

# I AM IMPORTANT

An Interview with Tony Albert

Maura Reilly



Tina and Tony Albert, 1984

Wedding of Stanley Albert and Diane Becker, 10 March 1979



In the decade since his graduation from the Queensland College of Art, Brisbane, in 2004, Indigenous Australian artist Tony Albert has achieved extraordinary visibility and much critical acclaim for his visual art practice that combines text, drawing, painting, photography, installation, and three-dimensional objects. In 2003, along with Vernon Ah Kee, Tony Albert, Richard Bell, Jennifer Herd, Gordon Hookey and Laurie Nilsen, Albert became a member of proppaNOW, Queensland's cutting-edge Indigenous arts collective, established to give urban-based Aboriginal artists a voice. Albert is still an active member of the collective, and his solo practice continues to pursue optimism and hope in the face of adversity – because, he says, quoting Martin Luther King, Jr., 'I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear'.

Albert was born in Townsville, Queensland, in 1981, and is recognised as one of the most exciting young artists to emerge from the Asia-Pacific region. Awarded two major Australian art prizes in 2014, the Basil Sellers Art Prize and the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award, and chosen among many applicants to build a monument in Sydney's Hyde Park dedicated to Indigenous soldiers, unveiled in 2015, Albert is firmly established as a leading contemporary Australian artist and most certainly poised for major international recognition.

**Maura Reilly:** Since so much of your work is related to your identity as an Aboriginal man, I'd like start by discussing your personal biography – your formative years, high school, your decision to become an artist, go to college, and so on. What can you tell me?

**Tony Albert:** I have an Aboriginal father and a white Australian mother. I am a descendent of the Rainforest people from Far North Queensland. My parents met in Cardwell, where they were neighbours. It's a small coastal town located in northeast Queensland. It's a beautiful place. It sits between the sea and a large lush rainforest. I'm one of two children. I have a sister, Tina, who is a year younger than me and we are very close. We relocated to Brisbane, Queensland's capital, where I was enrolled in primary school. We were the only brown skinned children in school, so it was very evident to us that we were different somehow. I think we were always aware of our Aboriginality. But as kids, all we wanted was to fit in with everyone else. It was really hard though. We were sometimes teased as kids – I remember being told that we should live in the bush and that 'Abos' just drink in the park. I was told that I was not 'a real Aboriginal', because I had lighter skin and lived in the city. The area we lived in was very white middle class so brown complexions were confronting. My sister was probably teased more because her skin is quite a lot darker than mine. My experience was, 'You look Greek, Italian, tanned, Egyptian. Why would you say *Aboriginal* if you don't have to?' And they'd say to my sister, 'You're too pretty to be Aboriginal'. Other kids were not allowed to associate with us. That's the way it was in Queensland, which I've heard referred to, euphemistically, as the American 'deep south' – full of racism.

**MR:** It sounds horrific. Were your parents supportive?

**TA:** Yeah, very supportive. It was also interesting from my mum's perspective as a white mother with two brown kids. As we travelled a bit – my dad was in the army – she was always asked if we were adopted. We hung out with our cousins and each other, but mostly our friends were outcasts or multi-racial kids too. I do remember vividly, too, as a kid, that there was not a lot of Aboriginal imagery on TV, in magazines, or in the movies. It was like we didn't exist. I came from a poor family and it was very common for us to buy second-hand. We actually loved thrift shops, for a couple of dollars we could fill our bags with clothes and toys. It was our weekend routine and we were *excellent* shoppers. We would spread out through the shop and go through every item to find treasures or discarded goods. It was at this point, in my pre-adolescence, that I started to find images of Aborigines on plates, cups, ashtrays, and in cartoons. It really excited me – a familiar face that I didn't see anywhere else. These were the faces of my uncles, aunts and grandparents. And, even though the images were derogatory, exaggerated, and racist, they reminded me of my family.

