# Right to be Counted

A photographic exhibition by Tobias Titz

'40 years ago, white Australians voted to include the indigenous Australians as fellow "Australians." That was before my time, even before my mother but if it hadnot happened my life and the life of others would be very different.'

Sheridan Walters, 2007

These are the articulate words of a young Indigenous girl living in Western Australia's remote Pilbara region. Referencing a momentous event that celebrates its 40th anniversary this year, this girl's words are informed, considered and intelligent beyond her young years.

Cover: Ginger Bob
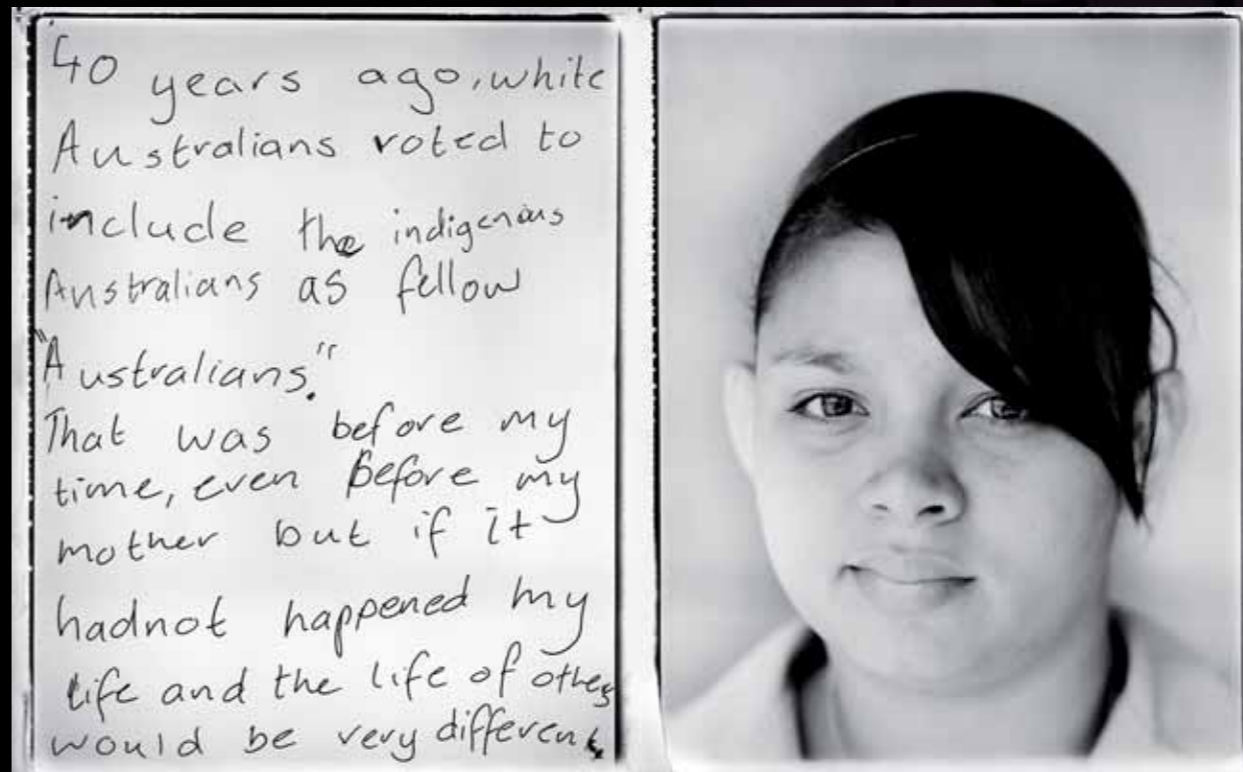
Sheridan Walters

Award-winning Melbourne photographer Tobias Titz and the Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre have collaborated with Indigenous community members from communities including Port Hedland, Yandeyarra, Carnarvon and Warralong, to create a body of photographs that articulate the communities' thoughts, opinions and experiences regarding the 1967 referendum. Internationally renowned for his emotive polaroid-style portraits, German-born Tobias has won many awards, including first prize at the International Polaroid Award in 2000, and in 2006 was shortlisted as one of the top ten portrait photographers in Australia as part of Capture magazine's Australia's Top Photographers.

