

## Blak on blak Vol 30 no 1, 2010

Political, satirical, hard-hitting art by blak artists around Australia is assessed and discussed by blak writers. Brought to prominence by the collective ProppaNOW in Brisbane, these works challenge ignorance and racism through deadly blak humour, irony and parody. Queensland, known in the 1980s as the Moonlight State, was the hotbed that bred the confrontational art of these artists. In a dynamic Australian publishing first both the Editor Daniel Browning, and assistant editor Tess Allas, are Indigenous, and all of the features are written by Indigenous writers. Some like Djon Mundine, Margo Neale and Brenda L Croft are well known as curators and essayists, others are newer on the publishing scene. All engage vigorously with their subjects - the artists Vernon Ah Kee, Richard Bell, Fiona Foley, Gordon Hookey, Tony Albert and Jennifer Herd. Donna Leslie provides a poignant look back at pioneer of political Aboriginal art, the late Lin Onus. The politics of skin, Aboriginality, colonial history and gender are a part of the mix with the works of Dianne Jones, Bindi Cole, Yhonnie Scarce and Gary Lee.



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## Vernon Ah Kee - sovereign warrior

[Garry Jones](#), Feature

Garry Jones teaches Aboriginal Studies and Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong. Through his mother he is of Gamilaroi and Ngemba descent from Brewarrina in north-western New South Wales. In Artlink's blak on blak issue he writes at length about the subtle and anger-driven art practice of Vernon Ah Kee whose work featured in the 2009 Venice Biennale in a group exhibition of early career Australian artists at The Ludoteca curated by Felicity Fenner.

"If I didn't have art as an outlet, I would be angry, really angry, and frustrated. Aboriginal people in this country are angry to varying degrees. Some are very, very angry; some have it on a low simmer; some hardly sense it at all. At different time, I experience all these things." (1)

Indigenous academic Aileen Moreton-Robinson has referred to Vernon Ah Kee as the 'sovereign warrior': an Aboriginal artist at war in the 'white postcolonial borderzone' that is contemporary Aboriginal arts.(2) As a contemporary artist of national and international distinction, Ah Kee's practice is profoundly underpinned by his personal experience as an urban based North Queensland Aboriginal person. While he may not have the reputation of the 'street fighter' that we see in his compatriot Richard Bell, Moreton-Robinson's 'warrior' appellation is appropriate as he possesses no less a fighting spirit; one that appears to be driven by deep resentment, and determined to disrupt notions of Aboriginal identity and the classification of Aboriginal art more specifically. However, the relationship between Ah Kee's practice and Indigenous sovereignty is far more ambiguous, particularly in his rhetorical pronouncements on the relative authenticity of 'remote' versus 'urban' Aboriginal people and art.

As a founding member of the Brisbane based proppaNOW urban Aboriginal artists collective, Ah Kee identifies vociferously as an 'urban Aboriginal Artist'. As observed by Robert Leonard (3) superficially he appears compelled to broadcast basic, clear, political messages about the Aboriginal experience. However, a more critical reading of his practice reveals that the power of his art lies in the way it negotiates ambiguities, double-binds, and catch 22s, and by the way it shift the onus back to the (presumably white) viewer, implicating them -in its inquiry. For Indigenous audiences, Ah Kee's practice can be seen to offer an example of a strong and self-confident artist, unrestrained in terms of technique and medium, while being inherently contemporary and uncompromisingly political. (4) Yet, Ah Kee presents challenges to Indigenous audiences also, demanding that they realise and declare their own authenticity, rather than playing out roles he argues are determined by the art market - a market dominated by non-Indigenous (white) interests.

Ah Kee has only been exhibiting for a decade now and in some circles is still regarded as an 'emerging artist'. Yet he is possibly one of the country's most controversial contemporary artists. Initially known for his direct and combatant neo-conceptual 'text works', he soon established his credentials as an 'artist's artist' with his elegantly detailed large-scale portraits of past and present relatives. He has since demonstrated a capacity to work across a broad range of mediums and styles, and his inclusions in the 2008 Sydney Biennale (What is an Aborigine/Born in this Skin), and more recently in the 2009 Venice Biennale (CantChant), demonstrate the breadth of Ah Kee's creative potential and the depth of his political convictions.

