



Foreword for ‘Richard Bell: Bell’s Theorem’

Jonathan McBurnie

Director, Rockhampton Museum of Art

Beginning the task of introducing an artist and a body of work that has been so highly influential is difficult without resorting to anecdotes. This is partially due to Bell’s heavy and involvement and investment in Brisbane, and more specifically, Queensland College of Art, where Bell’s proppaNOW co-founders Jennifer Herd and Vernon Ah Kee worked and studied, and West End, where Bell had a studio for many years. The decade of 2001-2011 was my first decade of both adulthood and as a practicing artist, and as a student and then staff member of QCA, and resident of West End, Bell was frequently a part of whatever was happening at the time, and the artist’s gregarious, outspoken and often hilarious public persona makes anecdotes almost impossible to avoid. I would locate Bell as a part of a rich cosmology of characters, rebels and raconteurs that have populated the Queensland art world, at that time occupying some very specific locales (Fortitude Valley, New Farm, Kelvin Grove, West End and Bowen Hills spring to mind, all of which have now been priced out of reach for most artists). Cultural landmarks like Soapbox Gallery, the Lychee Lounge, Ric’s, Oldspace, MSSR and the Arena, most of which are long gone, provided this cosmology with what was then, at least in the arts, known then as the Brisbane character: scrappy, do-it-yourself, fuelled by an intense desire to show the Sydney and Melbourne crews up through little more than self-belief. This character, too, is largely gone now, as Brisbane continues its decades-long gentrification process. What we see now is a beautiful, ‘international’ city, scrubbed of so much of what made it special (perhaps some of the cultural grime will build up again after the Olympics). Of course, the secret is well and truly out, now, if it ever was a secret, and cult of Bell (I cannot think of a better term) has extended beyond Queensland, and indeed beyond the continent. The world has caught up, just as I am sure Bell knew it would, destiny charted, and cruising altitude seemingly reached by means of artist-as-perpetual motion generator.

Starting work at Rockhampton Museum of Art in late 2021 and seeing that Bell had won a previous iteration of the Gold Award, a significant painting prize and a key strategy in expanding the RMOA collection with exciting contemporary painting. This excitement was doubled, as winners of the Gold are also offered the opportunity to exhibit with us, and as both an artist with strong connections to the Central Queensland region, and as a highly influential figure both nationally and internationally. To offer a unique survey of an artist of Bell's calibre in the regions is a special thing, and I am grateful to Bell for his continued commitment to this project, despite a soaring international reputation, and demands and commitments that I could only guess at. In pulling this exhibition together, one of the most interesting parts was to find in Bell work a surprising tonal consistency when viewed as a whole, despite an omnivorous artistic hunger that spans media. So many of Bell's works share an attitude: tough, no-bullshit, smart rather than clever. Even in the small selection of video works included in the exhibition, for me personally always Bell's most effective mode (in no small part for his incisive and sometimes brutally honest truths delivered surreptitiously with humour), are hugely different in scope and approach, but presented together they are complementary, bigger than the sum of their parts. Bell's gallery representation, Josh Milani, and his capable and dedicated team have offered incredible support in developing the exhibition, and were responsible for securing a number of plum key works from private collections, as well as lending works from the stockroom and even Josh's own collection, for the show.

Bell does not have a reputation for being shy. Beyond his own work and work with Aboriginal artist collective proppaNOW, Bell has often appeared in other people's work, which adds to both the cult of Bell, and emphatically underlines his predisposition for appropriation and satire of both his own work, and by extension the work of others. Luke Roberts' series of hilarious photographs of the pair, mugging for the camera, Bell with spear, posing with a summer dress-clad Roberts, Bell spearing Roberts. It is one of Roberts' more successful series and Bell's contributions are key to tone and humour. In one of Tony Albert's early series of photographs, applying African American tropes associated with Gangsta Rap to Aboriginal culture, Bell is recast as the Notorious B.E.L.L. Sophia Hewson's bizarre and hilarious remix of *The Sound of Music*, Bell painted prancing in some kind of Bavarian meadow, holding the hand of a Julie Andrews stand-in, Bambi observing the farce. Mike Chavez depicted Bell in a boxer's stance, face ready for the blow, fists blurred with movement. Perhaps the most vulnerable portrait of the artist to date, Julie Fragar's stunning portrait of Bell against the backdrop of the splinters and ashes of his childhood home, destroyed, stands as one of the great lost opportunities for the Archibald (the Museum of Brisbane wisely acquired the piece). All reveal different aspects of the artist- Bell as prankster, Bell as cultural (re)appropriator, Bell as satirist, Bell as a fighter, Bell as survivor. But we mustn't lose focus on the man behind the myth. Bell is a truly great raconteur, presenting as a cross between a confidence man and a political campaigner, but as with all artists, we have a version of ourselves that we present when we're 'on the job', the public face. I think that Fragar's portrait takes a look behind that curtain, and we see Bell the man, rather than the artist, and this is an important consideration. The *No Tin Shack* 2022 video is perhaps Bell's most autobiographical and nakedly personal work to date, and lends more

satirical works (the wonderful *Scratch an Aussie* 2008 for example) a heavy psychological base.