I just loved collecting when I was a kid. I had a special shelf in my room that was dedicated to my collection of Aboriginal objects, and like all collections, it slowly started to grow over time.

It wasn't until later in high school that these images began to take on political resonance with me, and that I began to really understand the sinister undertones.

**MR:** How was high school for you?

**TA:** Well, I feel really fortunate that in high school an art teacher recognised that I had a talent for art and she recommended that I spend one day per week at art college. This was extremely important to the foundation of my technical practice. Art college was more about technical than conceptual development, for example, using a brush, drawing techniques, and so on. I'm very grateful for this opportunity. It was also at this point that I got to see work by my then senior contemporaries, such as Gordon Bennett and Tracey Moffatt, who are both Aboriginal. They each had a profound impact on me, and helped me understand the importance of building a conceptual framework. They also expressed stories that were familiar to me – there was a shared history that I really related to.

**MR:** Wasn't it during your final year of high school, in 1999, that you went to your first art exhibition?

**TA:** Yes, at the Brisbane Museum. It was called 'History and Memory in the Art of Gordon Bennett', and it changed my life forever. It set me on the road to becoming an artist, and while I had always been interested in making art, I had not yet understood how to clearly express the way I experienced the world. Gordon gave me insight into that. Prior to that moment, my experience of art had been making beautiful pictures, whereas Bennett's work had really strong theory and content, a real power, behind it. It helped me understand how best to express how I felt about my life, my family and my community. It completely transformed the way I thought about art.



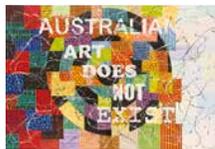
Tina and Tony Albert, 1983



Tina and Tony Albert at pre-school, 1985



Tony Albert, *50perCENT feat. NOTORIOUS B.E.L.L.*, 2006  
Type-C photograph, 100 x 100 cm,  
edition of 5  
Griffith University Art Collection, Brisbane



Richard Bell, *Judgement Day (Bell's Theorem) I*, 2007  
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas,  
240 x 360 cm  
Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Gift of James C Souris

**TA:** After high school I enrolled in a Visual Arts degree at the Queensland College of the Arts (QCA) in Brisbane (2000–04), specialising in Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art (CAIA). The degree is the only one of its kind in Australia, and during this time I was immersed in theoretical discussions around Aboriginality and surrounded by many of my heroes and role models in the art world. Leading contemporary artists like Vernon Ah Kee, Richard Bell and Fiona Foley became accessible contributors to this growing dialogue that I was experiencing in Brisbane. As a small but strong collective of students, we spent hours talking about our lives, and sharing personal stories. We hopped all over town to gallery openings, looking at art and drinking all the free wine we could get our hands on. The artists would always talk to us young enthusiastic 'groupies'. I'm certain that these conversations, this opportunity to witness behind the scenes after-parties, the drunken moments of creative expression, informed the conceptual framework of my work at that time. It was a really exciting time for me. It was the very first time I felt that I belonged somewhere.

**MR:** You met the artist-provocateur Richard Bell at the QCA and soon became his studio assistant...

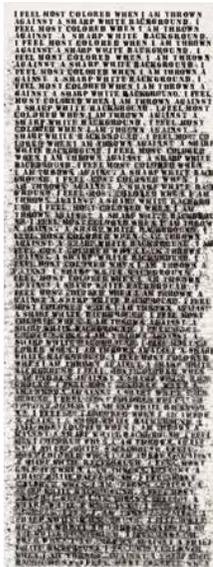
**TA:** Yes, it was at a stage when having *any* time with these more senior, established artists was such a joy. I would turn up at Richard's studio and just start working – sweep the floors, clean up, prime the canvases, look after his children – whatever I could do to help. And Richard would always tell stories, about incredible moments in history, about dealing with institutional racism in former jobs, about living on the fringes, protest rallies, and influential leaders like the Black Panthers in the United States. Then there were thrilling moments when you actually helped him paint.

