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Living Arts

Australian artist Bell provokes, protests with humor

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Richard Bell is an Aboriginal artist from Australia who may change forever your idea of Aboriginal art. His first American show, at the **Tufts University Art Gallery**, presents an engaging overview of his two-decade career as an activist and provocateur.

Non-Aboriginal Australia's relationship with its indigenous population is, by and large, schizophrenic, hypocritical, incoherent, and - in spite of decades of painfully well-intentioned efforts to mend it - flatly broken. Bell makes art that speaks plainly to this situation.

It is protest art. What distinguishes it - making it uncomfortably hilarious (and thus all the more effective) - is Bell's laconic humor.

That humor feels quintessentially Australian to me (I was born and raised in Australia). It also, however, expresses a sense of futility that is just a whisker away from outright disgust.

Bell's way of welcoming you, the non-Aboriginal viewer, in to his works - teasing you with congenial ironies, then turning on you with unpalatable truths, before collapsing back into humor or tired indifference - can be disorienting. But it feels honest, expressing a reality that is as personal as it is political (what point being political if you can't impress on your audience what it feels like, personally?).

Bell is especially scathing about Australia's love affair with Aboriginal art. With challenging frankness, he makes paintings and videos that riff on blind spots in the bleeding-heart liberal mindset - that sizable slice of the Australian populace that reveres (perhaps even buys) Aboriginal art, and once thought every injustice against Aborigines could be righted with a formal apology from the government. (After a long delay, by the way, that apology came in 2008. Little has changed as a result.)

Some background:

In 1788, the British landed in Australia, settling it with convicts, soldiers, and prostitutes. Declaring the island "terra nullius" (land belonging to no one) - a piece of legal chutzpah the British tried on no other colonized people - they tried ignoring the Aboriginal inhabitants. And when they could not ignore them they cleared them away, killed them, converted them, exploited them, and even forcibly removed their babies.

For the Aboriginal people, in other words, the arrival of white people marked the beginning of two centuries of disaster. As the 20th century drew to an end, any belated effort by well-intentioned governments to redress the situation seemed to have negative consequences.

For a while, people naively thought art might come to the rescue. In late 1971, a young teacher named Geoffrey Bardon encouraged - or cajoled - a group of initially reluctant Aboriginal elders in a remote and dysfunctional indigenous community to paint their secret emblems on the walls of a school building.

Prior to this event, Aboriginal artistic expression had flourished primarily on rocks and on impermanent surfaces like sand and human bodies.

Within two decades, Aboriginal imagery, most of it painted in bright acrylics, was accelerating into mainstream culture. Aboriginal paintings, which dealers liked to compare with modern abstract art even as they played up their deep connections with Aboriginal mythology (the "Dreamtime"), began fetching huge

prices.

Great things resulted from this astonishing boom - not least a new awareness of the complexity, the subtlety, and the beauty of the Aboriginal worldview. But, with the bubble having burst after the 2008 global financial crisis, it is clear that the boom produced few, if any, improvements in the Aboriginal communities that create the art.

Many of those communities are characterized by isolation, overcrowding, poverty, extremely poor health, universal welfare dependency, illiteracy, alcohol abuse, and violence.

"The failure to accrue wealth [for Aboriginals] from the long boom in art sales," wrote veteran observer Nicholas Rothwell in the newspaper the Australian last month, "is a lost opportunity of catastrophic dimensions."

Richard Bell has been making art all through this period. His work reacts to his people's plight not so much with anger - he is conscious of the stereotype of "the angry black man," as several works in the show attest - as with caustic mirth and ramped-up irony.

Using clichéd forms of postmodern appropriation art, he splices together pro forma styles of Aboriginal dot painting with Ben-Day dot Pop Art, Jackson Pollock's drip painting, Jasper Johns-like hatching, and lots of text.

While a lot of Bell's art alludes to esoteric moments in recent art history, almost all of it delivers joltingly direct messages. "Bell's Theorem," for instance, is painted in an idiom that students of Australian art history - but probably no one else - would recognize immediately as the language of Imants Tillers, an acclaimed postmodern painter who frequently uses Aboriginal motifs.

Tillers wrote an essay called "Locality Fails," in which he argued that "the conscious striving after the appearance of 'localness' could be an utterly futile and nonsensical activity." Bell uses this phrase and lots of other semi-obsured text in his painting. But the one piece of text that dominates the work is unmistakably clear: "Aboriginal Art - It's a White Thing."

As Bell has explained, "White people buy [Aboriginal art], white people say what's good, what's bad. They sit in judgment." It's also white people who benefit the most economically.

Another abruptly direct painting, "Fuchen Messe," riffs on a critical, but once again rather obscure, moment in the history of the reception of Aboriginal art: In 1994, the organizers of the Cologne Art Fair rejected an application to participate in the fair by Melbourne-based Aboriginal art dealer Gabrielle Pizzi on the grounds that the post-1971 Aboriginal art she showed was "folk art" and not "authentic Aboriginal art."

The ignorant and racist assumptions behind that decision prompted Bell's painting, which - against a background of tourist-level "authentic" Aboriginal motifs - spells out "If Aboriginal art is folk, then German art is folk. The essence of 'seeing' lies within ourselves. Aryan art is not [sign for "greater than"] or [sign for "less than"] non-Aryan art."

A second, related work - first exhibited in Germany - reduces the complex categories of art historical movements to just four: "Pre Aryanism," "Aryanism," "Pre-Post Aryanism," and "Post Aryanism."

Admittedly, a lot of this jesting can feel rather labored. I prefer Bell's video works, where his terse, mischievous personality comes to the fore.

The best of these videos, "Scratch an Aussie," sees Bell acting the part of a psychoanalyst listening to the petty grievances of a series of archetypal, and racist, young Australians. Wearing gold bikinis, the blond girls complain about stolen iPods and house keys, and admit that these petty thefts make them feel violated and victimized.

These scenes are interwoven with scenes of Bell himself undergoing therapy with Black Power leader Gary Foley, who tries to help him make sense of the younger white patients. We also hear these young Aussies mirthfully uttering racist wisecracks.

It's all deliberately arch and, in its lame acting and half-baked production, parodic. But the basic message - that if you "scratch an Aussie" you reveal a racist just beneath the surface - is impossible to miss.

The work is part of an unfinished trilogy. It is shown here with "Broken English," a video which probes soft spots in the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia with similar techniques.

Bell's personal manner, which brilliantly combines shoulder shrugs of indifference with penetrating accusation, is his great forte. I hope we see more of it as his art develops.

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ART REVIEW

RICHARD BELL: Uz vs. Them

At: **Tufts University Art Gallery**. Through Nov.

20. 617-627-3518, artgallery.tufts.edu

01bell.ART

Caption: Richard Bell's "Bell's Theorem," like much of his other work, is a protest against the plight of the Aborigines. **tufts university art gallery; tufts university art gallery**

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