

James C. Sourris Artist Interview Series

Vernon Ah Kee

I made work about my life and the kind of issues and events that informed my life, they informed my thinking. And I think of myself as coming from a family, I don't think of myself as being out on my own or as an individual at all really. I think my family is just a normal family, just an ordinary family with heroes and villains. And I thought that if my family is like this, then every family is. And that's the idea that I wanted to project; stripping away the primitive and the exotic from the image of the contemporary Aboriginal.

So I wanted to give this idea of the black people that I know is true; that I know is true of myself and my immediate family and my extended family. It had always been about making art about my life experience and my family and what happens to Aboriginal people, what actually happens to Aboriginal people, and what Aboriginal people do, and how they think, and what they say. And that's what I wanted to do. I mean it didn't make any sense to make art about, you know, a time, or an imagined time in Aboriginal history that, you know, may or may not have been real.

I have very early memories in drawing. I don't remember the first time but I do have a sense of drawing when I was very little. I have a sense of sitting down on the floor at my nanas house in a corner or under the table, just drawing; just drawing on, I don't know, anything, paper. My mum and my grandmother tell me that I was drawing really little and they would just give me something.

But then again all kids can draw when they're really little. You can give any kid pen and paper and they will draw. But I have a sense of that when I was very little, like four, three or four, five years old and things like that. But the difference with me though is as I got older I became more obsessed with it. None of us are born being able to draw well but we are born loving it. And that's all it takes really and you discipline yourself. But it's racking up the hours. And I really appreciate the obsessive way I went about it now.

I used to go looking in bookshops for any drawing books, any technical kind of processes that I could discover because I didn't really have teachers that could point me in those directions. I never had a teacher at school who said; here this is a book about drawing.

2004, 2005, was, some where around about there, Richard and I were sitting around and just talking and Richard, as he does, he just gets up and just says, that's it we should start up our own group. And he said yeah we need a name, and I said yeah you know this has to be a proper group, you know it's got to be a proper group, ProppaNOW, you know. And he said that's what we should call it then.

And we want it to be, you know, an engine that produces that kind of voice, you know, that sustains that kind of work. And I'm aware that it's up to us to actually lay the ground work for that, to produce a body of work as individuals and as a group identity. Because there's a lack of critique outside of ProppaNOW we have to be responsible enough to take on the role within ProppaNOW for each other. It's a good way of regulating the quality of what we do.

In North Queensland, it was made very, very clear to me, very early on, that I was Aboriginal and that I was not going to be considered or permitted to be anything other than that. And so, I don't know when I kind of took that and ran with it. And I like it. Certainly me and my cousins, that I grew up with, we like being black fellas. We all still like being black fellas and it doesn't occur to any of us that we want to be anything else. And so in terms, in terms of how that informed my art practice, I would say that it informed my art practice fully. And so if people want to call me an Australian artist, then that's fine, but an Aboriginal artist is probably more apt and more fully describes me.