

SYDNEY MORNING HERALD COLUMN

## proppaNOW & Tennant Creek Brio

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Fabian Brown and Rupert Betheras, 'The Headless Horseman'

With the greatest Aboriginal art it's often the skill and refinement that's impressive. One thinks of the hypnotic rhythms of Western Desert painting, the infinite patience with which John Mawurndjul applies thin lines of ochre to a piece of bark. There are the stories that hark back to a time of spirits and mythical beings, and a deep relationship with country that is so fundamental one can't imagine the artists living and working anywhere else.

I'm not sure any of this applies to the two exhibitions I'm discussing this week. The proppaNOW collective showing at the National Art School Gallery has its own distinctive skill set, while Tennant Creek Brio at Delmar Gallery, is connected to place in a very different manner to artists in other communities.



Laurie Nilsen, 'Dollar Dilemma Flag', (2020)

To begin with proppaNOW, this is an association of urban Indigenous artists that originated in Brisbane. The most prominent is Richard Bell, but his companions: Tony Albert, Vernon Ah Kee, Megan Cope, Gordon Hookey, Jennifer Herd, and the late Laurie Nilsen, have all had works exhibited and collected by the art museums.

One might think this constitutes success but the rhetoric in the catalogue paints a contrary picture. The artists proclaim their own importance and complain about the terrible neglect they have suffered, which may be attributed to racism, or even capitalism.

They assume this neglect is due to their own radicality, the fact that they are too outspoken, too hot to handle. Having taken on the heroic but burdensome task of speaking on behalf of all Indigenous people, they still insist on their own exceptionalism. Intoxicated by the myth of themselves, they feel mildly outraged that proppaNOW works are not prominently displayed in all Australian art institutions.

If this sounds like a caricature, I urge you to read the catalogue for this touring exhibition, initiated by the University of Queensland Art Museum in 2021. The high and mighty stance is nothing new, as I once heard Vernon Ah Kee deliver a speech on a forum in Cairns that was so militant it would have made Eldridge Cleaver blush. On that day he encountered opposition from the floor in the form of an elderly Aboriginal man who suggested, in not so many words, that the honourable speaker didn't know what he was talking about. Ah Kee's response was to accuse his critic of being a tool of the white power structure. The reply to that was unprintable.

I mention this anecdote because it's reflected in the belligerent and self-regarding statements in the catalogue, and in the nature of much of the work, which takes a consistently political stance. The exhibition title, *OCCURRENT AFFAIR*, puns on the sensationalism of the mainstream media, implying that the real scandal lies in the ongoing maltreatment of Aboriginal people.



Vernon Ah Kee, 'Scratch the Surface' (2019)

Works address this theme in ways that may be confrontational, or as oblique as Megan Cope's *Bated Breath* (2021), an installation in which more than a thousand tiny ceramic fish are displayed in a downward death spiral. It seems, at first, a comment on the way we mismanage the natural environment, but for Cope it's also a metaphor for the Internet, which captures multitudes in its deceitful meshes.

There's a gulf between this piece and Gordon Hookey's large painted banners, with their hectoring messages and in-yer-face imagery. I used to enjoy Hookey's spiky vulgarity, but the novelty tends to wear off as the humour grows increasingly crude and one-dimensional. Many of his works are vulgar in the worst sense, no

longer irreverent, but dumb and ugly. The sight of Scott Morrison may be offensive to many people, but it's not exactly a shaft of Wildean wit to portray him as a feral pig in a Hawaiian shirt in *Solidarity/You Are Here* (2020).

Most of the works in this show might be described as late-blooming examples of Pop or Conceptual art, with a large helping of politics and a rigorous sense of design. Jennifer Herd uses geometrical motifs to good effect, in poster-like prints that combine schematic shields with key words, in *Resist, Rebel, Reclaim* (2021).

Laurie Nilsen was probably the most hands-on maker in the group, with a very clear vision of what he wanted to say. His white-on-white, *Spreading the word* (2013), which spells out "trap", with real traps enclosed within each letter, is a warning about being co-opted into a dominant discourse. Nilsen's sculpted emu heads and barbed wire conjure an environment in which Indigenous inhabitants are confronted by hostile, artificial barriers.

