

Rockhampton
Museum of Art

Educator notes

Richard Bell: Bell's Theorem

Educator notes for *Richard Bell: Bell's Theorem*

Rockhampton Museum of Art | 18 November 2023 – 18 February 2024

Co-curated by Jonathan McBurnie and Emily Wakeling

This resource shares information about Richard Bell and his solo exhibition at Rockhampton Museum of Art, [Richard Bell: Bell's Theorem](#), which might be useful for educators and learners before, during or after visiting the exhibition.

The content of this resource is based on essays written by co-curators Jonathan McBurnie (RMOA Director) and Emily Wakeling (RMOA Curator). The exhibition catalogue containing these essays is available for purchase at RMOA.

Some of the hyperlinked external resources may contain strong language – educator discretion advised.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are advised that this resource and the external resources it references may contain images and voices of people who have died.



Richard Bell: *Bell's Theorem*, Exhibition title wall | Photo: Mad Dog Productions

Related Public Programs at RMOA

- [Footprints First Nations Tours for school and groups](#) (available Mondays/Thursdays, Weeks 2 – 4 of Term 1 2024)
- **Speakers in the Embassy series** (some talks will be available as video/audio recordings on the RMOA website soon)
- **Ningla A-Na documentary screenings** (access the video via [SBS On Demand](#))
- **You Can Go Now documentary screening** (access the video on [SBS On Demand](#))



Who is Richard Bell?

- Listen to “[Meet artist Richard Bell: Kids and family audio guide](#)” from Museum of Contemporary Art.
- Richard Bell was born in 1953 in Charleville, Bidjara Country. He is a Kamilaroi, Kooma, Jiman & Gurang Gurang man. See [AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia](#).
- Richard Bell is one of the most important artists working in Australia today. Most major galleries in Australia hold his work in their collections. He has exhibited all over the world.
- Richard describes himself as an activist first, and an artist second.

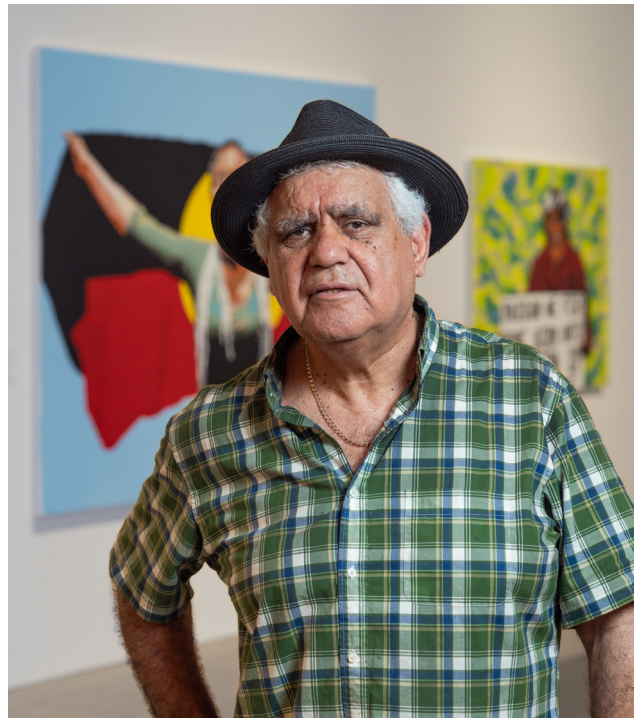


Photo of the artist Richard Bell | Photo: Nathan White

Why is this an important exhibition?

- *Bell's Theorem* is the largest exhibition Richard has ever had in his home state of Queensland. It features artworks made over the last forty years.
- Exhibitions and artworks can be used to help people have difficult and important conversations, share their experiences, and debate ideas.
- This exhibition creates a place where truth-telling about colonisation, racism and the experiences of Aboriginal people can happen.

What is Richard Bell's connection to Rockhampton, Darumbal Country?

- Richard went to Park Avenue State School for one year in Rockhampton, Darumbal Country.
- In 2018, Richard won the Gold Award, a painting prize held every two years at Rockhampton Museum of Art. The winner of the Gold Award receives \$50,000 and is invited to hold a solo exhibition at RMOA. Their winning artwork is added to the RMOA Collection. Richard's winning work is called *Untitled* and is on display in this exhibition, which is the outcome of winning the Gold Award.



What is Richard Bell's artwork about?

- Richard uses art as a form of protest, to share ideas and demand political change.
- Watch the video, "[My art is an act of protest](#)" by Tate Modern [**contains strong language**]
- Richard' paintings, videos, sculptures, installations, and writing speak about colonisation, racism, Aboriginal land rights, self-determination, and how the art world has treated Aboriginal artists unfairly.



Richard Bell: Bell's Theorem | Photo: Nathan White

How and why did Richard Bell become an artist?

- When Richard was 14, his family was living in Mitchell, Taungurung and Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Country. He remembers watching government officials bulldoze his family's home. His family moved around to many towns looking for work and housing. This experience had a huge impact on him.
- At 16, he left home. He got a job with the Aboriginal Legal Service in Redfern, Sydney, Gadigal Land, where he met Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people leading the fight for their rights and freedoms. He made important friendships and learned about political activism.



- Richard says he became an artist ‘by accident’. His first experience making art was working at his brother’s souvenir shop in Meanjin/Brisbane, Turrbul and Jagera Country. In Richard’s words, he painted ‘Aboriginal-looking’ designs onto boomerangs, spears and didgeridoos for tourists to buy.
- This led him to start thinking about what makes an Aboriginal artwork “authentic” (true, real). He noticed that Aboriginal artworks that looked “authentic” would sell for a much higher price on the art market than artworks by Aboriginal artists that were not created in a style that non-Indigenous people thought of as being “authentic”. Richard started to make artworks exploring how non-Indigenous peoples’ ideas about what can be called Aboriginal art, and who gets to be called an Aboriginal artist, have been unfair for Aboriginal people.

