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OCCURRENT AFFAIR // proppaNOW // OCCURRENT AFFAIR // proppaNOW // OCCURRENT AFFAIR // proppaNO // Gordon Hookey // Laurie Nilsen // Vernon Ah Kee // Tony Albert // Richard

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Laurie Nilsen

### WARNING

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned that the following document contains images and voices of deceased persons. Users are warned that there may be words and descriptions that may be culturally sensitive, and which might not normally be used in certain public or community contexts.

Terms and annotations that reflect the attitude of the author or the period in which the item was written, may be considered inappropriate today.

An exhibition from The University of Queensland Art Museum touring with Museums & Galleries of NSW. This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body. This project is assisted by the Australian Government's Visions of Australia program.











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# About this Mediation Handbook

This handbook is designed to assist tour venues, front-of-house staff, educators and volunteers to navigate the themes, ideas and issues in the exhibition OCCURRENT AFFAIR, showcasing the practice of the Aboriginal artist collective proppaNOW.

Museums & Galleries of NSW (M&G NSW) has been researching and providing training on the practices of Mediation (sometimes referred to as Cultural Mediation) with the aim to equip gallery and museum staff with the tools to implement this engagement strategy across the sector. Mediation is about deepening the engagement of audiences at a peer-to-peer level through personal opinions being shared, knowledge being discussed, and visitors being given the freedom to arrive at their own interpretations. You can read more about Mediation practice here: https://mgnsw.org.au/sector/programs/culturalmediation/cultural-mediation/

Volunteer and front-of-house staff are often the first people confronted with a wide range of questions from audiences. Outreach staff and educators engage their communities through public programming, enabling safe spaces for discussion, creativity and enquiry for all visitors. Through this handbook, M&G NSW aims to help gallery staff develop an inclusive and culturally sensitive vocabulary to talk about the themes and ideas in OCCURRENT AFFAIR to the local community, to simply provide starting points for conversation, and allow meaningful connections, stories, experiences and ideas to facilitate interactions between the exhibition, the gallery, and its public.

This handbook is designed to be used as a reference point throughout the exhibition presentation at your venue as well as provide some deeper background and starting points for conversation and engagement. It also aims to ensure First Nations cultural protocols and experiences are respected and prioritised.

This handbook was developed by M&G NSW in partnership with UQ Art Museum who collated much of this research to accompany their original presentation of OCCURRENT AFFAIR in 2021, with glossary contributions by Merindah Funnell, Emma Hicks and Nicole Barakat for FLENK Collective and Dr Megan R. Fizell.

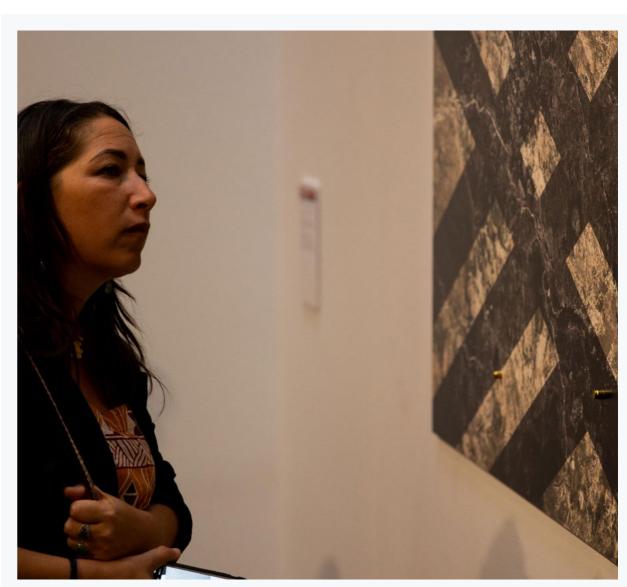


Photo by Simon Woods.

# For Visitors to the Exhibition

OCCURRENT AFFAIR includes proppaNOW artist Laurie Nilsen (1953 - 2020). Please be mindful of First Nations visitors and advise them in writing or verbally as follows:

First Nations visitors are advised that the following exhibition may contain images, names, and voices of people who have deceased. Permission has been granted from the family for all images and artwork to be shown.



Megan Cope admiring Jennifer Herd's work Still War! Mother's Country, 2021. Installation view at UQ Art Museum, 2021

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# About proppaNOW

One of Australia's leading Indigenous arts collectives, proppaNOW was set up in Brisbane in 2003 to give urban-based Aboriginal artists a voice. They present a unique and controversial perspective of black Australia which is sometimes confronting and always thought-provoking. proppaNOW create art that raises awareness of Aboriginal urban expression that depicts a contemporary story. They reinforce that Aboriginal Australia is a living culture that has evolved over time and dispel the notion that Indigenous art needs to be from a remote area to be 'authentic'.

Members Vernon Ah Kee, Tony Albert, Richard Bell, Megan Cope, Jennifer Herd, Gordon Hookey and Laurie Nilsen explore the politics of Aboriginal art and culture, re-thinking what it means to be a 'contemporary Aboriginal artist'. This will be proppaNOW's last exhibition as a collective.

# The Tour

OCCURRENT AFFAIR is a major exhibition featuring new and recent works by Brisbane-established Aboriginal artist collective proppaNOW. Conceived as a collaborative activist gesture, OCCURRENT AFFAIR addresses current sociopolitical, economic and environmental issues, while celebrating the strength, resilience and continuity of Aboriginal culture. Engaging wordplay through its title, OCCURRENT AFFAIR references the sensational journalistic style of some television current affair programs. OCCURRENT AFFAIR embraces the slippage between language and its associated readings to probe and present new narratives. The exhibition will reflect on the ongoing state of affairs affecting Aboriginal communities – issues that are relevant to all Australians.

OCCURRENT AFFAIR was first presented at UQ Art Museum in early 2021 and is touring with Museums & Galleries of NSW to venues across Australia in 2023 and 2024. You can read more about the tour here: https://mgnsw.org.au/sector/ exhibitions/now-showing/occurrent-affair/

# Museums & Galleries of NSW

Museums & Galleries of NSW runs the largest regional touring program in NSW and is committed to touring exhibitions of contemporary visual art to communities throughout Australia. In the last three years, M&G NSW has reached half a million people through 16 exhibitions of contemporary art that toured to 51 separate galleries across six States and Territories. These exhibitions have presented the work of 410 living artists, primarily to regional audiences, nationwide. Our program features the leading names in Australian contemporary art including: Tracey Moffatt, Mel O'Callaghan, Fiona Foley, Katthy Cavaliere, Abdul Abdullah and Soda Jerk among others.

# **Touring Partner - UQ Art Museum**

The University of Queensland (UQ) Art Museum was established in 1976 to house artworks collected by The University of Queensland since the 1940s. In 2004, the former graduation and music hall designed in 1973 was developed into an art museum to showcase the collection and contemporary art practice. With over 4,400 works, the University's Art Collection is one of Queensland's most significant public art collections.

UQ Art Museum is a site for progressive and contemporary creative inquiry. Their work speaks to the distinct context of the Art Museum's place within the University, aiming to connect each visitor with new ideas in creative practice, and with learning in its many forms.

UQ Art Museum collects and exhibits progressive works of art, which stimulate dialogue and debate. They are committed to opening up dialogue with the faculties, research institutes and centres of the University, and to place education at the core of their activities.

An exhibition from The University of Queensland Art Museum touring with Museums & Galleries of NSW. This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body. This project is assisted by the Australian Government's Visions of Australia program.

