



This PowerPoint slideshow is suitable for secondary teachers to use in the classroom or during a self-guided tour of the exhibition in the Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA). It has been designed for use with data projectors, school interactive whiteboards, or as a colour print-out.

The slideshow explores the ways contemporary Australian artists are actively engaged in creating works which aim to incite change in society. Some artists celebrate the passion of optimism, others irreverence, and some, the humour of contemporary Australian culture.

(Tony Ellwood, 'Director's foreword', in *Contemporary Australia: Optimism* [exhibition catalogue], Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2008, p.16.)

The notes sections provide background reading information for teachers, and include questions (in italics) which can be read aloud when discussing each of the art works.

Additional information about 'Contemporary Australia: Optimism' can be found in the exhibition catalogue, including essays on each of the artists featured in the exhibition.

The curriculum information included in this resource has been developed from the:

- Assessment and Reporting Framework for The Arts, focusing on learning and assessment around the Essential Learnings and Standards for Visual Art and Media (© The State of Queensland, Queensland Studies Authority, 2007)
- Senior Syllabus: Visual Art (© The State of Queensland, Queensland Studies Authority, 2007).



## ‘Optimism’ for artists

### CURRICULUM INFORMATION

(NB: Relevant artists for specific curriculum areas are noted in brackets.)

#### YEARS 11 AND 12

##### Visual Art

###### Appraising

Students will:

- explore and challenge representations and stereotypes embodied in other discourses (e.g. politics, race, gender)
- reflect and evaluate ideas, media, techniques and processes when describing, analysing, interpreting and justifying their position about visual art works and expression
- make informed judgements and justify a position when evaluating an artist’s body of work
- evaluate how artists can challenge, reinforce or manipulate ideas, beliefs and meaning through making and displaying art works.

###### Making

Students will:

- investigate sensory information and ideas from specific sources and contexts (e.g. Natasha Johns-Messenger)
- interpret and evaluate the meaning of art works, and deconstruct and reconstruct their intent for a different context and purpose
- examine Australia’s cultural and political climate and its impact on artists’ work (e.g. Arlene TextaQueen and Aleks Danko)
- consider elements of visual literacy in reading and processing images (e.g. James Dodd).

##### Film, Television and New Media

Students will:

- encounter the use of various film and new media technologies (e.g. Natasha Johns-Messenger and Darren Sylvester)
- understand the role of viewers as consumers of visual culture (e.g. popular culture references in Darren Sylvester's works).

CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIA  
**Optimism**  
 GALLERY OF MODERN ART BRISBANE  
 15 NOVEMBER 2008 - 22 FEBRUARY 2009

How could graffiti be considered a catalyst for action?



(Click on the above space to activate the movie)

James Dodd  
*Sunset dreaming* 2008

**Warning:** Please be advised that this art work contains adult content or mature themes.

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### James Dodd

James Dodd's practice of 'collecting' graffiti by way of photography provides him with a catalogue and a repertoire of writing from which to create his work. Much graffiti uses text in a way that can simultaneously exclude and alienate some audiences, while speaking directly in a coded, conspiratorial parlance to the initiated.

This sculpture is James Dodd's recreation of a Darwin bus shelter, adorned by the city council with paintings of local plants and animals, and 'tagged' by the city's youth. On a recent visit to Darwin, Dodd was surprised by the particular language and execution of graffiti there, compared to its uniformity elsewhere in Australia. Much Darwin graffiti is done by Indigenous youths who have developed a particular combination of initials and tags, which simultaneously reflect their blood name, skin name and graffiti alias. Tagging is destructive, and sometimes aggressive in its language, but people on the margins use it to etch themselves back into society. In 'collecting' tags with his camera and reproducing them in his work, Dodd elevates tagging to a creative act.