At the time, in Brisbane, many Aboriginal artists were sharing studios, and eating and drinking together at each other's houses. I was always meeting new people. Local Brisbane artists Gordon Hookey and Laurie Nilsen would stop in for a visit, as well as activists, writers and performers. It was a great time for Brisbane – artists were sharing ideas and making a strong impact on the whole creative scene. Aboriginal voices were starting to be heard. It was about the collective, working together.

This collective creativity resulted in the formation in 2003 of an artist group called proppaNOW. We were a strong group of like-minded friends and artists whose individual work challenged the position ascribed to traditional Aboriginal art – that is, dot painting. Our art was conceptually similar; it was challenging the 'here and now,' the world in which we live. Socially and politically we had something to say, which the general populous did not want to hear. It had made it difficult, of course, when we were working individually. We were not getting accepted into shows and our work seemed to be ignored. Together, as a collective, we became a force to be reckoned with. We could fight as a team, as a united voice, and this gave us much more traction as artists. The older members of proppaNOW really helped my career as an artist by advocating for my work.

Early on at the proppaNOW studio, I used photography as the main tool for my work. In 2006 I developed a photo series giving life to a brash Aboriginal hip-hop alter ego superstar called 50perCENT. The series had humour, political undertones and looked at the influence of strong black role models, particularly from the United States, who were infiltrating Australian community life. Hip-hop and the spoken word were being taken up by many Aboriginal teenagers as a way of identifying with their music heroes. The influence was undeniable but it was fantastic that these young kids were using music as a forum to discuss issues affecting them in their communities – especially things that we were finding hard to talk about. I was blown away by the political content and wanted to make a series of works that honoured that. I was inventing a hero who was proud, dominant, and respected.

proppaNOW has been going for a decade. Whilst I'm still an active member, the group is now spread throughout different areas of Australia. We remain tight but in a way have achieved our original goals in challenging ideas and offering support to each other.



Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)*, 1990-91  
Oil stick, gesso, and graphite on wood,  
203.2 x 76.2 cm  
Courtesy the artist and Regen Projects,  
Los Angeles

**MR:** Was it in works like *Headhunter*, 2007, that you first started using the images and objects depicting Aboriginal people that you had been collecting since childhood and where you also used text for the first time?

**TA:** My collection of Aboriginalia is personal, and has always been displayed in my home. I am a collector. I love searching, finding, uncovering these discarded objects. Once I move objects to the studio, they begin to take on a new life. I start to see the imagery differently again, whether through conceptual ideas or formal qualities, like colour, shape and contour. In my spare time I break them into different groups – all the plates, ashtrays, statuettes, and so on. One day I organised all the velvet paintings into a giant heart on the studio floor. It's at those moments that I begin to see a collective synergy. In 2007 I was struck by the abundance of heads in the collection, for instance. As a whole group, they reminded me of trophies from a long lost hunting expedition, hanging on the wall. What does it mean to hang an Aboriginal head on the living room wall? Who does this, and why? I had a huge roll of discarded linoleum at the studio; I rolled it out across the length of the floor and in massive bold block letters painted the word HUNTER. It was the first time I actually used the objects with an intended work in mind. I went through boxes and boxes of kitsch to find other heads. Slowly, over the week, I filled in the text with these objects, tightening it up as I went, and looking at the relationships the different heads had with each other. I wondered how I was going to make the objects speak to one another, and how the piece would read as a whole. Through this process it all came together.

**MR:** Of your early wall works, one of my favourites is *Ash on Me*, 2008. It's a disturbing work, and one with strong political associations. The idea of butting out your cigarette on the face of an Aboriginal person is really upsetting. But when you put all these ashtrays together, as you did in this work, it's really shocking. Especially as this work represents only a tiny percentage of what would have been available.

Your *Sorry* wall installation from 2008 is just as potent. What can you tell me about that work?

