

Maura Reilly, "Richard Bell: Imagining Victory," *The 4th Auckland Triennial: Last Ride in a Hot Air Balloon* (2010).



RICHARD BELL

Born 1953, Charleville,
Queensland, Australia.
Belongs to the Kamilaroi, Kooma,
Jiman and Gurang Gurang
peoples. Lives and works in
Brisbane, Australia.

Since the early 1990s, Richard Bell has established a reputation as Australia's *baddest boy* who aims to shock with public actions and politically provocative artworks that leave audiences laughing in one eye and crying in the other. His video trilogy, *Imagining Victory*, 2008–10, is no different. In these three videos, Bell layers complex issues utilising a brilliant strategy of interwoven narratives, a back-and-forth play or battle, between indigenous and white Australians that emphasises the country's glaringly contradictory race politics.

In *Scratch an Aussie*, 2008, the artist overturns political and social norms by masquerading as a black Sigmund Freud who psychoanalyses racist white Australians who recline on a sofa in gold lamé bikinis – like exoticised 'others'. They complain about the loss of personal property (iPods, house keys and other everyday objects) and their feelings of victimisation. Out of concern for his white patients, who 'seem to have the weight of world on their shoulders', Bell seeks out therapy for himself, and is analysed by Australian Black Power leader Gary Foley. These different sessions are interwoven throughout the video, juxtaposed with racist jokes about Aborigines and word associations that reveal the unconscious racism



within Australian culture: if you *scratch a (white) Aussie*, racism is always just beneath the surface.

In *Broken English*, 2009, Bell investigates indigenous politics, asking why Australian Aborigines appear to lack a vision for their own future. His quest for answers takes him first to a re-enactment of the arrival of the British in Australia, this time rewritten to depict Aborigines as welcoming participants in their own subjugation. Bell roams the streets of Brisbane in search of answers, as well, asking locals questions that result in varying and oftentimes disturbing responses. Do Aborigines have a fair go in this country? Do you reckon that Australia was peacefully settled? What do you think about Aboriginal people? His continued search for answers brings Bell to a VIP fashion opening at Brisbane's Gallery of Modern Art, where he attempts to hob knob with the rich and famous, and challenge them about indigenous politics, with dismal results. As counterpoint to this glitz and glamour, Bell also visits the remote indigenous community of Cherbourg, interviewing the residents all of whom argue that land rights, acceptance, justice and tradition are of the highest priority when asked the question, 'What do we [Aborigines]

Left:
Scratch an Aussie
(production still) 2008, DVD,
courtesy of the artist and
Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

Above:
Broken English
(production still) 2009, DVD,
courtesy of the artist and
Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

want?' All of these scenarios are interwoven within the video with the Black Power diatribe of Gary Foley and Bell as they play chess for the ultimate prize: an empowered future.

The Dinner Party, a new work to be produced in late 2010, will complete the trilogy. In this final video, the artist psychoanalyses Australia's 'Chardonnay socialists' during a dinner party in an opulent home overlooking Sydney Harbour. Inevitably, under Bell's direction, the party discussions will descend into what Bell sarcastically calls 'The Abo Discussion', where negative stereotypes about Aborigines are often unconsciously perpetuated, even by the most well-intentioned white Australians. As with the previous two videos, parallel narratives are interwoven: Bell's close friends discuss the same subject over backyard barbecues; while Bell and Foley truck a statue of Captain Cook from Queensland to Sydney to toss it, symbolically, in to Botany Bay.

Maura Reilly, Senior Curator, American Federation of Arts, New York.