A bus shelter has no other purpose than as somewhere to arrive at or depart from. Compared to the inner-city 'transit centre', bus shelters in the suburbs can appear lonely, forlorn and neglected. By day they tend to be where the car-less wait — pensioners, students and teenage mums with prams. By night, one can easily imagine them as targets for the aerosol cans, marker pens or scratching tools of nocturnal writers, taggers, drunks and punks.

(David Burnett, 'James Dodd: Culture crime', in *Contemporary Australia: Optimism* [exhibition catalogue], Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2008, pp.82–5.)

### Questions for discussion

- Why does James Dodd engage in graffiti? Are there any copyright issues that the artist needs to consider?
- A single line of text in Dodd's *Sunset dreaming* 2008 draws attention to the artist's self-conscious 'appropriation': 'I AM AN ART THIEF'. What does he mean by this?
- What could the bus shelter be a metaphor for?
- What is it about the Darwin area that's appealing to the artist?
- Why does the artist believe it's important to create an exhibition about optimism?

- *What are some of the humorous elements of James Dodd's work (e.g. the misspelt words)?*



## Art and politics



Tony Albert  
*Sorry* 2008



Aleks Danko  
*SITUATION: NUTS AND BOLTS MAKE A LOVELY PAIR WHEN YOU SCREW THEM (REHEARSAL MIX)* 1970-2008, *SONGS OF AUSTRALIA VOLUME 18 - A NEW VALLEY OF TEARS* 1970-2008

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OPENING: 13 NOVEMBER 2008 11 AM  
CLOSING: 22 FEBRUARY 2009 5 PM



### Tony Albert

*Sorry* commemorates the apology on 13 February 2008 by the Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, to Indigenous Australians who suffered as a result of 'past mistreatment' by the Government of Australia. Albert introduces us to a forest of Aboriginal faces, each of whom shares an element of history with those stolen from their people, land and culture. Each face represents a false identity — an identity given to them by a white society.

Albert 'repatriates' these souls through the act of re-contextualisation, by giving each a sense of Aboriginality and a 'proppa' identity. As an Aboriginal person buying, owning and re-introducing them into the world as 'Aboriginal', Albert is essentially liberating these identities.

Like many Aboriginal people, Albert identifies with these kitsch faces on a personal level. Growing up in north Queensland, he had few role models in the media with whom he could identify. Cartoons, such as Eric Jolliffe's *Witchetty's Tribe* — although outwardly racist — were almost the only representations of Aboriginal people which were popularly available. For Albert, collecting trips to the second-hand shops as a child remain a fond memory.

In Albert's work these objects represent those people stolen from families and communities, their ups and downs, their loves and losses. They also represent all Aboriginal people captured in a precious moment of rejoicing. Albert is asking Australia to look beyond this one popular historic wrong, to the many other policies, practices and prejudices which have contributed to condemning contemporary Aboriginal Australia to its current condition.

(Bruce McLean, 'Tony Albert: Sorry', in *Contemporary Australia: Optimism* [exhibition catalogue], Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2008, pp.42-5.)

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 12 NOVEMBER 2008 - 22 FEBRUARY 2009



## Art and politics



(Click on the above space to activate the movie)

Aleks Danko  
 SITUATION: NUTS AND BOLTS MAKE A LOVELY PAIR WHEN YOU SCREW THEM  
 (REHEARSAL MIX) 1970-2008 SONGS OF AUSTRALIA VOLUME 18 - A NEW VALLEY OF TEARS  
 1970-2008

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### Aleks Danko

One of the central tenets of Danko's substantial career has been the immigrant experience. His parents were Russian-Ukrainian immigrants and Danko often represents generational displacement in his practice — a situation once-removed, so to speak, in which the child must constantly negotiate between family histories and cultures, and his own experience of a different culture, a different time. Forever betwixt and between, there is no place Danko can clearly call home; there is no sense of belonging to a particular geography. Rather than yearning for the consolation that 'home' might bring, Danko demonstrates a remarkable lack of sentiment and uses this sense of displacement to create a critical space — the artist's studio — where 'not belonging' becomes a positive creative force.