**TA:** It's my response as an Indigenous man to former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's public apology to the Stolen Generations. This took place on 13 February 2008, the same year that the Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane had a large survey show titled 'Optimism', dedicated to contemporary Australian art. My *Sorry* text work was included in this exhibition. It comprises many objects – the largest text work I had made at that time – and spelt out the word SORRY in bold capital letters. The apology was an important symbolic gesture, but for many Aboriginal people little has changed.

To give some background to this work – the 'White Australia Policy' operated from the time of Australian Federation in 1901 until 1973. During this period only white people from Europe, preferably those from Britain or Ireland, were allowed to migrate to Australia. Other European immigrants were expected to leave their old way of life and customs behind. The Indigenous people, being black, also presented a problem. A number of policies were put into place to supersede the colonial system of protectionism and give control over Aboriginal people to the state governments. From 1937, these included

assimilation policies enabling governments to take Aboriginal children away from their parents. These children were part of what's known as the 'Stolen Generations' and were either put on missions to be raised by the Church or placed with white families. The idea was that in the future Aboriginal people, would be completely bred out of society. Assimilation was presented as being 'for the good' of the Indigenous people but became just another way of destroying Aboriginal culture.

My grandfather Eddie Albert was one of the Stolen Generations, as were his siblings. He was taken away from his family when he was two years of age and adopted into a white family. Having left school at an early age, his life consisted mostly of labouring work, and his room remained separate from the house itself. Whilst he never saw his parents again, he did reconnect with his siblings much later in his life, long after he had a family of his own. My aunts and uncles remember my grandfather's brother turning up at their family home, reuniting after sixty years apart. It was a moment of great sadness and happiness.

**MR:** These text works and others like them that you've produced remind me of works by Glenn Ligon, Barbara Kruger, Tavares Strachan and Jenny Holzer, who also use text in strategic and political ways.

**TA:** Yes, they are all huge influences on my work. Strachan's text pieces, like *I Belong Here*, really resonate with me. They're about rewriting peoples, in this case African-Americans, back into history. I also love how both Ligon and Holzer use text as composition, and that the text often has a certain ambiguity to it. Holzer recently completed a commission in Sydney that helped me understand her work through my own experience as a black man. *I Stay (Ngaya ngalawa)* is an animated public projection work in the heart of Sydney's business district that includes texts written by three hundred Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Although it's very personal, the themes of love and survival are universal. I love that Holzer was so open to working with Aboriginal writers, and open to a kind of cross-cultural collaboration. She has shone light on our stories – our fears, our oppression, our hopes, our humour – in a way that can resonate with the world. I think it's quite telling that a white, female, American artist has thrust Aboriginal voices into the public domain so powerfully. There is a real resistance in Australia to hear what we truly have to say.



Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (We don't need another hero)*, 1987  
Photographic silkscreen and vinyl,  
277 x 533 cm  
Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery,  
New York, © Barbara Kruger

Tavares Strachan, *I Belong Here*, 2011  
Neon, 210 x 280 cm  
Collection Peggy Scott and David  
Teplitzky

Jenny Holzer, *I Stay (Ngaya ngalawa)*, 2013  
LED sign with blue, green and red diodes  
Installation view, 8 Chifley, Sydney  
Courtesy MIRVAC, © Jenny Holzer, ARS



Bruce Nauman, *Pay Attention*, 1973  
Lithograph, printed in one colour,  
97.2 x 71.8 cm  
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra,  
purchased 1973  
© Bruce Nauman, ARS

Betye Saar, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972  
Mixed media assemblage,  
30 x 20 x 7 cm  
University of California, Berkeley Art  
Museum, Berkeley, purchased with  
the aid of funds from the National  
Endowment for the Arts  
Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC,  
New York  
Photograph Joshua Nefsky