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Museums

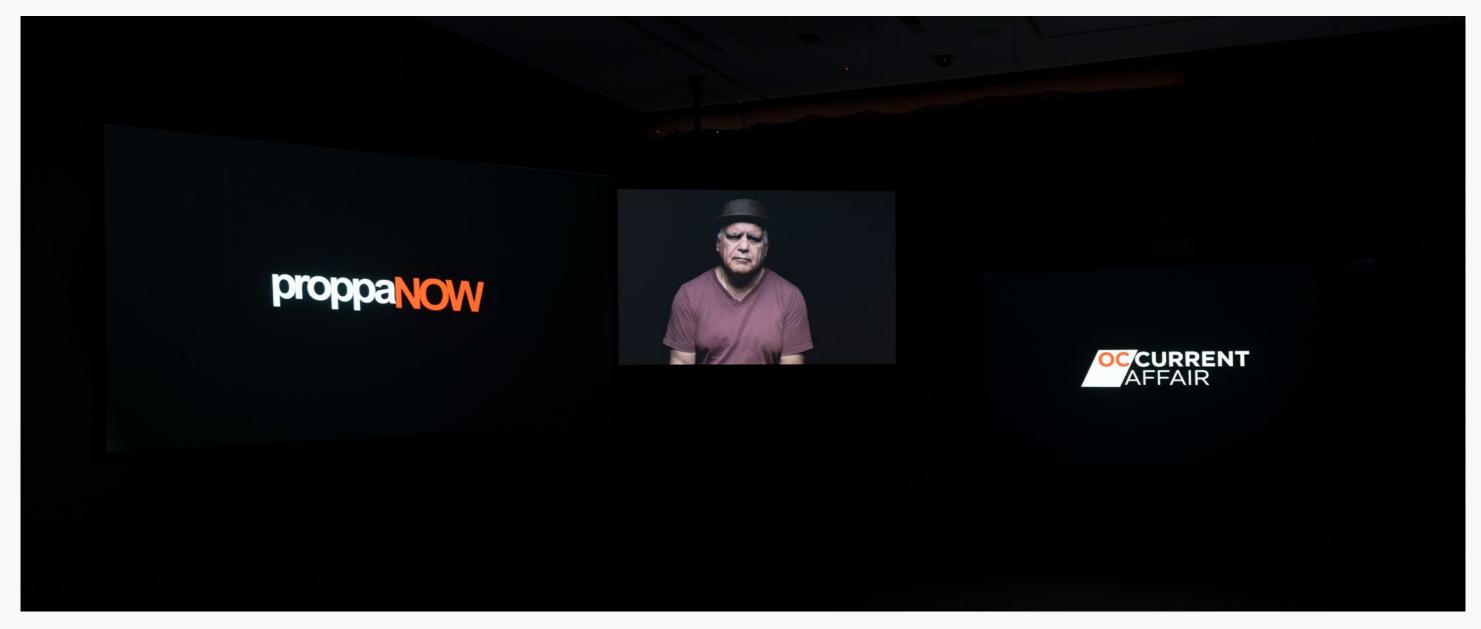
& Galleries of NSW







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Vernon Ah Kee, proppaNOW video, 2021, video documentary, colour video with sound. Installation view at UQ Art Museum. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane. Photo by Carl Warner.

The title OCCURRENT AFFAIR references the Australian television show 'A Current Affair', which presents advertising as editorial content and gives derogatory representations of minority groups. The title reflects the ongoing state of affairs affecting Aboriginal communities.

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# **Starting Points**

### Know your exhibition

- Read collateral like labels and the introductory panel •
- Refer to this mediation kit
- Read other exhibition support material such as the Education Kit ٠
- Spend time with each of the works of art and reflect on how you feel and think in the moment
- Talk to other mediators in the Gallery such as staff and volunteers •
- Exercise your mediation skills when talking with visitors. You may discover just as much from them as they do from you
- Aim to learn enough about each aspect of the exhibition, but accept that you may not know everything about every work. It's ok to say 'I don't know', in fact it could be an effective way to start a conversation.

### Terminology

When discussing the OCCURRENT AFFAIR exhibition with visitors, it is important to use respectful language in reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

Using respectful and inclusive language and terminology is a key component of the right to self determination and cultural safety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

When seeking best practice for terminology, language and communication, it is always best to ask the artist, individual or community for the preferred terminology.

### **Further resources**

- UQ Reconciliation Action Plan Terminology Guide: <u>https://www.ug.edu.au/</u> about/files/1685/RAP\_terminology%20guide.pdf
- UQ Guide to Using Inclusive Language: <a href="https://staff.ug.edu.au/files/242/">https://staff.ug.edu.au/files/242/</a> using-inclusive-language-guide.pdf
- Talking Terminology for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: https:// www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOOhNNdHOYI

# **Glossary of Terms**

	Colonisation	Colonisation is an the prospect of in whereby an invad people or territory subjugation. Color land with settlers, Nations populatio commandeering t colonising settler-
	Decolonisation	Decolonisation is whereby the invac- leaving the former to determine the f and government. peoples still do no Eurocentric colon decolonisation is s
	Institutional Racism	Institutional racism or <b>state racism</b> , de embedded in the marginalised peop identity.
	Postcolonialism	Postcolonialism is social, cultural, ec of colonialism on An important face Western ideologie knowledge, cultur
	Self-Determination	the entitlement of over their destiny going process of o to meet their soci

exploitive practice driven by ncreased power and wealth ling foreign state controls a y through often violent political onisation involves occupying the , imposing cultural practices on First ons like language or religion, and the region's resources to benefit the -nation.

the process of reversing colonisation ding settler-nation withdraws, erly colonised region independent form and structure of its statehood In Australia, where First Nations ot have self-determination and the niser's sociocultural systems remain, still underway.

m, also known as systemic racism lescribes discriminatory treatment policies and laws of a society against ple based on their racial or ethnic

s a critical study of the continuing conomic, and political ramifications the colonised peoples and lands. et of postcolonialism is decentring es in support of First Nations re, and ways of being.

of groups of peoples to have control and be treated respectfully. An onchoice to ensure that groups are able ial, cultural and economic needs.

### Albert // Richard Bell // Megan Cope // Jennifer Herd // Gordon Hookey // Laurie Nilsen // Vernon Ah Kee // Tony Albert // Richard Bell // Megan Cope //

Agency	the capacity of an individual and communities to have choices and resources to determine their own futures.	Stolen Generations	The Stolen Genera and Torres Strait Is from their families
Stereotype	a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person, culture or thing. Stereotypes are harmful because they reduce the complexity of real people and erase individuality, agency and power. They can permeate our shared culture and feed into unconscious biases.		government agend period between ag Prevailing falsehoo doomed to extinct [sic] (this is a dero overwhelm the Eu governments to en the removal of Ab
Terra Nullius	a Latin expression meaning "nobody's land". This legal concept was used by the British government to justify the invasion of Australia. In 1770, Captain Cook declared the east coast of Australia a British possession under the legal justification of 'terra nullius', arguing that Aboriginal people did not own		with European her from maintaining o children were forc Australian culture. 100,000 children v
	the land but rather 'roamed' on it. The Australian High Court upheld this justification until the 1992 Mabo vs Queensland (No. 2) case. The principle of Terra Nullius essentially served to characterise Aboriginal people as being less than human, and in doing so, ignored the 500+ nations that existed across Australia prior to colonisation.	Never Ceded	power or territory continent.
		White Privilege	White privilege is scribes the hidder white-skinned or ( because of their ra
Sovereignty	a state or a governing body that has the full right and power to govern itself without any interference from		
	outside sources or bodies.	Read/Watch: an explain https://www.nla.gov.a	u/digital-classroom/
1967 Referendum	The 1967 Referendum asked the Australian public to vote on amending two sections of the Australian Con- stitution, which declared that Aboriginal people were not to be counted in the Census. Over 90% of Austra-	cook-legend-and-legacy/challenging-terra Explore: the AIATSIS Map of Aboriginal Au https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/map-indiger	
	lians voted to change the Constitution. For the first time, Aboriginal people were given equal constitution- al rights to other Australians.	Read: a succinct reso https://australianstog generations	

# CURRENT AFFAIR // proppaNOW // OCCURRENT AFFA

rations were children of Aboriginal Islander descent who were removed es by Australian federal and state ncies and church missions in the approximately 1905 and 1967. oods of Aboriginal people being ction, and fears that "mixed-race" rogatory term) people would uropean population, encouraged enforce legislation that would allow boriginal children, particularly those eritage, from their families. Forbidden contact with their families, these rced to train to assimilate into Angloe. Anywhere between 20,000 and were removed from their families.

ry was never given up on this

s a form of racial inequality that deen benefits and inherent advantages r Caucasian individuals receive solely race.

ificance of 'terra nullius' m/senior-secondary/cook-and-pacific/ rra

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Generations ver-and-learn/our-history/stolenppaNOW // OCCURRENT AFFAIR // proppaNOW // OCCURRENT e // Tony Albert // Richard Bell // Megan Cope // Jennifer Herd // Gordon Hookey // Laurie Nilsen // Vernon Ah Kee // Tony Albert // Richard Bell // Megan

# What does proppaNOW mean?

- Proppa comes from the Aboriginal colloquial expression 'proper way', meaning to do things with due regard to appropriate protocols and community respect.
- Now of the present time; modern.

