



# GORDON HOOKEY

Story Tess Allas

**G**ORDON HOOKEY BUILT a reputation for himself from the time he graduated from art school in Sydney in the early 1990s (Hookey holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the College of Fine Arts, UNSW). Known for his strong and unapologetic comments on Australia's past and present treatment of Aboriginal people his career as a visual artist ran in parallel to the prime ministership of John Howard. Of late though, Gordon Hookey has kept a low profile. ARTIST PROFILE asked him to reflect on his career and what he has been up to in the last few years.

**Clearly art is political for you. Your motivation is sourced from politics, history and global events. Have you always been a political artist?**

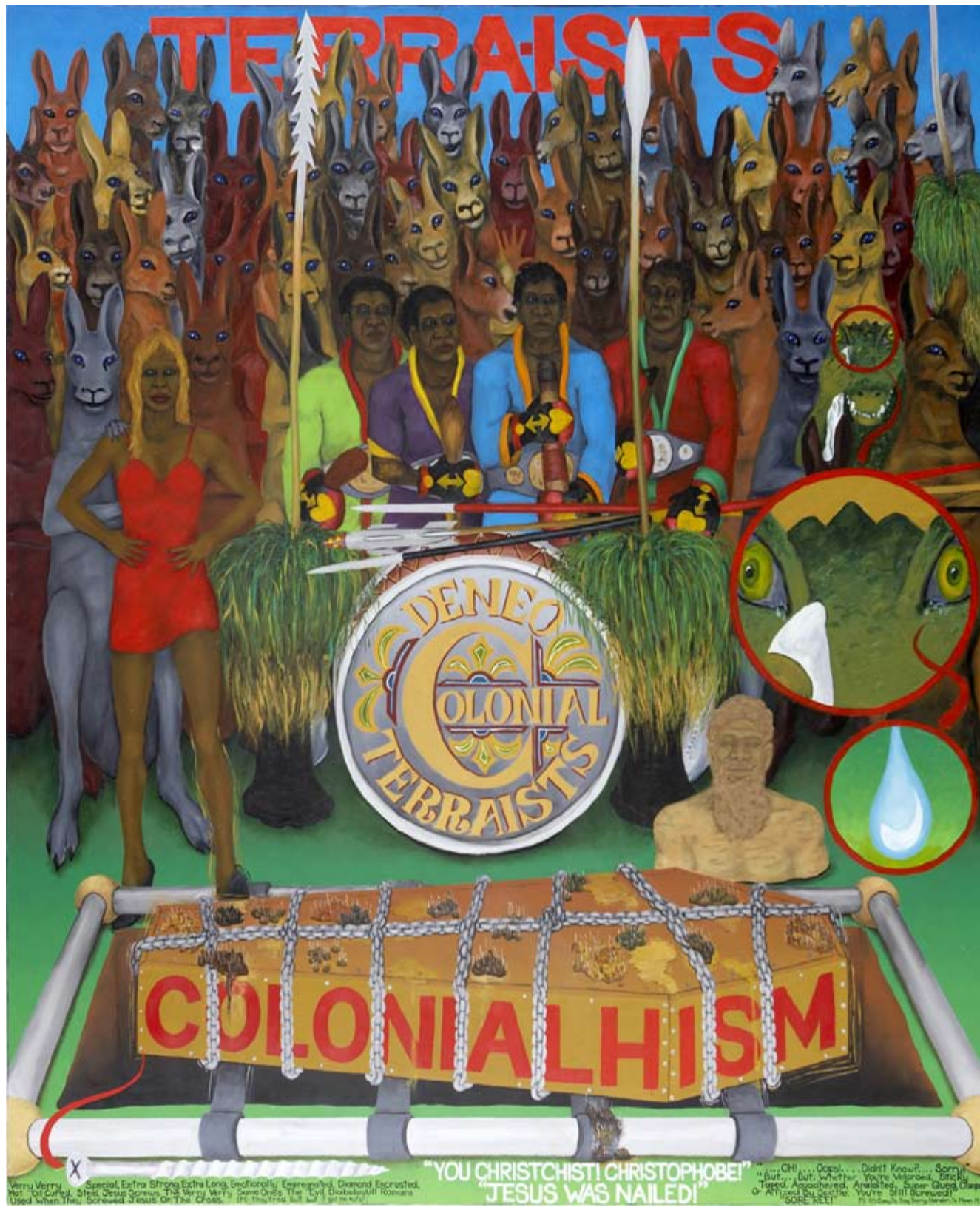
Yes, that's true. My art can be perceived as political. Being Aboriginal in this country is political. Aboriginal issues and concerns have never ever been addressed by this government, previous governments and, going by track record, less likely by future governments. It is our traditional and recent history that makes us Aboriginal people. Whitefellas today are the direct beneficiaries from the brutal atrocities that were committed by their ancestors upon my ancestors. They have inherited their status that is perpetuated through their political systems. We also have an inheritance from those very acts; one of subjugation, social inequality and disadvantage. More and more the political systems are being affected by global situations. It pays to think globally and act locally. I am an artist who is Aboriginal and if I am perceived as a political artist then I am happy to be that. I make art on the interface of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures within the whitefella discourse.