Richard Bell *No Tin Shack* (still) 2022, single channel digital video, colour, and sound, 7:28 mins. Image courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

It is instructive here to consider Bell's arguments around the exploitation of Aboriginal artists, particularly those that work through art centres, are not universally accepted. The reconfiguration of discourse around the value, in vulgar, dollar-driven terms, of Aboriginal culture, which has gone on more or less unchanged until recently, is discussed at length in *Bell's Theorem: Aboriginal Art – It's a White Thing!* 2002. This discourse was, of course, built on a fundamental misunderstanding, and to a large extent, a lack of interest or antipathy to the idea of Aboriginal land ownership, knowledge and even an economy of sorts; not what we recognize as an economy in the necrotic rigidity of the late capitalist era, an economy geared around the accumulation of wealth above all else, including the health of the planet, but an economy of knowledge, food, shelter, and partnership. Common, still largely unbusted myths abound, and the vast majority of them have grown from or in tandem with an all-consuming assimilate-or-die mentality that is typical of colonial powers. Looking with some detachment, it is hard not to see the rise of the colonial project in tandem with the rise of the capitalist project: expand, absorb, purge, expand, absorb, purge. Now that almost every scrap of land is owned, claimed and sectioned, the capitalist project must turn inward, for it has no place to go, turning on the very people who (consciously or not) support it. And here we are; rather than look at the root of the real problem, we are distracted by skirmishes that are very often staged. Racism, sexism, ableism, classism. These are failures of capitalism, a relatively recent mode of economics and an inversion of the laws (and lore) of the many different Aboriginal nations. In many ways, the pre-colonial way of

life is antithesis to capitalism, and proof that humanity can thrive harmoniously with the world. Colonialism is a direct response to the needs of capitalism, and in this way, Bell's war is one of classism rather than racism.

The issues Bell raises are perhaps most clearly embedded in one of the artist's more subtle, but provocative, demonstrations of Art World inequality, famously tossing a coin to decide upon the Sulman prize winner for 2011. The winner, Peter Smeeth, spoke of his dissatisfaction of the method, complaining of his painting's 150 hours of work being reduced to a coin toss. Smeeth's voice was joined by a chorus of others questioning Bell's method, which is a remarkable demonstration in naivety; art prizes *do* have an inherently arbitrary aspect in that they are (ordinarily) chosen by the judge's own subjective agency. Bell's coin toss simply changed the method of arbitration. I would argue that Bell's method— whittling his choices down to a final selection and choosing by tossing a coin— is far less arbitrary than the method used by the Archibald, Australia's most PR savvy art prize, which is chosen in a byzantine process of elimination by the eleven members of the AGNSW Board of Trustees. This ordinarily leaves the Archibald with a compromise, rather than a winner, of the Trustees' competing interests. Just the fact that, with a quick google, the coin toss, which would ordinarily comprise a mere footnote on an artist's Wikipedia page, is one of the most covered and argued aspects of a career so remarkable speaks to the power and savvy of the act itself, and demonstrates the national obsession with, and veneration of, art prizes. The gatekeeping, disparity and inequalities of the art world form the bedrock from which Bell builds his momentum in both of his *Theorem* essays, bookending a career that reads like the makings of the greatest novel never made.

As one would expect, some substantial art world changes have gone on between *Theorem I* and its 2022 follow-up, *Bell's Theorem, Contemporary Art – It's a White Thing*, accounted for in Bell's spirited prose. These include a downswing in the status of anthropologist and upswing in the status of the curator, shifts in the understanding and primacy of appropriation between Postmodernism and wherever we are now, and the steep decline of art criticism in Australia, helped along in part by the failure of many educational institutions, and the collapse of print media. Most substantial, however, is the change in status of, as Bell characterises it, 'Aboriginal art' (a change which Bell has undoubtedly influenced in recent decades), but paradoxically, little shift in the core structures of the art world, and more specifically, the art market.

