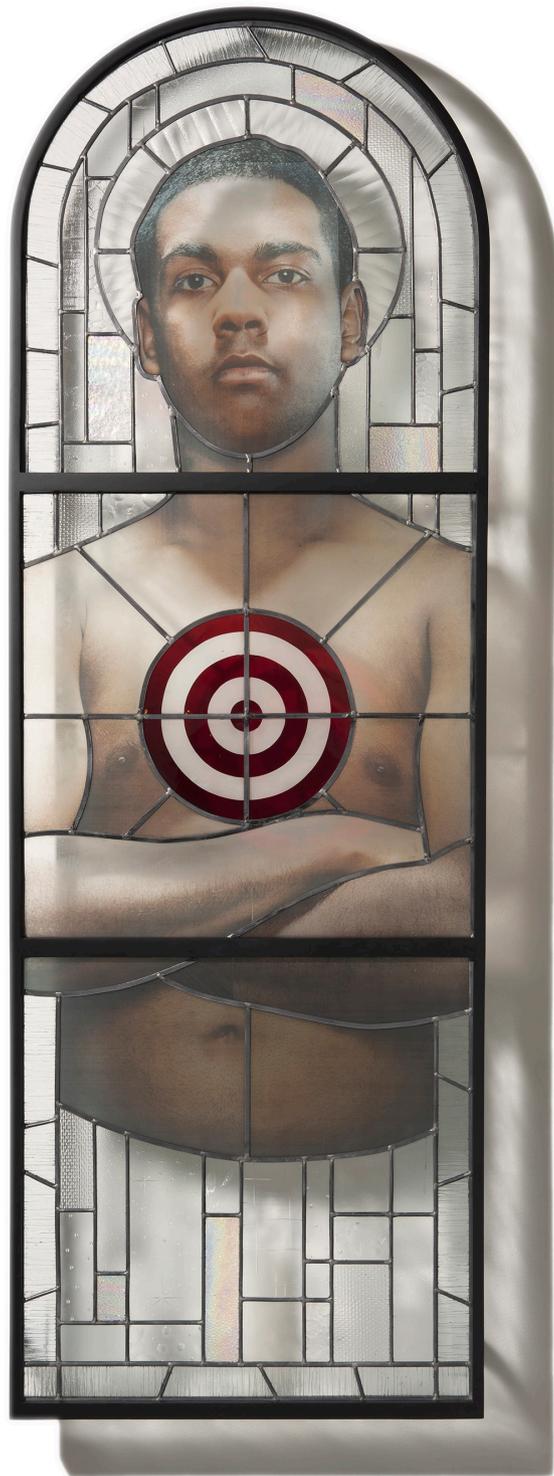


TONY ALBERT
DUTY
OF
CARE

13 JUNE TO 27 SEPTEMBER, 2020



We acknowledge the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples, the traditional owners of the ACT region, on whose lands we live and work and where the Canberra Glassworks stands. We pay respects to their Ancestors, Elders, leaders and artists past and present, and recognise their ongoing connections to Culture and Country. We also extend our acknowledgement to all First Nations peoples.





Tony Albert's multidisciplinary practice investigates contemporary legacies of colonialism, prompting audiences to contemplate the human condition. Drawing on both personal and collective histories, Albert explores the ways in which optimism might be utilised to overcome adversity. His work poses important questions such as; how do we remember, give justice to, and rewrite complex and traumatic histories?

Albert's technique and imagery are distinctly contemporary, displacing traditional Australian Aboriginal aesthetics with an urban conceptuality. Appropriating textual references from sources as diverse as popular music, film, fiction, and art history, Albert plays with the tension arising from the visibility, and in-turn, the invisibility of Aboriginal People across the news media, literature, and the visual world.

Albert has exhibited extensively both nationally and internationally. Recent solo exhibitions include; *Wonderland*, Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney (2019); *Native Home*, Sullivan+Strumpf, Encounters, Art Basel Hong Kong (2019) *Confessions*, Contemporary Art Tasmania (2019); *Visible*, Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane (2018) and *Unity*, Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney (2018). Recent selected group exhibitions include; *NIRIN: 22nd Biennale of Sydney* (2020); *The National 2019: New Australian Art*, Carriageworks, Sydney; *Dark Mofo*, Museum of Old and New Art, Tasmania (2019); *I am Visible*, commission for Enlighten Festival Canberra, National Gallery of Australia, ACT (2019); *Just Not Australian*, Art Space, Sydney (2019); *Weapons for the Soldier*, Hazelhurst Arts Centre, Sydney and touring (2018); *Continental Drift*, Cairns Regional Art Gallery, Queensland (2018); *Defying Empire: 3rd National Indigenous Art Triennial*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra (2017); and *When Silence Falls*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney (2016).

