



Australian artist and political activist Richard Bell was born in 1953 in Charleville, Queensland and currently lives in Brisbane. He is a member of the Kamilaroi, Kooma, Jiman and Gurang-Gurang nations. Bell works across a variety of media including painting, installation, performance and video to address the politics of Aboriginal land rights and identity. He often challenges our preconceived ideas of Aboriginal art and culture by combining western art styles with traditional Aboriginal designs and symbols.

Bell's painting *The Sign Says It* is a powerful image depicting a group of Aboriginal men walking forward; two of them hold a placard with the words "ASK – US – WHAT – WE WANT". This painting is based on a historical black and white photograph taken at a protest march in Darwin in the late 1960s. Gurindji people travelled from Wave Hill in the Northern Territory, 600km south of Darwin, to demonstrate against a Bill before the Northern Territory Parliament, which would lead, if not passed, to a loss of Aboriginal reserve land. The high key colours used by Bell transform the monochrome newspaper photograph into a striking image of protest and power.

image: Richard Bell, Australia, 1953, Kamilaroi/Kooma, northern Riverine region, Jiman/Gurang Gurang, north east region, Queensland. *The Sign Says It*, 2017, Brisbane, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 200.0 x 200.0 cm; Acquisition through TARNANTHI: Festival of Contemporary Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art supported by BHP 2017, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. © Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery

DID YOU KNOW?

The men holding the placards in Bell's painting are Aboriginal activists Tom Thompson, Clancy Roberts and Davis Daniels. Each had their own experience of injustice and, alongside their brothers Dexter Davis and Jacob and Phillip Roberts, were involved in the Northern Territory Council for Aboriginal Rights during the 1960s. The Davis and Roberts brothers brought ideas forward about improved living standards, equal pay and full control and ownership of reserves for Aboriginal people. Together with Vincent Lingiari who was a member of the Gurindji people and an Aboriginal land rights leader, Dexter Davis brought public attention to land rights and self-determination for the Aboriginal people on Wave Hill.

TIP For more information on the Wave Hill walk off and the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 see the interpretive resource on Mervyn Bishop.



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RESOURCES

ABC Radio – an activist masquerading as an artist

<http://ab.co/2wRVyJk>

Art Gallery of New South Wales – Richard Bell Profile

<http://bit.ly/2uKmrBn>

Colour Theory with Richard Bell DVD

<http://bit.ly/2w4I5By>

Creative Spirits – Famous Aboriginal people, activists and role models

<http://bit.ly/2vFlKrX>

Museum of Contemporary Art – Richard Bell

<http://bit.ly/2uRTuzH>

National Museum of Australia – Collaborating for Indigenous Rights

<http://bit.ly/2i7FL5I>

Reconciliation Australia – Let's Talk... Land Rights

<http://bit.ly/2vEUqdu>

KEY LITERACY WORDS

Aboriginal Land Rights Act

Activist

Appropriation

High key colours

Pop art

Protest art

EARLY YEARS

RESPONDING

List the colours in this painting from darkest to lightest.

MAKING

Create a portrait of someone special in your life using different shades of red, yellow and blue.

PRIMARY

RESPONDING

Protesting can increase visibility of a cause, demonstrate power, build relationships and energize participants. Identify some protests that have happened in Australia or elsewhere in the world. What were the outcomes of these protests?

Name something you would like to protest about.

Bell has transformed a newspaper image by replacing black and white with bright primary colours. Why do you think Bell changed the image in this way?

Investigate the photograph *Prime Minister Gough Whitlam pours soil into the hands of traditional owner Vincent Lingiari* by Mervyn Bishop. How is this image connected to Bell's painting?

MAKING

Bell sometimes appropriates other artists such as Roy Lichtenstein and Jasper Johns. Locate other works of art similar to *The Sign Says It*. What similarities do they share? Create a portrait of your family using a similar style.

The Sign Says It was based on a historical black and white photograph taken at a protest in Darwin in 1960s. Locate an iconic image captured from a moment in Australia's history. Using Photoshop transform this photograph into a striking image that includes a bright colour palette.



image: Mervyn Bishop, Australia, 1945, Wailwan people, New South Wales, *Prime Minister Gough Whitlam pours soil into the hand of traditional owner Vincent Lingiari*, 1975, Northern Territory, gelatin silver photograph, 50.5 x 40.5 cm (sheet); Board Members Fund 2009, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. © Photograph by Mervyn G Bishop, Courtesy the Australian Government

RESPONDING

Research the protests that occurred at Wave Hill. What were the people at Wave Hill protesting about? Describe their aims, strategies and outcomes. Investigate other significant moments in Australian history in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have struggled for their rights.

Bell began as an activist, before realising his ideas would reach a bigger audience and have greater power, through art. Similarly, Reko Rennie left journalism to pursue art as he too felt he would have more power as an artist than as a journalist. Compare both artists' work in relation to these statements. What power have these artists gained by sharing their art with a wide audience?

Using works of art in the collection discuss how artists have responded to the history of Aboriginal people's rights and freedoms post 1950.

In 2003 when Bell won the Indigenous Arts Award he stated: *"It is my job as an artist to provoke thought and discussion"*. Select another work of art in the Gallery that provokes thought and discussion. With a friend discuss some strategies the artist has used to convey meaning and prompt a response from the audience.

MAKING

Bell appropriates other artists and describes his style as Pop Art. Investigate other examples of Pop Art. Use these styles to create a work of art that responds to a contemporary issue or event.

Text is a common element in works of art by Bell. Compare how other artists have used text in their work. Create a work of art where text is the focal point.

Investigate other Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander role models or activists who have influenced the next generation of Australian youth. Cathy Freeman, Adam Goodes, Eddie Mabo, Archie Roach and David Unaipon are just a few. Create a portrait using a multi-layered stencil of your chosen role model or activist that celebrates their achievements.



image detail: Reko Rennie, Kamilaroi people, New South Wales, OA_CAMO, Adelaide, 2017; Commissioned for TARNANTHI: Festival of Contemporary Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art supported by BHP 2017, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. Courtesy of the artist and blackartprojects, Melbourne, photo: Saul Steed



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