and exhibitions project officer at QAGOMA during the 2000s, and he is the host of the television program 'Colour Theory' on NITV.

About the exhibition

'Tony Albert: Visible' is the artist's first major solo exhibition in an Australian state gallery. The exhibition features the artist's appropriations and re-appropriations of Aboriginalia in large-scale installations, found object collages, sculpture, photography, video and collaborative work. The title of the exhibition plays on a quote often used by the artist that relates to the invisibility of the stories and histories of Aboriginal people.

Contexts

Use different contexts to understand and appreciate how Tony Albert incorporates a range of influences and layers of meaning in his artwork.

- Contemporary context — **challenges** twentieth-century stereotypical misrepresentation and **questions** processes of reconciliation.
- Personal context — **reacts** and **responds** to events and issues as an Aboriginal artist and collector of objects.
- Cultural context — **invites** change and **provokes** conversation about historical practices of colonisation and continued mistreatment and misrepresentation of Aboriginal people in media and society.
- Formal context — **communicates** through symbols, familiar forms and diverse art processes.

BEFORE

Research – experiment, analyse and interpret

'It might be tempting to dismiss Aboriginalia for its racist imagery, however, its production is also intimately connected with modes of respect and appreciation for Aboriginal culture.'²

RESEARCH the historical production of *Aboriginalia*. Compare the opinions expressed by Liz Conor in her article 'The politics of Aboriginal kitsch'³ in relation to advocates of Aboriginal culture such as Bill Onus,⁴ who established *Aboriginal Enterprises* in 1952.

Albert created *Sorry* in 2008 as a commemoration of then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's apology to Indigenous Australians for past mistreatment by the Government of Australia. 2018 marks the ten-year anniversary of the apology.

READ the commentary on the *National Apology* then and now. Look for other responses to the apology within the arts community. Experiment with non-text visual representations of the concept of an apology.

This page

Objects from the Tony Albert collection of *Aboriginalia* | Photograph: Natasha Harth, QAGOMA
Sorry 2008 | Found kitsch objects applied to vinyl letters | 99 objects: 200 x 510 x 10cm (installed) | The James C. Sourris AM Collection. Purchased 2008 with funds from James C. Sourris through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation | Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

Opposite page

Brother (Our Present) 2013 | Pigment print, ed. AP 1 | 150 x 100cm | Gift of Tony Albert through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2014 | Collection: The University of Queensland
Vintage pinball machine from the Tony Albert collection of *Aboriginalia* c.1940s–80s | Vintage *Aboriginalia* kitsch | Collection: The artist

Albert is a founding member of the Brisbane-based collective *proppaNOW*, a group of contemporary, urban Indigenous artists who share lived experiences and push for social change through their art. Other members of the group include Vernon Ah Kee, Bianca Beetson, Richard Bell, Jennifer Herd, Gordon Hookey and Laurie Neilson. (You might see collaborative input from these artists in 'Visible'.)

RESEARCH the practices of the *proppaNow* artists. What cultural and political issues and ideas do contemporary urban Indigenous artists address? What points of comparison can be seen in the use of symbols, text, appropriation, representation, satire and/or parody?





Albert uses recognisable **symbols** in his artworks as reminders of the issues and events he is referencing.

IDENTIFY the symbols seen in this exhibition. Are any symbols repeated across multiple artworks? What ideas do the symbols communicate?

Talking about his artwork *Sorry* in 2017, Albert has said: 'it was always the **intention** of the work that it had infinite possibilities in the way it could be installed'.⁷ At the artist's request, *Sorry* is now installed backwards to read 'Yrros'.

DISCUSS how the installation of *Sorry* challenges the meaning of the word and is a reflection on the apology ten years after the fact.

LOOK for other artworks in the exhibition that could be reinvented or reinterpreted by the artist in response to issues or events.

Comparing and connecting — select one artwork in the exhibition that either represents or has been created from something familiar. Connect new ideas in the artwork with your prior knowledge.⁸

CONNECT — how are the ideas in the artwork connected to what you already know?

EXTEND — what new ideas can you draw from the artwork that extend or push your thinking in new directions?

CHALLENGE — what do you find challenging, confusing or surprising about the artwork? What does it make you wonder? If you could meet the artist, what questions would you ask him about the artwork? What would you like to know more about?

DURING

Reflect — evaluate and justify

'Albert has often spoken of his desire to engage in conversation with his audiences, rather than "tell the viewer exactly how to think".⁵ The artist's **use of humour, fun and familiar objects** appeals to a wide audience 'who can more easily access the political and conceptual framework of his creations'.⁶

LOOK for the elements of fun and humour in the exhibition.

DISCUSS the literal and non-literal meaning of these elements.

REFLECT on the ways Albert's materials, techniques and processes invite you into conversations with his artworks.

Albert refers to his work as **optimistic** (refer to 'About the artist' on page 1).

IN WHAT WAYS do the artworks in the exhibition deliver an optimistic message?



