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Brisbane-based Indigenous art collective proppaNOW wins prestigious global prize

Curator at school which awards Jane Lombard Prize says the artists' work would 'galvanise arts and social justice communities' in New York

By Joe Hinchliffe - October 21st, 2022



Members of Indigenous art collective proppaNOW (from left) Gordon Hookey, Jennifer Herd, Tony Albert, Megan Cope, Richard Bell and Vernon Ah Kee. The Brisbane-based artists have won the prestigious 2022–2024 Jane Lombard Prize for Art and Social Justice. Photograph: Rhett Hammerton/proppaNOW

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Indigenous Australian art collective proppaNOW has won a prestigious prize that will take them to New York next year after the selecting jury found their practices would serve as “models for political empowerment throughout the world”.

But don't expect traditional Aboriginal artworks.

Established in Brisbane in 2003, proppaNOW emerged to give voice to urban-based Indigenous artists. Nearly two decades later, that voice has gone global, with the collective awarded the 2022–2024 Jane Lombard Prize for Art and Social Justice on Friday evening in the United States.

Girramay, Yidinji and Kuku-Yalanji artist Tony Albert is a current member of the collective, alongside co-founder Richard Bell, Vernon Ah Kee, Jennifer Herd, Gordon Hookey and Megan Cope. He says the proppaNOW mission statement “ascribes to an Aboriginal aesthetic that is not traditionally seen as Aboriginal”.

“We talk a lot about social issues, commentary and politics,” Albert says.

“We're very much about the here and now.”

Carin Kuoni, chief curator at The New School's Vera List Center for Art and Politics, which awards the prize, says the artists' body of work “enacts principles that are only now beginning to gain traction in other parts of the world” and would “galvanise arts and social justice communities” in New York.

“proppaNOW's practice is exemplary for communities throughout the world precisely because of their determination to look at injustice in a systemic way – examining institutions, power structures, and social conventions – and they do so boldly by having art deliver the arguments,” she says.

“In the US, we're beginning to grasp the lasting impact of systemic racism and colonialism.”

As well as hosting an exhibition of their work, the Jane Lombard Prize will enable proppaNOW to undertake a short-term New York City residency, while their work will be integrated into classes.

The diversity of proppaNOW's work is apparent in the OCCURRENT AFFAIR* exhibition for which the collective won the prize.

Gordon Hookey's brash canvases carrying overt messages for settler Australia – “THE AUSTIKA” emblazoned above a southern cross constellation on the national flag – sit beside a dazzling installation of chrome and mirror by Megan Cope, fish falling in delicate swirls from the ceiling, and haunting goolburris, or emus, sculpted from barbed wire by the late Laurie Nilsen.

Sinister riot shields crosshatched with charcoal by Vernon Ah Kee dangle near Richard Bell's portrait of a maniacal Joh Bjelke-Petersen clutching a shotgun. Jennifer Herd's delicate pin hole designs on white paper speak with powerful subtlety of frontier violence and resistance and contrast markedly with

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Albert's colourful map of pre-colonial Australia upon which Scrooge McDuck chips a dollar sign from the rock at its centre.

For all their differences, Albert says what unites the works is that each does not conform to the "stigma that's still attached" to Aboriginal art. Hence the need, all those years ago, to form a collective.

"We believe we are Aboriginal artists, we want that attachment and that's really important," he says.

"[But it] was very challenging for institutions to understand where our work fitted."

Banding together worked. In the years since, each artist has carved their names onto the Australian art scene and, increasingly, abroad.

Bell – whose replica Tent Embassy is heading to the Tate in London next year – is in the process of moving to Europe, where he says there is "significantly more interest" in his work. He believes this is partly because his blunt political messages – "YOU CAN GO NOW!" – don't make audiences as uncomfortable there as here.

"The Europeans are not implicated in the colonisation of this place, other than the British," he says. "And even they're not implicated in what's going on at present."

Albert says that the opportunity to travel has "changed or challenged" the perspectives of the proppaNOW artists.

"When you look internationally at what we are doing, it doesn't just become about being Aboriginal, it's about that minority and periphery of society," he says. "But it takes leaving the country to understand that."

And Albert says the recognition of the Jane Lombard Prize is not only "phenomenal" but would reignite collaboration among old friends.

"It really blew us away, it lit a bit of a fire under us to keep going and pull the band back together," he says.

Kuoni says students and faculty at the New York university will spend the coming year preparing for proppaNOW's arrival "to ensure [we] will be ready to receive them and provide a context of public scholarship".

"We're thrilled about proppaNOW's practice not because it is Australian or Aboriginal, but because it points the way to how art can contribute to more inclusive, just communities," she says. "There is a lot for us to learn from them."

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*OCCURRENT AFFAIR was originally held at the UQ Art Museum exhibition last year and will be touring Australia from 2023-25 in partnership with Museums & Galleries NSW.