A defining moment in human rights for Indigenous Australians, the 1967 referendum determined whether to adjust two key phrases in the Australian Constitution. A 'Yes' vote would remove from section 51 of the Constitution the words: 'other than the aboriginal people in any State for whom it is necessary to make special laws'; and remove the entire section 127: 'In reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives should not be counted.'

The verdict, a 90.77 per cent 'Yes', resulted in Indigenous Australians legally considered equal Australians, able to move around the country freely and legally share the rights of other Australians, although the battle was far from over. Significantly, by the time the referendum came around the case for Indigenous rights was so strong that a 'No' case was not even formulated. However, Western Australia recorded the highest percentage of 'No' votes at 19.05%, in which Kalgoorlie had the strongest opposition. As Hedland resident Joseph Maher wrote in his photograph in Right to be Counted: 'It was a good start, still need more work.'

90.77%

said 'yes'

Joseph Maher

To create Right to be Counted, Tobias photographed each participant in a space of their choice; then he photographed the same space without the person occupying it. Following this, Tobias taught the participants to use a leather awl to write something of their choice into the negative of the empty space—in the case of Right to be Counted, the text relates to the subjects' perceptions of the 1967 referendum. Tobias worked directly with the project participants with the assistance of translators from Wangka Maya to teach them the hands-on skills involved in taking the photographs, processing the negatives, as well as scratching the text onto the negatives. All workshops were facilitated in groups, which encouraged interaction and active participation.

Tobias says the group experience 'gave a voice to stories'—many of which had not been aired for a long time. The collaborative process allowed younger members of the communities involved to learn about the referendum and to hear histories that contributed to their own futures. Like the photographer himself, many younger members of the communities had little or no knowledge of the referendum prior to taking part in the project. Tobias believes knowledge-exchange is important to any community. He says, 'it allows us to understand where we come from—how to move forward.'

Right to be Counted is an exhibition highlighting the power of words. The 1967 referendum was a groundbreaking moment for Australia. It was a decision based on the removal of words from the Constitution, yet there was a long build-up preceding the referendum. Several events in particular contributed to the referendum, including the first recorded Aboriginal workers' strike on May 1, 1946 in which at least 800 people from remote regions including Yandeyarra land in the Pilbara rebelled against their exploited status as underpaid, abused workers on local stations. One of the longest strikes in Australian history, the 1946 strike lasted until 1949, affected 20 stations and covered around 10,000 square kilometres of land.

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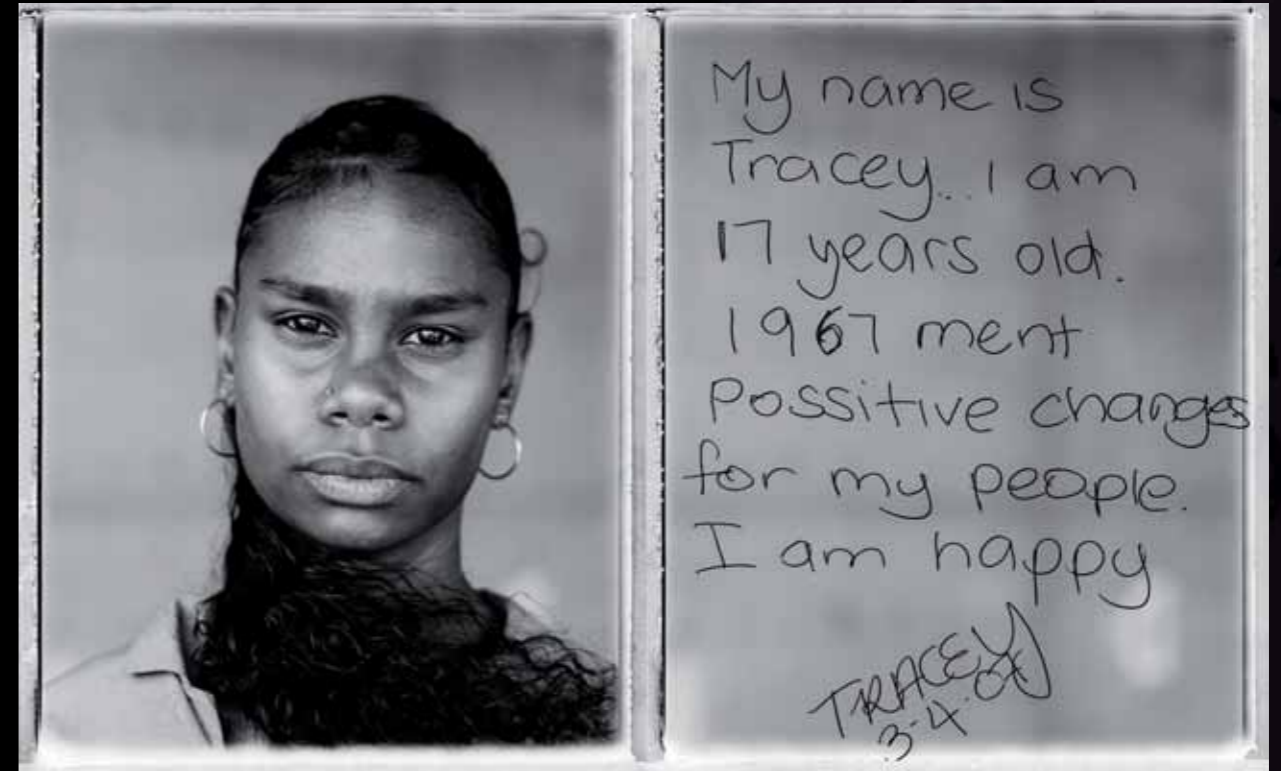