The name 'proppaNOW' reflects the strong moral and political principles which guide the group to challenge institutionalised racism. Gordon Hookey further explains these ideas:

"'proppaNOW' - it's about being proper; it's about the protocol. And 'now' is about reacting to now. We don't make art about what happened in the Dreaming. We don't make art about what happened in the Creation Time. We make art about now."

Gordon Hookey, proppaNOW exhibition catalogue, **Brisbane Powerhouse**, 2014

# History of proppaNOW

Timeline

- 1997 Vernon Ah Kee, Richard Bell and Jennifer Herd conceive the idea of proppaNOW.
- 2003 proppaNOW established: Richard, Jennifer and Vernon personally invited Laurie and Gordon to join (who were both out of Brisbane at the time) and Tony sometime later (who was graduating from a Fine Arts degree at Griffith University).
- **2004** proppaNOW is formalised in response to QLD Premier Peter Beattie establishing the Queensland Indigenous Marketing Export Agency (QIAMEA), which promotes and markets Aboriginal art from remote northern Queensland, proppaNOW saw this as a failure to support urban Aboriginal artists in favour of remote artists, and formalised proppaNOW as a way to support themselves.
- 2011 Megan invited to join proppaNOW after meeting them at Griffith University.
- 2015 proppaNOW artists all work on their individual practices, gathering occasionally to collaborate.

- February 2021 Major exhibition OCCURRENT AFFAIR at UQ Art Museum. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University of Queensland
- October 2022 proppaNOW win the Jane Lombard Prize for Art and Social Justice for 2022-2024, a unanimous decision of the jury, which commented:

"...[proppaNOW] has broken with expectations of what is proper ('proppa') in Aboriginal art; created a new sovereign space for First Nations artists internationally outside colonial stereotypes, desires for authenticity, and capitalist capitulations; and opened new political imaginaries" https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vera List Center for Art and Politics

### Looking Back: The Campfire Artists Group (1990-2005)

When proppaNOW was created, founding members Richard Bell and Laurie Nilsen were part of the Campfire Artists Group (1990-2005). This collective included both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists. It sought to foster a "black and white" dialogue in the Australian art industry and counter the racial stereotyping, discrimination and exoticisation of Aboriginal people by it. Campfire also equally supported 'urban' and 'rural' Aboriginal artists when urban-based artists were widely dismissed by curators and museum trustees as "not being Aboriginal enough".

As a Brisbane-based collective emerging in the wake of the deeply conservative (and racist) Bjelke-Petersen era (Joh Bjelke-Petersen was Premier of Queensland from 1968-1987), Campfire made major ground in redefining Aboriginal art outside of the strictures of non-Aboriginal institutions.

**Read:** Campfire Group History – (kooriweb.org) http://kooriweb.org/foley/ great/art/article11.html

proppaNOW built upon this groundwork with supporting urban Aboriginal artists in mind:

"It [proppaNOW] had to be Aboriginal, we were making an all-Aboriginal group... I've been a member of Campfire Group for twenty years, and that was not an Aboriginal group, an Aboriginal-only group. It included our friends, non-white friends, and white friends. This one, we needed it to be all Aboriginal. We had to be like minded..."

**Richard Bell, interviewed March 2020** 

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### Early Days of proppaNOW: Amersham Studio (Approx c. 2003 – 2011)

The Amersham studio in West End was proppaNOW's first group studio. The group often worked from the afternoon into the night, discussing issues and ideas together and criticising each other's work. The group has described Amersham as being vital to their career development and to their sense of group unity:

"This building [Amersham] was in many ways a formation of proppaNOW.... [W]hen we were here in this building, there was a leap of faith we made in each other, and it built up a trust in each other."

### Vernon Ah Kee, interviewed March 2020

"We pushed each other. And a lot of it was playful, but... it was competitive stuff. And it wasn't done in a negative manner, it was done to get the best out of each other. It's been noted before and in other places that there's not a lot of criticism of Aboriginal art... Probably because none of the art critics know anything about it. And they're certainly not experts in the field. What we discovered and what we asserted was that we were the only experts on our art."

**Richard Bell, interviewed March 2020** 

### proppaNOW Exhibitions

proppaNOW exhibited extensively from 2004 to 2013, after which they went on hiatus. OCCURRENT AFFAIR is proppaNOW's last exhibition as an actively operating collective.

**Exhibitions include:** There Goes the Neighbourhood, Ambleside Street (Amersham) Studio (2006); The Amersham Trophy, Ambleside Street (Amersham) Studio (2007); Friendly Fire, George Petelin Gallery, Gold Coast (2007); Putsch, Adelaide Arts Festival, Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute (2010); Jus' Drawn: The proppaNOW Collective, touring with NETS Victoria (2010); The Black See, KickArts Contemporary Arts, Cairns (2011); Existence Resistance, Bega Regional Gallery, Bega (2012); Touchy Fearly, Fehily Contemporary, Collingwood (2012); Insurgence, Museum of Australian Democracy, Canberra (2013); ProppaNOW, Brisbane Powerhouse, Queensland (2014) and OCCURRENT AFFAIR, UQ Art Museum, Brisbane (2021).

### Read more

- Insurgence, Museum of Australian Democracy: http://www. nationalunitygovernment.org/content/austracism-old-parliament-housefirst-nations-insurgence-exhibition
- proppanow/



Gordon Hookey, WAM / Ethics, 2021. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane. Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2021. Photo by Rhett Hammerton.

Insurgence, Museum of Australian Democracy: https://artsreview.com.au/

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### "Urban" and "Rural" Aboriginal art

"There was a belief in Australia, widely held still to this day, that all the real Aborigines live in the north of Australia, particularly the deserts in the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia, and that all the Aborigines died out in the eastern areas, where we had the best land and they [the British] settled the most. So, for us [proppaNOW], we were seen not as real Aborigines... and that our art wasn't authentic because we weren't real."

### **Richard Bell, interviewed March 2020**

In the late 20th century, the Australian art industry falsely conceived a harmful divide between 'urban' and 'rural' Aboriginal artists: namely, that 'rural' Aboriginal artists were "truly" Aboriginal, while 'urban' Aboriginal artists were not. This has ramifications on the market, and what was, and wasn't purchased. This schism came out of long-standing colonial prejudices of what "traditional" Aboriginal people were meant to be. The consequences of such stereotypes have been readily discussed by Aboriginal people and communities.

### **Rural Aboriginal Art**

In 1971, the <u>Papunya Tula art movement</u> began in the rural Aboriginal town of Papunya in Central Australia. The movement has instigated a major surge of art making by Aboriginal people across the Central Western Desert, which is called the Central Western Desert art movement – some of this work is colloquially known as "dot painting".

In response, Australia's art industry created a stereotype of what "authentic" Aboriginal art should look like: namely, stylised shapes such as dots, lines and circles painted in warm ochre-like colours. This painting form has been falsely framed as an identifier of 'authentic' Aboriginal art. As it doesn't use the same elements of visual language found in Western art, it has been seen as different, and therefore, problematically, 'pure' and, 'primitive'.

This stereotype plays into colonial power by foregrounding the Western narrative of "Aboriginality" and, again, taking away control from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over their own narratives and identities. By conflating the Central Western Desert art movement with outdated and paternalistic ideas of primitivism and cultural/racial imperialism, artworks became more digestible for Anglo-Australian buyers. Not only does this demean and infantilise rural Aboriginal artists, but it also hurts urban artists who have been ignored by the art industry for not conforming to the racist stereotype of Aboriginality.

