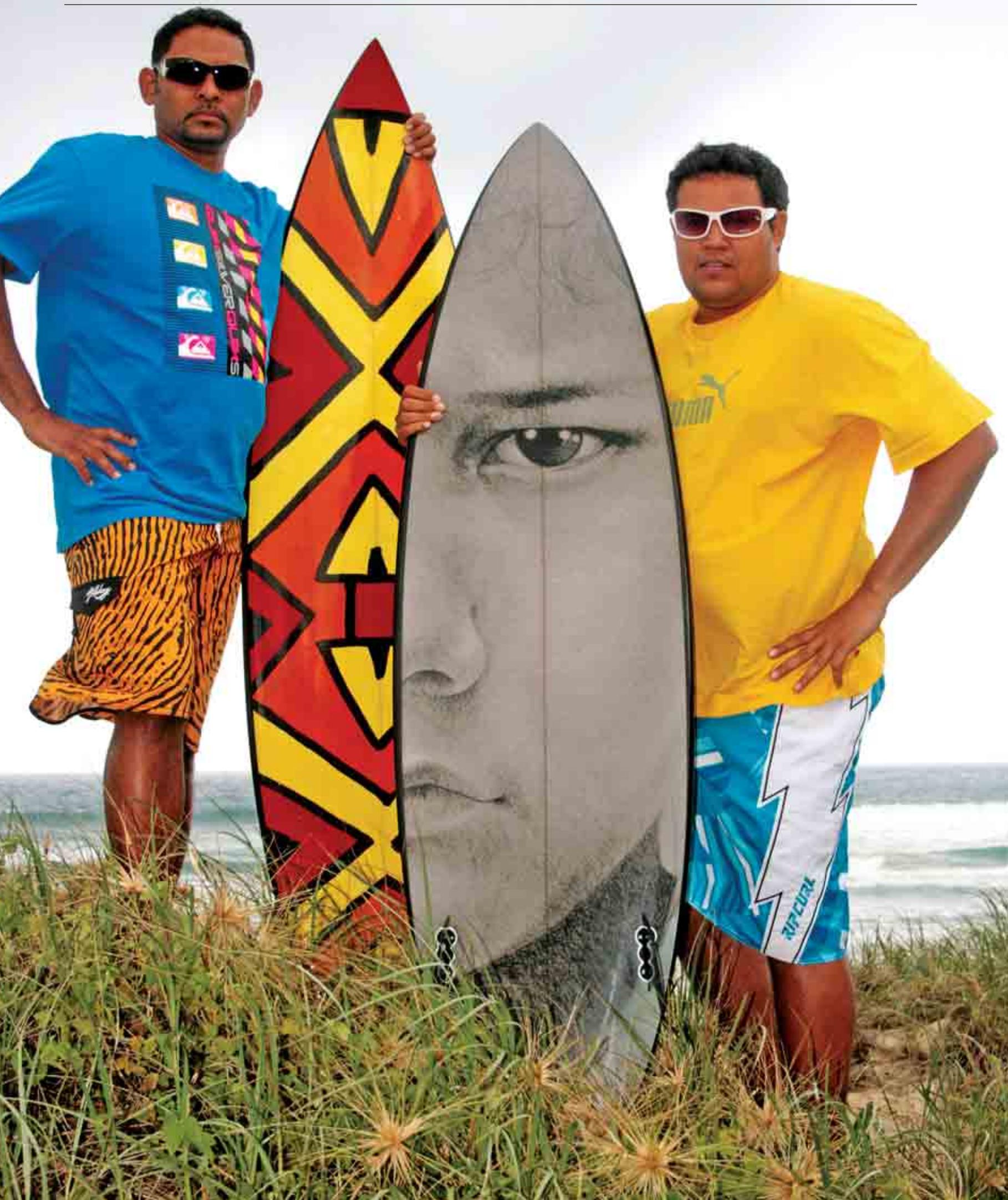
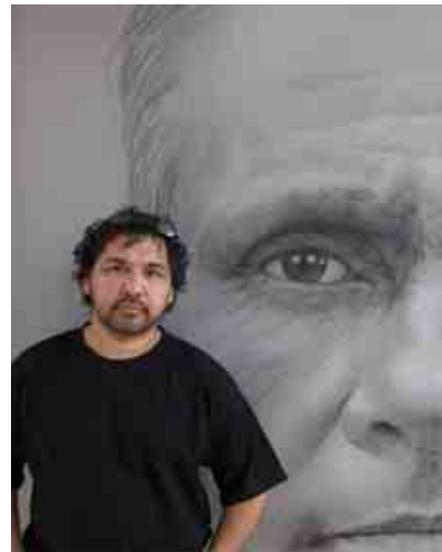

