

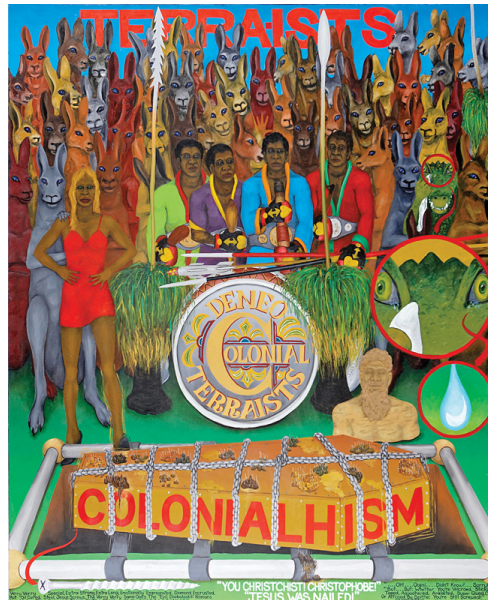
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Richard Bell on Gordon Hookey Reports: One on One

By Richard Bell
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GORDON HOOKEY, *Terrorists Colonialism*, 2008,
Oil on linen, 350 × 290 cm.

Photo by Carl Warner. Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

Gordon Hookey makes kick-arse art.

The first time Gordy and I met was at an art show at Queensland Aboriginal Creations in the late 1980s—before he went to art college. He was working for the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service as a ranger. I remember him because there weren't many blackfella park rangers around at that time, and we've been friends ever since. Years later in 2004, Gordy was the first artist invited to join proppaNOW, the Brisbane-based Aboriginal art collective, with Jennifer Herd, Vernon Ah Kee and myself.

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It would be remiss of me to write something about Gordon Hookey without telling a couple of yarns. Less than two months out from a big solo show, he called our mutual dealer Josh Milani to change the entire theme of his show. He wanted to make paintings about policemen getting bravery awards for brutalizing Aboriginal people, but the show was only five weeks away. Gordy and Josh then met up at a Vietnamese restaurant and the artist started piling a large bowl of fresh chili into his pho without even looking. When Josh pointed that out, the artist announced: "I'm the Murri from Cloncurry who can eat the most curry. Indeed, indeed, back in Cloncurry my nickname was chili, on account of the enormous amount of chili I can eat." With that, he continued expressing his outrage: he wanted to exact an artistic revenge. He was gesticulating wildly, talking about symbolic revenge and restitution when Josh noticed his face was getting redder and redder. Josh didn't know if it was the chili or the passion. Suddenly Gordy sneezed. A piece of chili had lodged behind his sinuses. Concerned, Josh asked: "Shall I call an ambulance?" Unable to respond, Gordy let out a loud noise when that piece of chili shot across the room. These days, the proppaNOW mob often utter the words "indeed, indeed."

Second yarn. We had a proppaNOW show at Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute in Adelaide in 2010. Gordy always used to wear a red shirt to his openings and, on that day, I happened to bring a red shirt and a blue shirt. He asked me what I was going to wear and when I showed him the red one, he got upset. Gordy turned up looking sad in a black shirt and he's never worn a red shirt to his openings since.

The art of Gordon Hookey is big. It's bold. It's bright. And it's funny. Gordy's been around the art scene in Australia since the early 1990s. During this time, he focused on residencies both domestically and internationally, developing his visual language and accumulating dozens of visual diaries packed with hundreds of ideas—90 percent of which he'll never use.

His work is visually, linguistically, metaphorically and culturally strong. Many of the characters in his work are based on real-life people he has engaged with while growing up in and around Aboriginal communities. And it's widely recognized that many of those characters exist in every such community. Consequently, we recognize ourselves, our families, our friends and our communities in his works. But we also recognize the colonizer. Uncompromisingly strident in his critique of the colonial world that surrounds him, Gordy produces hard-hitting, dynamic canvases that are definitely not for the fainthearted (or for those who prefer their art content-free). His works pack a punch and are visually loaded, with each identifiable section offering up thoughts, questions, ideas and ideals. Humor is also one of Gordy's most powerful weapons. It is laced liberally throughout his work.

There is nothing flashy or pretentious about Gordy's art or his life. Most often cautious and gentlemanly in social settings, he dons a cape and a superhero mask to deliver action-packed, metaphor-laden, occasionally lascivious, lusciously layered paintings that are monumental—sometimes, they can't even fit into the gallery. He very often uses text in which he brutalizes the English language. He twists and contorts words, crushing conventional meaning while describing a new, powerful, empowering, and often engaging Aboriginal English.

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In May, Gordy's work will be part of the group show "Frontier Imaginaries"—a collaboration between Brisbane's Institute of Modern Art and Queensland University of Technology's Art Museum—which features 100 works that describe Aboriginal history in Queensland from an Aboriginal perspective. I hope he wears a red shirt to the opening.