



# Richard Bell: Putting Art into Perspective

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*“It is a great source of discomfort to Aboriginal People that Aboriginal Art is not controlled by Aboriginal People.”* Richard Bell, 2002

The first task before writing an essay about artist and activist Richard Bell is to acknowledge that his own critiques and theory have perfectly positioned his own practice for two decades. In fact, as a non-Indigenous, white curator, I tread very carefully amid a history of white mistreatment of First Nations art.

Since the beginning of colonisation in so-called Australia, Indigenous art has been stolen (the British Museum’s claim on the Gweagal shield, an artefact likely from James Cook’s first contact with First Nations people on mainland Australia, being the earliest); silenced (through laws of the Protection Acts that prohibited cultural practices, for example); misrepresented (see the writings of dozens of explorers, ethnologists, and anthropologists); forged (see Elizabeth Durack’s nom de plume as the fictional Aboriginal stockman-turned-painter Eddie Burrup);<sup>1</sup> and appropriated. It was the latter, as highlighted especially by Latvian-Australian artist Imants Tillers’s sampling of a painting by a Warlipri artist Michael Nelson Kumantje Jagamara, that primarily provoked Richard Bell to pen *Bell’s Theorem: Aboriginal Art—It’s a White Thing!* in 2002.<sup>2</sup> Bell often describes himself as ‘an activist masquerading as an artist’;<sup>3</sup> this is of course a half-joke, made within the context of an Indigenous art

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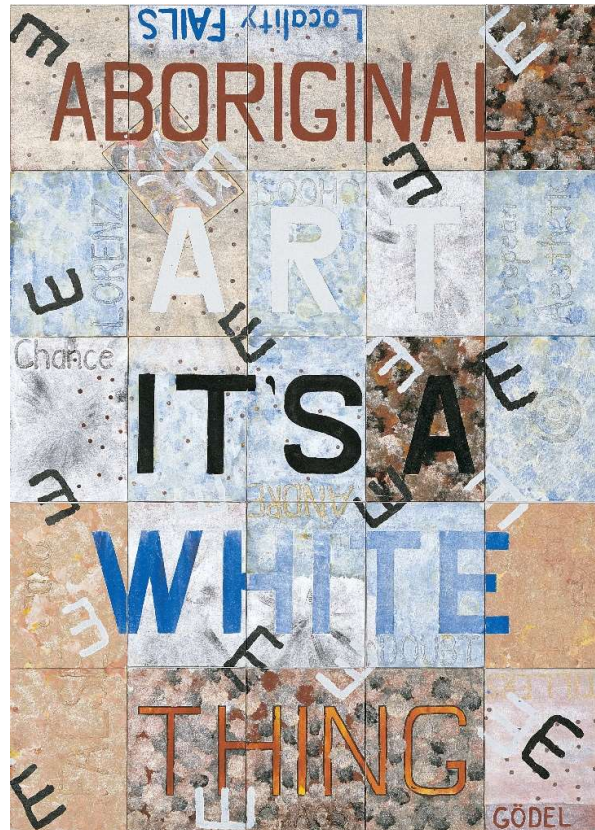
<sup>1</sup> Robert Smith, ‘The Incarnations of Eddie Burrup,’ *Art Monthly Australia*, 1997, no. 97, p. 4-5.

<sup>2</sup> Tillers’s *Nine Shots* is a combination of elements from Michael Nelson Jagamara’s *Five Dreamings* 1984 and German neo-expressionist George Baselitz’s *Forward Wind* 1965. To learn more about this well-known controversy and its outcome, see reviews of ‘The Loaded Ground’ exhibition held at Drill Hall Gallery, Australian National University, in 2012.

<sup>3</sup> This phrase has become the title for a key review of the recent documentary film about Richard Bell and his life, *You Can Go Now* (2022). Bronwyn Carlson, ‘An Activist Masquerading as an Artist: We Should All Be Talking About Richard Bell,’ *The Conversation*, published 26 January 2023, access: <https://theconversation.com/an-activist-masquerading-as-an-artist-we-should-all-be-talking-about-richard-bell-196577>

scene that is somehow an exception to so-called western art but also controlled by non-Indigenous individuals and systems.