These stereotypes, which pervaded Australian art institutions, heavily affected proppaNOW artists, who found their art practices and identities as Aboriginal people ignored and dismissed by others.

### The Influence of proppaNOW

proppaNOW has made enormous ground on bringing due attention to Aboriginal art from urban areas. Its success has brought attention to the true diversity of Aboriginal art across Australia, and has taught many that antiquated, racist ideas of "authenticity" and "purity" are unfounded and destructive.

"I think urban artists are always put on the back burner so to speak. I've always felt that there are a number of urban artists, some of them from within our group, that have been overlooked, and deserve much more attention than they have received. You see some of these remote area artists ... get good representation, and a lot of attention..."

### Jennifer Herd, quoted in Margo Neale, Learning to be proppa, 2010

Read more about the influence of proppaNOW in Margo Neale's, *Learning to be proppa*, Artlink, 2010: <u>https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/3359/learning-to-be-proppa-aboriginal-artists-collecti/</u>

...We [proppaNOW] changed the way that Aboriginal art was seen in this country and therefore the rest of the world. And we drove that change... Aboriginal art is between five and ten percent bigger than the rest of Australian art combined... When you look at that, and look at the fact that we changed the perception of Aboriginal art... that's really significant. So, we have been the most influential group of people on the Aboriginal art – on the Australian art – scene this century."

### **Richard Bell, interviewed March 2020**

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# proppaNOW's Mission Statement

In early 2005, the collective penned a Press Release for immediate distribution, via email. The press release entitled 'We have a dream' is a collectivist call to arms, in the style of American Civil Rights Leader Martin Luther King Jr's famous 1963 speech "I have a dream" for the March on Washington.

The Press Release outlines the hopes for the Australian art world and its institutions that centres and celebrates both urban and rural Aboriginal artists through autonomous Aboriginal Art Departments with separate acquisition budgets. They call for equity in positions held by Aboriginal staff so that remuneration and support is equal and permanent to those of the non-Indigenous staff members.

Among other 'dreams' that they outline, the significant point is that many of the demands they laid out in 2005 still have not been realised fifteen years later. The mention of certain galleries, while controversial, was also to use examples of institutions in which the artists would like to see change.



Gordon Hookey, Jennifer Herd, Tony Albert, Megan Cope, Richard Bell, Vernon Ah Kee (left to right). Photo by Rhett Hammerton

# The Artists

## Vernon Ah Kee

### In the exhibition:

ifiamextremeist, 2002 acrylic on MDF board Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

austracism, 2003 ink on polypropylene board, satin laminated, edition 1/3Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2010

proppaNOW, 2021 video documentary, colour video with sound Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Scratch the surface, 2019/2021 acrylic riot shields, charcoal Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Collaborative work with Laurie Nilsen Conversations I, II & III, 2022 barbed wire, aluminium, bronze and patina Courtesy of the artists, The Estate of Laurie Nilsen, FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

### About the Artist

Vernon Ah Kee was born in Innisfail, North Queensland and belongs to the Kuku Yalanji, Waanyi, Yidinji and Gugu Yimithirr peoples. Ah Kee has risen in prominence as one of Australia's most dynamic artists, his multi-faceted practice ranges from large-scale drawings of his ancestors to hard-hitting text-based works and installations. Ah Kee investigates the mistreatment of our country's First Nations Peoples since colonisation, focusing on lived experiences and those of his ancestors.

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### Learn more

- Interview with NAVA: https://visualarts.net.au/artist-files/2020/vernon-ahkee/
- Artist's gallery page: <a href="https://milanigallery.com.au/artists/vernon-ah-kee/">https://milanigallery.com.au/artists/vernon-ah-kee/</a>
- Scratch the surface, 2019/2021 was shown in the touring exhibition Violent Salt. Read about it on page 16 here: https://www.artspacemackay. com.au/ data/assets/pdf file/0005/243878/Violent Salt EdKit ArtspaceMackav.pdf
- Watch Vernon Ah Kee describe the work austracism, 2003: https://vimeo. com/215770500

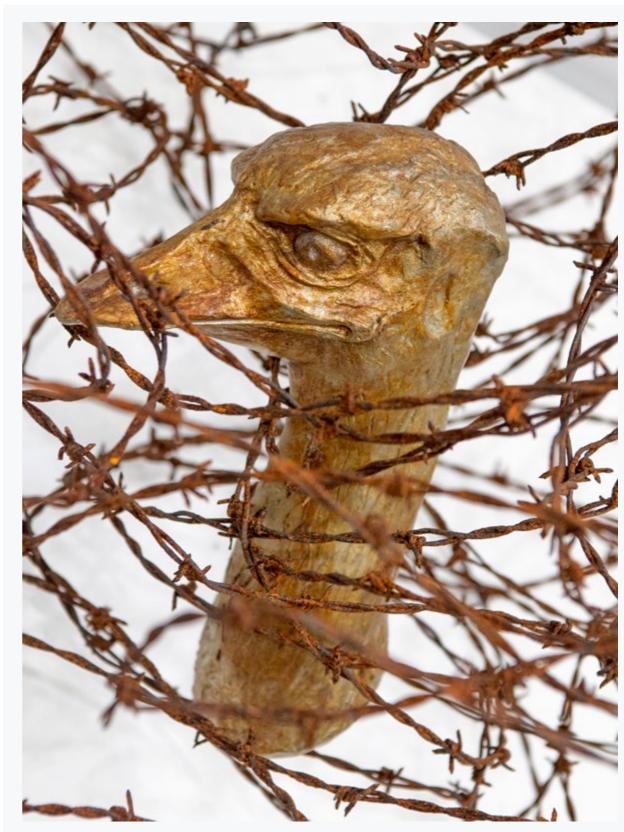
### Artwork focus - proppaNOW video, 2021

For OCCURRENT AFFAIR, Vernon Ah Kee made a new video interviewing each member of the proppaNOW collective, apart from Laurie Nilsen due to his passing. Ah Kee asks questions about the formation of proppaNOW. the significance of the collective, its early days, and individual memories of Nilsen as a key member and dear friend, with the video becoming a eulogy to him. This video documentary provides genuine insights into the artists and their various practices. The work emphasises that while some progress has been made in addressing issues related to Aboriginal inequality and mistreatment over the last 18 years, many remain unresolved.

Interview with Vernon Ah Kee by POPSART BEC MAC at OCCURRENT AFFAIR, UQ Art Museum: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifWregFbtLM

### Artwork focus - Conversations I, II & III, 2022 Collaborative work with Laurie Nilsen

The Conversations series are a new collaboration that culminated from conversations between fellow proppaNOW artists Vernon Ah Kee and the late Laurie Nilsen. Their ongoing dialogue revolved around redefining conceptual meaning and symbolism by combining critical components of their art practice, such as barbed wire and Nilsen's totem animal the emu. Nilsen incorporated barbed wire as the material had been used in rural Queensland to threaten native species such as emus. Such discussions together posed new sculptural ideas, however with Nilsen's failing health, these conversations continued on behalf of Nilsen, between Vernon Ah Kee and Nilsen's gallery dealer Michael Eather.



Laurie Nilsen & Vernon Ah Kee, Conversations I (detail), 2022 barbed wire, bronze & patina, 60 x 80 x 80cm Courtesy of the artists, The Estate of Laurie Nilsen, FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

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# **Tony Albert**

In the exhibition:

Butterscotch tribesman. 2009 synthetic polymer paint on Belgian linen Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2009

Corroboree, 2009 oil on canvas Collection of The University of Queensland. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by Danielle Milani in memory of Mona Dubois, 2018

Brother (Our Past), from the series 'Brothers', 2013 reproduction on di-bond Collection of The University of Queensland

Brother (Our Present), from the series 'Brothers', 2013 reproduction on di-bond Collection of The University of Queensland. Gift of Tony Albert through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2014.

