Exhibition Reviews


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
in the work, is not afraid to be sketchy, but the cumulative effect is
a solid, palpable sense. “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 curiosum 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
prize-winning painting, Scientists & Metaphysics (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.” “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,
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.

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
context, 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
AAAP “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
therewith 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-caste, Outsiders,
Wine, Cash, Drugs, Alcolhol, Protection, Christianity, Tindale (for
pioneering Aboriginal-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

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.
for his work in their collections, Bell responded by appropriating Roy Lichtenstein’s Interior With Waterfllies (1990), 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 (1994), 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 trolling scenario on Lichtenstein’s canvas—nothing more than the reassuringly cyclic tragedy of American youth— 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. Yr Vs. Them (2006) is a two-minute spoof of a promotional clip for a boxing match. Bell, as the “Magnificent Black Hero,” exchanges bars 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 hatred is boiled down to sport and entertainment. Bell gleefully engages in a battle on simplified terms while ensuring that loud

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 bravura 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 understand 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 The Cleaner (1991), a signature piece 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 trolling scenario on Lichtenstein’s canvas—nothing more than the reassuringly cyclic tragedy of American youth— 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.

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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.” Compositonally, 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 pande. 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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