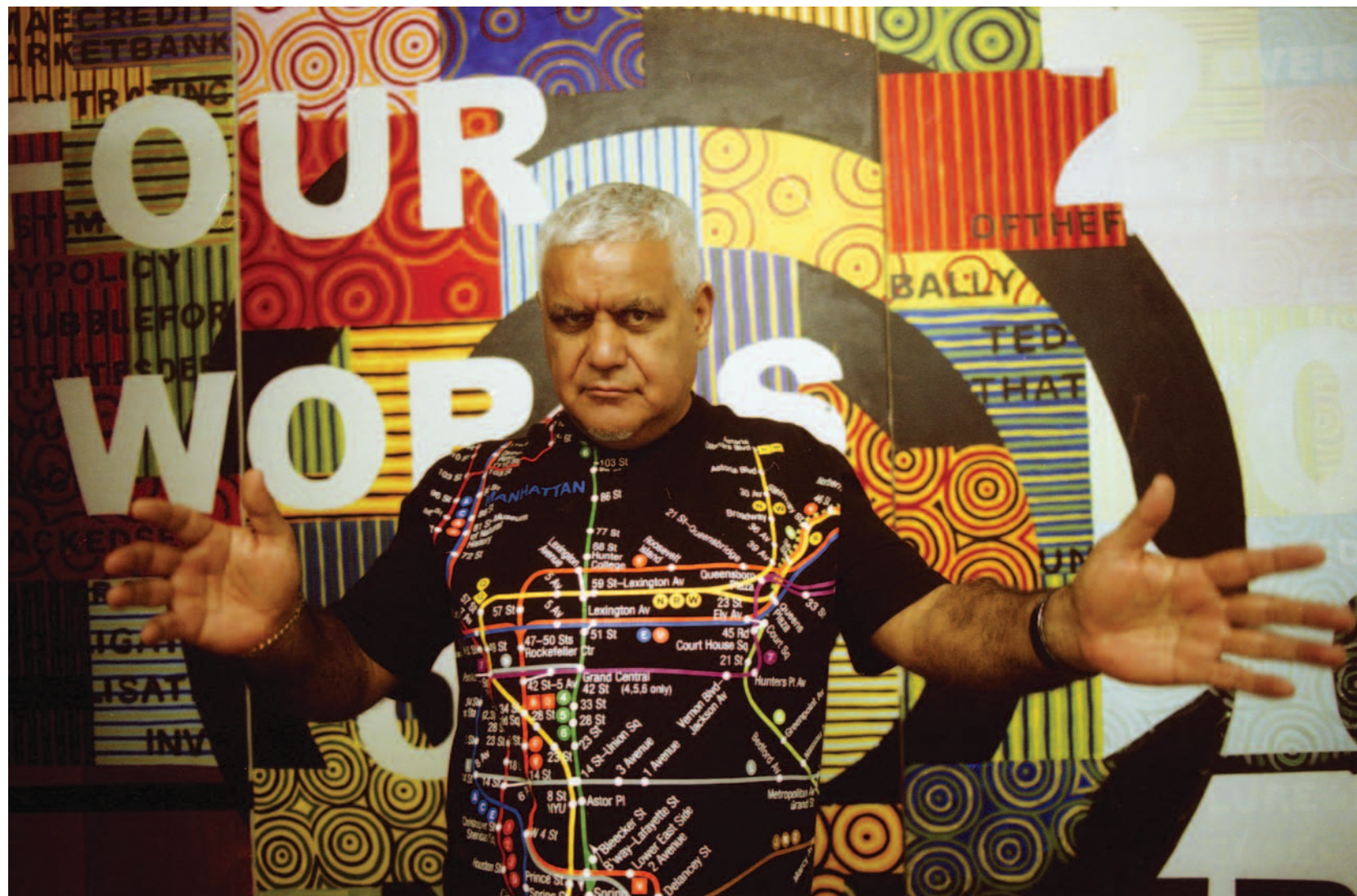


Exhibition Reviews

**Richard Bell, *I Am Not Sorry*, Location One, New York, New York,
October 2009 – December 2009**

- 1. William Pym, “Mockery gives way to magic,” *Art Asia Pacific* 69, July & August, pp. 82–87.**
- 2. Michael Harvey, “Richard Bell: Location One,” *Art in America*, February 2010.**



1.

