

FORT GANSEVOORT

GORDON HOOKEY

Sacred Nation, Scared Nation

January 07 – February 20, 2021

**An online exhibition
in collaboration with Gary Simmons**



Gordon Hookey, *Ready to Rumble*, 2020, Oil pastel and pencil on paper, 30.5 x 44 inches.

Beginning January 7, Fort Gansevoort will present *Sacred Nation, Scared Nation*, the gallery's first exhibition with the noted Waanyi Aboriginal artist Gordon Hookey. Organized in collaboration with Los Angeles-based artist Gary Simmons, the presentation will focus on Hookey's use of metaphors, wordplay, and humor – sometimes brazenly provocative – to subvert tropes of Western colonialization and to reclaim, empower, and redefine Aboriginal culture. Eschewing the traditional dot abstraction most commonly associated with indigenous Australian art, he deploys deceptively folksy figuration, contemporary images, and bold painted words in paintings that connect Black Aboriginal experience to that of African Americans.

Language is intrinsic to Hookey's work. Considering English his second language despite not knowing his first, Hookey addresses the forced extinction of most Aboriginal tongues by manipulating texts he paints directly onto his canvases. His deliberately crude wordplay cleverly undermines and challenges the notion that English is the superior language, suggesting a reversal of power. In the paintings *Arsonist* (2003) and *Arse-on-us* (2003), for example, Hookey recalls an incident in which members of the press inaccurately blamed adolescents for starting widespread bushfires in the early 2000's, inadvertently inspiring children to commit such arson. With his images of journalists as literal "arses" holding matches, Hookey raises questions about culpability for environmental destruction, while toying with tropes of propaganda.

In the works on view in *Sacred Nation, Scared Nation*, Gary Simmons detects and dissects messages within the words and letters on Hookey's canvases. "The alphabet – this kind of system – acts as a stand-in for figures and identities," Simmons notes. "Hookey replaces the body with letter forms and creates his own visual language." This reformulation of the human figure can be seen in the artist's paintings *Black Cunt / Black Sledge Back* (2012) and *Black See* (2012). In these works, Hookey portrays Rugby League players with bodies shaped as the letter 'C', reflecting the racist calls from their white opponents on the field, who are dressed in ominous blue hoods. Here, the artist is calling our attention to the ways in which indigenous bodies are rendered and contextualized through a system of language that was implemented as a colonialist tactic. Simmons notes, "The 'C' is a stand in, a target, for this racist situation."

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Hookey is unafraid of pointing a finger. In *The re re rediscovery of Aotearoa* (2006), he imagines America discovering New Zealand. Depicting the heads of American cowboy colonizers as cans of baked beans, and a herd of Zebras shaped like the letter Z, Hookey suggests the ignorance of settlers who ignore the presence of established indigenous cultures and idealize the inhabited land as an empty expanse 'AT ALPHABET'S END WHERE WILD ZEE ROAM'. The almighty American dollar flexes at the sight.

Hookey's 2003 painting *Elvis* (2003) illustrates the artist's penchant for excavating Western influence that infiltrates and undermines other original cultures. Emblazoned with 'PRESLEYS PREPLANNED PRIORITY: PROTECT PRIVILEGED PRECIOUS PROPERTIES PROMPTLY,' this work refers to a 2001 incident involving an Erickson S-64F Air-Crane helicopter that had been nicknamed 'Elvis,' for the time it spent in the service of the United States National Guard in Memphis, Tennessee, home of internationally renowned 'King of Rock and Roll' Elvis Presley. The same helicopter played a controversial role in fighting wildfires in the Australian bush. Hookey's painting speaks to its use to prioritize extinguishing small fires in affluent communities while underprivileged areas were devastated by larger conflagrations. Simmons notes, "It's an interesting commentary that goes beyond the literal fire. It starts to talk outside of itself and into places of American popular culture." Here, the anthropomorphized man-machine wears a white suit, the signature garment of an American entertainer whose global stardom and wealth were achieved via appropriation of the sounds and styles of African Americans. This superstar's outfit is embellished with Australian seven-pointed stars -- dots that connect two global territories to a shared history of colonialism. The words "FIRE DON'T DISCRIMATE PEOPLE DO" point to the relationship between privilege and ethics, in regard to both human and natural ecologies.

Gordon Hookey was born in Cloncurry, Queensland in 1961. Hookey belongs to the Waanyi people. He has received a BFA from The University of New South Wales and a Master of Visual Arts from Griffith University. His work has been exhibited throughout Australia and internationally at venues including, documenta 14; Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; Milani Gallery, Queensland; UQ Art Museum, Brisbane; and National Art Museum of China, Beijing. Hookey's work is held in major collections including the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art and University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane; Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth; National Gallery of Australia and Australian National University, Canberra; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; University of Technology, Sydney; Cleveland Shire Council, Cleveland, England; Osaka Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, Japan, University of Alberta, Canada; and a number of significant private collections. Hookey currently lives and works in Brisbane, Australia.