

Extract from review by Sandy Caldow

Richard Bell

Lessons On Etiquette And Manners

Monash University Museum of Art - MUMA

Curators: Max Delany and Francis E. Parker

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Assumptions about race politics and race relations in Australia are confronted in Richard Bell's exhibition "Lessons On Etiquette And Manners". Bell is regarded as a bit of an "enfant terrible" in the Australian art scene. He says, "I'm a black from hell", and "I'm an activist masquerading as an artist". He provides an important viewpoint and maintains a much needed challenge to the status quo. The exhibition curators Max Delany and Francis E. Parker compiled a significant survey of Bell's key works from the 1990's to the present, including paintings, drawings, collage, video, photography, and installations. Bell plays the "white fellas" game well but it is more that he plays their game back at them; it's like reverse psychology. In 2002 he wrote an essay known as "Bell's Theorem: Aboriginal Art – It's a White Thing" which has turned out to be a significant essay presenting arguments for the self-sufficiency of Aboriginal art and artists. In *Bell's Theorem* "Dreamtime is the past, the present and the future." This concept prevails in many of his most political works, showing that the fight for land rights and social justice is far from over. He adheres to logical and theoretical structuring amidst all types of diversity, linking divergent polarities, and interweaving contradictions.

In his video works Bell takes on various personas as characters in plots and performances. His public personas in this exhibition are represented in three video works, and various T shirts and also in what the artist refers to as his fur-bling. "Uz vs Them" 2006 is a video showing two sparring boxers, one is Bell, and his opponent is an angry "white boy". It is a metaphor for the fight that Bell is locked in, in order to survive. While sparring Bell exclaims racial slurs that have been directed toward Aboriginal people for years, and flips them saying things like "White people are lazy", and "I'm not a racist some of my best friends are white". He says, "The trouble with white people is that they don't pay enough taxes". Bell exclaims, "I want my whole country back". Despite the seriousness of his subject matter Bell often incorporates humour into his works. Works, such as "Uz vs them" push and pull the viewer's emotions, making you cringe and laugh simultaneously.

"If you scratch an Aussie you scratch a racist" Bell says, and artist Vernon Ah Kee calls this "Austracism". In the video work "Scratch an Aussie" Bell participates as a character called Richie, a capitalist, who is like a character from a "C" grade 70's soap opera. Richie represents the notion of "success"; having money, and power. He appears to be "the big boss" and is like a plantation owner from American slave trading days. Beautiful young Arian blonde women and men surround Richie. The women

wear gold bikinis and the scene has many possible meanings. Bell plays the part of an analyst, a powerful interrogator.

When the First Fleet arrived in Australia in 1788 the British took the land, by declaring that it was uninhabited. This meant that the traditional owners, Aboriginal people could not claim land rights under English law. To this day, Aboriginals are still not recognised in the constitution of their own country.

In his installation titled, “ A prelude to imagining victory” Bell recreates a scene from the famous Aboriginal Tent Embassy that was first erected in the grounds of Parliament House, Canberra in 1972 on Australia Day, 26th January (known to Aboriginal people as Invasion Day). Like the original Tent Embassy Bell’s installation is a protest calling for Indigenous land rights, better health and housing and to stop discrimination.

Bell uses synthetic turf, 2 deck chairs, a canvas tent roof, an esky and an old black and white portable TV playing original video footage of aboriginal activists at the tent embassy in 1972. A speaker on the video footage pronounces that this is just the start, it’s like a drop in the ocean and people need to continue the cause. In the footage three aboriginal activists hold placards saying “Destroy Arnhem land we destroy Australia”, and “Why pay to use our own land” and “which do you choose land rights or bloodshed”.

It is stirring work and tragic that more than 40 years later the same issues abound and change is agonisingly slow and hard fought. Bell reflects on this, and on Aboriginal people’s “Dreaming”, from the past, the present and future. In “A prelude to imagining victory” he envisages Aboriginal people creating their own treaties, designed to reflect aboriginal cultural requirements, not the Anglo Australian culture that has dominated for more than a century. Urban aboriginal artists are still “Dreaming’ in a contemporary way. Bell does this by putting Aboriginal land rights and social justice issues at the forefront of Australian politics and onto the world stage, using art as a means to create provocations, provoke discussion and to revolutionise the thinking of usually complacent, white Australians.