Brother (Our Future), from the series 'Brothers', 2013 reproduction on di-bond Collection of The University of Queensland

Terra Nullius (with Scrooge), 2021 acrylic paint on wall; ephemeral installation Courtesy of the artist and Sullivan and Strumpf, Sydney

### About the Artist

Tony Albert was born in Townsville, Queensland and is a descendant of the Girramay, Yidinji and Kuku-Yalanji peoples. He works across a range of media, often recycling kitsch, mass-produced objects that feature stereotypical depictions of Indigenous people. Over the past 10 years Albert has achieved extraordinary visibility and much critical acclaim for his visual art practice. His multidisciplinary artmaking investigates contemporary legacies of colonialism. prompting audiences to contemplate the human condition.

### Learn more

- Artist Website: https://tonyalbert.com.au/
- Interview: with the Art Gallery of New South Wales: https://www.youtube. com/watch?v=EK8gZnbwVxI
- Video Interview discussing his Brothers exhibition in Das Platforms: https:// www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xt2zgeSP5VE

### Artwork focus - Butterscotch tribesman, 2009 and Corroboree, 2009

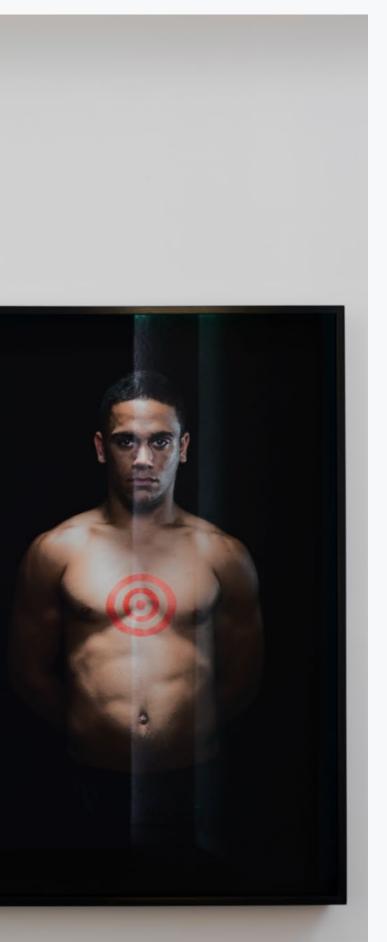
The images in Butterscotch tribesman and Corroboree have been sourced from Tony's Aboriginalia collection. 'Aboriginalia' are objects-often souvenirs and bric-a-brac such as ornaments, figurines, prints, stationery and biscuit tinsdecorated with stereotyped Aboriginal cultural designs and figures. These often distorted or sentimental images of Aboriginal people were incredibly popular in the twentieth century. 'Aboriginalia' suggests that Aboriginality is trivial and decorative, intended only for the profit and enjoyment of non-Aboriginal consumers. It also nearly exclusively depicts Aboriginal people in a fantasised pre-colonial state rather than the post-colonial reality, thus ignoring and silencing the experiences of Aboriginal people who have survived colonisation.

- Interview: Tony discussing his interest in Aboriginalia: <u>https://vimeo.</u> com/330403676
- Read: QAGOMA describes Tony's interest in Aboriginalia: blog.gagoma.gld. gov.au/tony-albert-uses-humour-to-render-visible-australias-history





Tony Albert, Brother (Our Past); Brother (Our Present); Brother (Our Future) (L-R), from the series 'Brothers', 2013, pigment print on paper, edition AP 1, 149 x 98.6cm each. Installation view at UQ Art Museum, 2021. Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2013 - 2014. Brother (Our Present): Gift of Tony Albert through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2014. Photo by Carl Warner.



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### Focus - 'Brothers' series, 2013

These works were created in response to a group of young Aboriginal men who Albert witnessed arrive at a community protest shirtless, their chests marked with red targets. They were protesting a car chase that occurred in Sydney's King Cross in April 2012, when two Aboriginal teenage boys were shot and wounded by police after crashing their car and injuring two bystanders. Albert was also inspired by his experience at Kirinari Hostel, which provides accommodation to young Aboriginal people attending high school in Sydney, and photographed some of them for the series.

These works depict the strength and vulnerability of the protestors and Kirinari students in the face of prevailing social prejudices that target Aboriginal men as lawbreakers. The three images of the brothers in the past, present and future indicate the continued fight against police brutality.

 Read more: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/25/policeshooting-aboriginal-teenagers-sydney



Tony Albert with University of Queensland students participating in the artist residency program to create the communal artwork mural Terra Nullius (with Scrooge). Courtesy of the artist and Sullivan and Strumpf, Sydney. Photo by Simon Woods.

### Focus - Terra Nullius (with Scrooge), 2021

From 13-26 February 2021, Tony Albert worked with two volunteer participants each day at UQ Art Museum to create a wall painting of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) map of countries. To create the work, Albert used the 'colour by number' system found in much of his practice (see Butterscotch tribesman, 2009 and Corroboree, 2009). Along the tour this work will be recreated at each venue with local participants.

On this map stands the Walt Disney character Scrooge McDuck, an oil and mining tycoon, businessman and industrialist who was created in 1947 in the image of the miser Scrooge in Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol. Standing on Australia, he represents the colonialists who, since invasion, have ruthlessly extracted Australia's resources for economic gain with no regard for the environment or the rights of those Aboriginal people to whom the land belongs.

- Read about Albert's residency at UQ Art Museum and development of his work Terra Nullius (with Scrooge): https://art-museum.ug.edu.au/ article/2021/09/tony-albert-artist-residency-sparks-big-ideas
- Example of Aboriginal Cultural destruction: In May 2020, mining giant Rio years of protest by the local Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura community and archaeologists who argued for the cultural and archaeological significance of the site. This example reveals the refusal of companies to recognise the significance of sacred Aboriginal sites.

Tinto destroyed several sacred 46,000-year-old rock shelters in the Juukan Gorge in Western Australia to gain \$135m of iron ore. This was done despite ppaNOW // OCCURRENT AFFAIR // proppaNOW // OCCURRENT

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# **Richard Bell**

In the exhibition:

Austika, 2018 synthetic polymer paint on canvas Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Embassy, 2013-ongoing installation; tent marquee and hand-painted signage Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Little fish are sweet, 2021 synthetic polymer paint on canvas, archival paper, paper bag, Ryan Presley's Blood Money banknotes Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2021.

Me, me dreaming, 2013 synthetic polymer paint on canvas Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Kessel Road Protest, 2022 acrylic on canvas Private Collection. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

### About the artist

Richard Bell was born in Charleville, Queensland and is a member of the Kamilaroi, Kooma, Jiman and Gurang Gurang communities. Bell grew out of a generation of Aboriginal activists and has remained committed to the politics of Aboriginal emancipation and self-determination. One of Australia's most significant artists, Bell's work explores the complex artistic and political problems of Western, colonial and Indigenous art production. In 2003 he was the recipient of the Telstra National Aboriginal Art Award, establishing him as an important Australian artistic figure. Bell is represented in most major National and State collections and has exhibited in numerous solo exhibitions at major institutions in Australia and America.

### Must read

 Richard Bell, "Bell's Theorem: ABORIGINAL ART – It's a white thing!" provides a great background of Richard's practice and the Australian art industry: http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/great/art/bell.html

### Learn more

- Interview: My Art is an Act of Protest' | Tate: <u>https://www.youtube.com/</u> watch?v=LDXksMvx2gk
- MCA Australia on Richard Bell <a href="https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/">https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/</a> artists/richard-bell/

### Artwork focus - Little fish are sweet, 2021

This work depicts the Premier of Queensland from 1968-1987, Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen. Nicknamed the 'Hillbilly Dictator', Bjelke-Petersen and his state government were notorious for their unrelenting conservatism, institutional corruption, liberal use of police violence, and discrimination towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and LGBTQIA+ communities. Richard has appropriated a photograph showing Bjelke-Petersen holding a gun in 1986. He has also given the figure a red tie and shock of blonde hair that vaguely resembles former US president Donald Trump- perhaps he intended to draw similarities between the two political figures.