RICHARD BELL

Mockery gives way to magic

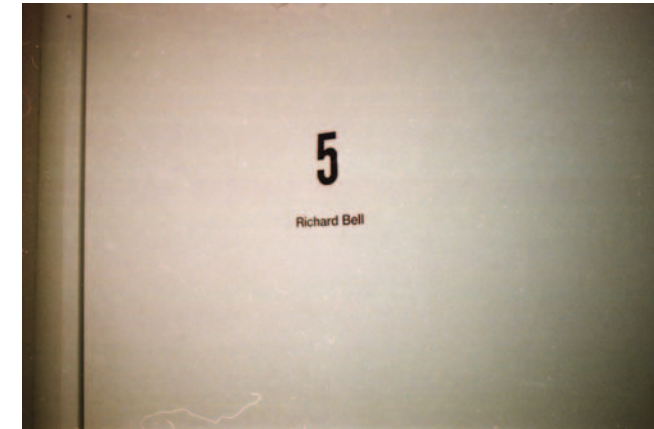
Considering the career of a renowned provocateur who balances blunt antagonism with wry humor to jostle the complacency of the Australian art world.

By William Pym

1. Richard Bell in front of **FOUR WORDS, ONE NUMBER**, 2010-, at his studio in New York.

2. The door to the artist's studio, during his nine-month residency with Location One, 2010.

3. The artist's shoes, splattered with multicolored paint, in his studio, 2010.



2.

On crossing paths with Richard Bell in a public setting, it is rarely Richard Bell whom one meets. Rather, it is Richie, a wild Lothario figure and self-described “superhero” of the artist’s own invention. At the opening of Bell’s solo exhibition at New York’s nonprofit Location One in October 2009—a retrospective and his United States debut—it was Richie who hobnobbed with patrons in a suggestive giant necklace fashioned from a long kangaroo’s tail that hung pendulously between his legs. In a November talk with Melissa Chiu, director of exhibitions at New York’s Asia Society Museum, it was Richie who explained that the act of reading opened his eyes to the world of ideas; when Chiu asked what he had read, Richie said *Playboy* magazine. Five months later, in thick traffic of tightly dressed women at the preview night of the Armory Show, it was Richie who remarked to *ArtAsiaPacific* that, had he been to such an event when he was younger, “I’d have 50 kids by now.”

Richie is a natural, a riot, so much so that one ignores the fact that time spent in his company is conducted on his terms alone. This character, however, has played a large part in the artist’s career. The alter ego gives contemporary artists strength and support. It allows them to reconcile the solitary world of the studio with the invasive free-for-alls of the opening night, the photo-op and the interview. The gimmick- and appearance-based contemporary art world demands that artists have star power that provides them a singular niche in a crowded, competitive marketplace. On the other hand, the unspoken international commandments of culture also require artists to have a calling that is greater than outfit changes and the chattering fripperies of parties. The systematic separation of interior and exterior worlds allows the artist the best of both.

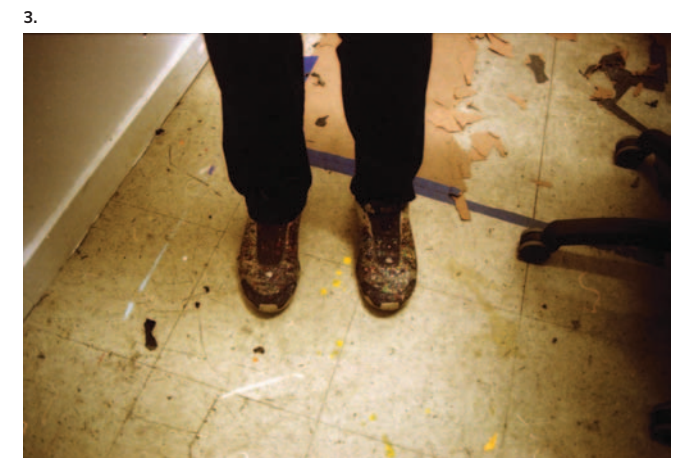
Modern art’s Western titans, Marcel Duchamp and Pablo Picasso, played their share of roles—Duchamp made art both as and about an invented female alter ego, Rose Sélavy, in the 1920s, and Picasso periodically worked in the comfortable guise of the virile, Iberian lover. Andy Warhol cemented this position for the postmodern age. In spectacles and platinum wig, Warhol was essentially in disguise for his entire career, as unknowable as he was indelible. Richard Bell’s Richie act is just as dogged and sophisticated but, in 2010, at a time when artists’ personas are as well documented as their work, Richie’s vamping is far from uncommon or unexpected. Artists are given license to play a reflective, self-indulgent role in society. Bell’s

Richie has written the headlines and propelled the artist’s career, but he is not unique. It is more rewarding to look past this figure and find the man behind, to find out what the interior and exterior personalities add up to.