The early anxieties around speaking about Aboriginal art and its contextⁱ appear to be long gone, but replaced by a kind of academic hybrid language consisting of anthropological and contemporary double talk; like the categorical boundaries Bell discusses being drawn around Aboriginal art, such as 'urban' and 'regional', so too are discussions framed. The regional is saddled with the exoticism and primitivism of 'the spiritual'- as Bell states, this is the idea that a little bit of spirit is available to the buyer, transferrable, for a price- and the urban must then surely deal with identity, and that's that. Of course, such designations are convenient and incredibly reductive, and serve the agendas of the curator, the theorist, the anthropologist. Bell's commentary on the 'pseudo-spirituality' of Ooga Booga art, as he calls it, the 'bursary rhyme'ⁱⁱ version of the dreamtime,

is cynical, but in many cases accurate. The packaging, marketing and selling of art can be a dirty business, and in many cases the line between whitefella/blackfella representation and exploitation is not only blurred, but deliberately smudged.

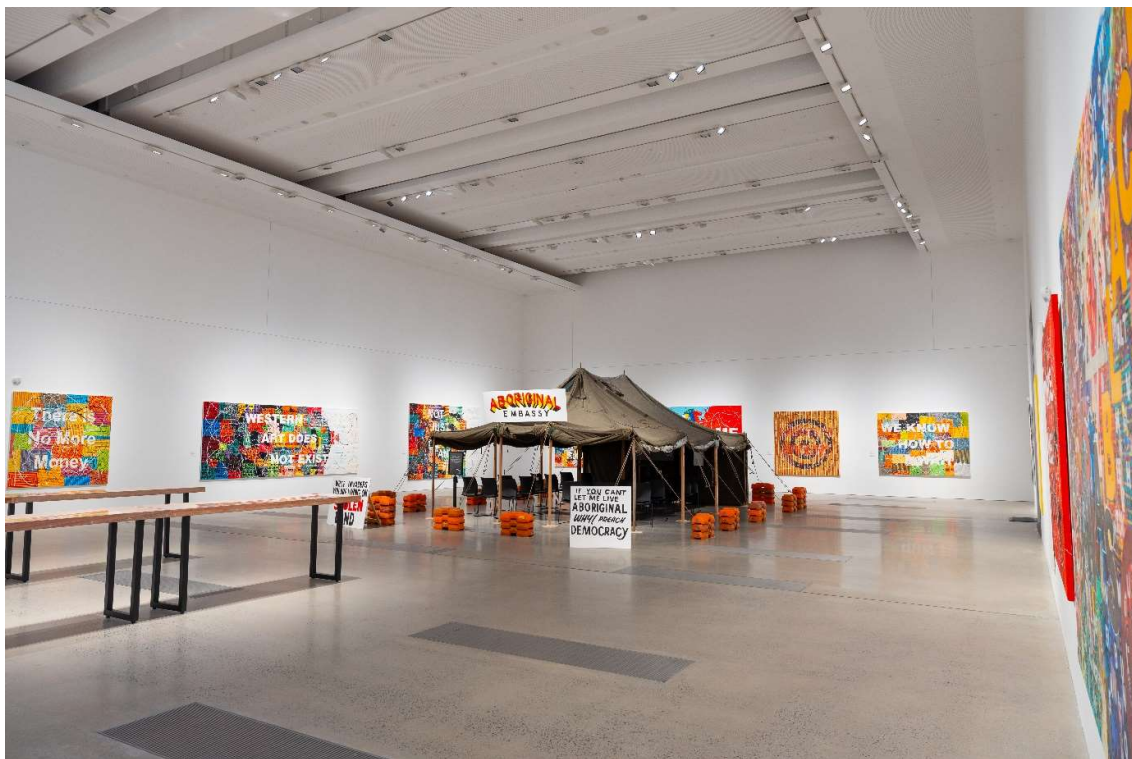
Theorem II is that of a more critically developed Bell, this time not relying solely upon his acid wit (which is still present) and an impassioned flair for rhetoric to make a professor or a curator blush; this time, Bell's argument is laid out with a cool, almost mercenary detachment, its polemic simmering like hot oil. This is not the bluster of a radical, but the knowledge of a lifetime's work in art and activism; *Theorem II* is a sleeker, more economical device (Bell's barbed wordplay has been sharpened to a skewering point), its ideas are fully realised. This time, its effectiveness lies in the follow-through of each ideological uppercut, compared to the powerful jabs of the younger artist. Bell's political and cultural awareness is on full display, with incisive insights on the shortcomings of capitalism, the postwar era and the Native Title Act, to say nothing of colonialism, institutionalised racism and the art world.

