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*Artpolitical Environment: Richard Bell and Emory Douglas's Burnett Lane Mural*

**ABSTRACT**

Black activists have long crafted systems of identification that intersect politics and aesthetics as a means of promoting social change for oppressed communities around the world. This article uses the global history of black political aesthetics as a framework for interpreting the collaborative practice of two artist activists—Aboriginal Australian Richard Bell (b.1954) and African American Emory Douglas (b.1943). It is the first study to examine their collaboration and interpret it as a mode of political aesthetics. In doing so, it argues, through an analysis of their Burnett Lane mural, that Bell and Douglas create *artpolitical environments*, in which they synthesise their visual languages, combine overlapping influences, reference historic Black Power imagery, and present internationally recognisable symbolism to collectively challenge global inequalities. The concept of an *artpolitical environment*, termed by the American philosopher Crispin Sartwell, is discussed in relation to the Marcus Garvey movement of the early twentieth century, and conceptualised through what French philosopher Jacques Rancière's calls the distribution of the sensible.

In 2011, Richard Bell and Emory Douglas painted *A White Hero for Black Australia* (Fig. 1)—a collaborative recreation of an iconic image from Australia and North America's shared histories of Black Power. The source image for the mural was taken during the 200-metre medal ceremony at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City, where white Australian athlete Peter Norman stood in solidarity with African-American athletes, Tommy Smith and John Carlos, to protest racial inequality and to project globally a message of black empowerment. The image captures the moment the US National Anthem began and Smith and Carlos bowed their heads and raised their fists in an emblematic gesture of Black Power. Wearing black gloves to represent the strength and unity of black minorities, Carlos also has beads around his neck, signifying the global history of lynching. The three athletes are shown with badges on their chests that feature the words: 'We are the Olympic Project for Human Rights'. As professional athletes continue to transform sporting events into sites of sociopolitical protest, the Olympic image remains poignant.

This article examines Bell and Douglas' collaborative art practice as a mode of political aesthetics, and argues that the artists create *artpolitical environments* that cohere around globally familiar symbolism. The image described above is an *artpolitical environment* in

itself because it features multiple visual symbols that collectively challenge the realities of oppression, while also resonating with a global community of participants. Bell and Douglas enhance this environment by combining their own visual languages in such a way that they remain individually recognisable—like the iconic moment they depict, it is a coming together of differences to fight for a common cause. Douglas' bold black graphic lines, used to render the figures as larger than life, are superimposed onto Bell's customary background of deliberately generic Aboriginal lines, swirls and large yellow circles, which appear as spotlights to emphasise the heroic actions of Smith, Carlos and Norman. Importantly, the artists have reduced the original image to foreground its visual symbols. The raised fists, black gloves, badges and beads operate as legible signs that together signify the historic scene. As does the year 1968, which simultaneously places the image in time, and also stands as a symbol for seismic social and political change. In recreating this historic image, Bell and Douglas rearticulate its message of global solidarity and black empowerment, while also utilising its internationally recognisable symbolism as a vehicle for social change.

What the American philosopher Crispin Sartwell has termed 'artpolitical environments' have long characterised the global history of black subjectivities and social change.<sup>1</sup> From the Marcus Garvey movement of the early twentieth century to the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s, black activists have constructed systems of identification that intersect politics and aesthetics. It is through these intersecting systems they attempt to transform the lives of black minorities and colonially subjugated black nations around the world.

### **Bell and Douglas' Art Activism**

Douglas was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1943 and moved to the San Francisco Bay Area when he was eight years old. It was during his time at Youth Training School in Ontario, California that he first developed an interest in art and design. Working in the print shop and receiving lessons in typography and illustration inspired Douglas to enrol in commercial art at the City College of San Francisco.<sup>2</sup> In 1967, he joined the Black Panther Party and became their Revolutionary Artist and Minister of Culture (1967–1980).<sup>3</sup> Today, Douglas continues to work after more than fifty years of political art making and activism, an endeavour to which Bell is also dedicated.

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<sup>1</sup> Sartwell, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Lampert, 2013, p.201.

<sup>3</sup> Lampert, 2013, p.201–202. The Black Panther Party is the most well known and iconic organisation of the Black Power movement, which had been founded a year earlier in Oakland, California.