Richard Bell, Tony Albert and Vernon Ah Kee, are the best-known members of proppaNOW, each of them working across a wide range of media, from film and photography to painting, graphic art, sculpture and assemblage. There's a tremendous slickness about their output, from Ah Kee's *Scratch the surface* (2019/21), with its suspended masks resembling Ned Kelly helmets, but also the riot shields held by police, perhaps with a distant echo of Aboriginal shields; to Albert's *Brothers* photos of 2013, in which we see young Aboriginal men with targets painted in their chests, as a comment on police prejudice and priorities,



Megan Cope, 'Bated Breath' (detail) (2021)



Gordon Hookey, 'Terraist Gloves' (2008)



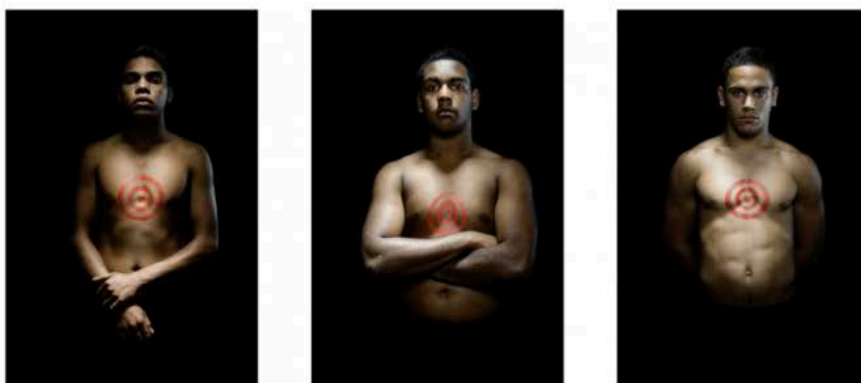


Anybody remember Joh? Richard Bell,  
'Little fish are sweet' (2021)

Bell is the senior member of the group, whose simplified paintings of protests, whose slogans and provocations, have won him an exalted status in the Australian art world. Like Andy Warhol, he has no qualms about the flat 'manufactured' nature of his imagery. Unlike Andy, he is happy to portray himself as "an activist masquerading as an artist." A master at biting the hand that feeds, the poverty and discrimination Bell experienced in his early years are now used as fuel for a relentless – and utterly theatrical – assault on white middle-class values.

After absorbing all the indignation and political grandstanding this show has to offer, it's amusing to read Hookey's complaint that the group has hardly had a chance to meet over the past five years because "these guys are too busy travelling the world and living elsewhere." Presumably he means Bell, Albert and Ah Kee, who have been included in numerous overseas exhibitions. This points at once to the difference between the urban and community versions of Aboriginal art, as the former are cosmopolitans whose work is not vitally embedded in a sense of place. It also suggests, in relation to all the griping in

the catalogue, that they doth protest too much. Few Australian artists of any persuasion have enjoyed as much attention from local institutions or had so many opportunities to show internationally. There's something not exactly proper about what we're hearing from proppaNOW.



Tony Albert, 'Brother' series, l-r. 'Our Past'. 'Our Present', 'Our Future', (2013)

If the proppaNOW show is smooth and professional, the work of the group called Tennant Creek Brio is extraordinarily raw. It features one white artist, Rupert Betheras, who previously played in the AFL for Collingwood, and six Indigenous artists – Lindsay Nelson Jakamarra, Fabian Brown Japaljarri, Clifford Thompson Japaljarri, Joseph Williams Jungurrayi and Marcus Camphoo Kemarre 'Double O'. This must be one of the wildest exhibitions ever to be featured at Delmar Gallery, in the grounds of Trinity Grammar School.

The selection, put together by Dallas Gold of RAFT in Alice Springs, is not comparable to the two Brio exhibitions I saw last year in Darwin. There are fewer large-scale paintings, and much of the smaller work has a scrappy, perfunctory feeling.

The Brio approach is all about energy, spontaneity, and a free flow of imagination. It's inevitably a hit or miss affair, with some works succeeding and others missing by a long way. One of the surprising hits is an untitled picture by Clifford Thompson that consists of nothing but hand-painted red and white horizontal stripes. It's rough and ragged, but it compells attention. A more obvious highlight is *The Headless Horseman* by Fabian Brown & Rupert Betheras, which was shown last year in Darwin. There's never been anything in Indigenous art that resembles this expressionistic canvas, with its white, emblematic horse's head, and a hammer that floats in the air against a backdrop of black and rusty red.



Clifford Thompson, 'Untitled'

The impurity of the work is one of its talking points, because Brio is a rare instance of collaboration between black and white artists, with both taking something from the other. The group began with therapeutic ambitions, aiming to restore the spirits and self-confidence of people who were doubly dispossessed – first by the mining industry, then by the squalor of Tennant Creek, a town currently striving to raise itself from the ruins and join the tourist industry.

In its unedited chaos, its rejection of obvious political messages and conceptual conceits, Brio is the very antithesis of proppaNOW. It makes a powerful point about life in a small outback community marked by the legacies of colonial occupation and the self-destructive tendencies of the present. There's no denying that the proppaNOW crowd are the more accomplished artists, but there's a degree of gritty reality in the Brio works that can't be matched by those globe-trotting urban sophisticates who would bring capitalism to its knees by absorbing all that it has to offer.

#### **proppaNOW: OCCURRENT AFFAIR**

**National Art School Gallery, 24 June – 5 August, 2023**

#### **Control Point: Tennant Creek Brio**

**Delmar Gallery, 24 June – 30 July, 2023**

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