Albert's work is well represented in major national collections including the National Gallery of Australia; the Australian War Memorial, Canberra; the Art Gallery of New South Wales; the Art Gallery of Western Australia and Brisbane's Gallery of Modern Art—Queensland Art Gallery.



We cannot hide or destroy racist images. They are an important societal record that should not be forgotten and must be reconciled so our future can be better for our children.¹

Duty of care is a social contract, an obligation of individuals to ensure the safety of others. In a country of multiple languages and cultures, such as Australia, duty of care is also an act of reconciliation. To care and ensure the safety of others we must see, accept and respect difference as well as be able to see through it. Care is a visible and invisible force. In material form, care may well be represented by the clear glass we use in windows to protect us from the rain and wind, in the cups that help us quench our thirst, and on the surface of a mirror that reflects our own image. Clear glass dominates Tony Albert's latest exhibition *Duty of Care* at Canberra Glassworks. Glass is a new medium for Albert, a contemporary artist and Gurramay, Yidinji, Kuku-Yalanji man, who regularly works with collage, painting, found materials and photography to explore Australia's contentious history and fraught race relations. During a six-week residency in late 2019, Albert collaborated with a team of highly skilled local artists to produce stained glass windows, sand-etched glass text works, and glass casts of Aboriginalia (domestic and tourist artefacts that include images of Aboriginal people, their cultural objects and designs).

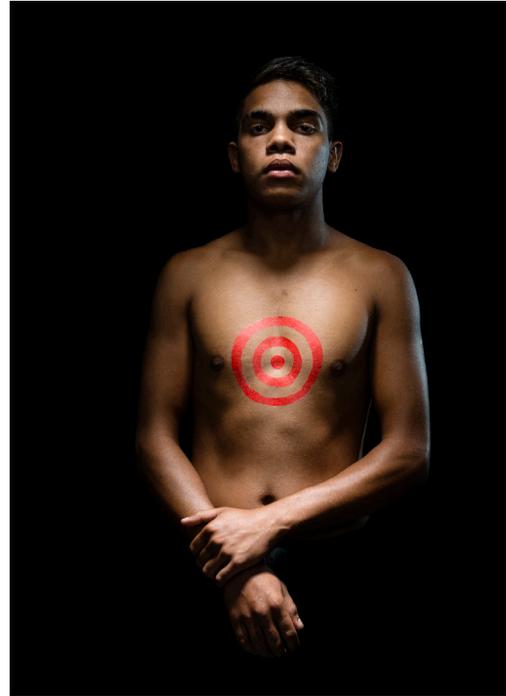
The results are both stunning and stinging, ubiquitous and other worldly, familiar and provocative, characteristics common to Albert's practice whatever medium he deploys.

Visitors to the exhibition are welcomed by two guardian figures, *Nguma* and *Yabu*. The titles translate to 'father' and 'mother', respectively, in Gurramay one of Albert's ancestral languages from Far North Queensland. Recast from the artist's vast collection of Aboriginalia these two glass lamps offer another life to the man and woman originally captured as racist stereotypes. Transformed into glass, their frosted shades become glowing halos, elevating the two individuals into the heavenly divine. Albert usually creates a second life for the people captured in Aboriginalia through the inclusion of text, giving a voice to the dispossessed. *Nguma* and *Yabu* are accompanied in the exhibition by arrangements of words on glass panels that include the phrases 'invisible is my favourite colour', 'exotic other', and 'sorry'. The works are a quiet chorus for contemplation while *Nguma* and *Yabu* remain silent and steadfast. Solid and transparent, they appear to be asking us: What do we see? What can't we see?