Bell was born in Charleville, Queensland, in 1954 and is a member of the Kamilaroi, Kooma, Jiman and Gurang Gurang communities.<sup>4</sup> In the 1970s and '80s, Bell became politicised through his involvement in the Aboriginal Rights movement. He interacted with black activists and artists (including Paul Coe, Gary Foley, Jenny Munro, Kevin Gilbert and Bob Mazza), participated in demonstrations—such as those against the 1982 Commonwealth Games in Brisbane—and worked at the New South Wales Aboriginal Legal Service, a welfare initiative modelled on those established by the African-American Black Panther Party.<sup>5</sup> It was not until 1987 that Bell became involved in the visual arts—initially by making and marketing Aboriginal souvenirs, before realising that his political message could ‘reach a bigger and more influential audience through [fine] art’.<sup>6</sup> Similar to Douglas, Bell has channelled his individual practice into collective participation as a founding member of the Brisbane-based Indigenous art collectives the Campfire Group (1990–) and proppaNOW (2003–).

Both Bell and Douglas have dedicated their multidimensional practices as artist activists towards the fight for black political and social rights. Their activist art can therefore be seen as art that ‘engages in the “real” world, while attempting to blur the boundaries and hierarchies set up by social, political, [ideological] and economic systems’.<sup>7</sup> They both attempt to convince their audience of current injustices that necessitate social change.<sup>8</sup> In this regard, Bell and Douglas are involved in what Nancy Love and Mark Mattern identify as ‘prefigurative politics’. Prefigurative politics is defined as art that challenges established social systems, while simultaneously prefiguring a desired society.<sup>9</sup> This concept also relates to Martin Randy’s identification of the two political temperaments in contemporary artistic practice—the interventionist and the utopian. Whereas the former makes ‘the familiar strange’ in confronting prevailing rules and norms, the latter makes ‘the strange familiar’ in imagining the possibility of a different world.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Reilly, 2011, pp.10–13 for an in-depth discussion of Bell’s early childhood and involvement in the Australian Black Power movement.

<sup>5</sup> Reilly, 2011, p.12.

<sup>6</sup> Reilly, 2011, p.12.

<sup>7</sup> Gonzalez and Posner, 2006, p.213.

<sup>8</sup> Mesch, 2013, p.8.

<sup>9</sup> Love and Mattern, 2013, p.11.

<sup>10</sup> Randy, 2015, p.5.

In their individual practices, both Bell and Douglas have formed aesthetic systems that constantly move between interventionist tactics and utopian imaginings. As Revolutionary Artist and Minister of Culture, Douglas was responsible for creating the Black Panther Party's images, graphics and posters, along with the layout, design and production of their weekly *Black Panther* newspaper.<sup>11</sup> This visual iconography was aligned with the Black Arts movement (of which Douglas was an active member while studying at the City College of San Francisco), and inspired by the international political imagery of Central America, Cuba, Asia and South America—particularly their utilisation of twentieth-century graphic art to convey messages of revolution.<sup>12</sup> Douglas implemented the 'structures of commercial art',<sup>13</sup> such as giant headlines, an overpowering use of colour, dramatically scaled portraits, and strikingly rendered drawings, to create visually seductive and irresistible representations of black pride and solidarity.<sup>14</sup> From images of poverty and police brutality, to those representing Panther warriors and the Party's community development programs, Douglas crafted an aesthetic system that revealed injustices suffered by black communities, while simultaneously offering pictures of self-empowerment and collective unity as a means of alleviating these inequalities. This aesthetic system of identification became synonymous with the Black Panther Party, as well as the Black Power movement more broadly.

Bell's practice was shaped by his involvement in the Aboriginal Rights movement, which adopted and adapted the ideas and tactics of the American Black Power movement.<sup>15</sup> Bell's multidisciplinary practice as an artist activist is inspired by Redfern's National Black Theatre (established in 1972 by Bob Maza, following a visit to the National Black Theatre in Harlem, New York)—a community space for theatre, art, music, dance and the proliferation of black creativity and discussion.<sup>16</sup> Like black theatre, Bell is driven by the desire to create a space for collective participation and action, as seen in his travelling *Embassy* (2013–).<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Bell as "Richie", a fabricated public persona that uses in-your-face humour—a tactic regularly employed in black theatre—has appropriated the didacticism of Australian teaching standards into a medium for challenging white audiences into confronting accepted

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<sup>11</sup> Lampert, 2013, pp.201–202.