Bell's work is difficult to place on the artistic continuum because it is so frequently chameleonic, incorporating the styles of various canonised artists into a complicated body of work, and the art world has always struggled with satire, which plays a predominant part in the artist's modus operandi. Satire has an invitational aspect in Bell's work, an accessibility, which draws the viewer in for the greater (and often far more uncomfortable) message. I liken this to boxing, a metaphor Bell himself has used in work; satire is the exploratory, calculated jab; it may have impact, but more often than not it is a strategic ploy, helping place the opponent (or viewer) for a more devastating bodyblow which is the blunt force trauma of Bell's polemics. It is folly to argue with or refute this position, one of anger, outrage and frustration on behalf of his people. And I would be quick to point out that this anger, outrage and frustration is based not only on the many indignities and injustices heaped on the Aboriginal peoples during colonisation, but the continuing inability to adequately come to terms with these wrongs as both a government and a nation. Bell's satirical commentary is peppered throughout his body of work, in the form of his many memorable one-liners, his appropriations of artists like Tillers, Pollock, Roy Lichtenstein, Bennett, which have been all but incorporated into Bell's visual chameleonry, even the little details in what he refers to as his history paintings (look closely at Bell's rendition of the famous image of Gough Whitlem pouring earth into Vincent Lingiari's hand; here there is no soil). In the past Bell has expressed a fondness of cartoons during his childhood.ⁱⁱⁱ I would argue that this influence is still a vital part of the artist's visual and satirical lexicon, an embedded predisposition toward the cheeky, subversive and anti-authoritarian.

I encourage readers to take a look at the strangely compelling Q & A with Andrew McNamara at the 2022 AAANZ conference for a sealed-in-amber example of two vastly different perspectives attempting to find parity and common ground. Both are as usual highly intelligent and intelligible, but one cannot help but notice a fundamental failure to connect. While Bell is engaging as ever, it is as if he is expected to play the punchy provocateur cracking wise about the art world (and through it privileged white Australia), and one cannot help but wonder if this is the kind of issue that Bell cites as a key flaw in the

structure of the so-called 'Aboriginal Art industry'. Bell, however, is circumspect, deflecting, demurring and obfuscating while McNamara searches for semiotic specifics. It is a singularly awkward experience which perhaps speaks to the arguments of *Theorem I* particularly, in its criticism of the difficulties and failures of contemporary art criticism (to wit: semiology is so worn out and has seemed to reduce art to a state of banal immanence; this would explain a lot about a lot). It is as if Bell wants to provoke responses of McNamara himself, and McNamara struggles with the blunt force trauma of many of Bell's statements (whether verbal or artistic). McNamara, ever the Modernist, attempting to meet Bell, ever the Postmodernist, on his own artistic turf. The conversation warms, but never simmers, and is rewarding when McNamara brings up works, rather than concepts.

On one level, Bell's puns and one-liners might appear antecedent to what is considered contemporary art, but they offer an access point, which is hugely important; contemporary art's biggest and most damning issue remains its impenetrability and its close association with the bourgeoisie; not so with Bell. The power of Bell's work lies in its visual directness and semiotic legibility. No Schopenhauerian handwringing here, Bell is far more preoccupied with the state of the world itself and the impact his words and images can have, in this way more akin to laconic wordsmiths Hemingway or McCarthy. Sturdy constructions that make up for any perceived lack of artistic finesse with raw, burly, angry polemic. Couched in art references of the kind that have not only been canonised, but live rent-free in the popular consciousness, and brandishing phrases that, at the very least, pack a punch. Even Bell's more conceptually ambitious works are not above using humour to invite audiences to engage with the artists in his critiques, sometimes getting to laugh along at a joke at their own expense.



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

To conclude, I thought to mention an anecdote that Bell appears in only peripherally. It was my first year as Director of Townsville's Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts, and I was at the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair at the Umbrella exhibition, speaking with artist Hannah Bronte. To my horror, Pauline Hansen walked in, flanked by not one but two of her own cameramen, making it instantly clear that this was a media stunt. Disgusted by this (anybody who has been to CIAF will know that it is an event of overwhelmingly positivity, friendliness and inclusivity) I turned my back to her upon her approach, my insides churning with anger. But it was Hannah's immediate response that I remember, immediately searching for her phone, saying to me 'shit, I've gotta call Richard!'. Unfortunately, Bell missed the call, and the honour of publicly dressing down Queensland's most famous demagogue went to Murrandoo Yanner, but this speaks to Bell's stature and necessity in contemporary art; even in his absence, Bell is a figure to be reckoned with. Hanson made some cheap political hay with the footage, which was always the intention, but I do lament Bell's absence; if anybody could have turned this incursion into a work of art, it would be Richard Bell.

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

ⁱ Adam Hill and Adam Geczy, 'Aboriginal Art Diagnostic' in *Broadsheet*, vol. 40.2, 2011, p.133.

ⁱⁱ 'Richard Bell in Conversation with Andrew McNamara,' *AAANZ Conference*, National Gallery of Victoria, 3 December 2022. Recording access: <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/live-stream/richard-bell-in-conversation-with-andrew-mcnamara/> Retrieved 09/05/2023

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.