In the late 1990s Ah Kee undertook formal studies at the Queensland College of Art.(5) He had arrived at art school having been inspired by the race politics and activism of Malcolm X, the 1960s separatist African American Black Power movement leader. At art school he read X's contemporary James Baldwin, who was also an 'angry, intelligent black man' at war with white (American) society. Inspiration closer to home was found in the writings of the Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi artist and activist Kevin Gilbert. Gilbert's 1973 text Because a White Man'll never do it provided Ah Kee with a clear and unapologetic summation of the

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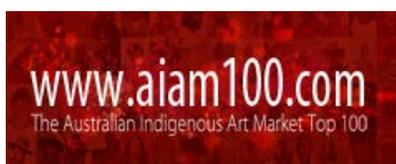
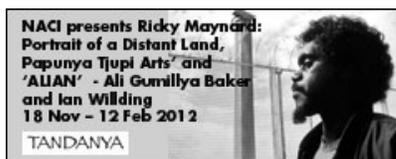
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Aboriginal position, politically, historically, and socially.(6) While initially focused on honing his life drawing skills he was inspired by other Indigenous Queensland artists, particularly Richard Bell and Gordon Bennett, whose explicit artistic attacks on Australian colonial racism were achieved through the interplay of text and images. Art school also introduced Ah Kee to Russian Constructivist poster art and the contemporary American artists who drew on the techniques of this movement, such as Barbara Kruger.

Ah Kee's 1999 debut solo exhibition titled *ifwaswhite*, loudly declared the artist's polemic: to challenge racism in Australia by drawing attention to the unquestioned normativeness of whiteness. By turning the tables on his audiences and switching the subjective positions between the viewer and viewed, Ah Kee seeks to make the 'coloniser' feel colonised. The opportunity to develop a 30 second video work for ArtTV in 2002, titled *whitefellanormal*, further articulated his interest in disrupting the ways in which racist values are projected onto Aboriginal people. In X-like fashion, Ah Kee challenges his audience 'to perceive the black man's world differently':

"If you wish to insert yourself into the black man's world with his history, in his colour and on the level at which you currently perceive him, then know that you will never be anything more than mediocre. You will not be able to involve yourself in the decision-making processes of this land, and you will not have any constructive access to the social and political mechanisms of this land. At times, this land will shake your understanding of the world, confusion will eat away at your sense of humanity, but at least you will feel normal." (7)

In 2004 Ah Kee returned to portraiture in the work *Fantasies of the Good*. Consisting of a series of large-scale charcoal drawings of male relatives, these developed out of a study of photographs that his grandmother had carried around in her purse. While he'd seen them since he was young they held no great significance. It wasn't until undertaking research into anthropological depictions of Aboriginal people years later, that he realised the images were reproductions of 19th Century photographs taken by the colonial ethnographer Norman Tindale. The initial project led directly on to an expanded study of living male relatives from his own photos, in which Ah Kee required his sitters to replicate the intense gaze of the subjects in Tindale's original images, a gaze the artist sees as an expression of their resilience and dignity.

Ah Kee's invitation to audiences to perceive the black man's world differently is developed dramatically in the installation *CantChant*. Created for Brisbane's Institute of Modern Art in 2007 the work was also selected for the 2009 Venice Biennale. *CantChant* confronts white Australian beach culture in the wake of the 2005 Cronulla Riots. The title is a sardonic reference to the chanting of (mostly white) rioters: 'we grew here, you flew here', which Ah Kee regards as an insincere excuse for racial violence. *CantChant* can be seen as challenging white Australian beach ideology by making visible the invisibility of Aboriginal sovereignty. (8)

The work has three components: an installation of custom-made surfboards bearing North Queensland Indigenous rainforest shield designs; a body of surrounding text works; and a 'surf' video which contains three scenes. The boards, hung vertically with the traditional designs facing the audience as they enter the gallery space, are arranged in a formation which temporarily transforms them into warriors painted and prepared for battle; the viewers potentially the enemy. Once past the warring configuration the audience are confronted by something of a human presence protected behind and within the underside of the boards. What is present however are severely cropped large-scale portraits, most rendering a large single eye as the dominant feature, staring intensely, casting an 'evil-eye' on those who have intruded.