**MR:** Bruce Nauman's text works are far less political but equally interesting in the context of your work.

**TA:** Yes, one of my larger installations, *Pay Attention Mother Fuckers*, 2009, was inspired by Nauman's piece of the same name, which I first saw installed at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra. He has been a source of inspiration for many years, particularly in his use of text. In fact, in 2013, when the Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane wanted to include *Sorry* in a rehang of their collection, I asked that it be installed with the text reading backwards – similar to the way in which Nauman often muddles and confuses text. Flipping or turning things on their side is an act of rebellion. It is simple, it is intentional, it is clear. It goes against the western framework of logic. I view these visual tools as guerrilla tactics. So, with the *Pay Attention* installation, the title statement is spelt out forwards and in mirror–reverse.

**MR:** It is also a collaborative work.

**TA:** Yes, collaboration is very important to me. *Pay Attention* brings together twenty–six artists of colour from across Australia, including many senior practitioners, such as the great late Arthur Pambejan Jr., Vernon Ah Kee and Richard Bell, as well as a number of younger artists already receiving significant recognition for their work, including Daniel Boyd, who was the recipient of the 2014 Bvlgari Art Award. Some of the other artists who participated include Gary Lee, Judy Watson, Rahel Ungwanaka, Judith Inkamala, Jennifer Herd and Megan Cope.

Perhaps a fifty metre–long wall emblazoned with the statement *Pay Attention Mother Fuckers* is a little less subtle than I usually aim for, but some works demand this abrasiveness. And when you spend time looking at *Pay Attention* and the incredible contributions from the twenty–six artists who collaborated on it with me, you see that it is clearly intended to be a lot more than a gratuitous one–liner. I really want people to *pay attention* to our stories and see our work as relevant contributions to contemporary art and life.

**MR:** Well, your monumental *History Trilogy*, 2002–13, certainly ensures that Aboriginal stories and histories are heard. Each work in the series, which includes *A Collected History*, 2002–10, *Rearranging Our History*, 2002–11, and *Projecting Our Future*, 2002–13, comprises over a thousand objects of reworked Aboriginalia, including vintage velvet paintings superimposed with text, such as I Am Important; Open the door others will follow; Mother yabu, Nauma father; A Campaign of 'ethnic cleansing' begins with one neighbour turning on another, and so on. There are also photographs – both your own and vintage ones – as well as boomerangs, placards, wallpaper, dinner trays and plates, cups, ashtrays, and other memorabilia.

Kelly Gellatly, Director of the Ian Potter Museum of Art in Melbourne, recently said of your work that it: 'is neither a lesson nor a sermon, and provides no answers, but instead creates a contemplative space that encourages the audience to think about these issues in a way that engenders a sense of hope and of the possibility of change'. Do you think that your works 'engender a sense of hope'?

**TA:** I certainly hope so. What I do know is that I need to tell these stories before they're lost to history, to future generations. Art can be used as a tool for telling these stories, whether they're good or bad. As an artist I have a deep sense of social responsibility, which has been instilled in me by both my family and the artists who have mentored me along the way.

I really like the saying 'Ignorance is bliss', because I feel that Australians often suffer from cultural and historical amnesia. It's much easier to ignore the issues than to actually speak about them or deal with them.

**MR:** African–American artists like Betye Saar and Kara Walker would agree with you. They have also re–used commonplace images and objects that have historically infantilised and dehumanised black populations. Saar reclaims the iconic Aunt Jemima, whilst Walker uses the form of the silhouette to reproduce narratives of violence. Their works resonate visually with yours. Are these artists of interest to you?

**TA:** Yes, definitely. The global impact that African–Americans have had on marginal groups of people worldwide, including the Australian Aboriginal people, has been phenomenal. I often find myself looking at work by African–Americans and really connecting with it. Saar's objects play on humour but also 'pack a punch'. Her Aunt Jemima is subverted to become a symbol of defiance, a powerful woman to be reckoned with.