Bell, an Indigenous Australian of Kamilaroi, Ji’man, Kooma and Goreng Goreng descent in his late 50s, has been present on the Australian art scene for the past two decades. In Brisbane in the 1980s, he made a living selling “pretty pictures for tourists” in a palatable, broad Aboriginal vocabulary that included repeating patterned motifs, dots, vibrant optical effects and graphic figures and creatures. He was a professional artist, in that he made a very modest living with his skills.

Bell’s life changed in 1987, when a visitor to his workshop asked if he had ever considered making fine art. Bell gleefully recalled his riposte to the “fine art” question in a recent interview with AAP: “I already make fine art,” I told him. ‘Look at these fine lines, motherfucker!’” The visitor, whom Bell will not name, persisted. “When he told me that I could reach a bigger audience through art than I ever could marching in the streets, I told him to sit down and keep talking. We became friends, and he taught me everything about art. He introduced me to artists, curators and collectors, and three years later I was ready to have a crack at making art.” Bell realized in the course of this education that he could make work about his life, and that such a course might, in fact, truly suit him. “Compared to my mates growing up,” he says, “I was really nerdy. I read magazines and stuff. I wrote, just had lots of pages, and I wanted to put all those thoughts together, but I wasn’t sure how.”

His interest in social and political issues in Australia put him in a loose category of artists and activists dubbed, at the time, “Urban Aboriginals,” Indigenous people who interacted with the issues and rhythms of contemporary life rather than simply with nature, history and tribal communities. “Urban Aboriginal Art,” a genre devised by white art critics, has become an increasingly pejorative term, for the distinction it made implicitly assigned a particular level of authenticity to dot-painting Aboriginal desert artists. Such a convenient judgment, by extension, deferred on a full confrontation with the new issues that city-dwelling Indigenous Australians hoped to address. Urban Aboriginal Art is a reductive term. “It’s the inauthentic art being produced by Aboriginal people



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The profane Richie persona that Bell has adopted throughout his career is his gift to the swampy political and social discourses of Indigenous rights and identity.

in Australia,” Bell bluntly explained, when pressed for a definition in a 2006 interview.

Bell and the other so-called Urban Aboriginal artists of the early 1990s, including Tony Albert, Jennifer Herd, Gordon Hookey and Vernon Ah Kee, with whom Bell formed the Brisbane-based collective ProppaNOW, were making work that could not simply be categorized as Aboriginal. It could certainly be traditional, in that it employed vernacular techniques such as dots, patterns or crosshatching that situated it within a specific ethnic and historical continuum, but it could just as well grapple with up-to-the-minute political issues, contemporary art strategies or modern attitudes in the personal, idiosyncratic way it was executed.

“I was involved in community politics, and there are a lot of compromises involved in making your argument,” Bell recalls to AAP. “In the fantasy world that I live in as a painter, in the studio, I’m in control of the circumstances in a way I’m not, always, outside of it.” In his adoption of contemporary art-making, he explains, there was no need to be stuck in a movement whose terms, and

thereby whose battles, had been determined by an overwhelmingly white Australian art world.

The potential of Bell’s newly discovered controlled world can be seen in transitional works such as *Crisis: What to Do About This Half-Caste Thing* (1991), a six-by-eight-foot canvas in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra. *Crisis* is decoratively painted with broadly suggestive motifs, from an anchor to a crucifix, boomerangs, currency symbols, numbers and letters. Three figures are juxtaposed at the top of the composition—one black, one white, one patterned in a black-and-white checkerboard. The figure-ground relationship shifts back and forth, but several large shapes can be perceived as prominent areas of activity in the foreground. The bottom right of these zones contains a list of words that fade in and out of coherent rhythm and narrative: *Half-castes, Outcasts, Wine Casks; Drugs, Alcohol, Protection; Christianity, Tindale* (for pioneering Aboriginally-sympathetic 20th-century ethnologist Norman Tindale), *Rabbits*. The work has a skillful stream-of-consciousness visual rhythm, and the list of words, like much else

4. **SCIENTIA E METAPHYSICA (BELL'S THEOREM)**, 2003, acrylic on canvas, 240 x 540 cm. Collection of Museum and Art Gallery of Northern Territory, Darwin.