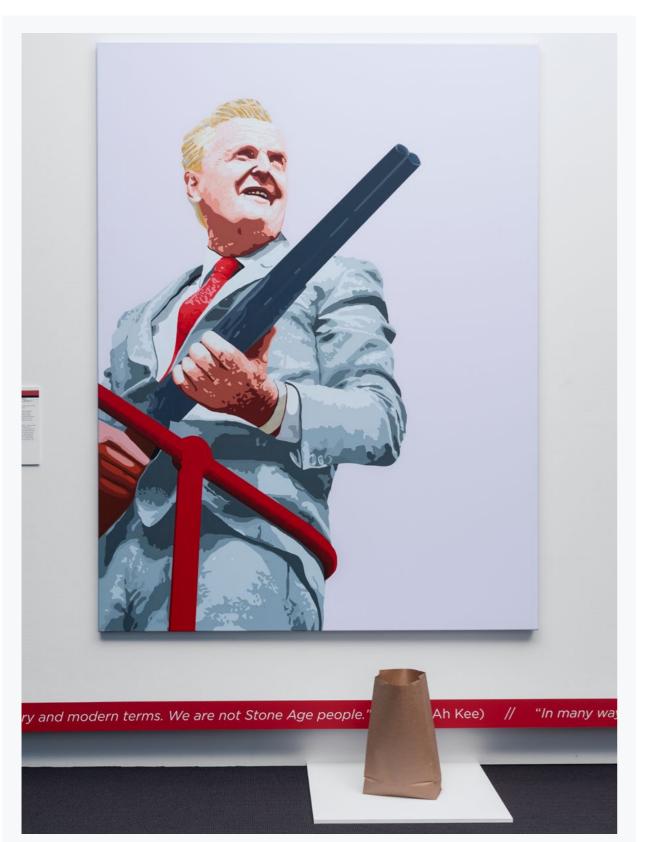
The title of the work, "Little fish are sweet," refers to a book by Brisbane-born writer Matthew Condon entitled Little Fish Are Sweet, which interrogates decades of crime and corruption in the Queensland Police Force while Joh Bjelke-Petersen was Premier.

The following stories detail the extent of Bjelke-Petersen's racism: • Wikipedia- Bjelke-Petersen on Aboriginal affairs: <u>https://en.wikipedia.org/</u> wiki/Joh Bjelke-Petersen#Aboriginal people Bjelke-Petersen tried to stop Aboriginal people from being screened for HIV: https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/sir-joh-bjelke-petersen-opposedhiv-screening-for-indigenous-australians/ldgzx9gh8 • Bjelke-Petersen gave a racist rant against the Labor party in 1984: https://

- racist-nr-rant-cabinet-papers-reveal-20150101-12gn1s.html

www.brisbanetimes.com.au/national/gueensland/joh-bjelkepetersen-made-

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Richard Bell, Little fish are sweet, 2021, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, archival paper, paper bag, Ryan Presley's Blood Money banknotes, canvas 200 x 150cm, installation total 251.0 x 146.0 x 56.0 cm. Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2021

### Artwork focus- Austika, 2018

This work plays on the words "Australia" and "swastika", indicating a latent legacy of racism prevalent in contemporary Australian culture. The term "austika" notably emerged in Australian slang in the aftermath of the 2005 Cronulla Riots a civil conflict occurring at the beachside suburb of Cronulla and later spreading to additional suburbs. The riots were the culmination of growing racist sentiments from a largely Anglo-Australian group towards Australians with a Middle Eastern/ West Asian background. Many Anglo-Australians involved in the violence wore Australian flags and Southern Cross tattoos- both, the latter in particular, have since become generally associated with racist and ultranationalist sentiments.

"Austika: A tattoo in the shape of the Southern Cross constellation. Mostly worn by young Australians as an ill directed show of patriotic nationalism. A merger of Australia and Swastika." From the Urban Dictionary

- About the Cronulla riots: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2005 Cronulla riots
- The term 'austika' might in part be inspired by filmmaker Warwick Thornton's remark to a journalist in 2010 that the Southern Cross has 06-07/we-dont-need-a-map-film-explores-southern-cross-use-andabuse/8594120
- Vice interviews people who have removed their Southern Cross tattoos southern-cross-tattoos-why

### Artwork focus - Me, me dreaming, 2013

In Me, me dreaming, Richard addresses how the art market reacted after Emily Kame Kngwarreye's passing, with art dealers focusing on money grabbing and finding a replacement artist instead of showing concern for Kngwarreye's family and community. It revealed the desire for the commercial gain of artworks and atmosphere of where it is sold in contrast to the meanings of Kngwarreye's works and their deep significance to dreaming. Me, me dreaming addresses a fixation on self in the West. Bell also points to the mass reproduction of prints of Kngwarreye's works.

• Director of Aboriginal art at Sotheby's, Tim Klingender, states that Emily Kame Kngwarreye was relentlessly pursued by carpetbaggers towards the end of her career: https://www.theage.com.au/national/aboriginal-worksand-artful-dodgers-20030920-gdwdga.html

become a racist symbol, like a swastika: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-

after 2005: https://www.vice.com/en/article/igx473/we-asked-people-with-



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# Megan Cope

In the exhibition:

Nyanba tahbiyilbanjara gnanany (He knew his saltwater country), 2019 lithograph on paper Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Arsenal, 2021 glow mineral and acrylic on black slate Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Bated Breath, 2021 chrome-plated ceramics on steel support, fishing line and mirror Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Deadwood, 2021 paperbark, tissue paper, bees wax, ink Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

### About the artist:

Megan Cope was born in Brisbane and is a Quandamooka (North Stradbroke Island in South East Queensland) artist. Her site-specific sculptural installations, video work and paintings investigate issues relating to identity, the environment and mapping practices. Cope's work often resists prescribed notions of Aboriginality and examines psychogeographies that challenge the grand narrative of 'Australia' and our sense of time and ownership in a settler colonial state. These explorations result in various material outcomes.

### Learn more

- Artist Website: <u>https://www.megancope.com.au/</u>
- Watch: Megan discuss her childhood and art practice: https://www.youtube. com/watch?v=wBBaHvrA8eg
- Interview discussing Megan's connection to Minjerribah (Stradbroke Island): https://vimeo.com/240927840
- Interview with NAVA: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KzgDgezInRk
- Read profile article on Megan Cope: <u>https://www.theguardian.com/</u> artanddesign/2022/jun/19/death-is-birth-megan-cope-on-creating-art-outof-catastrophe

### Artwork focus - Arsenal, 2021

Arsenal is a set of five text-based works with words written in the Warner Bros Loony Tunes font: Dime a Dolezal (Dime a Dozen), Murdocracy (Autocracy), Influenzer (Influencer), Net Zero, trENDING.

The fluorescent green words glowing upon black slate within a darkened room causes an illusioned afterimage on the retina, as if they are almost dangerously radioactive in nature. Their materiality correlates with the common saying and takes a cue from the reality that "words are weapons" and language is powerful.

In the broader sense, this work comments on the most important topics of our time: identity politics; climate change; and how the media manipulates, fatigues and creates derogatory language used in association with Aboriginal people, the environment and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. This is particularly so in the Murdocracy (referencing Rupert Murdoch) that dominates news-reporting platforms. Sadly, such language is reiterated by peers within social media spaces and has become a common form of online violence and populism, thus reducing meaningful relationships and a focus on the topics and tasks at hand for our futures.

