

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

RICHARD BELL

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LOCATION ONE
by michael harvey



NEW YORK This exhibition of 16 paintings and two videos presented, for the first time in the U.S., the work of midcareer Aboriginal artist Richard Bell (b. 1953). Based in Brisbane, Bell managed a health clinic before turning to art, in his early 30s, as a means of protesting the plight of indigenous Australians. He now engages in cocky, irreverent, in-your-face agitprop. The work—combining nihilistic anger with humor—is the sort of thing you might expect if Abbie Hoffman had taken up studio practice.

In the video *Scratch an Aussie* (2008), for example, Bell plays a black psychoanalyst probing the mental processes of white racists. *Broken English* (2009) has him asking both white and black countrymen why Aboriginals seem to have no vision of their own future.

The paintings feature two formal devices that are as persistent as Bell's political message: the inclusion of written language and the appropriation of Western art. Language is the more strident. In a variety of typefaces, either screened or hand-painted, the artist offers contentious slogans such as "I Am Not Sorry," "You Can Go Now," "Give It All Back" and "Pay Me to be an Abo / We Were Here First." Compositionally, in a kind of reverse-colonialist gesture, Bell "borrows" familiar Western forms, layering the text and/or Pollock-style dribbles over familiar motifs such as Johns's Targets. He does this over and over, taking an image from, say, Lichtenstein and tailoring it to his own ends.

Half of the pictures on view were very large (8 by 12-plus feet), the rest a little over easel size. Some of the bigger pictures are made up of panels, and in general Bell has a tendency to divide his canvases into grids. The paint application, for the most part, is flat and graphic, suggesting little interest in the sensuality of the medium. Bell's facility, however, is quite broad. One work, *Psalm Singing Suite* (2007), is made up of 28 small pictures painted in styles reflecting widely varied sources: Abstract Expressionists, Aboriginal dot painters, Keith Haring and others.

In *Pigeon Holed* (1992), Bell uses the documentation format of Conceptual art. Six identical head shots of the artist hang side by side, and under each black-and-white photo is a term from Bell's altered version of an old nursery rhyme: "Drinker," "Tailor," "Sold Yer," "Failure," "Butcher," "Baker." The last term, "Troublemaker," a role the artist obviously relishes, is matched with a mirror, identifying every viewer as a culprit.

Why the use of Western art images and formal conventions? One painting bears the inscription "Abo Art—It's a White Thing." Bell obviously doesn't want to fall into the self-exoticizing mode. Better to appropriate, it seems, than to pander. In this theater of confrontation, where Bell uses art to make politics, nothing is sacred. So why not exploit the richest models?

Photo: Richard Bell: Psalm Singing Suite, 2007, acrylic on 28 canvases, dimensions variable; at Location One.