AFTER

Develop – implement and create

ARTIST AS COMMENTATOR

Tony Albert's text-based artworks use 'language as a vehicle for deeper understanding'.¹⁰ His use of text ranges from single-word statements that demand attention to words that 'are appropriated from existing song lyrics or original commentary that seek to make connections between black peoples around the world'.¹¹

DEVELOP an artwork that challenges the meaning or intention of a word or phrase. Use a word cloud generator to identify and select dominant words in a text relating to an event or issue that has meaning for you.



ARTIST AS COLLECTOR

Albert's engagement with Aboriginalia is not a recent phenomenon brought on by a contemporary art installation practice. On the contrary, as a young boy growing up in regional Queensland and suburban Brisbane, Albert accompanied his family on regular trips to local thrift shops . . . and would often find objects decorated with Aboriginal-like designs or Aboriginal-like faces. Something about these pseudo-Aboriginal objects appealed to the Aboriginal boy living in white Australian suburbia.⁹

What do you collect and why? What is the appeal of your collected objects? Are your reasons for collecting personal, cultural or aesthetic? What are the origins of these collectable items?

DEVELOP an artwork that incorporates something you collect. How can you communicate your connection to the collection? How can you invite the audience to see your perspective of the collection?

ARTIST AS COLLABORATOR

'Collaborations with artists, communities and organisations is a major element of Albert's practice'.¹² He is deeply invested in the work of Indigenous artists and appreciates the potential of collaborative projects to give a voice to many.

How can collaborative projects allow individual voices, ideas and styles to be identifiable?

DEVELOP a collaborative portrait series using digital media. Work together to devise a set of conditions that communicates a shared cultural idea or cultural diversity. Consider how gaze, gesture, symbols, props, background, lighting, intervention and display can influence audience engagement and communication.





Useful terms for discussion

Aboriginalia — ‘dehumanising caricatures of Aborigines made for the souvenir market between the 1940s and 1970s’. These feature on objects such as ashtrays, tea towels, garden ornaments, cross-stitch, plates and wall decorations.¹³

Appropriation — the incorporation of a recontextualised or borrowed idea or image

Connotation — an idea or feeling that is suggested by a word in addition to its literal meaning

Familiarity — close knowledge or comfort with ideas, objects or people

Intervention — action taken to change, improve or manipulate a situation or object

Kitsch — objects considered to be in poor taste that may have had popular appeal, but now appreciated in an ironic way

Misrepresentation — an intentionally or accidentally false representation

Optimism — belief and confidence in successful outcomes and bright futures

Paradox — concept addressing two opposite ideas

Recontextualise — reworked through overpainting, deconstruction or repurposing to change the original meaning

Stereotype — a widely held and often negative idea of a particular type of person or thing, which is often not true in reality

Symbolism — the use of visual forms, gestures, words or sounds to represent an idea.

Above & cover

The artist at work in his Carriageworks studio, Sydney, 2018 | Photograph: Mark Pokorny

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Headhunter 2007 | Synthetic polymer paint and vintage Aboriginal ephemera | 110 x 370cm | Purchased with funds provided by the Aboriginal Collection Benefactors' Group 2007 | Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Rearranging Our History 2002–11 | Installation view | 97 reworked velvet paintings | 200 x 1150cm | Private collection | Image courtesy: Sullivan+Strumpf

Tony Albert, David C Collins and Aziah Smythe | *Warakurna – The Force is with us* #3 2017 | Archival pigment print, ed. of 3 + 2 AP | 100 x 150cm | Collection: The artist

Endnotes

- 1 Tony Albert, interview with Bruce Johnson McLean, Brisbane, 6 February 2018.
- 2 Sally Brand, 'Aboriginalia: Conversations and connections', in *Tony Albert: Visible* [exhibition catalogue], Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2018, p.42.
- 3 Dr Liz Conor, 'The politics of Aboriginal kitsch', *The Conversation*, 3 March 2017, <<https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-the-politics-of-aboriginal-kitsch-73683>>, viewed March 2018.
- 4 Dr Sylvia Kleinert, 'Bill Onus, b.15 November 1906', *Design & Art Australia Online*, December 2012, <<https://www.daa.org.au/bio/bill-onus/biography/>>, viewed May 2018.
- 5 Brand, p.38.
- 6 Bruce Johnson McLean, 'Invisible truths', in *Tony Albert: Visible* [exhibition catalogue], Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2018, p.21.
- 7 'Australian Art/Tony Albert discusses Sorry', *QAGOMA YouTube Channel*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htlM8m6j6i8>>, viewed March 2018.
- 8 The 'Connect/Extend/Challenge' routine is adapted from the *Visible Thinking Project*, © Harvard Project Zero, 2006, <<http://www.pz.harvard.edu/projects/visible-thinking/>>, viewed March 2018.
- 9 McLean, p.16.
- 10 Franklin Sirmans, 'Hear and now', in *Tony Albert: Visible* [exhibition catalogue], Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2018, p.30.
- 11 Sirmans, p.31.
- 12 McLean, p.22.
- 13 Sirmans, p.28.

Installation view of *A Collected History* (detail) 2002–10 | Collection: Peggy Scott and David Teplitzky

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LEARNING