Tracey Monaghan

Also significant were the 1965 Freedom Rides in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous students from Sydney drove throughout regional New South Wales to protest against racial segregation and living conditions of Indigenous people. In 1966 the Gurindji people, who worked as labour on the Vestey station in the Northern Territory, went on strike in what came to be known as the Wave Hill Strike. They established their own community and demanded that their lands be returned to them. Both events attracted considerable media attention. Also in 1966, the United Nations' General Assembly approved two Covenants regarding Civil and Political Rights and Social and Cultural Rights. Then in January 1966, Sir Harold Holt became Prime Minister of Australia and signed the United Nations International Accord for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, compelling him to rectify the 'White Australia' policy.

Like the 1967 referendum's agenda, Tobias' works are especially potent because of the words involved. The collaborating participants' freedom to have their say and write exactly what they wanted renders the visual impact of the photography even more powerful. These carefully considered words, positioned next to the compelling portraits, create an exhibition that is at once confronting, personal, and stunning. The result of scratching text into a photograph of an otherwise empty space allows the unseen and unsaid to be given a voice and physical form. Right to be Counted asserts that even once a person has left a space, even after an event has come and gone, something remains—repercussions, impact, memory. In the case of the 1967 referendum, the removal of words from a government document left an immense impact. In the empty space those words left behind, much was said.