**Would it be fair to say that your work and your profile as an artist gained notoriety with every year that Prime Minister John Howard was in office?**

Yeah I think that could be said, but I was just too busy making art and responding to whatever stimuli that was happening to take any notice of anything outside my studio. I did not notice that my notoriety in making art about John Howard's politics was building up. I was just doing what I do. It so happens that during that time period John Howard and Pauline Hanson were really pushing their conservative agendas and moved the whole political landscape to the right. I guess I was hanging around with people who were talking about little Johnny and Pauline and they were things that I continually commented upon in my art.

**What has been the topic of your work since the 2007 federal election? Is the Labor government safe from your artistic enquiry?**

Well, this has been the topic of my work since 2007:



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How does politically oriented urban Australian indigenous art say more with less, by simplifying its recognisable aesthetics and content?

I am doing my Masters at Griffith University and that's my research question. However, I did do a large 'sorry' painting entitled Poor Fella You that commented on the hollow nature of Rudd's 'sorry' that was only said because John Howard did not say it. The painting asks for a big solid golden 'sorry' sitting on top of a big mob of money. I feel 'sorry' is good for its time but it was really for the white man and not for us.

I hate Aboriginal people being portrayed as victims therefore I inserted a subversion into this painting where we feel sorry for the poor white fella who is indoctrinated, brainwashed and coerced into slave labor within government's subjugate hierarchical system that has no heart, spirit or soul—only greed, ugliness, sadness and death.

I guess if I feel strongly about any issue or concern as they arise they may enter my artworks.

**Has your work ever commented on any Aboriginal 'leaders' whose opinions differ dramatically from yours?**

Generally my artwork does not attack other Aboriginal people. I try to make Aboriginal people look deadly, solid, strong and united. Even though I am passionate I do not take issues and concerns personally. I blame the cause. The colonial 'divide and conquer' strategy is utilised by governments even today.

**What have you got against pigs? Why use them in such a way as to make them figures of ridicule in your work?**

To me, the pig as an animal is honest, innocent, pure, clean, intelligent and like all animals and living things, beautiful. It's society and culture that imbue it with human qualities like sloth, gluttony, ugliness, greed, unhygienic, smelly etc. Initially I have utilised the pig as George Orwell did in Animal Farm—expressing the condition in dominant cultures. As well as the pig I've symbolised sheep, cattle, cane toads and other introduced species to symbolise the colonial invaders. The native animals are Aboriginal people. My artworks always enact scenarios where the native animals/Aboriginal's are victorious. Emery Douglas of the Black Panther's in the USA strongly utilised the pig to represent the police in making political statements. Even though I didn't know this at the time, I did the same because in this culture that is a colloquial term for police. I also use pigs to represent politicians and rednecks.

**Have you ever been able to produce work that is not in some way, 'political'?**

In my 20 years of artistic practice I have created many large bodies of artworks. With art pieces being subtle to 'in your face'. I have refined my practice by utilising single icons from my visual language such as the kangaroo. A picture of a single kangaroo was hard to accept by some gallerists who are used to me doing complicated multi-layered multi-dimensional, metaphorical, complex and politically loaded panoramas. The single kangaroo can be perceived as 'not political' but at the same time, when looked at in terms of my practice, it becomes political. I think gallerists want to keep artists doing the same thing so as not to disenfranchise clients and collectors. To me this pigeonholes and stops the artists from expressing themselves and growing. As I am trained and multi-skilled in most of the disciplines of visual arts I can do beautiful work that does not say anything, as well as produce highly brutal political work that has a sledgehammer subtlety.