Accompanying the text pieces and lamps are three boomerang shaped tables nestled together in the mid-20th-century style from which they are cast. The tables are a recreation of furniture manufactured at Aboriginal Enterprises (1952–1968) under the direction of business owner, Aboriginal activist and artist Bill Onus (Australian, 1906–1968, Yorta Yorta people). Onus established Aboriginal Enterprises in Belgrave at the foot of Victoria’s Dandenong Ranges in the early 1950s employing Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to produce and sell a range of boomerangs, ceramics, velvet paintings and furnishings.² Aboriginal Enterprises was an extraordinarily successful business promoting Aboriginal art and culture decades before the market proliferation of Western Desert painting in the 1980s. While the vast majority of Aboriginalia was produced by European makers, either racist or sadly ignorant of their offensive stereotyping of Aboriginal people and their culture, some items of Aboriginalia, such as these boomerang tables, were also produced as objects of pride and celebration of Aboriginal culture at Aboriginal Enterprises. Recast in glass, Albert’s tables are an homage to Onus’s elegant modernist designs and effort to promote recognition of Aboriginal people and understanding of culture. The tables remind us that while some Aboriginalia is blatantly sinister other objects come from a space of love and respect. It is what you know that changes the story.

Installed at the heart of the exhibition, *Brother (The invisible prodigal son)* II is a stained glass window that features a defiant, proud, and strong young Aboriginal man with a red target through his chest. This piece is one of a series that premiered on the grounds of the National Art School for *NIRIN*, the 22nd Biennale of Sydney curated by First Nations artist Brook Andrew. In preparation for *NIRIN*, Albert visited the school that has occupied the site of the former Darlinghurst Gaol since 1922. The central chapel, built in 1873, features a stained glass window with its central subject the prodigal son, a parable of Jesus that reminds us of the power of acceptance and the importance of family. For Albert, the connection with his *Brothers* series, created almost a decade ago in response to police violence against a group of Aboriginal teenage boys in Sydney’s Kings Cross, was immediate.³



Tony Albert, *Brother (Our past)*, 2013, pigment prints on paper, ed. of 3 each 150.0 x 100.0 cm. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf.



The *Brothers series* ‘...allude to the holy trinity – strong yet powerful, bathed in light, yet still innocent and vulnerable. I wanted to immortalise our people who are all too often written out of history.’⁴ In early 2019, Albert also projected images from his *Brothers series* onto the epic brutalist façade of the National Gallery of Australia. Images from the *Brothers series* also won Albert the prestigious Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards in 2014. Albert regularly reuses images and materials in his practice and one might expect this could dilute their power. For the *Brothers series*, this repetition has the opposite effect. This series continues to be potent and relevant because institutional and systemic violence experienced by Aboriginal people, and particularly men, is unchanging. While Albert was resident at Glassworks news of Warlpiri man Kumanjayi Walker shot dead by Northern Territory police sparked protests and fund-raising initiatives across the county.⁵ This month, America is burning after the death of African American man George Floyd at the hands of white police officers. Another brother with his life cut short, another too many. We see him, but can we see the system that perpetuates such violence?

Australia’s optimism but ultimate impotence for change were also central concerns for the artist Gordon Bennett (1955-2014) who Albert directly references in his five-part piece *Nuance*. Bennett is best known for his large paintings of the late-1980s and early-1990s that championed quotational strategies to re-present the history of Australia. In these works, Bennett rejected the Modernist concept of progress: the assumption that humanity was, as a matter of course, engaged in an ongoing collective advancement.⁶ Rather Bennett’s practice sought to expose hidden truths and biased structures that today we acknowledge as white privilege. Three decades ago, Bennett was at the forefront of a movement to broaden the mainstream understanding of Australia’s history of massacres and violence against this country’s first peoples. His painting of such atrocities, *The nine ricochets (fall down Black Fella, jump up White Fella)* (1991), won him the Moët et Chandon Australian Art Fellowship at the National Gallery of Australia, which at the time was the most prestigious art prize in the country.

Over the past three decades, many other artists, historians, broadcasters, curators, writers and poets have worked to broaden the mainstream understanding of this history of Australia. Today, within our cultural organisations, government departments, universities and other civic forums we regularly acknowledge the continuous culture of First Nations peoples. This year we may even have a referendum to give First Nations people a voice to parliament as requested in the Uluru Statement from the Heart in 2017. We can and should feel optimistic about these recognitions and important changes in our society’s understanding of the past, present and potential future. In their artistic practices, Bennett and Albert are not proposing we be cynical, but rather measured in our appreciation of these changes. Albert’s *Nuance* re-casts the head of an Aboriginal man in five glass colours from black, brown to clear. The head is cast from a decorative piece of Aboriginalia, once used as a wall hanging in Australian homes. In Bennett’s original *Untitled (Nuance)* (1992) eight photographs show the artist removing a skein of dried glue from his face. Underneath these images, Bennett has paired monochrome panels that transition from black to white with six inscribed with the word ‘nuance’. In both Albert and Bennett, there is the promise of transformation but in actuality very little change.