It is important to recognise that when we speak of 'not belonging' in relation to Danko's position, it is not a simple oppositional stance, nor is the drama of the romantic outsider implied: this artist operates in a much more shadowy and nuanced realm where things are never black and white.

Danko finds fertile ground in the tension held between two seemingly contradictory ideas, and this is what makes his work so interesting in relation to the idea of optimism. In the same way that light can only be understood in terms of darkness, optimism can only exist as a counterpoint to a much darker set of ideas. For Danko, optimism is a deliberate political choice, a stance adopted to highlight certain nationalist ideologies that he finds repugnant.

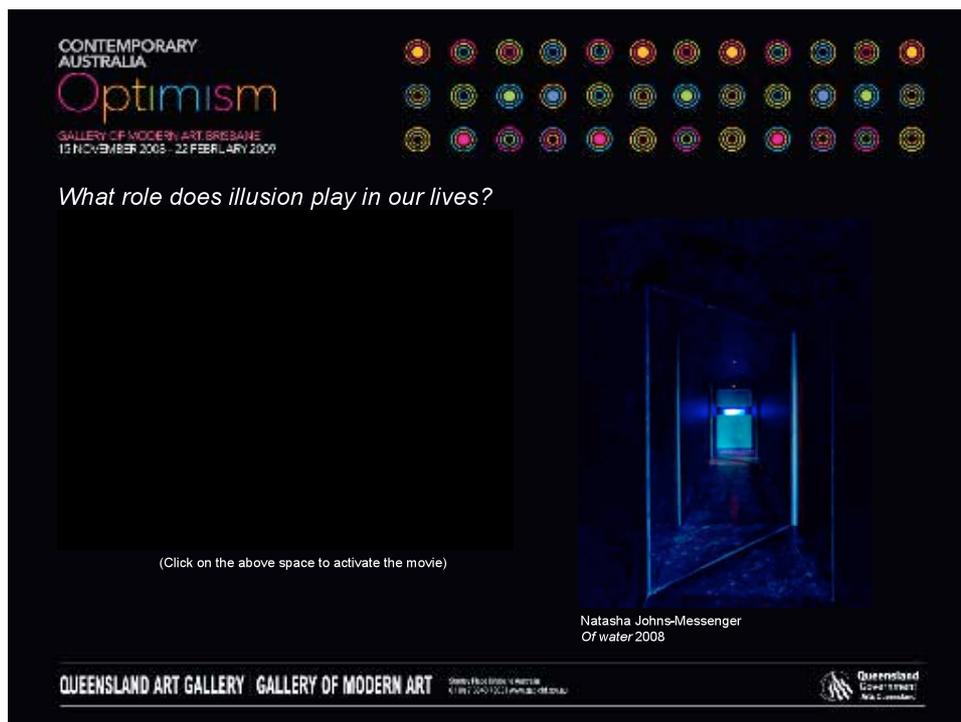
Humour has always been the artist's most potent weapon in this quest, and Aleks Danko takes great delight in puncturing the conceits of those in positions of power. As he states, laughter 'holds the hope of political liberation; it suggests that the world does not have to be accepted at face value'. Humour has a way of shattering the illusion of authority and exposing its tenuous grip.

(Kate Ravenswood, 'Aleks Danko: Humour as a weapon', in *Contemporary Australia: Optimism* [exhibition catalogue], Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2008, pp.62-5.)

### Questions for discussion

- How do artists address contemporary political concerns through their work?

