

Richard Bell – Cosmic Avenger

Richard Bell is one of the most important Australian artists alive today. This is not just because of his rambunctious persona and the thought-provoking, and challenging art projects he creates, but also because of his unapologetic and passionate commitment to the on-going struggle for justice of his people. The wit and style of this blending of his twin passions of art and politics may well invariably alienate many of his more pretentious critics, but it also continues to excite and win him new audiences, especially among the young. This is important because a basic tenet of the Bell message is that the struggle for justice and recognition goes on, and a new generation of people globally need to be educated and cajoled into understanding.

I see my friend Richard Bell as a cultural warrior, and a man of vast intelligence and humanitarian humour. He is an indispensable asset in Aboriginal Australia's quest for a greater understanding of who we are as Aboriginal people. Through the subversive wit frequently lurking in his art, he is able to pin-prick the pretensions and self-delusion of the themes of white superiority that dominate narratives of both Australian history and the Australian art scene. As Brenda Croft has said "his work throws a direct response or challenge to those in authority".¹ Richard's two contributions thus far for the *Edge of Elsewhere* project are typical of his ability to combine the aforementioned passions of art and politics in subtle and effective ways.

His 2011 *Edge of Elsewhere* collaboration with legendary US Black Panther Emory Douglas was as historically significant as it was artistically. **The strong historic political connections between Black Panthers of Emory Douglas and the 1970s Australian Black Power movement resonates in the Douglas/Bell collaboration.** It was a/the? closing of a circle that began with the formation of the Australian Black Panther Party in Brisbane in 1971, which was inspired by the American Panthers of which Emory Douglas was Minister for Culture. Thus the Bell/Douglas mural is also representative of a mutual respect and love that still connects two peoples'? struggle for justice. It is because of the depth and intensity of these historic and political connections that invests their artistic collaboration with such power. Linda Carroli has observed that "Without ethics, there's no connection or affirmation. These ethics aren't abstractions nor are they a kind of postcolonial radical chic. Rather, they are negotiated, lived and practiced."²

In another *Edge of Elsewhere* project, the release of Madeline McGrady's film of the 1982 Commonwealth Games protests, *We Fight*, Richard is again not so subtly blending his passions of art, history and politics. Mainstream production of Australian history often

¹ Croft, B., *Cultural Con/Texts: Apologists vs. Apologies*, "Art Museums: sites of communication", Symposium. National Gallery of Australia & the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, 14-15 March 2003

² Linda Carroli *Open Hearted, Open Handed, Open Minded* (Commissioned Essay) 2003.

chooses to conveniently forget those embarrassing moments that challenge to popular narratives, and the huge Aboriginal protests during the 1982 Games are an example of this. By resurrecting and reminding us all of those potent protests and the underlying issues, Bell is challenging what Stanner described as the “Great Australian Silence”³. He is also showing and reminding us of the great courage of those who marched in 1982 when the QLD Premier Joh Bjelke Peterson had introduced new laws that made it illegal for people to either march, or even assemble in groups of more than three. Bell has said that the film itself is a work of art, and I also believe that to be true.

The film, *We Fight*, reveals the passion, bravery, solidarity and power of the Aboriginal people who came from all parts of Australia to demonstrate in solidarity with their QLD brother and sisters against the old notorious and repressive QLD Aborigines Act. An interesting aspect of the film is that at one stage we see a young, earnest Aboriginal Legal Service field officer by the name of Richard Bell. This minor segment is a gem in itself in that it is a portrait of the young man before he was an artist. As such it is a valuable contextualisation of Bell the political artist/agitator in an earlier manifestation as merely a young political agitator. It demonstrates the internal consistency of Bell’s life path. Of his work, Richard Bell has said, "It's a relentless campaign, but it's the reason I got into fine art. I have a direct message, not a subtle one and through art I can reach more people."⁴

His assertion of the film as a work of art is also valid in the context of his belief that often political action is a form of performance art. This was certainly so in Brisbane in 1982 when Aboriginal protesters from all over Australia occupied Musgrave Park in South Brisbane as a campsite and performance area. In one memorable scene in the film then Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser is seen arriving at an official event adjacent to Musgrave Park. As he is rushed into the venue, a large crowd of demonstrators jeer him from across the road, to the strains of legendary Aboriginal musicians like Bart Willoughby and Joe Geia performing in a concert deep within Musgrave Park. Politics is also subtly evident as one notices of the people in the film just how many are no longer with us. Just a passing but powerful reminder of the reality of the difference in life-expectancy rates among Aboriginal people.

This is part of the power of Bell’s multi-dimensional artistic expressions. Always lurking close is the reality of oppression in today’s Australia. No matter whether Richard is finding creative (but valid) new ways to judge major art awards by the toss of a coin, wearing an outrageous T-Shirt while accepting a major art prize, or terrorising the cream of the Australian art glitterati with his video crew and kangaroo bling, he will always make people sit up and take notice of him. As his email tag suggests, ‘heisashowoff’, but his showing off is more often than not cunningly crafted to make you think. In my mind it is his ability to provoke people into thinking that is his greatest asset.

³ Stanner, W.E.H. 1979: *Whiteman got no dreaming: essays, 1938–1973*. Australian National University Press.

⁴ *The Courier Mail*, 20 September 2003

As he has matured as an artist, he now certainly reaches more people to make them think, than he probably ever dreamed he would. With national and international recognition I expect him to continue to develop his power as an artist, and also as an ambassador for Aboriginal rights. His anarchic and Dadaist sense of humour will continue to assure that he will charm, educate and conquer many more people for a long time to come. I have faith in him to turn a nation of drinkers, into a nation of thinkers. Not to mention a nation with a better appreciation of the power of art.

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