<sup>12</sup> See Gaiter, 2007, pp.93–109 for a thorough explication of Douglas' influences and historical precedents.

<sup>13</sup> Douglas, 2007, p.172.

<sup>14</sup> Gaiter, 2007, p.94.

<sup>15</sup> Reilly, 2011, p.12.

<sup>16</sup> Lothian, 2007, p.24.

<sup>17</sup> Bell's *Embassy* is an ongoing recreation of the 1972 Aboriginal Tent Embassy. It has appeared in galleries, biennales and other public spaces around the world, and is used as a space for art, performance, film and conversation.

norms about Indigenous Australians.<sup>18</sup> Bell presents such black activist tactics via an aesthetic akin to the ‘Aboriginalia’ of Aboriginal art and craft manufacture (for example those practiced by Bill Onus and Robert Campbell Jnr), mixed with postmodernist appropriation devices prominent in the rise of urban Indigenous art in the 1980s and ’90s.<sup>19</sup> Moving between painting, video-making, writing, producing clothing and performing as “Richie”, Bell combines these influences to craft an aesthetic system that offers a continuous challenge to established social orders, articulating and demanding action against the continued oppression of Aboriginal people.

### Collaborative Beginnings

Bell and Douglas’ aesthetic strategies first entered into a profound dialogue during the *16th Biennale of Sydney: Revolutions—Forms that Turn* (2008), where their artworks were displayed side-by-side within the decaying navy barracks of Sydney Harbour’s Cockatoo Island. The curator of the Biennale, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, created a platform for the circulation of artworks and the formation of global dialogues across geographical and cultural differences. More specifically, she used this platform to display artworks that expressed cultural changes—of revolution in thought and society.<sup>20</sup> Combining contemporary artists with historical examples of seminal or revolutionary artworks, a space was formed that continuously moved between political change and aesthetic revolution.<sup>21</sup> In this regard, the Biennale echoed the post-World War I Dada and post-World War II Neo-Dada New Left.<sup>22</sup> It was within this environment that Bell’s and Douglas’ artworks were able to form connections across global borders—between Aboriginal Australia and African America. Further, Bell’s contemporary video work *Scratch an Aussie* (2008) and Douglas’ historical 1960s and ’70s posters and *Black Panther* illustrations shared a similar ability to intersect art and politics with a desire to achieve social change for black minorities. Just like the emergence of Dadaism, this black theory of social change that both Bell and Douglas promote, began in the early twentieth century with Garveyism and regained momentum after World War II with the proliferation of worldwide black political movements. In bringing their artworks together, it became obvious that Douglas’ political imagery continues to resonate today, just as Bell’s relates to past global fights for black political and social rights. As the catalyst for their

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<sup>18</sup> Lothian, 2007, p.24.

<sup>19</sup> Mundine, 2011, p.21.

<sup>20</sup> Christov-Bakargiev, 2008, p.30.

<sup>21</sup> Christov-Bakargiev, 2008, p.30.

<sup>22</sup> Blazwick, 2008, p.35.

artistic relationship, it is such connections that Bell and Douglas continue to explore in their collaborative practice. This practice was cemented in 2009 when their works were once again brought together in the exhibition *All Power to the People* at Milani Gallery in Brisbane (1–17 October 2009).<sup>23</sup>

Nikos Papastergiadis argues that the recent collaborative turn in contemporary artistic practice is a means by which artists participate in the creation of new social meanings.<sup>24</sup> Referring to the role of the artist as a ‘context shifter’, he contends that collaborative practices ‘allow each partner to go beyond their own certitudes and participate in collaborative knowledge making that is not just the sum of their previous experiences’.<sup>25</sup> In their collaborative practice, Bell and Douglas take on this possibility of expanding their roles as activist artists—Bell, through operating within the historical context of the Black Power movement, and Douglas, by inserting his political imagery into the context of contemporary art.

### **Global Artpolitical Environments: Marcus Garvey and Jacques Rancière**

The concept of a global artpolitical environment can be traced to the Marcus Garvey movement, and is presented here as an example of what the French philosopher Jacques Rancière articulates as the ‘distribution of the sensible’.<sup>26</sup> In combining Garveyism with Rancière’s theory on political aesthetics, Bell’s and Douglas’ practices as artist activists are interpreted in a new framework—one that takes them beyond the local contexts within which they have largely been understood, and instead places them within a global history of black political aesthetics. This global history offers a useful context for exploring their collaborative practice, in which they intersect their aesthetics, historic Black Power imagery, globally familiar symbolism, and a synthesis of multiple other influences, to enhance through collective means their individual aims to create ‘dissensus’. This term, used by Rancière, describes the ability to create a crack in what he terms the existing ‘distribution of the sensible’.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> This exhibition included Douglas’ posters, illustrations and original issues of *The Black Panther*, as well as Bell’s video work *Broken English* (2009) and a number of his paintings.