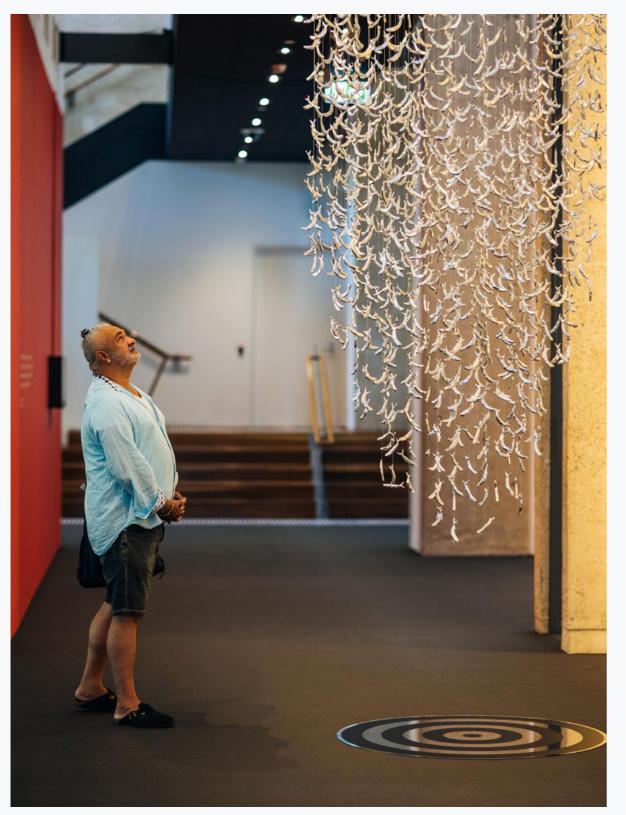
### Artwork focus - Bated Breath, 2021

Megan Cope presents *Bated Breath* as a portrait of the present-day internet. The title is a play on words, a homonym of 'bated breath'—a phrase first mentioned in Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice-which infers to holding one's breath in suspense, anxiety or fear. Using bait fish as a metaphor, Cope integrates her connection to Quandamooka waters and recurring themes involving sea management.

As an impressive installation of 1,300 shiny ceramic fish spiralling downward towards a mirrored reflection, the work presents a grand spectacle that draws parallels to the gleaming allure of mass participation in social media streams. In reality, however, the internet can be as harmful as it is helpful. Bated Breath largely comments on the psychology of the internet, including social media, racist online journalism, fake news and clickbait.

Often baited with racism, social media spaces have become a trap and a divisive tool that sanctions a common form of lateral violence within Aboriginal communities. The mirror symbolically refers to narcissism, involving selfcentred, arrogant thinking and behaviour lacking empathy. Caught in such a vortex encourages mob mentality and prohibits autonomy.

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Megan Cope, Bated Breath, 2021, chrome-plated ceramics on steel support, fishing line and mirror, total approx. 3m high; mirror 120cm diameter. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane. Photo by Simon Woods.

# Jennifer Herd

### In the exhibition:

In defence, 2021 vinyl Courtesy of the artist and FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane

In Defence I, II, III, 2017 pinholes in Arches paper Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2021.

Resist, Rebel, Reclaim, 2021 screen print on paper Courtesy of the artist and Fireworks Gallery, Brisbane

Mother's Country, 2022 archival ink on canvas with bullet casings Courtesy of the artist and FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane

Still War, 2021 digital print on 320gsm Sihl paper, pinholes Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2021.

Target, 2008 acrylic on canvas Courtesy of the artist and FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane

### About the artist

Jennifer Herd is from Eumundi, Queensland. Herd is a Mbarbarrum woman whose family roots lie in far North Queensland. Herd draws on her past experiences and knowledge in costume design, often incorporating stitching and pin holes in her installations, painting, drawing and sculptural works. She creates shield designs as a way of connecting to her heritage and culture. Herd's shield designs are presented as a reminder of speaking truth to power, frontier resistance and the aftermath of cultural identity stripped bare.



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### Learn more

- FireWorks Gallery Website Artist Page: <u>https://fireworksgallery.com.au/</u> artist/jennifer-herd
- Must Watch: This Portrait of an Artist talk offers a unique insight into the life and work of Aboriginal artist Jennifer Herd: https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=gU16My4vTeQ
- Read about Jennifer Herd's installation at UQ Art Museum of In Defence, 2021, https://art-museum.ug.edu.au/article/2021/09/jennifer-herd-defence

### Artwork focus - In Defence I, II, III, 2017

Jennifer Herd draws on her past experiences and knowledge in costume design, often incorporating stitching and pin holes in her installations, painting, drawing and sculptural works. In these works, Jennifer creates a minimalist style, often utilising the shield to reference her Aboriginal ancestry of Northern Queensland and to symbolise strength and defence. During her research, she noted words from early North Queensland explorer Christopher Palmerston (1850-1897), "Their shields may answer very well for the purposes of their wars, but my rifle drilled through these as if they were sheets of paper."

Jennifer says of these works:

"This particular series of works pays tribute to the Bama warriors of the North Queensland rainforests in the Atherton Tableland region. These warriors fought valiantly over many generations to defend their ancestral lands from frontier expansion. These shields were not only objects of defence but also symbols of identity and conveyors of cultural knowledge and place."

### Artwork focus - Resist, Rebel, Reclaim, 2021

The geometrical designs in the work reference the traditional painted shields unique to the region. These shields were not only objects of defence but also symbols of identity and conveyors of cultural knowledge and place. Shields were used by Aboriginal people in Far North Queensland to ward off the intruder, enemies and invaders of the land. Shields were used as armour, weapons, cover and to safeguard in battle.

- Explanation of the role of North Queensland shields during the invasion of European colonists on Aboriginal Peoples' lands: https://www.nma.gov. au/learn/encounters-education/community-stories/cairns
- Watch SBS series on the frontier wars: https://www.sbs.com.au/ ondemand/tv-series/the-australian-wars



Jennifer Herd, Resist, Rebel, Reclaim, 2021, screen print on paper, Courtesy of the artist and Fireworks Gallery, Brisbane. image previous page: Jennifer Herd In defence I (detail) 2017, pinholes in Arches paper, 94 x 73.5 cm each. Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2021. Photo by Simon Woods.

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# **Gordon Hookey**

In the exhibition

Austika / Austrailya, 2020 canvas, synthetic polymer paint, wood dowels, traffic cones, castors Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2021

Solidarity / You Are Here, 2021 canvas, synthetic polymer paint, metal eyelets, on wood dowels, traffic cones and castors Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2021

WAM / Ethics, 2021 canvas, synthetic polymer paint, wood dowels, traffic cones, castors Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2021

Dundalli Banner, 2021 canvas, synthetic polymer paint, bamboo poles Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2021

Kangaroo Point, 2011-2012 oil on canvas Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2012

*Terraist Gloves,* 2008 mixed media Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2008

### About the artist

Gordon Hookey was born in Cloncurry, Queensland and belongs to the Waanyi/ Waanjiminjin peoples. One of Australia's most renowned contemporary Indigenous artists, Hookey's figurative paintings layer visual puns and linguistic wit to occupy a space where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures converge, in a style that is urgently political and often darkly humorous.

### Learn more

- Artist page: <a href="https://milanigallery.com.au/artists/gordon-hookey/">https://milanigallery.com.au/artists/gordon-hookey/</a>
- Read: <u>https://artistprofile.com.au/gordon-hookey/</u>



Installation view at UQ Art Museum, 2021 featuring Gordon Hookey, *Solidarity/You Are Here*, 2021; WAM / *Ethics*, 2021; and *Austika / Austrailya*, 2020. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane. Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2021.

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### Artwork Focus - Terraist Gloves, 2008

Gordon has painted these boxing gloves with the colours of the Aboriginal flag and the word 'terraist', which fuses together the words 'terrorist' and 'terra nullius'. The 'terraist' occupies a core position in Gordon's practice, often manifesting as a kangaroo intent on protecting Aboriginal land and culture. The gloves further invoke the image of the 'boxing kangaroo', a popular Australian mascot reclaimed by Hookey as a symbol of Aboriginal empowerment and sovereignty. This work bristles with the desire to fight both racism and the establishment that supports it.

"It's the whole concept of getting even with the boss, or to get back at the source of your pain by punching it."

### Gordon speaking about his work and on the Terrarist Gloves: https://vimeo. com/256883393

### **Artwork focus - Banners**

All of the banners in OCCURRENT AFFAIR were used in Invasion Day protests in Meanjin (Brisbane). The two-sided painted banners are stretched between two tall poles that sit atop witches hats on castors. They have small cuts throughout them, for practicality, so they don't catch the wind while being used in marching, and also so that both sides can be viewed.

Hookey's art delivers scathing critiques of the Australian political climate. His work harnesses powerful symbols, biting language, vibrant colours intimidating comic-like characters that challenge Australian racism and the myth of 'terra nullius'. Central to his work is a focus on Indigenous sovereignty against colonial oppression, which he equates with terrorism. Australia's political leaders and representatives are often victims of his wit.