On the walls surrounding this installation is an assortment of text works, which engage the issues at hand in the ways made familiar in Ah Kee's earlier works: they are overtly political as a whole, while politicising the everyday. *hangten* for instance, an institutional reference to popular surf culture and surf fashion, starts to hint at more sinister undercurrents when read in conjunction with other texts such as *yourdutyistoaccommodateme/mydutyistotolerateyou*. While *we/grew/here* is a direct reference to the chanting of the Cronulla rioters, Ah Kee appropriates it, as a correction to some fundamental misconception. The sound of gunfire in the neighbouring room, followed shortly by the thumping rhythm of the Warumpi Band's 1990s Aboriginal Rock classic *Stompin Ground*, coalesce to generate a sense of apprehension.

The video work is integral to how the larger installation is read. It consists of three separate but interrelated scenes: the bush scene, the beach scene, and the surfing flick. As a looped sequence there is no clear beginning and end. The bush scene starts with a picturesque but largely unremarkable bush landscape – not desert interior and not coastal fringe, possibly a hinterland. Nothing much appears to be happening, it just is. In a flash we are up close to a surfboard, entangled in rusted barbed-wire, suspended in the air. Next, another surfboard also bound with barbed-wired to a large burnt out tree stump. Suddenly, the explosion of a gun, then the impact on the surfboard: a gaping hole blown into its pale fragile body. The board recoils in the air unable to fly loose of its tether. The other board is also fired upon with its nose blown away. It also recoils against the shot but is pulled up fast against its binding. We see the ominous sight of the barrel – long, slender, and black,

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but we see no hand, and no obvious clue as to who the perpetrator might be. Finally the violence is over and we are privy to the disposal of the victim; a bound and shattered board is tossed into a creek to let nature take its course and wash away the remains?

This scene can be interpreted as a metaphor for colonial violence against Aboriginal people – a lynching, a massacre site in Australian history, representing Australia's repressed memory maybe. While the metaphor appears appropriate, what Ah Kee has achieved is far more challenging. At first glance the whiteness of the surfboard is un-remarkable (as whiteness tends to be), until it is seen in contrast to the blackness of the tree limb from which it hangs. Suddenly the board is more than the stock standard off the shelf variety, it is a white board and by extension a white body. Correspondingly, the sleek black shaft of the rifle can be read as being attached to a black body.

The tables are turned in a way which unsettles the comfortability of even the most sympathetic audience. The idea of black violence against white Australia is not a concept readily toyed with. This may in part be a legacy of the colonial myth of peaceful settlement. Thomas Keneally's 1972 Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith is the only mainstream narrative that comes to mind that explores this concept. However, Tom E Lewis's character Jimmy (in the later film adaptation) was nevertheless firmly positioned as a victim. This interpretation seems to sit with Ah Kee's practice of exploiting ambiguities, reversing roles between viewer and viewed, and his desire to make the coloniser to feel Othered.

Next, the beach scene has three young Aboriginal men arrive at a city beach all decked out in popular beach garb, with shield boards under arm. The Warumpi Band's Stompin Ground fires up. The scene is strikingly comic in contrast to the preceding segment; these guys don't quite fit. Is it, as Ah Kee argues, because of a popular perception that Aboriginal people are desert people, remote from the coast and from the mainstream? They seem over dressed and not quite convincing as 'authentic' surfers. They never enter the water but appear to be on the look out for something – a bit of 'action' maybe. Except for an initial glimpse of some passing bystanders the beach appears completely empty. In this context Warumpi's Stompin Ground lyrics are ambiguous, but the redemptive sentiment of the song is not lost:

Listen to me, if you wanna know  
If you wanna change yourself, I know a place to go  
We got a ceremony, I wanna paint your face  
Just follow me, just walk this way  
Stompin Ground (9)

Superficially it can be heard as a challenge, possibly an invitation to the Cronulla rioters, to settle a score, to clarify that misconception about who grew here. But fundamentally the song is embracing and inclusive, an offering to teach and to learn about what it means to be Indigenous; what it means to grow here.

