

RICHARD BELL'S EMBASSY

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PHOTOGRAPHY **MICK RICHARDS**

126

'NEVER SEND TO KNOW FOR WHOM the bell tolls; It tolls for thee.' (John Donne, 1624). 'Toll' is a curious word, an imposed cost, a price, an expense, a demand, a payment, a tariff, an impost, a tax ... but it's also the sound a bell makes ... and here it's the voice of Richard Bell, who, along with all other first nation peoples, is paying a heavy toll indeed – one imposed by a redundant colonial mindset.

As an Australian-born person of European heritage, I'm embarrassed by the insulting Union Jack in the corner of our national flag and the silly colonial apron strings of having in place a Governor General, the Queen's representative in Australia. I can't even begin to imagine the hurt, humiliation and disgust disenfranchised blackfellas must feel; the insufferable toll they've paid for colonisation. These are insurmountably complex issues; impossible to do any real justice to in my feeble essay, so I'm making a few cursory observations only.

Bell proposed a monumental artwork to the Australia Council for the Arts, with the support and stewardship of Aboriginal curator Clothilde Bullen, to represent Australia at the 2019 Venice Biennale. 'My proposal is critiquing the processes and inner workings of the art world, that's what I do,' Bell said.

It is titled 'We Don't Really Need This/ EMBASSY: BELL Invites' and staged in two locations, the Australian Pavilion in La Giardini and the island of Certosa. I asked Bell why Venice was important to him and what he expected his proposal to achieve. He said, 'It's important for the validation of my work, being able to represent my

country on the international stage and to bring more attention to the issues I'm discussing in my work. I expected it would be an irresistible prop for visitors to appropriate, tapping into the current vogue for "selfies" being a social media hit, hopefully going viral.'

The proposal was not successful as the officially commissioned artwork for the 2019 Biennale. That honour was given to the Sydney/Paris based video, installation and performance artist, Angelica Mesiti. Her appointment is the first since contentious selection rules were introduced last year. These apparently stemmed from a directive of the Venice Biennale themselves that the commissioning must be entirely from within the Australia Council, so as to preclude any perception of favour by vested interests. Wondering if missing out on being commissioned for Venice made him feel hard done by, I asked Bell, who replied, 'Gee I don't have much time to think about that. I actually do stuff, rather than dwell on things. I try to have a positive approach and not get caught up in negativity. It's something that took me a long time to learn.'

The first and major component of his proposal is 'We Don't Really Need This', an architectural intervention imposed on the existing Australian Pavilion by wrapping it in chains and thus excluding entry. Chains are heavily loaded devices in an artwork (or reality); they are used to hold things in place, such as a ship at anchor, as a lifting device or in the Australian bush in a process inanely referred to as 'pulling scrub' dragging a long length of heavy anchor chain between two bulldozers and brutalising the native landscape, as only foolish white men would.

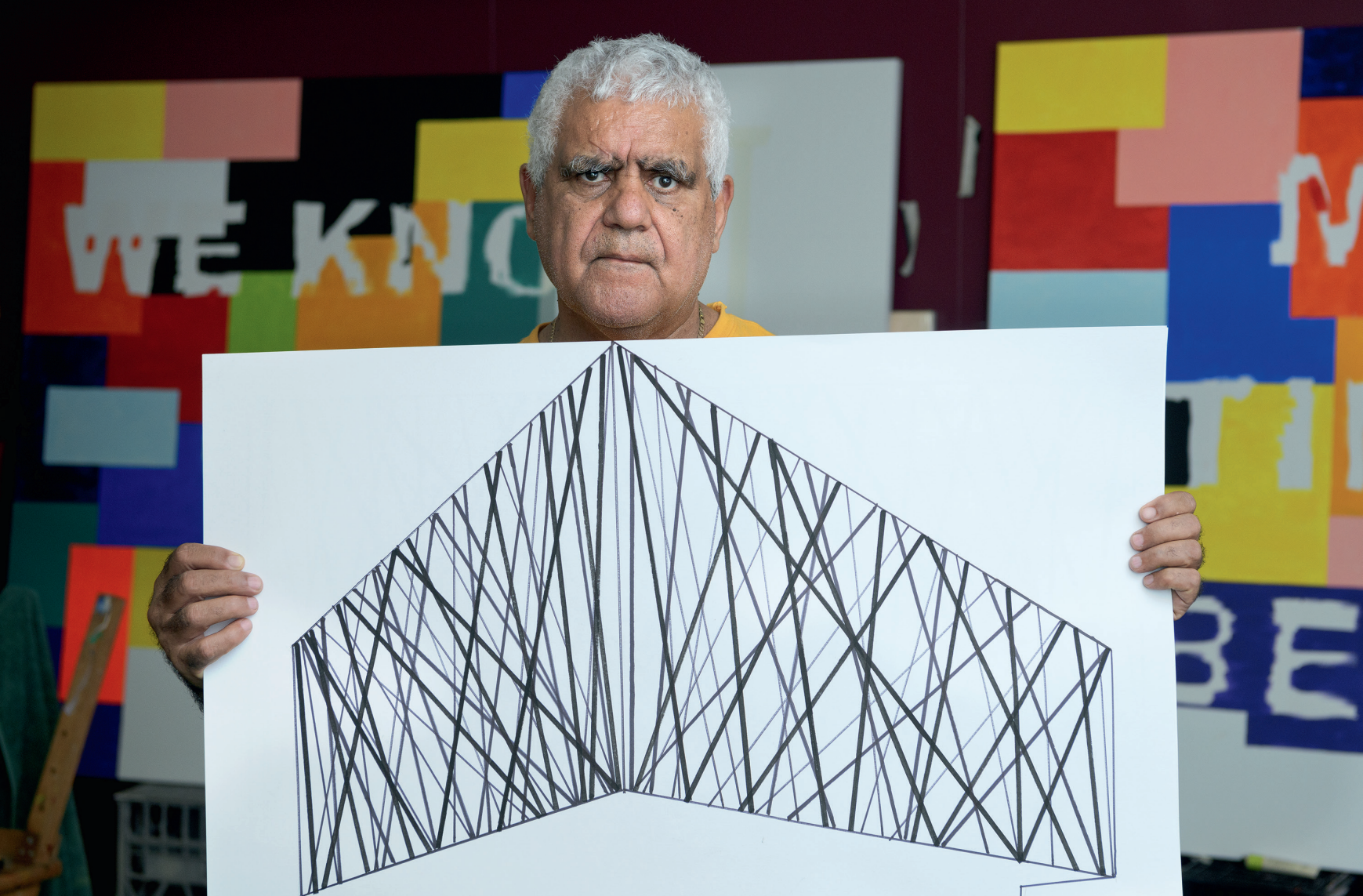
Chains are used to restrain a dog or other animal, and more darkly they are synonymous with immobilisation of people, incarceration or slavery.