<sup>24</sup> Papastergiadis, 2012, p.159.

<sup>25</sup> Papastergiadis, 2012, p.174.

<sup>26</sup> Rancière, 2014, p.7.

<sup>27</sup> Rancière, 2014, p.89.

The distribution of the sensible refers to the visual, textual and audible components of sense perception available (or ‘distributed’) to a given individual, class or socio-political group based on their inclusion or exclusion from a particular social order.<sup>28</sup> Rancière argues that ‘dissensus’ takes place when those who are usually excluded from a given order, seek active involvement in the process of defining its structures, attempting to create new terms of interaction and thus perception—that is, a new aesthetics.<sup>29</sup> In other words, Rancière argues that political emancipation lies in the hands of the people, and always goes hand-in-hand with the transformation of aesthetic experiences, or the rearticulation of ‘what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time’.<sup>30</sup> Rancière’s association of self-empowerment and aesthetic experience was also fundamental to early twentieth-century black theories of social change around the world.

Garvey’s attempt to transform the lives of black minorities around the world, through his organisation the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), can be understood through Rancière’s concept of ‘dissensus’. From its early beginnings in Jamaica (where Garvey was born in 1887), to its establishment in Harlem New York in 1917 (where Garvey’s ideas were embraced by members of the African-American population, before spreading both nationally and internationally), the Garvey movement’s underlying message of strength, unity and cultural pride subsequently helped to shape black political movements of the 1960s and ’70s.<sup>31</sup> Garveyism continues to resonate today through contemporary expressions of reggae, hip-hop,<sup>32</sup> as well as the current #BlackLivesMatter campaign. Two major components of Garveyism—both reimaged by the Black Power movement—are explored below to illustrate how they continue to operate in Bell and Douglas’ collaborative practice. These components are, first, the establishment of a global diaspora of black communities as ‘interconnected international networks of cultural exchange’,<sup>33</sup> and, secondly, Garvey’s continual intersection of aesthetics and politics to articulate the emergence and ideologies of this new community.

Garvey’s view was that:

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<sup>28</sup> Papastergiadis, 2014, p.14.

<sup>29</sup> Papastergiadis, 2014, p.15.

<sup>30</sup> Rancière, 2014, p.13.

<sup>31</sup> Maynard, 2014, pp.262–264.

<sup>32</sup> Sartwell, 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Maynard, 2014, p.263.



all the races in the world, except for the black, accept themselves as equal and approach life in all its dimensions with an equalitarian ethos. As a result, ... these races are ... trying to impose the kind of social and political conditions on the world that will insure their continued equality<sup>34</sup>

This distribution largely excluded black minorities, who are (and remain) subject to, and dominated by, Western colonialism and the power structures of empire and capitalism. Garvey's ideology instilled the notion of active self-involvement to achieve emancipation, arguing that it is up to black people to take responsibility for their own destiny and fight for their own problems.<sup>35</sup> Through his teachings, Garvey challenged the dominant Western social hierarchies, reorganising them to establish a new ordering principle for the distribution of the sensible.<sup>36</sup> This distribution was not limited to African-American people, but included black people from an array of social and cultural backgrounds.<sup>37</sup> In other words, Garvey articulated a global black community, one that could co-ordinate their emergence through their engagement in a variety of political and aesthetic spheres.<sup>38</sup>

In 1920, the Australian branch of the UNIA was established, from which the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA) was formed. Realising that the racism, prejudice and oppression they were fighting against in Australia was, in fact, a global battle that required the implementation of a global strategy, the AAPA embraced Garvey's ideals while also remodelling them to meet the particular oppressive conditions of colonisation in Australia.<sup>39</sup> Historian John Maynard reveals how scholars have minimised the impact of Garveyism and the AAPA, failing to recognise their significance in shaping the global political outlook of future generations of black activists.<sup>40</sup> Importantly, it is this history that uncovers the fact that Aboriginal Australians and African Americans were connected as part of Garvey's global black community. This intersection of international black inspiration, influence and connection occurs throughout Australian history, but particularly during the

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<sup>34</sup> McCartney, 2010, p.81.