- Watch an interview in his studio spot the artworks in OCCURRENT AFFAIR!: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjWT\_glgLgY
- Interview with NAVA: https://vimeo.com/243513934
- Interview with The James C Sourris AM Collection: https://www.youtube. com/watch?v=1lreEPdwesA

### Artwork focus - Dundalli Banner, 2021

Dundalli (1820 – 1855) was an Aboriginal lawman who featured prominently in accounts of conflict between European settlers and Aboriginal people in the area of Brisbane and South East Queensland. Traditionally described as a murderer, savage and terrorist, he is now thought to have been a guerrilla leader who coordinated a decade-long resistance against white colonisation in the area. He was publicly hanged in Brisbane in 1855.

Hookey portrays Dundalli as a superhero holding spears in his hands. At the ends of the spears are nuclear warheads, referencing Maralinga, the site where the British conducted nuclear tests on Aboriginal lands, often without removing the Aboriginal people. On the reverse, a purposeful intervention of a hand-written scroll, resembling white colonial documents, exposes ongoing white fragility and refers to the discomfort and defensiveness that mainstream Australians feel when they are confronted by information about racial inequality and injustice.

"He [Dundalli] was a powerful resistance fighter, and when Queensland was being colonized he kept the colonizers at bay for something like ten to fifteen years. They were basically scared of him. To symbolize that they were scared, I got him standing there, almost like a superhero, with spears in his hands. At the ends of the spears are nuclear war heads, because if humans are scared of anything, it would be nuclear war. At the same time however, this image of Dundalli holding the spears references Maralinga, the site where the British conducted nuclear tests on Aboriginal lands, often without removing the Aboriginal people."

### Gordon Hookey on the significance of Dundalli

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## Laurie Nilsen

### In the exhibition:

In the exhibition: Dollar Dilemma (Flagless), 2020 Dollar Dilemma (\$2), 2020 Dollar Dilemma (Flag), 2020 Dollar Dilemma (\$1), 2020 Dollar Dilemma (Sold), 2020 digital colour print on paper (facsimile) Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2020

Dollar Dilemma Flag, 2020 digital print on textile Courtesy of the artist, The Estate of Laurie Nilsen, and FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane.

Signage VI, 2012 Hannemuhle 308gsm 100% cotton photo rag paper Courtesy of the artist, The Estate of Laurie Nilsen, and FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane.

Signage I, 2012 Hannemuhle 308gsm 100% cotton photo rag paper Courtesy of the artist, The Estate of Laurie Nilsen, and FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane.

Signage II, 2012 Hannemuhle 308gsm 100% cotton photo rag paper Courtesy of the artist. The Estate of Laurie Nilsen, and FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane

Spreading the word, 2013 metal dingo traps, paint, MDF Courtesy of the artist. The Estate of Laurie Nilsen, Joanna Baillieu and FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane

Laurie Nilsen & Vernon Ah Kee, Conversations I, II, III, 2022 barbed wire, aluminum, bronze and patina Courtesy of the artists, The Estate of Laurie Nilsen, FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

### About the Artist

Laurie Nilsen was born in Mandandanji country, also known as Roma, Queensland. Nilsen (1953-2020) was an artist who worked with drawing, painting and mixed media, and was best known for his barbed wire emu sculptures. Nilsen moved to Brisbane as a teenager in the late 1960s to become a jockey, although he soon found a love for art. In 1988, Nilsen became one of the first 'urban' Aboriginal artists to have work acquired by the National Gallery of Australia. He was been considered a paternal figure in the Brisbane Aboriginal art scene, and was a founding member of both Campfire Group and proppaNOW.

### Learn more

- Engaging summation of Laurie's 40-year-long art practice: <u>http://www.</u> fireworksgallery.com.au/sites/default/files/Laurie%20Nilsen Art%20 practice%20over%2040%20years February%202020.pdf
- Gallery artist page: https://fireworksgallery.com.au/artist/laurie-nilsen
- Must watch interview with Laurie Nilsen: https://vimeo.com/132379036

### Artwork focus - Dollar Dilemma Flag, 2020



Laurie Nilsen, Dollar Dilemma Flag, 2020, digital print on textile, Courtesy of the artist, The Estate of Laurie Nilsen, and FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane.

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Dollar Dilemma Flag responds to the recent debate over the copyright status of the Aboriginal flag, which was designed in 1971 by Harold Thomas (b. 1947), an artist and activist from the Luritja people of Central Australia. Thomas originally created the flag for the 1970s land rights movement, in which Aboriginal people - only granted Australian citizenship in 1976 - began demanding that the government recognise their legal right to own and govern their country, which they argued the government had stolen. Since then, the flag has become a symbol of Aboriginal strength and sovereignty: in 1995 the Australian government recognised it as a 'Flag of Australia'.

In 2018, Thomas granted exclusive copyright to the company WAM Clothing, which guickly issued cease and desist warnings to two Aboriginal businesses and the Australian Football League (AFL) for printing the flag on their clothing. The act sparked heated debate in Aboriginal communities, with many claiming that this non-Indigenous company had no right to have license of such an important symbol of communal Aboriginal sovereignty.

Nilsen uses the iconography of Australian currency to highlight the flag's uneasy dual status as both a commercial product and symbol of cultural sovereignty. On a broader scale, the series critiques the appropriation and commercialisation of Aboriginal art and culture by non-Aboriginal businesses when it is deemed profitable.

In January 2022, the Commonwealth of Australia acquired the copyright of the Aboriginal flag, allowing it to be reproduced freely by the public, except on flags and pennants, banners and buntings, where Carroll & Richardson-Flagworld Pty Ltd remains the exclusive licenced manufacturer and provider.

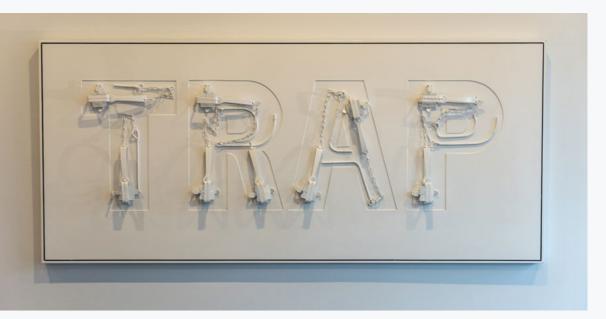
- Watch FireWorks Gallery Director Michael Eather discusses this work: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvK20c3fZfA&t=38s
- Read a timeline of the debate over the Aboriginal flag: <u>https://www.</u> clothingthegaps.com.au/pages/aboriginal-flag-timeline
- Read about the governments purchase of the copyright: https://www. theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/jan/24/australian-government-buyscopyright-to-aboriginal-flag-in-20m-deal

### Artwork focus - Spreading the word, 2013

Nilsen has painted several steel jawed "Henry Lane" rabbit traps (in use in Australia from 1880-1980) in white paint and placed them behind translucent letters spelling the word "TRAP". Encased in these letters, the traps resemble bones seen in an X-ray. The term spreading the word discusses themes of introduced species, religious doctrines and the spread of ideas through communities. This work becomes a metaphor for Nilsen's personal feelings of entrapment at both a physical, mental and spiritual level.

In the *Putsch* exhibition catalogue Laurie states that:

"The steel-jawed trap is a device used to catch and kill rabbits and iterates a desire to eradicate these vermin in order to re-establish the indigenous mammalian populations from that area, who sometimes also fall victim to these controls. The traps also note the representation of Aboriginal people and culture in the media. The media constantly bait participants on both sides of the 'culture wars' on issues of identity and culture. Commentators such as Andrew Bolt are happy to take the bait, whilst others, like Pauline Hanson, can themselves be trapped. Aboriginal people must be wary not to fall victim into these elaborately baited traps, observing the destructive devices from a safe distance."



Laurie Nilsen, Spreading the word, 2013, metal dingo traps, paint, MDF, Courtesy of the artist, The Estate of Laurie Nilsen, Joanna Baillieu and FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane.

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