

Vernon Ah Kee

TALL MAN

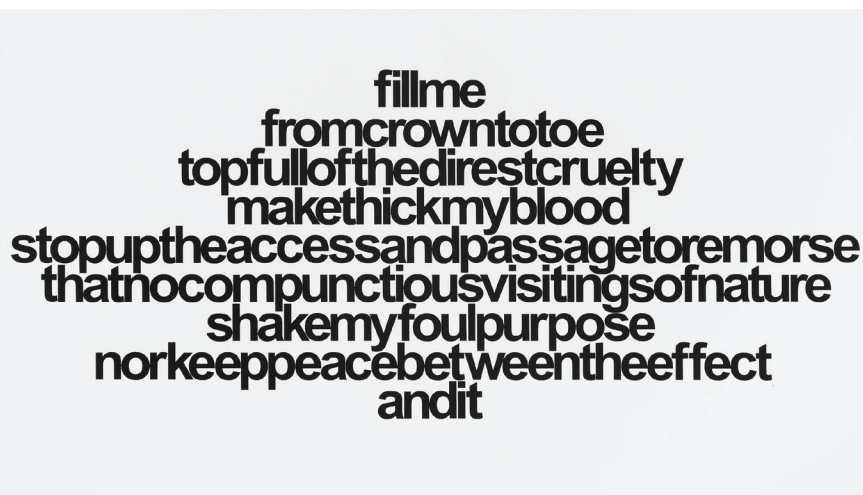
Vernon Ah Kee's "Tall Man" is a smartly composed yet painful examination of race relations in Australia. The exhibition takes as its theme the subject of the 2004 Palm Island riots that occurred in the wake of Indigenous Australian Cameron Doomadgee's murder at the hands of a white police officer, Chris Hurley. Anchoring the show was *tall man* (2010), a four-channel video installation, which was accompanied by a drawn portrait of Lex Wotton (the man convicted of inciting the riots), and a text-covered piece of linen titled *fill me* (2009).

Using footage obtained from anonymous sources—including clips from mobile phones, handheld cameras and TV news reels—*tall man* constructs a visually arresting narrative of the day's events, during which the island residents, angered by the coroner's report that stated Doomadgee had died from an "accidental fall," razed the police station and Hurley's home. Ah Kee uses the footage—which the prosecution used to convict Wotton—to ironic effect, showing how in different hands it can tell an entirely different story.

Each of the installation's channels presented a different perspective of the same event; some fragmented, others conventionally shot. Clips of the officers arming themselves in order to, as one of them says, "scare the shit out of these cunts," are juxtaposed against aerial shots of the island as a tropical paradise. The video's editing, with its quick cuts, "real" soundtrack and simultaneity of visual information from multiple channels, conveys the urgency and chaos that clearly defined the riots.

Toward the end of the video, we see footage from outside the Townsville courthouse (where Wotton and others involved in the riots stood trial), of island protesters carrying placards that read, "Thou shalt not covet the land no more" and "Thou shalt not steal from us no more." The use of biblical terminology both highlights the hypocrisy of some white, and thus putatively Christian Australians, and also reminds us that Indigenous Australians were indoctrinated by missionaries. In the final clip, Wotton's mother angrily demands an end to police brutality, calling for a legal system that will provide "black fellas" in custody with round-the-clock security. The moment reaches fever pitch as she urgently explains how Aboriginal men have repeatedly had their manhood stripped away: "they have no jobs" and live "locked up like monkeys."

Among the residents of Palm Island, the term "tall man" refers to a legendary and dangerous creature living in the surrounding hills that is imagined as a combination of Big Foot and a bogeyman. However, locally the term was also used to refer to sergeant Hurley, who is over six and a half feet tall. In Ah Kee's exhibition, "tall man" takes on a different meaning altogether, referring instead to Wotton, as a figure who elicits the truth about



Australian society. The larger-than-life portrait of Wotton as *tall man* is rendered in Ah Kee's now-signature portrait style—an extreme close-up of a face, realistically rendered in charcoal, crayon and acrylic on canvas. Wotton, who according to the artist has been deemed a hero by many Palm Islanders for "standing tall" and "speaking out so strongly," is depicted as a monumental, nonthreatening figure, with a slight smile and kind eyes—in short, as a tragic hero.

The related text work, *fill me*, is equally striking. Like Ah Kee's other text works, the painting takes a passage and reproduces it as a run-on sentence. Here, Ah Kee quotes Shakespeare's *Lady Macbeth* to offer an allegory of man's inhumanity to man, an age-old, seemingly endless cycle of cruelty begetting cruelty.

As a whole, the exhibition begs the question: were the Palm Island rioters justified in their actions? Ah Kee clearly leads viewers in a certain direction, and as a microcosm for race relations in Australia, the riot was remarkable in that the Indigenous Australians fought back.

Intentionally or not, what is left out of Ah Kee's narrative are the sad events that occurred after the riots, namely that the police officers working that day were given bravery awards by the government, and that while Wotton was imprisoned, Hurley was not only acquitted but also promoted to the most desired destination in the Queensland Police Force, the Gold Coast. How can this overt act of racism happen without massive national protest in a country that proclaims that every citizen gets a "fair go"? And what of the countless Indigenous deaths that continue to occur in police custody, and at an alarming frequency? But, most importantly, amid the chaotic aftermath of events, Ah Kee's exhibition left us wondering: where is the justice for Doomadgee, the original victim, in all this?

MAURA REILLY

Left

VERNON AH KEE
fill me
2009
Acrylic on linen, 180 x 240 cm.
Courtesy the artist and
Milani Gallery, Brisbane.