<sup>35</sup> McCartney, 2010, p.82.

<sup>36</sup> Papastergiadis, 2014, p.16.

<sup>37</sup> Watson, 2000, p.64. Including black activists from Africa, West India, Canada, Australia and South and Central America.

<sup>38</sup> Maynard, 2014, p.262.

<sup>39</sup> Maynard, 2005, p.12.

<sup>40</sup> Maynard, 2013, p.158.



height of the Black Power movement;<sup>41</sup> and it continues today, as envisaged by Bell and Douglas' collaborative art practice.

Garvey's global black community was not only articulated through political means, but also through the creation of what Sartwell calls 'artpolitical environments' or 'multimedia aesthetic environments'.<sup>42</sup> This is an example of Rancière's argument that the distribution of the sensible is the key means by which political and aesthetic practices intermingle.<sup>43</sup> A given distribution of the sensible is made up of a multiplicity of different aspects, none of which are fundamental, but all of which are related. As Sartwell argues, political systems are aesthetic systems that appear in different media: 'they are no more centrally textual than they are centrally systems of imagery, architecture, music, graphic arts, etc'.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, it is in the interface created between different aesthetic media that the formation of a new distribution of the sensible can arise. As Rancière states, 'it is the connections forged between poems and their typography or their illustrations, between the theatre and its set designs or poster designs, between decorative objects and poems ... that an entire distribution of sensory experience [is] overturned'.<sup>45</sup>

Garvey's black transnational political system had all possible aesthetic expressions. From the crafting of his own symbolic political persona, to speeches, flags, poetry, art, music, journalism, religious works, personal appearances and clothing styles, the aesthetic and political aspects of Garvey's ideology were inextricable.<sup>46</sup> Further, within these aesthetic expressions he combined multiple influences—such as African, masonic, religious, scientific, and medical—in order to create a coherent synthesis of symbolism.<sup>47</sup> For Garvey, politics and aesthetics share a mutual ability to challenge dominant social hierarchies, and in turn imagine new social realities. According to Rancière, it is this imaginative ability of aesthetics to challenge the established aesthetic order, while also offering an alternative, one that provides it with the ability to in fact precede the political.<sup>48</sup> It is in this sense that Garvey's theory of blackness for social change can be described as an artpolitical environment that challenged

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<sup>41</sup> See Lothian, 2007, p.19-34 and Foley, 2013, p.12-21 for an extensive examination of the Black Power movement in Australia.

<sup>42</sup> Sartwell, 2015.

<sup>43</sup> Rancière, 2014, p.7.

<sup>44</sup> Sartwell, 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Rancière, 2014, pp.11–12.

<sup>46</sup> Sartwell, 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Sartwell, 2015.

<sup>48</sup> Papastergiadis, 2014, p.16.

Western colonial and empirical power structures through multiple media, while also using these media to articulate new terms of perception and interaction.<sup>49</sup> As Civil Rights activists A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen highlighted in a 1922 edition of *The Messenger*—a socialist-aligned African-American publication—Garvey’s articulation of new terms of perception and interaction were founded on a desire to ‘instil a feeling into Negroes that they are as good as anybody else. He has inspired an interest in Negro traditions, Negro history, Negro literature, Negro art and culture’, which have in turn ‘stressed the international aspect of the Negro problem’.<sup>50</sup>

The Black Power movement also constructed a powerful artpolitical environment, or aesthetic system of identification, which has been remodelled by black activists around the world. This system—which moved from manifestos, speeches and political personas, to black berets, leather jackets, afros and raised fists—promoted a black theory of social change founded on Garvey’s core principles of self-determination, economic independence, cultural and historical pride, and global solidarity between black minorities. Douglas’ posters and *Black Panther* illustrations were part of this system—they captured, conveyed and were influential in forming its political ideologies. In Bell and Douglas’ Burnett Lane collaboration, Douglas’ Black Panther aesthetico-political system combines with Bell’s contemporary art aesthetic.