- *Why do personal/family experiences inevitably interconnect with these concerns and how do artists draw on the personal to represent something bigger?*
- *Why does humour remain an important tool in maintaining an element of optimism?*
- *To what extent do Tony Albert and Aleks Danko demonstrate people's capacity to draw optimism from emerge from adversity?*
- *As these works are viewed by the public during the 'Contemporary Australia: Optimism' exhibition, and as they are re-displayed in the future, how might they be understood and considered in different ways depending on the social and political climate at any given time?*
- *How are these artists' approaches to and relationships with notions of 'home', 'place' and 'belonging' different or similar?*



### Natasha Johns-Messenger

The underlying themes of Natasha Johns-Messenger's practice are the inversion of inside and outside and the collapsing of space and preconceived notions. Her installations begin with mathematically calculated dimensions. Into her algebraically constructed rooms she inserts tricks and illusions. It is only when the spectator enters the space that it comes alive. Each person becomes a possible illusion and the viewer becomes as much a subject of the work as the walls.

Johns-Messenger's commissioned project for 'Contemporary Australia: Optimism' features a carefully measured passage or walkway surrounding a hidden or secret area, the use of mirrors placed at angles, and a final aperture through which to view an inverted illusionistic space. It also reconfigures and explores the viewer's space in relation to the Gallery's architecture — Johns-Messenger's installations convey the artist's original experience of the site, drawing colour, composition and materials from their context, and include an element of institutional critique, such as the notion of the gallery space as a 'white cube'.

(Abigail Fitzgibbons, 'Natasha Johns-Messenger: Adventures in perception', in *Contemporary Australia: Optimism* [exhibition catalogue], Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2008, pp.38–41.)

### Questions for discussion

- *How do you think Natasha Johns-Messenger's installations deliberately 'frame' or implicate the viewer? What is the effect of this? What ideas or notions does she encourage her viewers to question?*
- *How could Johns-Messenger's work be considered as painting, installation and sculpture? Why is she interested in breaking down ideas of distinct artistic practices?*
- *Why is Johns-Messenger interested in optics? How does she think about the idea of 'viewing' or 'seeing'?*
- *Investigate the historical notion of the 'white cube' — why would the critique of the gallery as a sanctioned space interest this artist? How does she use architecture to undermine ideas of 'ideal' spaces?*

- As an affect of Johns-Messenger's work, viewers experience a range of emotions and sensations that include instability, uncertainty, shyness, and confusion. *What is 'optimistic' about these sensations?*





## YEARS 11 AND 12

### Appraising

- *How are gender, identity and race explored by particular artists? What representations or stereotypes do they challenge?*
- *In what ways do the media and techniques chosen assist artists to express and justify their message?*
- Select an artist from this slideshow and justify the position presented in their body of work.

### Making

- Choose a sensory medium that enables you to investigate an idea from a specific context.
- Using a political cartoon for inspiration, create a work of art which addresses Australia's current political climate.
- Use text for effect to explore a particular issue that needs to be resolved in Australian society.



## List of art works

The art work captions are listed below in the order they appear in the PowerPoint.

**James Dodd**  
Australia b.1976  
*Sunset dreaming* 2008  
Synthetic polymer paint on MDF board  
With timber frame  
210 x 227 x 120cm  
Collection: The artist

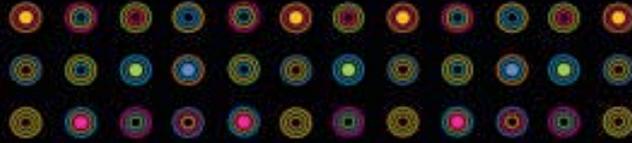
**Tony Albert**  
Australia b.1981  
Girramay/Kuku Yalanji people  
*Sorry* 2008  
Mixed media on applied vinyl  
200 x 510cm  
Collection: The artist

**Aleks Danko**  
Australia b.1950  
*SITUATION: NUTS AND BOLTS MAKE A  
LOVELY PAIR WHEN YOU SCREW THEM  
(REHEARSAL MIX)* 1970-2008

**Natasha Johns-Messenger**  
Australia/United States b.1970  
*Of water* 2008  
Mirror, fabricated walls, theatre lights,  
perspex and water  
Dimensions variable  
Site-specific work for 'Contemporary  
Australia: Optimism'  
Courtesy: The artist

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