In a recent keynote presentation, Bell recalls the events leading up to *Bell's Theorem* as a time in which he was re-starting his art practice.<sup>4</sup> He was surprised to learn his upcoming solo exhibition at Fireworks Gallery, Brisbane, was changed to a group exhibition including Anmatyerre artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye, the aforementioned Jagamara, and Jagamara's appropriator Imants Tillers. Bell took this exhibition grouping with Tillers as a challenge, or debate, in which to speak back to Tillers and beat the appropriator at his own game. After researching Tillers's painting and theory, Bell produced *Bell's Theorem* 2002, which comprised original essay notes alongside a painting that made reference to the deconstructed picture plane typical of Tillers's work. It held a message: ABORIGINAL ART IT'S A WHITE THING. 'I remember him [Tillers] walking into the gallery, he came round the corner and saw [*Bell's Theorem*]...if he was on a horse he would have fallen off the f\*\*king thing.'<sup>5</sup>



Richard Bell *Bell's Theorem* 2023, acrylic on canvas boards, 173 x 127 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

As well as being a satisfying 'win' over his art rival, the moment was a nexus for Bell's artmaking experience, which had two seemingly separate paths up until this point. His first encounter with artmaking was in 1987, through his brother's souvenir shop

<sup>4</sup> 'Richard Bell in Conversation with Andrew McNamara,' *AAANZ Conference*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 3 December 2022. Recording access: <https://www.aaanz22.live/post/in-conversation-richard-bell-andrew-mcnamara>

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

in Brisbane, in which Bell painted 'Aboriginal-looking' designs (to use the artist's description) onto boomerangs, spears and didgeridoos for the tourist market.<sup>6</sup> It was a venture that prompted Bell to reckon with the notions of 'authenticity' that dictated the value and sales of 'Aboriginal art,' a term with which Bell could not relate.

Soon after, Bell expanded into his second path of fine art making, from studio to institute, with the Queensland Art Gallery acquiring their first acrylic painting on canvas by Bell in 1989. The paintings on canvases of this time, as seen in *Heritage Act* c. 1993, resemble dot-style landscapes, with iconic cross-hatching and circles seen in so-called authentic Aboriginal paintings, but stealthily carrying another message calling for justice. In amongst the symbols are archival photographic images of First Nations ancestors, and one of the artist himself. Bell's naked form hangs by a noose attached to a landmark Brisbane building, the old windmill in Spring Hill. It's a site well known for its historic hangings—and by inserting himself in the noose, Bell hides a strong statement in plain view about the ongoing legacy of colonial violence.

As souvenir artist and as fine artist, Bell knew there were limitations to both because of the era's popularised notion of 'urban Aboriginal artist.' Bell is a Kamilaroi, Kooma, Jiman and Gurang Gurang man, born in 1953 in western Queensland. At the age of 14, one of the artist's most formative experiences was having his home bulldozed in the name of 'housing reform' for Indigenous people.<sup>7</sup> Throughout his childhood, his family moved frequently, including periods in Augathella, Morven, Mitchell, Rockhampton, Dalby and Darwin. In the 1970s, Bell became involved in the Black Power movement, a politically charged centre of action in Redfern, Sydney, and took on the role of field officer for the Redfern Aboriginal Legal Service. This was the beginning of the artist's talents for telling truth to power.

The biography outlined above is in stark contrast to the more readily associated image of an 'authentic' Aboriginal painter commodified within the Australian tourism industry and the remote Indigenous art centres that emerged in the 1980s and '90s. Aboriginal painting was synonymous with central desert artists applying dots onto a canvas spread out on the ground, telling sacred stories through signs and symbols – and available to purchase and furnish suburban living rooms around the world.

However, this highly sell-able image of an 'authentic' Indigenous artist does not align with the reality for the displaced, urbanised Indigenous populations—of which Bell is part—whose lives were forcibly disrupted by stolen lands and other government policy targeting Aboriginal populations as a 'dying race.'<sup>8</sup> The term 'urban Aboriginal art' gained currency as a way of distinguishing between so-called 'authentic' desert painting and the 'inauthentic' perception of art made by Aboriginal people displaced from Country. Bell and his brother, frustrated at the idea of being considered not 'authentically Aboriginal enough' to make 'authentic Aboriginal artworks' after a

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> See, for example of the rhetoric, the *Cairns Post* article from 29 August 1946 (p.3) proclaiming Indigenous people to be a dying race based on statistics gathered about the number of 'pure bred' Aboriginal people compared to the increase in mixed race people.

lifetime of race-based oppression, found themselves at the junction of this artistic paradox. Therefore, it makes sense when Bell discloses that the dotted patterns he painted on boomerangs and canvases alike are 'just circles. They look Aboriginal but they're not.'<sup>9</sup> In *Bell's Theorem*, the artist describes the false urban divide like this:

We are not purebred *Aborigines*. Our culture was ripped from us and not much remains. Most of our languages have disappeared. We don't all have black or even dark skin. We don't take shit from you. We look disdainfully at you bringing our people from the North to parade them like circus animals to your audience.<sup>10</sup>

In Bell's words, urban Aboriginal artists are simply the more autonomous of the two categories, owing to their working independently from desert art centres.<sup>11</sup> In his fine art practice, Bell says he learned that 'I could say whatever the f\*\*k I wanted to in art...and not get arrested'.<sup>12</sup>