**How do you respond to journalists who have called you racist and your work childish; to students who have turned your paintings away from public view inside galleries and to those who have physically attacked your work in an attempt to destroy it?**

All those were honest reactions that my artwork has provoked. My response is to applaud that. They say in the arts it is more of a crime to be ignored, that any publicity is good publicity, that no publicity is bad publicity. Andrew Bolt, the right wing conservative journalist for the Melbourne Herald Sun wrote about my work unfavourably.

He shot himself in the foot, so to speak, as he created more interest in that particular work—Sacred Nation, Scared Nation, Indoctrination—than it would have achieved on its own. Hundreds of people rushed into the National Gallery of Victoria especially to view it.

During the 2004 Sydney Biennale many in the art world said to thank him. So, for the record, "Thank you Andrew Bolt!". Politicians are smart, they rarely comment on artists or particular artworks, as it is a validation. I was told Phil Ruddock was once asked about the Ruddocks Wheel artwork. His response went something like this: "Our government likes to encourage freedom of expression, but when artists, minorities and special interest groups appear to push their own agenda's it will be seen for what it is." Well, there you go.

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The artwork *White Man Native Title* was turned around (to face the wall) during the nationally touring *Native Title Business* exhibition at the Southern Cross University in Bundaberg, Queensland. Of all places, a university, a place of learning and open-mindedness. Apparently, a young accountancy student took offence to this work and took it upon herself to turn the painting around. To me this isn't bad because I stretch my own canvas and I like how it looks at the back as well. The point is though; the act was a fascist act of censorship denying the public their own perception. She had her own reading of the painting and did not like her own interpretation and assumed everyone would have that same interpretation. This got a bit of media attention, which was good for art, good for me and good for the touring show.

The painting *The First Stolen*, was vandalized where it hung (and still hangs) outside the moot court of the Law Faculty at the University of Wollongong. Racist text was scratched into the surface. The suspects could not be identified in the security footage, as they wore coned white hooded masks and robes. The painting went to conservators and maybe now it is in better condition to provoke again.

When the artwork leaves the studio it has a life of its own. I am too busy moving on to new work to concern myself with old work. Much of the artwork I do is metaphorical and can be interpreted any which way. When the viewer reads my artwork they see it through the screen of their own experience—that interpretation is valid and it's their own. In fact, a lot of the readings say more about the viewer than it does about the actual artwork or the artist. The art pieces are like a mirror held up for humanity, society and culture to see itself. Many people do not like what they see including the journalist, the young accountant and the university vandals. Their honest and extreme reactions make making art worthwhile.

**You have recently become a father for the first time. Has this experience changed your worldview?**

Yes, Joshua Judama Kaya is 4 months now, he is a joy, and becoming a father has changed me. I am more responsible, less freewheeling, less impulsive and ruthless in terms of what I want to do and where I want to go. Now, I stop and think that I'd rather spend time with mother and child, than getting on the piss. I have not made a lot of art recently mainly because of study. So I don't know how Judama Josh will affect my art in the future but I know I have to make use of every ounce of time I have. Yes babies do soften the hardest of hearts, so perhaps I will get to do some 'beautiful art'.

**Your artistic colleague Vernon Ah Kee, has said of himself that if he did not create art he would be an angry man. Why art? What does it do to you and for you?**

In the past, I have done presentations and workshops in prisons. Many of the inmates have said they were at their calmest when they are making art. So there must be some therapeutic value to art. Someone said to me that I would be in jail if I didn't have my art. They reckon I would have killed someone... I don't know about that. My nature is polite, gentle, passive and unassuming. When I meet arts people for the first time, some are quietly surprised that I am not the big, black, hateful, verbose, militant, black radical activist they had pictured in their mind from following my art practice.

Yeah, I know I said black twice. ■

Gordon Hookey is represented by **Milani Gallery, Brisbane** and **Nellie Castan Gallery, Melbourne**.

[www.milanigallery.com](http://www.milanigallery.com)  
[www.nelliecastangallery.com](http://www.nelliecastangallery.com)

- 01 **The first stolen**, 1994, oil on masonite, 134 x 196cm (collection of University of Wollongong)
- 02 **Terrarists Colonialism**, 2008, oil on linen, 350 x 290cm
- 03 **Sacred nation, scared nation, indoctrination**, 2003, oil on canvas, 183 x 640cm.
- 04 **Terrarist Gloves**, 2008, mixed media, 30 x 20cm
- 05 **Untitled**, 2008, mixed media, 30 x 20cm
- 06 **Spears of Intervention**, 2009, oil on linen, 300 x 200cm

Courtesy the artist, Milani Gallery, Brisbane, Nellie Castan Gallery, Melbourne and the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne



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