In *Duty of Care* Albert demonstrates generosity through his practice, not by offering ready solutions to past and present traumas but providing objects, images and ideas that drive urgent and necessary conversations. The artist urges us to recognise the invisible forces that bind us, both strong and fragile, to reckon with our histories to find a better future together. Glass is both fragile and strong and like racism it can be broken.

Sally Brand
June 2020





Tony Albert, *Brothers (The Prodigal Son)*, 2020, glass, lead, photographic decal, steel, stone. Commissioned by the Biennale of Sydney with generous support from the Australia Council for the Arts, and Create NSW, and generous assistance from The Medich Foundation. Courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf. Fabricated at Canberra Glassworks.



Tony Albert, artist in residence, Canberra Glassworks. *Brothers (The Prodigal Son)* - work in progress, 2019

Essay footnotes:

1. Tony Albert: Archibald Prize 2016, Art Gallery of New South Wales, <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/prizes/archibald/2016/29737/>
2. Sylvia Kleinert. 'Aboriginal Enterprises: negotiating an urban Aboriginality'. *Aboriginal History* 34 (2010): 171–96.
3. Sally Brand. *Tony Albert: Brothers. exh. cat. Sydney: Sullivan & Strumpf*, 2013.
4. ARTIST INSIDER: 22ND BIENNALE OF SYDNEY: NIRIN, INTERVIEW WITH ARTIST TONY ALBERT, 2020, National Art School, <https://nas.edu.au/tony-albert-interview-nirin/>
5. Lauren Roberts, *Yuendumu police shooting sees officer Zachary Rolfe charged with murder, but what happens next?*, 2019, Australian Broadcasting Commission, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-11-16/yuendumu-police-shooting-charges-laid-against-zach-rolfe/11705986>
6. Gordon Bennett & Ian McLean. *The art of Gordon Bennett*. Roseville East: Craftsman House, 1996.





Duty of Care installation, Canberra Glassworks, 2020
Artworks by Tony Albert, exhibition curated by Sally Brand



Tony Albert

Nguma

2020

cast and blown glass, painted steel and commercial
light fitting

edition of three



Tony Albert

Yabu

2020

cast and blown glass, painted steel and commercial
light fitting

edition of three





Tony Albert

Duty of care

2020

fused, coldworked and constructed glass, ink



Tony Albert

Brother (The invisible prodigal son) II

2020

glass, digital print glass decal, lead, painted steel

A/P





Tony Albert

Uncodified (which way same way)

2020

sandblasted recycled glass





Tony Albert

Uncodified (Duty of Care)
 2020
 sandblasted recycled glass



Tony Albert

Uncodified (I want to beLIEve)
 2020
 sandblasted recycled glass





Tony Albert

Nuance
2020
cast glass

edition of three



Tony Albert

Nuance (detail)
2020
cast glass





Tony Albert

Piracy

2020

sandblasted commemorative plates





Tony Albert

Piracy (detail)

2020

sandblasted commemorative plates



Exhibition partners

Supported by



Australian Government
Visual Arts and Craft Strategy

Canberra Glassworks is supported by the ACT Government through artsACT and the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

Cover image:

Tony Albert, Brother (The invisible prodigal son) II, 2020.
glass, digital print glass decal, lead, painted steel

Tony Albert is represented by Sullivan+Strumpf

Photography by Brenton McGeachie

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Sally Brand, curatorial support

Spike Deane, casting

Jon Ely, metal work

Rose-Mary Faulkner, photographic decals

Louis Grant, EASS resident

Georgena James, metal work

Peter Nilsson, cold working

Ruth Oliphant, stained glass

Kirstie Rea, kiln forming, cold working and mentoring

Tom Rowney, blowing and technical

Luna Ryan, casting

Canberra Glassworks staff

Sullivan+Strumpf

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