How does Richard Bell use art to share important messages?

- Richard uses lots of techniques to get his message across, including humour and wordplay. The words in his paintings are based on clear slogans used on protest signs to get a point across fast when fighting for rights and freedoms. Examples can be seen in the protest signs that are part of *Embassy*.
- Sometimes the written statements seem humorous on the surface. Richard uses humour to draw viewers into the work, so that they can reflect on how the ideas in the artwork relate to them.
- Richard has also written two important essays that look at how Western contemporary art (ideas about art that come from Europe) has had a negative impact on how people view artworks created by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists. One of these essays is called, ‘*Bell’s Theorem*’ (a theorem is an idea that can be proved to be true using evidence), which is where the name of this exhibition comes from.
- Appropriation is another technique that Richard uses to speak about how Aboriginal artists are treated unfairly by the art world. Appropriation means taking an idea or style that belongs to another artist then using it in your own artwork.
- In his artwork, Richard appropriates the painting styles of non-Indigenous artists who copied ideas and art styles belonging to First Nations peoples and used them in their own artworks without permission. Richard explains in his video works that the art world described non-Indigenous artists who copied the styles of First Nations people as “original” and “genius”, but ignored the genius of the First Nations artists and cultures who had those ideas first.



Who is Richard Bell's audience?

- It might seem like the words in Richard's paintings are speaking to non-Indigenous audiences, however, Richard says, "I make art for other Aboriginal people. That's my audience... I want it to be empowering to them" in the video, "[My art is an act of protest](#)" by Tate Modern [**contains strong language**].



Embassy | Photo: Nathan White

Why is there a tent in the centre of the exhibition?

- This is an artwork called [Embassy](#) that Richard based on the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, which started on 26 January in 1972 when four Aboriginal men set up a beach umbrella on the lawn outside Parliament House in Canberra, Ngambri, to protest the government's refusal to give First Nations people their land back.
- Learn more about the [Aboriginal Tent Embassy](#) at the National Museum of Australia website.
- Embassy has travelled around the world as a space for people to talk about land rights and other important issues. Watch a [video of Richard speaking about his artwork, Embassy](#).
- RMOA has organised a series of free events where First Nations people will give talks inside the Embassy about important issues affecting them. See our website to book tickets to "[Speakers in the Embassy](#)" talks. Some of the talks will be recorded and available to watch/listen on our website soon.



Why is this exhibition called ‘Bell’s Theorem’?

- ‘Bell’s Theorem’ is the name of two pieces of writing by Richard. A theorem is a “manifesto”— which means it’s his theory about how the world works.
- Read [Richard’s essay](#) online [**contains strong language**].
- Richard’s writing explains that Aboriginal artists are not paid or appreciated fairly, because colonisation treats Aboriginal people unfairly, even though this is Aboriginal land.
- He wrote ‘Bell’s Theorem’ as an early career artist because he was frustrated at the unfairness, and that frustration was something many other readers could relate to. The essay became very well known.
- Richard’s original essay notes are on display in this exhibition for the first time, just like an artwork, to show how important ‘Bell’s Theorem’ is now to Australian art history.



“Bell’s Theorem” | Photo: Nathan White

External Learning Resources

- Meet artist Richard Bell: Kids and family audio guide: <https://www.mca.com.au/resources/audio-guide-richard-bell-kids-and-family/>
- “My art is an act of protest”: <https://milanigallery.com.au/artists/richard-bell/works/5115-richard-bell-my-art-is-an-act-of-protest/> **[contains strong language]**
- <https://milanigallery.com.au/artists/richard-bell/>
- <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/calendar/embassy-talk/>
- <https://www.veralistcenter.org/network/proppanow>
- <https://www.veralistcenter.org/events/prize-ceremony-and-conversation-proppanow-with-wanda-nanibush>
- <https://www.aboriginalembassy.com.au/>
- <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/aboriginal-tent-embassy>
- <https://digital-classroom.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/aboriginal-tent-embassy-established>

The Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Sydney, Gadigal Land, has produced a number of learning resources and activities about Richard and his work:

- <https://www.mca.com.au/learn/learning-resources/richard-bell-you-can-go-now/embassy/>
- <https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/exhibitions/richard-bell-you-can-go-now/>
- <https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/artists/richard-bell/https://www.mca.com.au/resources/audio-guide-richard-bell-kids-and-family/>
- <https://www.mca.com.au/learn/learning-resources/richard-bell-you-can-go-now/>
- <https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/exhibitions/richard-bell-you-can-go-now/>
- <https://www.mca.com.au/resources/audio-guide-richard-bell-you-can-go-now/>
- <https://www.mca.com.au/stories-and-ideas/digital-aboriginal-embassy-sovereign-space/>
- <https://www.mca.com.au/resources/360-tour-richard-bell-you-can-go-now/>

Vocabulary List

- Abstract Expressionism
- Activist
- Appropriation
- Anthropology
- Authenticity
- Colonisation
- Colonialism
- Capitalism
- Classism
- Contemporary art
- Country
- Embassy
- Diplomat
- Installation
- Invasion
- Imperialism
- Land Rights
- Mabo Decision
- Modernist art
- Postmodernist art
- Postcolonialism
- Pop Art
- Protest
- Racism
- Satire
- Self-determination
- Solidarity
- Sovereignty
- Speaking truth to power
- Terra Nullius

