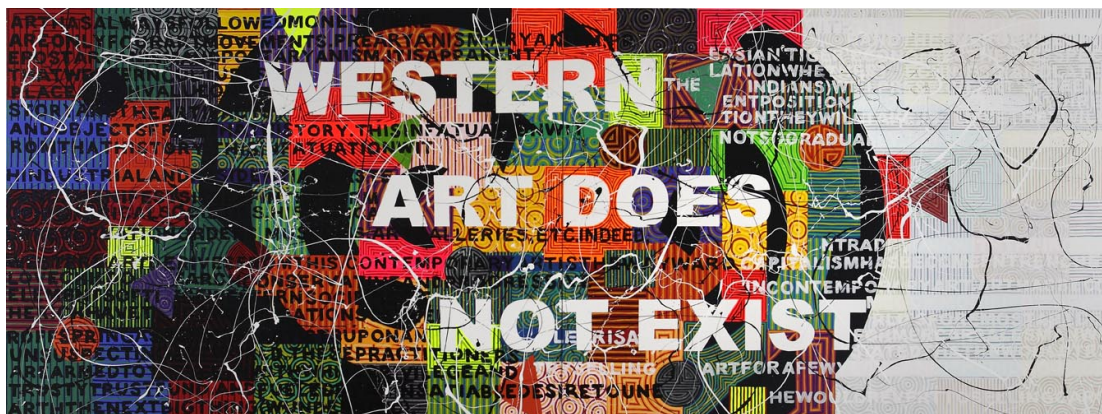


AN INTERVIEW WITH ARTIST RICHARD BELL

Acting Education Program Manager Minaxi May
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Richard Bell *Prelude to a Trial (Bell's Theorem)* 2011, 182 x 480cm

Describe your approach to art making. Do you begin with an idea, a concept, an issue, or do you start by exploring materials and/or processes?

I begin with all of the above – idea, concept, issue, material and/or processes. For example, materially, I was exploring lines in my paintings, specifically the gap between the lines. It appeared that the lines worked best just slightly touching. Looked fantastic, so I used it.

On the other hand, sometimes I go into my studio with an idea or concept. This is my most used approach. I imagine a rough visualization of what I want to do and then work directly onto the canvas.

I tend to use a code within my paintings. For example, black and white is painted like a binary¹. So I am setting up sequences. For example one black, one white; two black, two white; then a space... I also use bright watercolour washes often.

I have refined my process. Ten to fifteen years ago, to place the text on the paintings I used to grid up the canvas and draw the text. Now I use a projector, making the process easier and more efficient.

Did you undertake your usual process in making work for this exhibition? How does this work sit within your more broad 'body of work'?

Yes, definitely, I used my usual process. Except the larger work *Peace heals, war kills...*, entailed a slightly different process, as it was a collaboration with Emory Douglas.

In 1968 I wanted to do something with images. I met Emory, who was the Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party². He collaborated with me on a big mural. We had a mural project in Brisbane and used both images that are reproduced in this exhibition, *A white hero for a black Australia* 2011 and *Foley vs The Springboks (Lone protestor)* 2012. Emory drew the images, then I photocopied them onto a transparency and projected the images. I worked the images up from just being flat images to being more rewarding for the viewer.

The pieces in this show are great examples of all of my work. They are pretty good choices. All of these works have been shown at least once.

¹ <http://www.mathsisfun.com/binary-number-system.html>

² <http://www.blackpanther.org/legacynew.htm>



Richard Bell *A White Hero For A Black Australia* 2011, 180.5 x 250cm

How do you classify your work?

Really, really good in a Zoolander³ kind of way. Really, really good-looking paintings.

My work is classified as painting and installation – the tent, video and signs. The audience fulfills and completes the installation.

How do the formal, stylistic and technical elements contribute to the function or meaning/s in your work?

I have no idea. Never learnt about that shit sort of 'stuff'.

Formalistically I use colour, shape, pattern, composition and repetition. I use whatever serves the purpose in helping to deal with tough issues. Also, so that the themes and work are approachable to the viewer, I make the paintings optimistic, inviting looking, to entice the viewer closer to look at the work.

The paintings are attention seekers like me. Art should reflect the personality of the artist.

What are the three art elements & design principles that you feel you have used most prominently in relation to your work for this exhibition.

Line – in my paintings

Colour – 3 colour combinations as they attract the eyes. Placing words under or over e.g. white over black. The black recedes.

Light – Can't see some of the 'stuff' in the paintings unless you move into the light. There is the presence of iridescent colour.

What effect/s would you like this exhibition to have on viewers? Do you think responses will vary depending on his/her social and cultural backgrounds? Do you imagine your work will be challenging to any particular viewers?

I'd like them to engage with the questions and assertions posed.

Yes, responses will differ for sure. It's a given. We all see things differently, even if from the same cultural background. No two people see things the same.

My work will probably challenge people with closed minds. Each one of the works is very confronting. There are very cringe-worthy moments even for me. The videos for example, I even find them difficult to watch. Also, it's hard to watch myself. So I started to get actors.

How do you envisage your work within the context of contemporary arts in Australia, and/or in the world? Would you call your work (or elements of it) postmodern? NB the way that the secondary school art curriculum defines postmodern is as having one or more of the following characteristics: "irony, paradox, parody, pastiche, appropriation, and intertextuality."

