

James C. Sourris Artist Interview Series

Richard Bell

I'm an activist masquerading as an artist. I can get away with all sorts of stuff as an artist and not get arrested. Like every revolution has involved artists. So I'm thinking that's not by accident.

I'm classified in every institution in this country as an Aboriginal artist and my work is deemed Aboriginal. Now that in itself is racist.

Cause I came to art from tourist art and everything was filled, every line every stroke. Whereas, I was looking at the desert artists; and like they felt no problem letting the paint run out, and then I found that it actually helped the work, it made them shimmer. So I thought, damn, I'm going to start painting like that. And that was quicker. So that fell within the realms of my art work which is to make work efficiently with minimum of effort. My experience with tourist art, I learnt to paint really quickly anyway. Now I have developed styles of painting that look like they take forever but I can do really quickly.

I was doing these little things there and this white dude comes up to me one day and he says, he's looking over my shoulder and he says why don't you get into fine art? I said what do you mean? There's fine lines here. That's fine art isn't it? [laughs] You're a bit of an activist aren't you? I said, Yeah. Well he said you know you can reach a much bigger audience than you can ever do by marching down the street.

I got the idea that to do some small things, tourist size things, and just get them printed off set. So I did, but, I also did a couple of political things as well.

I developed this new way of marketing. I'd looked at what was around in the shops and that and what I noticed was that some of the white boys and girls were putting things, images, in a window, a framed window, and then putting a backing board and a blurb about themselves on the back. And shrink wrapping them. I said damn I'm going to do that with black fella stuff you know. And they were really successful. I would have sold maybe half a million.

I think the ideas are really strong. Certainly I'm challenging everybody to buy my work. Am I making it hard for, well I'm not challenging black fellas to buy it, other than the fact that my dealer charges ridiculously high prices for them.

I constructed this painting for the Telstra Art Prize and I told everybody that it would win before I painted it. I was just sciting, blowing some. Anyway, I finished it, and I didn't send it away because I got cold feet. I said what if it doesn't win? But my daughter said, oh no dad you got to send it away. So I sent it. It was the last work to arrive and it was the first time everyone in the gallery agreed with that on what would win.

One of the reasons for starting ProppaNOW was so that we had a united voice to speak out against the ethnicising of Aboriginal art and in particular our position off to the periphery within Aboriginal art. We probably look for overtly, overtly political and with a tough air, taking a very strong pro-Aboriginal stance.

I would want people to look, immediately I want them to look deeply at the works and look beneath the surface of the direct statement and contemplate other meanings there.

I believe in freedom for everybody; free thought, yeah, free speech. Yeah but we have to be careful about what we say. And I'm serious when I say that I'm a recovering racist, recovering sexist and a recovering homophobe, because that's how I was taught to be like that. So I've been trying to undo what I have been taught. And, well I think my life has become richer for it and I would like more people to do that.