Vernon surfs into Venice

Vernon Ah Kee's challenge to Australia's surf culture will be exhibited at the 2009 Venice Biennale.





That Vernon Ah Kee is still described as an emerging artist, even after being selected to represent Australia in the 2009 Venice Biennale, is testimony to his talent and potential.

For the 2009 Venice Biennale, Vernon will install a show called *Cant Chant* that he created for Brisbane's Institute of Modern Art (IMA) which he says is 'an examination of white Australian beach culture, particularly surfing and the role that surfing has in white ideologies, and how the ideal of the beach informs surf culture.'

The idea came to him around six years ago, around the time of the Cronulla riots in Sydney, when the IMA offered him a major show. 'They made it urgent and it was the right time to do it,' said Vernon. The show's title refers to the chants by Cronulla locals in the riots: 'We grew here, you flew here'.

Vernon Ah Kee said: "We grew here, you flew here" is an insincere statement and they were chanting it over and over again. It's a way to exercise racism. I'm like "WE grew here, say what you want, but we're the fellas that grew here".

The work that Vernon will exhibit in Venice features video, images, installation and text – including video of his three cousins in bright beach garb with surfboards decorated with Aboriginal rainforest shield designs from his country.

'These guys look like they really think they fit in, when black people don't. Black people just don't fit in. It's about territory and belonging but not fitting in at all.'

Vernon's work also features footage of Aboriginal surfer, Dale Richards surfing on one of the painted boards to the music of the Warumpi Band's *Stompem Ground*.

Another part of the video shows boards, wrapped in barbed wire, being shot with a shotgun. One is tied to a tree and one is hung in a tree. These boards will be taken to Italy riddled with bullet holes representing bodies.

'The irony of my selection in the Biennale doesn't escape me,' said Vernon. What I'm trying to do is get white Australians, who play a role in maintaining the myth of popular culture here in Australia, to question themselves.

They don't question themselves. People in power, why should they? Everybody must bend around them.'

Vernon Ah Kee, 41, hails from Queensland and is of Kuku Yalandji, Waanji, Yidindji and Gugu Yimithirr people.

Vernon's stablemates are Richard Bell and Gordon Hookey, part of the politically conscious artists collective *ProppaNow* who exhibit together annually. Of them Vernon says: 'We all walk around with our eyes open and do work that has something to say. It's not meant to match your curtains.'

'With Venice, I want the international audience to ask questions of Australia as a nation. How come this portrayal of beach culture in Australia doesn't look right? How come there are black people in this video when Australian beach culture is white?'

Vernon also wants more people to challenge his ideas. When *Cant Chant* was first exhibited, 'people got all the references to the Cronulla riots but I don't get a lot of critical response. I think people are a little bit put out by the themes I deal with, and don't know how to take it. Which is fine, but you want to have some critical to and fro.'

'People are used to seeing blackfellas having much less power, being much less assertive. Whitefellas prefer their blackfellas this way, even blackfellas prefer their blackfellas this way,' said Vernon.

'Our lives are lives of discomfort. Our lives are established for us and our powerlessness just reinforces that. I accept that our lives are lives of discomfort but what I don't agree with is that whitefellas should feel comfortable. The history of blackfellas in this country should mean they have no right to feel comfortable.'

'Anyone who's not white in this country should not feel comfortable too. If your life is comfortable you should take a hard look at yourself.'

This page: Vernon Ah Kee, *Cant Chant*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2007 (installation view). Vernon Ah Kee. Image courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Previous page: Vernon Ah Kee, *Cant Chant (Wegreshere)*, video still, 2007. Image courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane