Who belongs?

BARACK OBAMA'S face beamed from the back of Fremantle artist Tania Ferrier's jacket, attracting plenty of attention in the southern states of the US as the president campaigned for a second term.

Not all of it was welcome: Ferrier reports that in an Elvis Presley-themed diner, "I got knocked to the ground by a white man in a suit".

Having been allowed to the ground Ferrier assumed it was an accident and was waiting for an apology. [but] he just walked off. "Thank you very much. Not. Ferrier spent two years interviewing 33 Americans and 33 Australians from all walks of life for her "hybrid arts installation", Talkback, exploring race and identity in both countries.

"It's a look at blackness, whiteness and belonging," Ferrier says. It has particular poignancy this week in the wake of the police shooting to death an unarmed black teenager in Ferguson, Missouri.

A "magnificent seven" collaboration of people is behind the exhibition (Ferrier, Laura Mitchell, Leslie Morgan, James Kerr, Americans Yulissa Morales and Mirla Jackson, and IT man Alan Thompson who ensures the high-tech installations go off without a glitch).

Wandering through, you'll hear occasional interjections from Martin Luther King and Tony Abbott.

Morales and Jackson linked up with Ferrier after finding her lost purse not only did they track her down through Facebook and post the wallet to Australia, they sweetened the deed with a box of chocolates.

When Ferrier headed back to the US the young women helped find interview subjects, including an AIDS clinic manager, a teenager raising her brother and a couple of drug users.

Statistics in the US and Australia are similar when it comes to the proportion of white and non-white people, as is the grim disproportion of non-whites behind bars.

"Fourteen per cent of the population is African/American and they make up 70 per cent of the prison population," Ferrier states.

She'd intended to take a hard edge to the issues in mind, but her new young friends convinced her to take a different approach.

"They helped me look at it as more positive, aspirational."

Morales flew in for the exhibition the Colombian/American says racism should be countered wherever it's found but notes a gentle approach is more likely to win people over.

"No matter what perspective you come from you can look at this [exhibition] without feeling attacked," she says.

With comfy chairs to sit on, visitors are invited to take their time to look and listen and absorb another's point of view, Ferrier says.

Talkback opens today at the Heathcote Gallery, Applecross and runs till September 21.