5. **THE CLEANER**, 2004, acrylic on canvas, 240 x 270 cm. An appropriation of Roy Lichtenstein's *Interior With Waterlilies* (1991), in which Bell shows his on work on the walls.

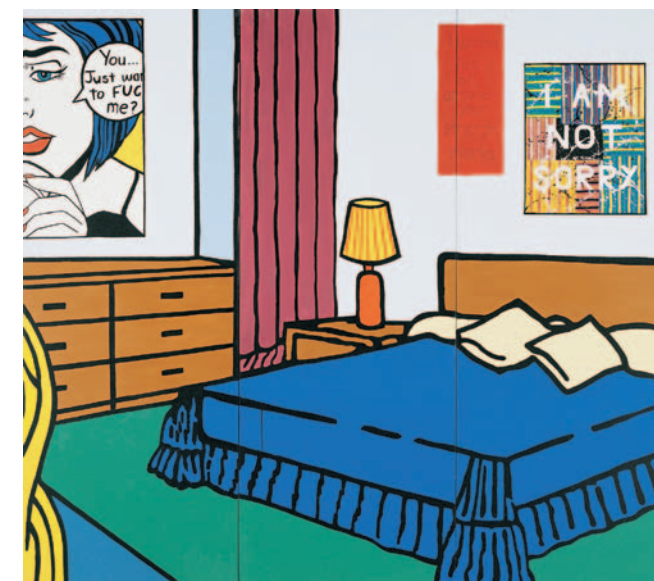
6. **CRISIS: WHAT TO DO ABOUT THIS HALF-CASTE THING**, 1991, collage and acrylic on canvas, 180 x 250 cm. Courtesy National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

in the work, is not afraid to be sketchy, but the cumulative effect is a solid, palpable sear. “What to Do About This Half Caste Thing” can function as both a statement and a question. In its measured inconclusiveness, the painting wonders “what to do?” and with its naked sincerity and curiousness it shows explicitly “what to do.” The work does not preach, but allows the artist to have a discussion on measured, discursive terms, ones that need not be ramped up into incensed and hysterical language or the rhetoric of group politics. “It’s just me and the canvas,” he explains, “and I can start an argument with it.”

Having found the freedom to speak without a filter, the Richie role took shape through the turn of the century. It came to a head in 2003 when Bell, at that point a nationally known artist, won the Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award. The prizewinning painting, *Scientia E Metaphysica (Bell's Theorem)*, stated succinctly, in large white letters on a patchwork-patterned ground covered by Jackson Pollock-like drips and throws of paint: “Aboriginal Art – It’s a White Thing.” The work was the culmination of a manifesto that Bell wrote about Indigenous Australians and the marketing of their art. The *Bell's Theorem* text argues that Indigenous art is sustained and defined by a white majority and it concluded, with graphs, lists, histories and analyses of commercial and institutional mechanisms, that “there is no hope.”

The national recognition Bell gained for his work testified to his efforts in the last decade and to the deftness with which he had developed the means to make and win arguments. It could be called a victory, if not for what happened next, which has taken on huge, mythic significance. At the glamorous, media-saturated gala ceremony for the Telstra awards, Bell accepted the prize—as Richie, one can plainly tell—in a homemade T-shirt carrying the slogan “White Girls Can’t Hump,” a pun on *White Men Can’t Jump*, a 1992 Hollywood movie about the relationship between two Los Angeles street-basketball hustlers, one black and one white. Bell’s outfit proved a moment of instant, incandescent controversy,

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blanketing the Australian art world, stirring the general public, and filling column after column in the national press. The fallout, Bell says, “went on for six weeks, with letters to newspapers, calls for the prime minister to comment on national radio and the shock jocks out to get me—all that.” The artist had swerved violently to avoid a cozy relationship with the political and art establishments just as acceptance had been offered. Socio-cultural anthropology scholar Franca Tamisari may have put it best when she described Bell’s T-shirt as an act of marking racism “return-to-sender.” It was as degrading, ignorant and self-destructive a gesture as possible, introduced to befuddle white perceptions at a precisely scripted moment of white-designated equilibrium and progress.