For me, Walker is rewriting a narrative of subjugation that is familiar to us all. It also plays to the general population's unconscious association of Black people with something sinister. Black people can't care for their children. Black men are violent and not to be trusted.

**MR:** In the US there are varying reactions to Walker's work. Some older African–American artists like Saar and Howardina Pindell feel that images of Sambos, mammies and pickaninnies are irredeemably evil, while the younger generation, Walker included, assumes that *all* images are unstable projections, subject to transformation, and that her re–use of racist imagery allows her to challenge and taunt our collective unconscious. Have you ever received similar comments or criticism?

**TA:** Fortunately, no. I guess because I'm part of a different generation, I don't agree with their criticism of Walker. Though I do believe that the dialogue we have about the representation or manipulation of these objects is incredibly important. We have a saying in Australia 'Scratch an Aussie', which simply means that if you scratch the surface of society, or most people, it does not take long to arrive at strongly engrained racist attitudes. If our works can scratch that surface, then we've succeeded.

At the core of my work is a kind of reconciliation with these racist objects' very existence. Yes, they are painful reiterations of a violent and oppressive history, but we also cannot hide or destroy them because they are an important societal record that should not be forgotten. I'm trying to reconcile those two positions.



Kara Walker, *Slavery! Slavery! Presenting a GRAND and LIFELIKE Panoramic Journey into Picturesque Southern Slavery or "Life at "Oll' Virginny's Hole" (sketches from Plantation Life)* " See the Peculiar Institution as never before! All cut from black paper by the able hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negress and leader in her Cause, 1997  
Cut, paper on wall, installation dimensions variable; 365.76 x 2590.8 cm  
Installation view, 'Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love', Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2007  
Courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York  
Photograph Dave Sweeney  
© Kara Walker



Gordon Bennett, *Home Decor (Algebra)*  
*Daddy's Little Girl*, 1998  
 Acrylic on linen, 182.5 x 182.5 cm  
 Private collection, Melbourne  
 Photograph Kenneth Pleban  
 © The Estate of Gordon Bennett

**MR:** In 2014 you received the prestigious Basil Sellers Art Prize for a work titled *Once Upon a Time*, 2013–14, in homage to Gordon Bennett. What can you tell me about this work and how it relates to Bennett?

**TA:** *Once Upon a Time* is the continuation of an earlier work titled *Daddy's Little Girl*, 2010, which included a letter to Gordon. The work for Basil Sellers came a few years later. The premise of the prize is Art and Sport. I had always wanted to continue with the writings to Gordon and this seemed like the perfect opportunity. The work refers to a specific incident in May 2013, when a young Collingwood football supporter, no more than thirteen years old, called Adam Goodes an 'ape' from the grandstand. Adam is a former captain of the Sydney Football Club, a star athlete and a proud Aboriginal man. He was, in his own words, 'gutted'. The irony of the situation was that the Australian Football League was celebrating its Indigenous Round, which honours Indigenous footballers, and is inspired by legendary footballer Nicky Winmar who, in April 1993, responded to an ugly outbreak of racism during one particular match by turning to the crowd, lifting his shirt and pointing proudly at his black chest. It is a moment I will never forget. The act reminded me that the undercurrent of racism in this country thrives on ignorance.

*Once Upon a Time* is built up from twenty-six individual framed works arranged together on top of a larger red target painted on the wall. A number of the works include texts like: Racism has no place in sport; Are you making a monkey out of me; I am not an animal, I am a human being; I am important. This text is aligned graphically with imagery relating to football, anthropology and culture.

Very sadly, Gordon passed away unexpectedly on 3 June 2014. Simon Wright, a curator who was a mutual friend, rang to let me know. He also said that they had talked about my most recent letter only the week before, knowing this is very important to me. Gordon was an incredible man and mentor to so many of us. His vision, courage and talent will always be remembered.

