Vernon Ah Kee’s *Cant Chant* was first exhibited at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, in 2007. It featured in *Once Removed*, the Australian group exhibition at the 2009 Venice Biennale, and is being toured through Australia by the IMA with support from Visions of Australia.

This education resource has been prepared to assist the appreciation of the exhibition. It is designed to be used in conjunction with exhibition visits and with the Institute of Modern Art book, *Vernon Ah Kee: Born in this Skin*. While aimed at secondary-school art students, the resource can be adapted for other key learning areas, particularly History, Legal Studies, English, and Indigenous Studies.

**ITINERARY**
CAST Gallery, Hobart, 12 February–14 March 2010
Academy Gallery, Launceston, 16 April–30 May 2010
Blacktown Arts Centre, 25 June–21 August 2010
Tandanya, Adelaide, 10 September–6 December 2010
University of the Sunshine Coast Gallery, 3 February–19 March 2011
Gold Coast City Art Gallery, 6 May–28 June 2011
Pinnacles Gallery, Thurigowa, 17 September–13 November 2011

Because I am Aboriginal, because I was born with dark skin and dark, curly hair, I’ve never had the opportunity to be perceived as anything other than Aboriginal, and it has never occurred to me that I could be anything other than Aboriginal. So everything I think, say, and do is done from that position—never from outside that framework. My practice is about my own history, position, and experiences as an Aboriginal person. I’m making art about my life. I don’t think I’m always being overtly political.

—Vernon Ah Kee

Vernon Ah Kee was born in Innisfail, North Queensland, in 1967. He is Yidinji, Kuku Yalangi, Waanji, Gugu Yimidthirr, and Koko Berrin. After high school, he did the Aboriginal Art course at Cairns TAFE, where he majored in printmaking. He subsequently worked as a screenprinter for several years. He moved to Brisbane to attend Queensland College of Art, where he completed a Bachelor of Visual Arts with Honours in 2000, and where he is currently enrolled in a Doctorate of Visual Arts. He held his first solo exhibition in 1999. Since then, he has emerged as one of Australia’s most prominent urban Indigenous artists, with his works exhibited and collected throughout Australia and overseas. He is represented by Milani Gallery, Brisbane.
**post-medium**

In the past, artists generally specialised in one medium, being, say, a painter, sculptor, photographer, or filmmaker. However, these days artists regularly work in several media, often combining them within individual projects. This gives them the opportunity to use the most appropriate medium for their message. *Cant Chant* has three components, in different mediums: a three-screen video, graphic wall texts, and ‘painted’ surfboards. Ah Kee has also created photographs as part of the project. Ah Kee worked with specialist technicians to make some works. For instance, the video was directed by filmmaker Suzanne Howard and the surfboards were made by board shaper Dave Verrell.

**Research and discussion**

- How do Ah Kee’s surfboards relate to one another? How do the surfboards relate to the video and to the textworks? Do all the components all fit together? Does it feel like one show, by one artist? Is there any aspect of the exhibition that you feel doesn’t work or is out of place?
- If you were an artist, would you want to specialise in one medium? How could you use different media to express an artistic message?
The Australian Government sent armed troops into defenceless Aboriginal communities in the north of Australia and we let that slide. Would that have happened if Aboriginal people were truly recognised as people? Not only do we not have full rights as citizens, Australia still struggles to acknowledge that we are fully human. If they did, there’s no way armed troops would have been sent into our unarmed communities.
—Vernon Ah Kee

Ah Kee’s work critiques Australian race politics and asserts Aboriginal sovereignty. You may not be convinced by his position. You don’t have to agree with him in order to understand his work. Feel free to unpack his argument, looking for weaknesses or gaps in it. Make up your own mind.