The surf scene is a sublime declaration of the in-placeness of Indigenous people at the beach and in the mainstream, maintaining their sovereignty while participating in the 21st century. In true surf flick fashion Indigenous pro-surfer Dale Richards gives a demonstration of his grace and agility in the waves at Surfers Paradise, while demonstrating that Ah Kee's shield boards are the real McCoy. The scene allows the audience some reprieve, an opportunity to share Ah Kee's/Richards' joy in their contemporary indigeneity, and maybe a sense that experiencing the 'black man's world' isn't necessarily so fraught with danger and apprehension – but not for long, before we know it we're back in the bush. The video sequence in some ways can be read as corresponding with the degrees of Ah Kee's anger indicated in the opening quote to this essay. He fluctuates between them, but he's not ready just yet to indulge any potential fantasy his audiences might have that reconciliation can be easily achieved.

Provocatively, Ah Kee has elaborated on the well-aided proppaNOW catch-cry that 'Aboriginal art is a white thing', and that by producing 'ooga-booga' art and catering to white market desires for the 'authentic', many Aboriginal artists have reduced themselves to neo-colonial clichés. While elsewhere he has suggested that Aboriginal art should be as varied as the lives of contemporary Aboriginal people, he rejects the authenticity of 'traditional' Aboriginal art, contending that it is urban Aboriginal people and their art that is most authentically 'Aboriginal'. However, challenging the authenticity of other Aboriginal people, who have their own cultures, their own histories, and their own relationships to broader Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal society, seems disingenuous. Claims to greater or lesser authenticity based on relative degrees of 'white' influence, whether in peoples' lives or in their art practice, is highly problematic. In the short term it is divisive. In the longer term it seems counter productive to the ongoing struggle for Aboriginal people to be recognised for all their richness and diversity, and ultimately undermining of legitimate claims to sovereignty.

Pre-colonisation, much Aboriginal art would be classified as inter-cultural, with over 60,000 years of sharing and melding of practices between different Indigenous nations. Post-colonisation, and particularly over the last four decades, 'Aboriginal art' has become irrevocably inter-cultural, where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal influences meet, compete, and affect new forms of practice. For many Aboriginal people (urban/rural/remote) art-making has provided great social and cultural benefits, it has been the basis of personal

and collective pride and self-determination, and has been an important means of reconnecting with, reviving, and maintaining culture. For some it has delivered great economic returns, while for others it has provided an opportunity to break out of chronic material poverty.

Ah Kee's artistic practice has a valuable role in the discourse that is contemporary Aboriginal arts. Asserting the authenticity of urban Aboriginal identities and therefore the authenticity of urban Aboriginal cultural production, connects Ah Kee with a proud history of urban Aboriginal activism, a role that arguably has facilitated enormous developments in the awareness and recognition of Aboriginal rights nationally and internationally. Aboriginal art should be as varied as Aboriginal people, and the political strength of Aboriginal art today may be that it is an expression of contemporary Aboriginal sovereignty in action.

#### Footnotes

1. Quoted in Glenn Barkley, 'Vernon Ah Kee' in *borninthisskin: Vernon Ah Kee*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2009:22
2. Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'ChantChant' in *borninthisskin: Vernon Ah Kee*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane. 2009:66
3. Robert Leonard, 'Your Call' in *borninthisskin: Vernon Ah Kee*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2009:13
4. Glenn Barkley, 'Vernon Ah Kee: whitefella/normal', Artist Profile, Summer 2007, St Leonards NSW, 2007:53
5. Tess Allas 'Vernon Ah Kee', Dictionary of Australian Artists Online, <http://www.daa0.org.au/main/read/6995>, <http://www.daa0.org.au/legal/eula.html>
6. Glenn Barkley, 'Vernon Ah Kee' in *borninthisskin: Vernon Ah Kee*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2009:20  
<http://www.acmi.net.au/whitefellanormal.aspx>
7. Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'ChantChant' in *borninthisskin: Vernon Ah Kee*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane. 2009:66
8. Sam Butcher and George Rurrumbu, song lyrics to 'Stompen Ground' on Too Much Humbug, Warumpi Band, Broome, 1992

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