**MR:** What is the significance of the large red target that occurs frequently in your work?

**TA:** The target is a simple iconic symbol. It is also a very beautiful geometric form. A target takes away any invisibility – it highlights presence, defines the object within its scope. The target for me takes on a very literal meaning. It's akin to policy attached to 'Indigenous Affairs' and the government's 'Intervention' where Aboriginal men, without any conviction, were blanket-labelled as women bashers and paedophiles. It is at moments like this where we, as black men, become walking targets. The visibility of the targets becomes less about the symbol itself and more about our skin colour, our facial features. Our Aboriginality is what makes us the target.

**MR:** In 2015 you presented *Moving Targets* at Carriageworks in Sydney, which is a commissioned work presented as part of the exhibition '24 Frames Per Second'. It is a multi-media collaboration between yourself and internationally acclaimed choreographer Stephen Page, Artistic Director of Bangarra Dance Theatre. It was a really powerful installation. How did the collaboration come about?

**TA:** Stephen and I met in 2006 when we worked together on Bangarra Dance Theatre's production of *Kin*. It was first presented at the opening of the Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, where I was then working as the Exhibition Project Officer and Indigenous Trainee Coordinator. *Kin* was a coming of age story that centred on seven young Aboriginal boys, all related to the Page family. The production was staged in and around a burnt-out car, which had been fitted with audio-visual components. I remember being incredibly moved by the performance itself, but also by Stephen's creative energy. The opportunity arose to work collaboratively again in April 2012. I had recently relocated to Sydney and awoke to local news that two Aboriginal teenagers had been shot by police in Kings Cross overnight. The officers were not charged with unlawful shooting or unnecessary violence. Whilst one can argue the teenagers were doing the wrong thing, joyriding, the excessive use of force was never questioned. If it had been young white men in the car, the outcome would have been very different. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are massively over-represented in Australia's criminal justice system. Aboriginal people represent only three percent of the total population, yet more than twenty-eight percent of Australia's prison population is Aboriginal.

**MR:** These are also massive issues in the United States among African-Americans as well as Native Americans. It's really tragic.

**TA:** Yes, it's *beyond* shocking. In this instance, in Australia, the local community was deeply angered and protests broke out spontaneously. At one of the protests the number of young Aboriginal men who had drawn targets over their chests really moved me. It reinforced my thoughts that as an Aboriginal man, I am, we are, walking targets.

For a long time now I have been creating an ongoing series called *blak 'n blue*, which examines police violence and brutality towards people of colour. Working with Stephen on *Moving Targets* for the Carriageworks exhibition seemed like a natural progression. The work itself is a four-channel multimedia installation with screens positioned throughout the burnt-out car. Weaving together elements from *Kin*, Stephen has choreographed specific dance performances for each monitor to reflect ideas of Aboriginal men as 'moving targets', with a simple narrative telling the story. In the first screen, the young man is preparing himself for the day, next he is starting a journey, then there is the 'incident', and lastly, his death. This final screen, located in the trunk of the car, shows the young man's body laid out on a table in the morgue to the mourning screams of Aboriginal women.

**MR:** In March 2015, a major new monument entitled *Yininmadyemi – Thou didst let fall* was unveiled in Sydney's Hyde Park. It is dedicated to Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander military servicemen and women, and comprises a group of seven-metre-tall bullets sculpted from steel, corten and black marble. How did this prestigious project come about for you?

**TA:** When the tender came out for this memorial project, I had just completed my commission as the first official Indigenous war artist for the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. I was deployed to NORFORCE, a non-combatant, infantry battalion located in the top end of Australia. Sixty percent of NORFORCE are Indigenous men and women. They are our country's first line of defence and are responsible for the ongoing protection of our most vulnerable border, yet most Australians would never have heard of them.

In colonial times Aboriginal warriors fought in frontier wars to defend their land. From the late nineteenth century, Aboriginal soldiers have fought alongside settlers in every war since the Boer War (1899–1902). Enlisted soldiers were treated as equals, united by bravery to protect their country. However, on return to Australia they were greeted by the same racism they faced before leaving for war.