My art sits at or near the top of Australia and world art. No, seriously, I don't see myself as part of Western art. Just how my work fits into the West is not my problem. I just do what I do. It's up to the style masters – the collectors, curators, dealers, they choose the place for your work in the art world. I'm more interested in igniting interesting conversations between artists like the Dadaists⁴, Surrealists⁵, and Cubists⁶. They ran the art world. They were artists in discussion – discussing about the art they were making.

No, I would not call my work postmodern. I've moved past that nonsense. I've moved past postmodernism. I was always interested in the dynamics and discussions between artists and about what is happening now. Sure we were all informed by postmodernism theory but I just didn't buy into it. There is always a new theory every three to four decades. That is the cyclical nature of what is popular, from model making to photography to digital art.

³ <http://www.allmovie.com/movie/v252771>

⁴ http://www.moma.org/collection/details.php?theme_id=10455
⁵ http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/surr/hd_surr.htm
⁶ <http://www.quqgenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/movements/195210/description>

But yes, I guess I do I have elements of postmodernism in my work, but not deliberately so.

Can you name any artists or other practitioners who have influenced your practice and describe how these influences have impacted on your work?

Trevor Nickolls⁷: He's a guy from South Australia, who did some of the first manifestations of urban [Aboriginal] contemporary art.

Andy Warhol⁸: for how he made fun of things.

Francisco Goya⁹ and Diego Velazquez¹⁰: they painted ordinary people and that was revolutionary in their day.

How do you define innovation (originality/newness), and what is innovative about your artwork and/or your practice?

I am innovative due to the fact that I describe myself as an activist masquerading as an artist. As far as marketing goes that puts me in a group of one. I'm there by myself.

I'm also innovative because of the fact that I make films, paint and do performance. That is pretty unique. Also, I have my own television program, Colour Theory¹¹ on NITV.

Questions for students

1. Discuss Bell's use of line, colour and light in his paintings.
2. Bell cites artists such as Andy Warhol as influential. What are some aspects of Warhol (or other Pop artists) that you can describe in Bell's work?
3. Originally Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan, later Andy Warhol stated, "Art is what you can get away with." Discuss this statement in regards to Bell's pieces. Does he have elements of disregard for convention in his art?

4. Contrast Bell's work with Trevor Nickolls. They both share some aspects of traditional aboriginal painting motifs with 'Western' styles and a large scale. How do they do this?



Trevor Nickolls *Rover Driving* 2010, 61.5 x 81.5cm

5. Further research the artists that Bell has cited as influential.
6. In regards to the tent work Bell states: I also wanted to quote Arthur Danto, the American art critic. He said, in his book *What Art Is* [2013], that art was 'the embodiment of an idea' defined not by how it looked but by what it had to say. *Art Monthly Australia*¹²

Discuss the above statement.

7. In the video *Scratch an Aussie* (2008), Bell 'plays a black psychoanalyst probing the mental processes of white racists'.¹³ What is Bell asking/stating? Why is the artist placing himself in the artwork? Does this add or take away from the issues he's highlighting?
8. Bell has created *The Peking Order* in the style of Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein's¹⁴ use of Ben Day dots and cartoon-like imagery. Compare and contrast the paintings visually and conceptually. Why would Bell create a pastiche (imitation) of Lichtenstein's work *Shipboard Girl*?

⁷ <http://www.aiarts.com.au/trevor-nickolls.html>

⁸ <http://www.warholfoundation.org/legacy/biography.html>

⁹ <http://www.franciscogoya.net/>

¹⁰ <http://www.diegovelazquez.org/>

¹¹ <http://www.nitv.org.au/tx-program.cfm?pid=i529CC90-9C5C-F7FA-BCEC7CC04C:A486F>

¹² *Insurgence at the museum of democracy: An interview: Adam Geczy, Megan Cope, Richard Bell, Jenny Mcfarlane & Tony Albert*, 13-15, *Art Monthly Australia* #266 summer 2013/14

¹³ Harvey, Michael 2010 *Location One*, *Art in America*, 2/23/10

¹⁴ <http://www.lichtensteinfoundation.org/frames.htm>



Richard Bell *The Pecking Order* 2007, 15 x 15cm



Roy Lichtenstein *Shipboard Girl* 1965, 68.6 x 50.8cm

Activities for students

1. Make an installation from fabric and billboards that references a significant event personally or in current affairs. Pay attention to Bell's *Tent Embassy* work. Older students could also look at artist Tracey Emin's work *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995* (1995), also known as "The Tent". (For Secondary/Tertiary only).



Richard Bell *Tent Embassy* 2013, 320 x 500 x 600cm



Tracey Emin *Everyone I have Ever Slept With 1963–1995*, 1995, 122 x 245 x 14cm

2. Experiment with making a controversial video – in creating this consider politics, race relations or another important issue. You could act as a well-known figure like the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud whom Bell has portrayed.
3. Experiment with painting – specifically make four paintings: 1 that explores the rhythms created by repetitive line; 2 iridescent colour and/or almost white on white; 3 three colour usage and 4 inciting text. Do one large final painting by bringing all the elements together.
4. Find a picture from a magazine, newspaper or the Internet that documents a significant and controversial event in history. Photocopy the image, outline and copy onto a transparency. Project the image onto a wall, canvas or paper. Repaint this image considering Pop elements, bold colours and your own style/techniques. Consider the composition and any words that are included in the image. Think about what this new artwork is about? How does it relate to the original image?