### **Burnett Lane**

Bell and Douglas’ three-panel Burnett Lane mural (Fig. 2) was created in 2011 as part of the Brisbane City Council’s ‘Vibrant Laneways’ initiative.<sup>51</sup> Situated between Albert and George streets, and adjacent to the busy shopping area of Queen Street Mall, Burnett Lane is also Brisbane’s oldest laneway, dating back to Australia’s colonial past. The mural covers three walls that contain the delivery dock of home entertainment store JB HI-FI, and immerses itself in this setting by reflecting the familiar, bright yellow branding of JB HI-FI’s signage.

In the pedestrian passageway, however, Bell and Douglas’ collaborative mural creates a dialogue with the history of Brisbane, and Australia more broadly, by connecting its local

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<sup>49</sup> Sartwell, 2015.

<sup>50</sup> Martin, 1983, p.6.

<sup>51</sup> The below description is how the Burnett Lane mural appeared at the time of writing. Since, the JB HI-FI store has relocated and the Olympic Black Power image has also been removed. It will hopefully be reinstalled shortly.

origins to global historical movements. It depicts two iconic moments from Australia and America's shared histories of Black Power: the first, the iconic image described above of Smith, Carlos and Norman protesting at the 1968 Olympics; the second, Aboriginal activist Gary Foley's protest against the South African Rugby Union Springbok Tour in 1971. These moments both deployed internationally familiar aesthetic systems whose symbolism powerfully challenged the racist realities of black life, and presented a message of self-empowerment and solidarity. Within their collaborative re-creations, Bell and Douglas bring a new dimension to the iconic moments of the movement. They not only reference the shared histories of Australia and America, but also put these histories, and the aesthetic forms they encompass, together with their individual visual languages, as well as contemporary consumer symbolism. In so doing, they create an artpolitical environment that collectively transcends their individual circumstances, and instead presents a resonant message of 'reparation' for the discrimination and oppression of global minorities.

The mural shares many similarities with Chicago's iconic Wall of Respect (created in 1967 and destroyed in 1971) (Fig. 3). Painted collaboratively by the Organisation of Black American Culture (a collective of writers, artists, historians, educators, intellectuals and community activists), it featured images of black heroes. From Marcus Garvey, accompanied by his slogan 'Up The Mighty Race', to Malcolm X, the wall also consisted of prominent sportsmen, musicians, writers and performers—reflecting the multifaceted nature of the black struggle for social change.<sup>52</sup> In fact, the wall was inspired by Douglas who, according to Erika Doss, 'crafted a protest aesthetic ... [that] inspired community muralists ... throughout the late 1960s ... to paint the sides and facades of inner-city buildings', transforming them into Walls of Dignity and Walls of Respect, designed to represent the strength and unity of black people.<sup>53</sup> In Burnett Lane, Bell and Douglas' mural continues this tradition. The artists use the facades of the JB HI-FI delivery dock to ironically transform the stories of their own heroes into enticing consumer symbols.

The right-hand wall features the momentous act of global solidarity that occurred between Smith, Carlos and Norman during the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. The story began in the lead up to the Olympics, when students of Mexico State University began protesting against the false image of Mexico that the Olympics was presenting to the world. Incorporating

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<sup>52</sup> Jolly, 2006, p.118.

<sup>53</sup> Jolly, 2006, p.118.

widespread Olympic symbolism into their slogans, the students demanded an explanation for how their country could commit exorbitant funds to finance the games, while the Mexican people suffered in poverty.<sup>54</sup> What began as a mild conflict rapidly escalated into the massacre of hundreds of students by the state military in Mexico City's Tlatelolco Square.<sup>55</sup> This tragedy provided the catalyst for the political statement made by Smith, Carlos and Norman. As African-American athletes, Smith and Carlos also opposed the way in which their country was using the Olympics to create a false message of what it meant to be black in America.<sup>56</sup> Wishing to present a declaration for their own cause of peace and freedom for black Americans, and also to expose Mexico's internal unrest, they utilised the symbolism of Black Power to project a forceful image of self-empowerment. Norman joined together with Smith and Carlos in an act of international solidarity to present this cause to the world—connecting it to Australia's own struggles with racism as a settler-colonial country.<sup>57</sup> In expressing the multifaceted nature of their statement, Carlos declared that 'it was not only about the Mexican students ... but everything that led up to 1968'.<sup>58</sup> From the history of slavery, black education, unemployment and the destructive impact of drugs, to their own realities as African-American athletes, their gesture galvanised the issues of black communities around the world. This international sentiment was not something new, but rather rearticulated what John Maynard has called the 'united tradition of opposition by oppressed groups around the world'.<sup>59</sup> It is this history that Bell and Douglas draw attention to in their recreation of the African-American, Australian and Mexican global political gesture of solidarity.