The term “creative mockery,” coined by the author Ralph Ellison in a 1969 piece about pioneering black jazz artist Duke Ellington, helpfully applies when considering Bell and his brazen T-shirt. Ellison explains that Ellington’s ongoing engagement with white styles, attitudes and expectations were a means of refining his own creative and political agenda, likening his strategy to those of slaves in the plantation yard outside a party, copying the movements of the dancing people inside, “burlesquing the white folks and then going on to force the steps into a choreography uniquely their own.” The guests inside are bemused by the steps, but they will absorb and copy them with the fullness of time. Thus, this creative mockery creeps into culture, instinctively twisting and improving an established order, turning the supposed teacher into the student, and subtly changing the fabric of society. It “rises above itself to remind us of the inadequacies of our myths, our legends, our conduct and our standards.” This is the prerogative of the restless, profane Richie, and it is Bell’s gift to the swampy, halting political and social discourses of Indigenous rights and identity. Bell found an empowering groove and a higher purpose, working from the inside as a fearless brute. He listened, he watched, he copied what he saw—and knew he could do it better himself.

Sales of Bell’s work were damaged by the Telstra furore, but he found his way back by continuing to use art to make arguments, creative arguments, that he could not lose. As newly cautious collectors backed away, claiming politely that they had no place

7a-b.
SCRATCH AN AUSSIE, 2008,
scenes from the video in which
the artist plays a patient discussing his
identity to his psychiatrist.

7c-d.
SCRATCH AN AUSSIE, 2008,
scenes from the video in which
the artist plays a psychiatrist analyzing
a bikini-clad, white Australian girl.

8.
Richard Bell sitting on
the front steps of his studio building
in SoHo, New York, 2010.
Photo by Alis Atwell / ArtAsiaPacific.



for his work in their collections, Bell responded by appropriating Roy Lichtenstein's *Interior With Waterlilies* (1991), a signature piece depicting a modern bedroom interior with art-covered walls. Bell's version, *The Cleaner* (2004), shows his own work on the walls. "They told me they couldn't hang my work," he says. "So I painted my work on the walls of a super cool interior, and they started buying again." A concurrent series, "Made Men," reworked various Lichtenstein comic-book panel paintings from the 1960s. The American Pop master's *Oh Jeff... I Love You, Too... But* (1964), depicting a blonde beauty cradling a telephone and knotting her brow, is born again, in Bell's remake, with Richie's name in place of Jeff's. And the trifling scenario on Lichtenstein's canvas—nothing more than the reassuringly cyclic tragedy of American young love—is suddenly incredibly dramatic in Bell's. The lives of Lichtenstein's girls will go on, like charming clockwork. The girls tangled up with Richie, however, are facing problems that intensify with their every iteration, for resolution comes no closer: they are in purgatory. Many of Bell's Lichtenstein panels are desperately sad, but they glide into the mind in some of the mellowest, least demanding language of contemporary art. The creative mockery continued.

With this rapid recovery, it seemed Bell could play the Richie role for the rest of his career, bouncing off one set of expectations, preempting his critics' prejudices with his actions, forcing them onto the defensive as his position in contemporary art and discourse became increasingly stable. He had a brand. He did not, however, become complacent with it. Bell began making films, starring himself, in 2006. "I was reading about Shakespeare, and thinking that he was the ultimate artist," he explains. "He wrote stuff, he produced the plays, he directed them, he acted in them, the whole box and dice. At the same time I began to see video as a great medium for disseminating ideas and for communicating with people, unparalleled in contemporary visual art, really." It was time to synthesize his work, and bring Richie and Richard together.

Bell's videos of the past four years show a more forceful, direct and open method than the works he made before. *Uz Vs. Them* (2006) is a two-minute spoof of a promotional clip for a boxing match. Bell, as the "Magnificent Black Hero," exchanges barbs with an "Angry White Dude" as the two fighters pump themselves up before a bout. "I'm going to teach this guy a lesson," barks the Magnificent Black Hero, "a history lesson." "This is a war, and I'm fighting for Australia," says the Angry White Dude. Seething racial hatred is boiled down to sport and entertainment. Bell gleefully engages in a battle on simplified terms while ensuring that loud rage stays front and center.

On a more subtly ironic note, in *Scratch an Aussie* (2008), Bell cuts between scenes in which he talks about his identity in a dream-like, all-white psychiatrist's office and scenes where he plays analyst to nubile, young white Australians in golden swimwear. In an early scene, Bell listens with great concentration to a young girl's account of having her purse stolen. The distressed girl's script—her list of everything she has lost, how it's all suddenly gone forever and how unfair it feels—blatantly evokes the Aboriginal experience at the



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Bell's years as Richie have allowed him to firm up his identity as Richard Bell, and realize that his identity as an artist was never just a role—never constructed, never invented.

hands of colonial powers. The camera pans over to Bell, who allows the slightest twinge of comic recognition to cross his face.