The memorial itself is inspired by my grandfather Eddie Albert's remarkable story of survival as a prisoner of war in Germany in the early 1940s. His story was researched and documented by my aunt Trish Albert. Shortly after his capture Eddie escaped the prison grounds and crossed Germany's southern border into Italy. He and six other Australian men took refuge in a remote farmhouse on the outskirts of the town; however, they were recaptured by Italian soldiers. The seven men were ordered to line up side by side and be shot one at a time. It was not until after three of them had been executed, that an Officer-in-Charge realised they were allied soldiers to be returned to Germany. Eddie Albert and three of his companions survived the ordeal.

What makes this story even more tragic is that upon returning to Australia, white servicemen and women were given land in recognition of their services – but not my grandfather, or any of his Aboriginal brothers and sisters. Not only did Eddie Albert not receive any land, his family was still having their land taken from them in Far North Queensland.

Last year, at the launch for the memorial's chosen site, my Aunt Trish, Eddie's daughter, was in tears. She explained that my grandfather could not have imagined that his personal story would be recognised. When Eddie returned from Germany in 1945 he was not allowed to enter a pub and share a beer with his mates. Bars were for whites only; Aborigines, if they wanted a drink, had to sit outside. Aboriginal people were not even recognised as Australian citizens until 1967.

My commission for the War Memorial, and much of my recent work, seeks to overturn this history of non-recognition. I want to empower our people, and give them a voice, when for so long they have been silenced. This is not a memorial that glorifies war. It is a monument to honour Aboriginal service men and women who for so long were subjected to profound racial discrimination despite their bravery.

**MR:** Your recent wall installations have also explored Australia's Aboriginal war service. Sullivan+Strumpf gallery in Sydney exhibited these installations and a new series of paintings in April 2015 under the same title, *Thou didst let fall*.

**TA:** Yes, one of the installations features a large gun, made up of multiple objects of Aboriginalia tied together with army string to form one single work. Torn camouflage material almost completely covers the work, resembling weeds or foliage entangling the gun itself. The other wall installation using multiple Aboriginalia depicts a soldier carrying a wounded comrade. I really wanted an image that represented the power of humanity, friendship, one man carrying another.

Lately, I've been interested in the idea of camouflage. In a way it's the opposite of a target. It's about concealing, rather than drawing attention. Camouflaging until the point of complete erasure and eradication. Since our stories are being eradicated, the camouflage functions like a disease, creeping over our histories.

**MR:** And the new series of paintings?

**TA:** The eight canvases are based on a series of smaller works on paper called *Green Skins*, 2014. In NORFORCE, the Indigenous service personnel are actually given the name Green Skin, which supersedes their traditional skin name. This demonstrates how highly regarded service men and women are held in northern Australia. I love the idea that they are green – it is natural, and free from racial descriptors. In the paintings I have been combining images of vintage war comics with green silhouettes of soldiers. These silhouettes strip the images bare of any detail, exposing the problematic portrayal of Aboriginal people from the perspective of the coloniser. Kara Walker's work achieves this as well.

The paintings are covered in green and gold confetti. They are reminiscent of ticker-tape parades for returning veterans and sporting teams. I like the idea of the dots referring to fanfare, but I also feel the confetti resembles Yayoi Kusama's obliteration dots. You have to move through the dots for the truth to be revealed. It is there; it has always been there. It is via our oral histories that these family stories have been kept alive.

I aspire to create work that is not only visually appealing, but more importantly acts as a vehicle for stimulating discussion and creating change. As a visual artist I have the opportunity to communicate the historical truths that the education system, the media, and society as a whole, denied me as a child. Like my encounter with Gordon Bennett's work as a teenage boy, my only hope is that my work is able to touch others, somehow, and that I might instil in them the belief that they are important.