The artists' depiction of Smith, Carlos and Norman is similar to their collaborative painting *A White Hero for Black Australia* (2011). With the Burnett Lane mural, Bell and Douglas have recreated the original image, foregrounding the aesthetic system and symbolism of the Black Power movement (Fig. 4). From raised fists, black gloves, beads and Olympic badges, each symbol posed its own challenge against the oppressive realities affecting global minorities. It was, however, in the athletes' action to combine these aesthetic symbols that a moment of dissensus occurred. Bell and Douglas rearticulate this defiant act to reveal the ability of aesthetics to precede the political and create a space of potentiality for emancipation. They

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<sup>54</sup> Carlos and Zirin, 2011, p.107.

<sup>55</sup> Carlos and Zirin, 2011, p.107.

<sup>56</sup> Carlos and Zirin, 2011, p.108.

<sup>57</sup> Montague, 2012.

<sup>58</sup> Carlos and Zirin, 2011, p.112.

<sup>59</sup> Maynard, 2007, p.3.

converge their visual languages and tactics to exaggerate the athlete's actions, drawing attention to visual symbols. The symbols are thus vehicles that represent the Black Power message of self-empowerment and collective action, and yet they are universal enough to relate to a wide array of international circumstances and situations—communicating to black communities and situations all around the world.

Further, in selecting the Olympic image to be displayed in a public laneway, Bell and Douglas sought to reveal Norman's often forgotten role as a white hero for black Australia. In America, this moment has taken on legendary status, whereas in Australia, Norman received criticism and was viewed as the 'white man who stood with those two Aboriginal devils'.<sup>60</sup> As recently as the 2000 Sydney Olympics, Norman was given no formal recognition, nor invited to attend in any capacity. Instead, it was the United States Olympic Committee that asked him to take part in their delegation.<sup>61</sup> Many Australians remain unaware of this heroic event, just as they remain unaware of Australia's history of Black Power more broadly. In standing alongside Smith and Carlos in a forceful moment of Black Power, Norman connected the African-American cause to the realities of Aboriginal Australia. Bell and Douglas' collaborative work therefore also pays homage to Norman, and importantly reconnects and rearticulates these shared histories.

The artists do this by connecting the Olympic image to another moment from Australia's Black Power past, one that occurred during the South African Rugby Union Springbok Tour in 1971. It reveals how Aboriginal activists used international racial conflicts and conditions associated with apartheid South Africa to draw attention to their local situations and circumstances—further emphasising the global outlook that has long characterised black theories of social change. During an Anti-Vietnam War protest in 1971, Paul Coe expressed the rising frustration felt by Aboriginal people, as non-Aboriginal Australians were 'prepared to turn out *en masse* in support of the oppressed people of all other countries but Australia'. As he stated, 'you raped our women, you stole our land, you massacred our ancestors, you destroyed our culture, and now—when we refused to die out as you expected—you want to kill us with your hypocrisy'.<sup>62</sup> This sentiment peaked during the Springbok Tour, in which anti-apartheid supporters from around Australia protested against South Africa's racist

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<sup>60</sup> Carlos and Zirin, 2011, p.118.

<sup>61</sup> Montague, 2007.

<sup>62</sup> Schaap, 2009, p.211.

politics and their egregious human rights record. The Springboks, with their green and gold jerseys and white-only rhetoric, were a global symbol of racism. With racism, poverty and political disempowerment still prevalent in Indigenous communities in Australia, Aboriginal activists used the Springbok tour to challenge white protesters to also recognise resonances between the apartheid in South Africa and colonial Australia, and to garner support for the fight for land rights and self-determination on Australian soil.<sup>63</sup> In a pivotal moment during a demonstration, which took place outside the Springboks' hotel in Sydney, Gary Foley was photographed wearing a Springbok jersey, and holding a placard that consisted of the powerful words that resonated throughout the world: 'pardon me for being born into a nation of racists'.