While the Pavilion is shut down, a conversation about matters beyond the confines of the Venice Biennale must ensue. In consumer culture it's well known the best way to generate desire is to create exclusivity. There is a void inside; we all know it exists, but it is inaccessible. It's an embodiment of the emptiness that must fill the hearts of all Aboriginal peoples who've been colonised and dispossessed, an emptiness that is palpable when you think about it for long.

In an art historical context, the mocked-up images of Bell's proposal suggest Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum, Berlin, 2001, that exhibits the social, political and cultural history of the Jews in Germany. Here, diagonal lines criss-cross the exterior design of its architecture representating the railway tracks that ferried people to Nazi death camps. Bell's vision also invokes Christo and Jeanne-Claude's wrapped Reichstag in Berlin, 1995, and Pont-Neuf in Paris, 1985, or Santiago Sierra's 'Wall Enclosing a Space', Venice Biennale, 2003. For this, Sierra bricked up the entrance to the Spanish pavilion, prohibiting entry to all who didn't hold a Spanish passport, thus bringing into question the idea of a homogenous egalitarian gathering of sovereign states celebrating fine art as an international family at the Biennale.

'EMBASSY: BELL Invites' was originally proposed to be installed on the island of Certosa concurrent with the pavilion work, as a companion artwork previously shown at





02

but not limited to Monash University Museum of Art in 2013; Performa 15, New York City in 2015; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney and the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam, Amsterdam, 2016. It's an homage to and continuing conversation with the original Aboriginal Embassy of Australia Day 1972, when four young men erected a beach umbrella on the lawns outside Parliament House in Canberra and put up a sign, which read 'Aboriginal Embassy'.

'EMBASSY: BELL Invites' will present a political program that will be developed into the next installment in another location, around themes of Indigenous sovereignty, forced migration, and the effects of late capitalism. Professor Gary Foley has written: 'Bell's Aboriginal Embassy project is in certain ways in keeping with the politically educative nature of much of his other work and the theatrical and artistic aspects of the 1972 Embassy.'

From an outsider's perspective, Bell appears to be a provocateur of the staid and timid, applied at times with a wicked sense of

humour. He's a passionate and deeply sensitive Aboriginal man disappointed by the mediocrity of society, understandably disappointed at the snail's pace of advancement for equity and recognition of his sovereign people, the lie of terra nullius, and the twin insults of restrictions placed on freedom of Aboriginal communities via the Federal Government's Intervention of 2007 and its Basics Card of 2017.

A hard-working and deep-thinking artist, Bell freely admits he's discriminatory and matter of fact, a man with the courage of his convictions. He makes purposeful sweeping generalisations about whitefellas and the colonial mindset, a conscious provocation. Some people may consider that racist, but he says, 'To be racist you have to be in a position of power.'

We talked about how he is pigeonholed as 'an angry, bitter, old man' (as he facetiously puts it). Quite simply it isn't true; I found him a nice bloke and it doesn't take long talking with him for this to become apparent. Bell was bemused by the irony of the suggestion that he could be thought of as

being in an empowered position, via his prominent art practice. The art world is a very precipitous world to inhabit, and it's a position he doesn't take lightly.

For some reason, considering Richard Bell's practice I'm reminded of Eddie Murphy in the classic film *48 Hours* (1982). Armed with a borrowed police badge he confronts a cowboy in a redneck bar saying, 'You know what I am? I'm your worst fuckin' nightmare man, a nigger with a badge.'

For me, Richard Bell embodies *that* attitude ... confrontational, intelligent, fearlessly critical, a spokesman for his brothers in and out of the art world ... but he's not acting! ■

02-03 Richard Bell with his 2019 Venice Biennale proposal, photograph Mick Richards

Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

