

# Vernon Ah Kee

TALL MAN

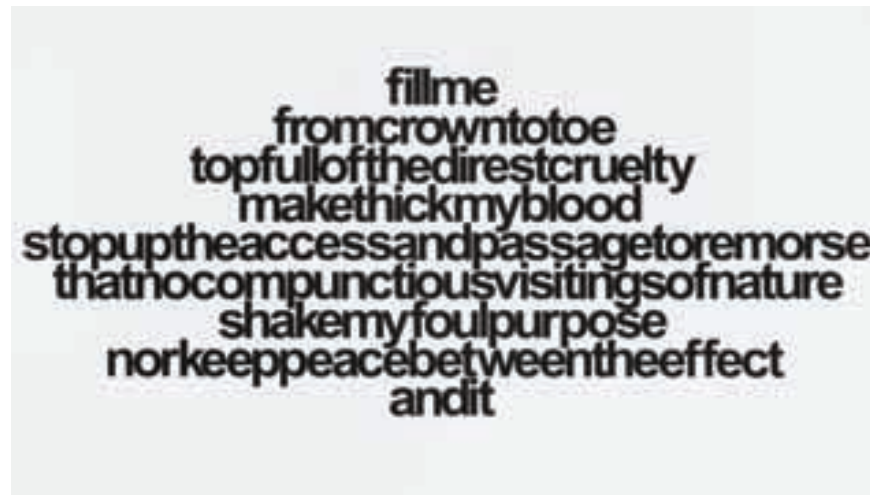
Vernon Ah Kee’s “Tall Man” is a smartly composed yet painful examination of race relations in Australia. The exhibition takes as its theme the subject of the 2004 Palm Island riots that occurred in the wake of Indigenous Australian Cameron Doomadgee’s murder at the hands of a white police officer, Chris 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.

## Below

TADAAKI KUWAYAMA  
*Project for 21st-Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Plan for Courtyard (Gold and Silver)*  
2011  
Anodized aluminum, 24 pieces.  
Courtesy 21st-Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa.

# Tadaaki Kuwayama

UNTITLED

Often associated with the American Minimalist movement of the 1950s and 1960s, Tadaaki Kuwayama was a close colleague of artists such as Dan Flavin and Donald Judd, whom he began to associate with after moving to New York from his native Nagoya in 1958. After showing his work in the early 1960s at New York’s Green Gallery—an important early supporter of Minimalism—Kuwayama participated in the seminal “Systemic Painting” show at the Guggenheim Museum in 1966. Throughout most of his career, however, he has been lumped in with what many mistakenly think of as a “painting” movement, and with which his work has few formal similarities anyway. Sharing something of the obsessively perfect geometry and immaculate finish of Judd’s sculptures, Kuwayama’s canvases feature glimmering, impassive surfaces made out of synthetic materials such as acrylic, Bakelite and Mylar.

This exhibition of four new paintings and installations (or, as the artist describes them, “plans”), specifically conceived for four of the museum’s exhibition spaces, is a landmark demonstration of Kuwayama’s talent for creating rigorously executed, holistic environments that harmonize with their surrounding spaces.

Gracing an outdoor space at the heart of the

museum is *Plan for Courtyard (Gold and Silver)* (2011), a sleek structure consisting of 24 thin, elongated plank-like strips of anodized aluminum in alternating gold and silver finishes. Kuwayama’s collaboration with the Nihon Anodizing company and the Kokuyo Aluminum factory to produce these works has yielded poetic results: on the January day of my visit, the sprightly, two-toned industrially fabricated structure wavered gently in a passing snow shower, glinting faintly in the muted light of the late afternoon.

Encircling the installation was a square enclosure of regularly spaced glass panels, five on each side of the courtyard. This was offset and counterbalanced in turn by the white façade of rectangles that rose up from the museum’s single-story circular core to varying heights. Viewed in this light, *Plan* functions as a sort of structural intervention at the heart of the museum, collapsing distinctions between artwork and environment.

As critic Taro Igarashi has noted, this building, designed by the Pritzker Prize-winning Japanese firm SANAA, consists of “an assortment of exhibition rooms in different sizes, each displaying the work of a different artist—a parallel arrangement that also articulates individual approaches and worldviews.” As modular constructions that also reflect a range of articulations, Kuwayama’s “plans” cleverly mirror the way in which the museum was built.

This strategy was deftly captured in *Plan for Gallery 12 (Blue and Yellow)* (1996–2011). Fourteen long modules, each consisting of two jointed plywood panels gilded over with Bakelite and a coat of alternating blue and yellow metallic paint, were carefully hung on the far wall of a rectangular room. The width of each jointed panel was equal to that of the intervals that separated them, while the softly shimmering finish of the paint and the flat, ambient white light of the gallery did away with almost all sense of depth perception, making the work appear as a single continuous plane of vertical stripes that seemed to hover ominously. While Kuwayama’s installation almost dissolved into the larger canvas of the wall on which it was hung, it also borrowed the “blank” space of the gallery wall and weaved it into its own gaps.

Despite the modest scope of the installations when compared to the sprawling, reticulated structure of the entire museum building, Kuwayama’s carefully constructed modules are the perfect foil to the translucency and reflectivity of SANAA’s gleaming architecture. Far from being hermetic exercises in Minimalism, Kuwayama’s “plans” functioned more like open propositions that expanded the physical and liminal possibilities of the museum architecture.

DARRYL WEE