Research and discussion

• Do you think Ah Kee’s views are balanced? Do you expect artists to present balanced views? What would a balanced view be? Who has a balanced view?
• Create a concept map of ideas around Australian race history and Aboriginal sovereignty. Locate Ah Kee’s views within it.
• Many political writers have influenced Ah Kee, including black Americans Malcolm X and James Baldwin, and Aborigines Kevin Gilbert, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, the artist’s uncle Mick Miller, and the Aboriginal Provisional Government. Find their texts and explore their connections with Ah Kee’s work, both in what they say and how they say it.
strange fruit

_Cant Chant_ explores a range of themes, including racial tension between cultures in conflict, the history of the dispossession of Aboriginal people, romanticism and myth-making, and ownership and privileging of icons (such as the surfer) and landscapes (such as the beach).

_Southern trees bear strange fruit, blood on the leaves and blood at the root, black bodies swinging in the southern breeze, strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees._

—‘Strange Fruit’, as sung by Billie Holiday

Dead boards are useless, waterlogged surfboards—surfboards that no longer work. Ah Kee hangs a dead board from barbed wire, suggesting a lynching, recalling a time when white Australians killed Aborigines with impunity.

Research and discussion

- _Cant Chant_ explores many contemporary political issues. Some argue that politics should be separate from art. Do you agree? Why? Do good politics make for good art?
- Can you find other artists who deal directly with political issues?
- Ah Kee says he doesn’t see his work as overtly political but more ‘about my life as an Aboriginal person’. Do you agree? Do you see the work as primarily political or primarily cultural?
- Do you think showing _Cant Chant_ overseas, at the Venice Biennale, alters its meaning? Will an international audience read the work the same way as an Australian one?
nonsense song

It was enthralling watching it on TV. I’m sitting there knowing that, if I was down there, I would have had my head kicked in, because I have dark skin and dark, curly hair. But watching it from the safety of my home was surreal, like watching a time-lagged news report from Nazi Germany. The rhetoric was there, the hysteria was there, they just had no Adolf Hitler to lead the charge.
—Vernon Ah Kee on the Cronulla Riot

On 11 December 2005, in the Sydney beach suburb of Cronulla, tension between ‘Aussies’ and ‘Lebs’ escalated into violence. Righteous ‘Aussies’ claimed the beach, chanting ‘We grew here, you flew here’, as if asserting their indigenous rights. *Cant Chant*, Ah Kee’s response, seeks to articulate a position identifying with neither ‘Aussie’ nor ‘immigrant’. The title combines the words ‘cant’ (nonsense) and ‘chant’ (song).

Research and discussion

- Research the Cronulla Riot. Explore the notion of an ‘Aussie’ expressed at the time. What makes someone an Aussie, or not an Aussie?
- As an Aborigine, how would you respond to White Australians saying ‘We grew here, you flew here’?
- How effectively does Ah Kee’s title capture the spirit of the Cronulla Riot?
- Explore images of the Australian beach. Do Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders feature? Why?
- Where do Aborigines figure in the Australian imagination? Is this accurate?
tribalism

**tribe n.** 1. A unit of sociopolitical organisation consisting of a number of families, clans, or other groups who share a common ancestry and culture and among whom leadership is typically neither formalised nor permanent. 2. A political, ethnic, or ancestral division of ancient states and cultures. 3. A group of people sharing an occupation, interest, or habit. 4. A large family.

Tribalism is fundamental to social life. It can be seen as positive and as negative. Tribalism generates community around values and ideas, images and things. However, it also excludes others, often violently (for example in soccer-fan violence and religious wars). But, paradoxically, every tribe needs an other. There can be no ‘us’ without a ‘them’. We need ‘them’ to be ‘us’—they make us us.

**Research and discussion**

- What tribes do you belong to? What makes you a member? What rules does your tribe have? What distinguishes members of your tribe from others? How does your tribe treat others?
- Who were the tribes involved in the Cronulla Riot? What distinguished them? Did they have anything in common?
- Can you identify other moments in history where tribalism has led to violence?
hang ten

The Cant Chant video includes three stories. Each has a different flavour. The first is a tale of dispossession: a surfboard hanging by barbed wire from a tree is shot up, then ominously discarded in a creek (as if to wash away the evidence). The second is a tale of marginalisation: three young Aboriginal men in the prime of their lives take to the beach in their garish surf-gear, yet they seem comically out of place in this landscape, which does not recognise their sovereignty. The third is a tale of resistance: a strong, handsome, young Aboriginal man takes to the waves on his surfboard-shield, as if demonstrating the grace and sovereignty of a people who have ‘been here before’. These tales of dispossession, marginalisation, and resistance parallel experiences of Aborigines in different times and places.