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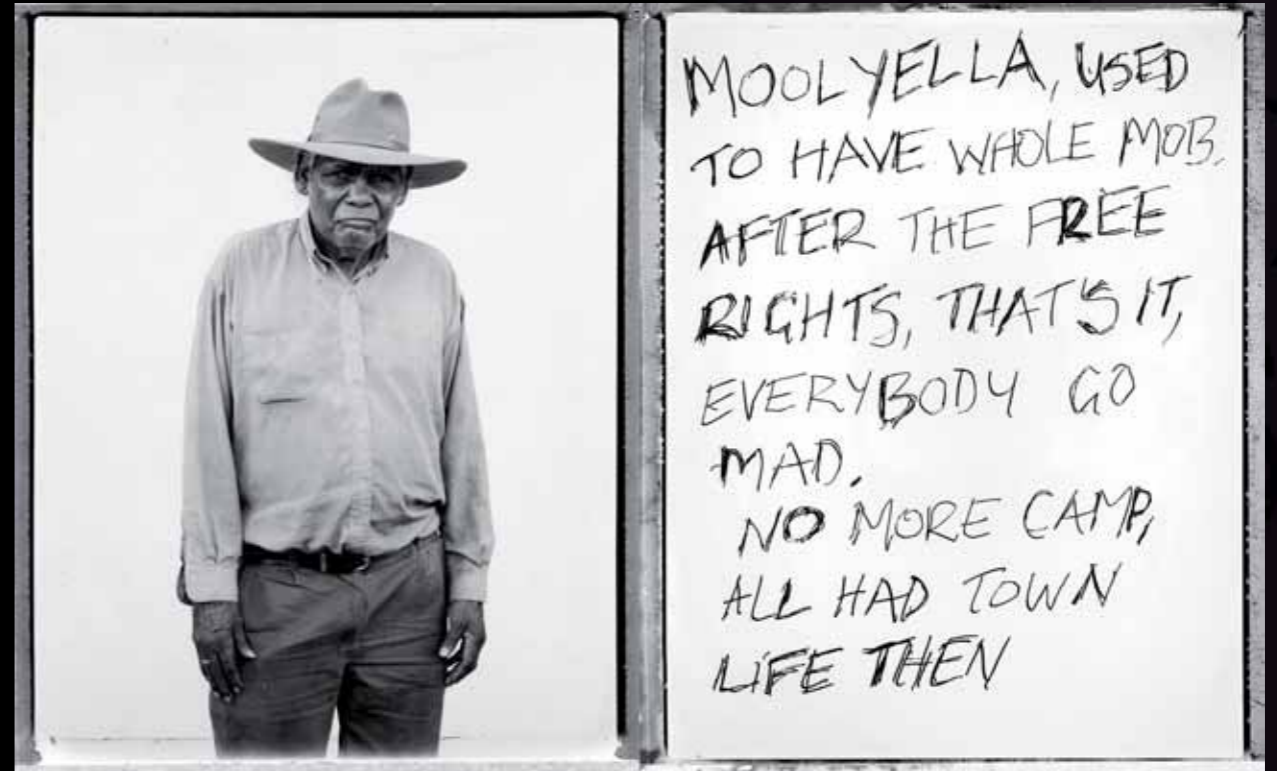
Charlie Coppin

Right to be Counted forms part of a larger cultural picture in the Pilbara, in which investment in cultural programming has resulted in greater opportunities for knowledge preservation and cross-cultural exchange. Organisations such as Wangka Maya and cultural hybrid FORM have worked intensively in the Pilbara centres of Port Hedland and Newman to create quality community-focused and cultural programming. When partnering with corporate or government bodies such as BHP Billiton Iron Ore, the Pilbara Development Commission and the Town of Port Hedland, non-profit cultural organisations like FORM can assist regional towns in achieving a more holistic sense of identity, belonging and wellbeing. Strong cultural programming also encourages industry-development in areas other than the traditional resources sector, which attracts a broader tourism demographic, including the rapidly growing cultural tourism sector. Likewise, it increases the sustainability and liveability of regional communities as it helps to attract and retain workers, residents and tourists by offering alternative avenues for commercial ventures, as well as more community participation and interaction through events and workshops.

Interactive programs such as Right to be Counted also offer community members the chance for skills-building, which can in turn boost motivation to pursue other goals and develop potential career or education paths. Some participants in Right to be Counted also completed the Aboriginal Visual Arts Certificate at the Pundulmurra campus of Pilbara TAFE, highlighting the stepping-stone effect that skills-development within these programs encourages. In redeveloping the Port Hedland Cultural and Tourism precinct (encompassing the Visitor Centre and the Courthouse), FORM and BHP Billiton Iron Ore created a platform on which community/cultural programs can be developed and executed. Wangka Maya Manager Fran Haintz, who worked directly with Tobias and collaborating Indigenous community members to facilitate Right to be Counted, says the existence of these community-specific platforms helps to create a 'trusted organisational structure', which encourages community confidence in new programs, as well as earning trust from participating Indigenous communities.

Sheridan Walters' response to the 1967 referendum, like every other work in the exhibition, speaks volumes: of the past, the present, and with hopeful reflections of the future.

Top row: Adrian Alone, Arnold Carter, Brodie Tittums, Lindsey Ginger.
Middle row: Janita Barker, Ty Kite, Charlie Coppin, Rose Murray.
Bottom row: Sheridan Walters, Kelman Tullock, Fran Haintz, Sylvia Clarke.

Right to be Counted: Created in the Pilbara by Tobias Titz in collaboration with the Wanka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre and local Indigenous communities.