These videos represent a synthesis of his beliefs and research, as told in *Bell's Theorem*, with his reactionary acts, as seen in the bravado and shock factor of "White Girls Can't Hump." Richard and Richie coexist in this work, the sophistication and the gaucheness combined, for Bell no longer needs to hide behind his invincible, untrumpable persona, as Richie has nothing more to prove. The ease with which he has won arguments in the past 20 years no longer need fuel his practice and he may focus, now, on making art. "I realized what art was when people could see things in my work that I thought only I knew. There was something magic in it," he says. "I understood people's appreciation of art—that they believe in magic. And I believe in it now too." It is Richard's art, not Richie, that is ultimately to be thanked for his success.

Bell has spent nine months in New York, on a residency with Location One, working on a new film provisionally entitled *A Blackfella's Guide to New York*. In the course of the shoot he spoke

to a homeless Honduran woman in Harlem, hung out around a newly commissioned mural by Shepard Fairey in the East Village, sat in confession for the first time at St. Patrick's Cathedral and went on a river cruise. It is not completely clear what the piece will become, but Bell knows what he is doing. "I came to New York with my perspective, a non-native perspective. I saw things that natives haven't seen before, and all I will offer is a new window."

Mockery, then, gives way to magic. Bell's years as Richie have allowed him to firm up his identity as Richard Bell, and realize that his identity as an artist was never just a role—never constructed, never invented. Compared to a decade ago, his art is less reliant on Richie's sensational agitations. "I come from the periphery," Bell explains while saying goodbye on the crowded street outside his studio, ready to go back to Brisbane and edit the new film. "And in the end, I belong on the periphery." These are the words of a man whose hunger for attention and controversy has appeared, for so many years, to be limitless. Perhaps he has only ever wanted to participate in culture through creation.

RICHARD BELL

2/23/10

LOCATION ONE

by michael harvey

NEW YORK This exhibition of 16 paintings and two videos presented, for the first time in the U.S., the work of midcareer Aboriginal artist Richard Bell (b. 1953). Based in Brisbane, Bell managed a health clinic before turning to art, in his early 30s, as a means of protesting the plight of indigenous Australians. He now engages in cocky, irreverent, in-your-face agitprop. The work—combining nihilistic anger with humor—is the sort of thing you might expect if Abbie Hoffman had taken up studio practice. In the video *Scratch an Aussie* (2008), for example, Bell plays a black psychoanalyst probing the mental processes of white racists. *Broken English* (2009) has him asking both white and black countrymen why Aboriginals seem to have no vision of their own future.

The paintings feature two formal devices that are as persistent as Bell's political message: the inclusion of written language and the appropriation of Western art. Language is the more strident. In a variety of typefaces, either screened or hand-painted, the artist offers contentious slogans such as "I Am Not Sorry," "You Can Go Now," "Give It All Back" and "Pay Me to be an Abo / We Were Here First." Compositionally, in a kind of reverse-colonialist gesture, Bell "borrows" familiar Western forms, layering the text and/or Pollock-style dribbles over familiar motifs such as Johns's Targets. He does this over and over, taking an image from, say, Lichtenstein and tailoring it to his own ends.

Half of the pictures on view were very large (8 by 12-plus feet), the rest a little over easel size. Some of the bigger pictures are made up of panels, and in general Bell has a tendency to divide his canvases into grids. The paint application, for the most part, is flat and graphic, suggesting little interest in the sensuality of the medium. Bell's facility, however, is quite broad. One work, *Psalm Singing Suite* (2007), is made up of 28 small pictures painted in styles reflecting widely varied sources: Abstract Expressionists, Aboriginal dot painters, Keith Haring and others.

In *Pigeon Holed* (1992), Bell uses the documentation format of Conceptual art. Six identical head shots of the artist hang side by side, and under each black-and-white photo is a term from Bell's altered version of an old nursery rhyme: "Drinker," "Tailor," "Sold Yer," "Failure," "Butcher," "Baker." The last term, "Troublemaker," a role the artist obviously relishes, is matched with a mirror, identifying every viewer as a culprit.

Why the use of Western art images and formal conventions? One painting bears the inscription "Abo Art—It's a White Thing." Bell obviously doesn't want to fall into the self-exoticizing mode. Better to appropriate, it seems, than to pander. In this theater of confrontation, where Bell uses art to make politics, nothing is sacred. So why not exploit the richest models?

Photo: Richard Bell: Psalm Singing Suite, 2007, acrylic on 28 canvases, dimensions variable; at Location One.

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