Research and discussion

- Why does the artist use the surfboard-shield? What is it a metaphor for?
- How does its meaning change across the three stories in the video?
- Can you find parallels between the textworks and the stories in the video? Which texts speak of dispossession, which of marginalisation, and which of resistance?
- Ah Kee’s text ‘hang ten’ is the name of a famous surf-clothing brand but it also suggests lynching. Why would Ah Kee make such a ‘bad joke’?
stompin ground

*I always saw this film being made to ‘Stompin Ground’. If I couldn’t get permission to use it, then there would have been no music at all.*

—Vernon Ah Kee

The Warumpi Band hail from Papunya, the Aboriginal settlement in the Central Desert region of the Northern Territory. In 1983, they wrote, recorded, and released the first rock song in an Aboriginal language, ‘Jailanguru Pakarnu’ (Out from Jail). Their 1995 album *Too Much Humbug* featured the militant anthem ‘Stompin Ground’, which conjures with images of war and territory. In the *Cant Chant* video, this song accompanies footage of Dale Richards, an Aboriginal professional surfer, as he gracefully takes to the waves.

**Research and discussion**

- Listen to the song, particularly the lyrics. What *Cant Chant* themes does it address?
- How old was Ah Kee when ‘Stompin Ground’ was released? Why do you think it is so important for him?
- How does the song affect your understanding of surfer Dale Richards’s ‘performance’ in the video?
- What would the video have been like with no music?
first person

*I got tired of seeing rainforest shields as museum pieces. They have marks on them, gashes, and sometimes bullet holes. Shields are for battle.*
—Vernon Ah Kee

In *Cant Chant*, the surfboards are arranged like a phalanx of warriors, ready for battle. Their decks are decorated with Yidinji shield designs and their undersides feature portraits of the artist’s family members. For Ah Kee, Aboriginality is centred, explicit, noble. *Cant Chant* seeks to express this.

**Research and discussion**

- How did you feel walking through the surfboards? Did you identify with them or find them confronting?
- Research North Queensland shields. How does the traditional military use of these shields influence their meaning? How has Ah Kee drawn on that in his work?
- How does Ah Kee’s representation of Aborigines and of surfing differ from representations in mainstream media?
it’s only words

*Cant Chant's* textworks recall headlines, corporate signage, and advertising slogans. They are in dialogue with one another and with the surfboards and the video. Ah Kee says his textworks were informed by diverse sources, including Russian constructivists of the early twentieth century, American feminist artist Barbara Kruger, and Aboriginal artists who used text to make biting political statements (including Kevin Gilbert, Avril Quail, Gordon Bennett, Gordon Hookey, and Richard Bell).

**Research and discussion**

- How does Ah Kee’s distinctive typographic treatment influence the interpretation of his textworks?
- How does the context of the exhibition shape their meaning?
- How do the textworks engage with the surfboards and the video?
- In groups, dissect each textwork individually. What is the artist saying? Does he use language for its clarity or its ambiguity? Is there any text that does not fit?
- Research other artists who use text—Indigenous, Australian, and international. Do they use text for the same reason as Ah Kee? What are the differences?
Suddenly a lone Aboriginal surfer appears on his shield-surfboard gracefully moving through the water, displaying his skill as he takes command of the waves. He is not out of place. He embodies the resilience of Aboriginal sovereignty, disrupting the iconography of the beach that represents all that is Australian within white popular culture. Ah Kee’s masterful use of irony and anomaly is like a stingray barb piercing the heart of white Australia.

—Aileen Moreton-Robinson

Violence erupted on Cronulla beach, Sydney, 11 December 2005. Racial tension turned to violence as at least 5000 angry people converged on the beach after simmering anger and disputes between beach users flared, following an attack on two lifeguards. Rioters attacked a man of middle eastern appearance, who was later saved by police armed with capsicum spray. PHOTO Adam Ward/Newspix/Getty Images