Deliberately positioned opposite the Olympic Black Power salute, Bell and Douglas unite Foley's actions with the broader movement of Black Power, allowing the global and local to resonate in this inner-city laneway, and in turn connecting the African-American experience to the Australian context (Fig. 5). They take Foley's original activism and transform it into a visually seductive representation that brings his experiences into the present, and highlights their continued relevance. Red lines—characteristic of Douglas' aesthetic of pastiche modernism—protrude from behind Foley, who is strikingly rendered and framed within a yellow circular target. These visual devices direct the viewer's attention towards the white placard held by Foley. Its message, which is presented in bold black letters, is cut short—only registering the top half of the word 'racists'. In leaving the viewer to decipher its content, Bell and Douglas provoke us to question the reality that continues to make this statement relevant today.

Bell and Douglas also utilise the devices of commercial art and advertising—prominent aspects of their individual activist aesthetics—to bring the heroic actions of Smith, Carlos, Norman and Foley into the present. These moments of Black Power are deliberately painted in the same colour combinations as the JB HI-FI branded sign, thus causing the otherwise distinct political and commercial aesthetic systems to interact and link together to form a 'division of the sensible', an artpolitical environment. In fact, these moments take on the same function as the recognisable consumer symbol of JB HI-FI. As Douglas stated in *Art for the Peoples Sake* (1972), commercial art 'is a method of persuasion [and] mind control. If we

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<sup>63</sup> Foley, 2013, p.16.

look around our community ... we see billboards, with advertising, that tell us what to buy [and] how to buy'.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Daniel Browning argues that Bell utilises the work of Edward Bernays (the propagandist and pioneer of public relations who was Sigmund Freud's nephew), and his theory of three or four colour combinations to sell ideas and offer consumables. This device, 'used by activists, dissidents, and revolutionaries ... throughout history', is also present in Bell and Douglas' mural.<sup>65</sup> Shifting between black, white, red and yellow, the images are designed to appear like commercial billboards, instantly grabbing the viewer's attention so as to decipher the message contained. The message is one of 'reparations'. It forces the viewer to recognise these prominent moments of Black Power, which have largely been ignored by the dominant classes, and in turn realise that the global issues, debts and obligations that these moments encapsulate still require reparation.

Bell and Douglas explicitly instil this political message into the mind of the viewer, through painting the word 'reparations' on the wall situated between Foley and the image of Smith, Carlos and Norman (Fig. 6). Directly below, they have included a chain-like pattern—intended to reference the Dugong symbol of West Africa, which means, 'you are a slave to him whose handcuffs you wear'.<sup>66</sup> This symbol assists in linking the mural's geographically disparate imagery together and collectively pose a global message. It references the ongoing importance of the shared principles that black communities around the world continue to promote, and especially the principle of self-empowerment, founded on the belief that emancipation always lies within the hands of the people. As Garvey stated in 1924:

Everywhere black [people] are beginning to do [their] own thinking, to demand more participation in [their] own government, more economic justice, and better living conditions. The Universal Negro Improvement Association during the past five years has blazed the trail for [them], [they] are following the trail. We do not think [they] will turn back. [They] have nothing to lose and everything to gain by pushing forward, whatever obstacles [they] may encounter.<sup>67</sup>

In their collaborative practice Bell and Douglas continue to push forward—through creating such global artpolitical environments of black inspiration, influence and connection, which

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<sup>64</sup> Douglas, 2007, p.171.

<sup>65</sup> Browning, 2013, p.23.

<sup>66</sup> Douglas, 2015.

<sup>67</sup> Maynard, 2015, p.264.



propel them into fighting against the ongoing inequalities of the contemporary world.

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**Figure 2.** Richard Bell and Emory Douglas, *Mural Burnett Lane*, 2011. Acrylic on wall.  
Courtesy of the artists and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.





**Figure 3.** Organisation of Black American Culture, *The Wall of Respect*, 1967. Acrylic on wall. Reproduced from Jeff Donaldson, 'The Rise and Fall and Legacy of the Wall of Respect Movement,' *The International Review of African American Art* 15, no. 1 (1998), p.22.





**Figure 4.** Richard Bell and Emory Douglas, *Mural Burnett Lane*, 2011. Acrylic on wall.  
Courtesy of the artists and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.  
(Olympic Black Power salute)



**Figure 5.** Richard Bell and Emory Douglas, *Mural Burnett Lane*, 2011. Acrylic on wall.  
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**Figure 6.** Richard Bell and Emory Douglas, *Mural Burnett Lane*, 2011. Acrylic on wall.  
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