The artist's messages come loud and clear, through the coloniser's textual and visual language: *Scientia e Metaphysica (Bell's Theorem)* 2003,<sup>13</sup> among other paintings, addresses the appropriation of Indigenous artworks by making reference to the famous drip painting method of US Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock—a white artist whose method has been closely compared to Native American art and specifically Navajo sand painting.<sup>14</sup> The drips unify a patchwork (reminiscent of Tillers's grid-like composition) of various colours and patterns. The patterns, blended into the iconic drips of a white appropriator, are based on the type of 'Indigenous-passing' designs Bell would paint on souvenirs. The work's message, in the language of the colonisers, repeats the same slogan about Aboriginal art being 'a white thing,' while other paintings enforce similar mottos; AUSTRALIAN ART DOES NOT EXIST (*Judgement Day (Bell's Theorem)* 2008), and PAYE THE RENT (*Paye the Rent* 2022).<sup>15</sup>

Bell's acts of appropriation, ripped from iconic Modern artists, have crossed genres from Pollock's and Jasper Johns's Abstract Expressionism into the Dada territory of Michel Duchamp's *Fountain* (see *Western Art* 2018), Roy Lichtenstein's Pop Art comic book imagery (see *Getting Over It* 2004,) and Howard Arkley's suburban Australian interiors (in *Untitled* 2018, the award-winning piece in the Rockhampton Museum of Art Collection, which also nods to First Nations artist Gordon Bennett, Bell's contemporary, and his body of work under the John Citizen moniker). His work is also very much Pop Art in his keen understanding and application of the

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<sup>9</sup> 'Richard Bell in Conversation with Andrew McNamara'

<sup>10</sup> Richard Bell, 'Bell's Theorem: Aboriginal Art – It's a White Thing!' *Koori Web*, 2002, access: [www.kooriweb.org/foley/great/art/bell.html](http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/great/art/bell.html)

<sup>11</sup> Richard Bell interviewed by Archie Moore, 2006, reprinted in Robert Leonard (ed.), *Richard Bell: Positivity*, 2007, Institute of Modern Art, p. 84.

<sup>12</sup> Tessa Morgan (dir.), *Artist Richard Bell: My Art is an Act of Protest*, Tate, 2019, access: <https://youtu.be/LDXksMvx2gk>

<sup>13</sup> Not included in this exhibition.

<sup>14</sup> Jackson Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant Garde*, 1995, University of Texas Press.

<sup>15</sup> Knowing Bell's adept communication style, this apparent spelling mistake in *Paye the Rent* is more likely to be a reference to the tax acronym PAYE (pay as you earn), as a suggestion for the method in which the mentioned rent should be paid. The 'rent' it refers to is compensation paid by non-Indigenous people occupying Indigenous land since colonisation.

advertising world's methods for getting a message across to the masses. Reduced to its bare visual and textual essentials, the painting *Immigration Policy* (2017) packs an immediate punch for viewers and readers. It could not be any clearer in what it says, and also to whom it is addressed. The outline of the Australian continent, plus Tasmania, sits on a dark background. Within the continental shape, bright orange capitalised letters spell an address in the second person, *YOU CAN GO NOW*, for any non-Indigenous viewer who stops long enough to read it.

In the same year, Bell produced *Poor/Lean* 2017, chosen as the key image for this exhibition's promotion. This work also represents a recognisable and colourful map, this time of Europe. The title, when read aloud with an Australian accent, is a homonym for Pauline, the first name of an often-headlining white politician who is known for suggesting immigrants and descendants from East and Central Asia to 'go back to where they come from' to solve the nation's problems. In response, this artwork addresses Pauline's familiar racist sentiment by reminding her and her fellow white Australians that; *YOU COME FROM HERE*.



Exhibition view 'Richard Bell: Bell's Theorem,' Rockhampton Museum of Art, October 2023. Photo: Mad Dog Productions.

Despite his many references to Modernists of the global north, Bell's art is the antithesis of *art pour l'art*, the sentiment of 'art for art's sake' that moved through many Parisian and US artist circles as they aimed to prioritise a 'pure art' completely separate from serving any practical, moral or social function. On the contrary, Bell's paintings, video and installations are very much the product of a political and moral agenda that has found an appreciative art audience locally, nationally and internationally. Amid a lifetime of land rights activism and negotiating racist paradoxes regarding authenticity, Richard Bell's critiques and artworks have been a vehicle of authentic expression for over three decades. His artworks, relying not on metaphor or allegory, are direct and unfiltered through the usual artistic strategies.

'Richard Bell: Bell's Theorem' was held 18 November 2023 to 18 February 2024 at Rockhampton Museum of Art.