

Albert Namatjira's Grandson Vincent Revisits Dargie Portrait

By Bronwyn Watson

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For the past five years, Vincent Namatjira, descendant of renowned landscape artist Albert Namatjira, has been painting idiosyncratic and often witty portraits of important historical and political figures.

One of his portraits, James Cook — with the Declaration, was bought last year by the British Museum for its permanent collection. It is on display in London as part of the museum's Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation exhibition, the first in Britain devoted to the history and culture of indigenous Australians.

Besides Cook, Namatjira's other portraits feature members of the royal family, such as the Queen, Prince William and the Duchess of Cambridge, Australian politicians such as Tony Abbott and John Howard, and his grandfather Albert.

Namatjira began painting in 2011, encouraged by his wife and father-in-law, who are both artists. He had early success last year when his first solo exhibition at Marshall Arts in Adelaide was purchased in its entirety by the Queensland Art Gallery.

Namatjira was born in 1983 in Alice Springs. As a child he lived at Hermannsburg within Ntaria country but his mother died when he was six, and he and his older sister were sent to foster care in Perth.

When he turned 18, he and his sister returned to Hermannsburg to search for their family. While living there, he watched his aunt, a leader of the celebrated Hermannsburg Potters, create art about their country and the family legacy.

It wasn't long before Namatjira was incorporating these themes into his work. Of this legacy, he says: "I hope my grandfather would be quite proud, maybe smiling down on me because I won't let him go. I just keep carrying him on, his name and our family's stories."

One of Namatjira's portraits of himself and his grandfather is on display at the QAG, and when I visit Brisbane I am shown the work by the gallery's curator of indigenous Australian art, Bruce McLean.

Albert and Vincent is the result of the artist's visit to QAG in May last year. He was keen to see William Dargie's 1956 portrait of Albert Namatjira, which won the Archibald Prize. Namatjira spent many hours in the gallery, leaning a small mirror against a plinth so he could view and sketch himself with the portrait. He took the sketches home to remote central Australia and finished the painting there.

In the gallery, McLean has placed Albert and Vincent alongside the picture that inspired it, the Dargie portrait.

As McLean and I stand before the portraits, he tells me Namatjira first came to his attention when he was a judge at the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award in 2013.

"Vincent really wanted to see the Dargie portrait, which he'd only seen in black and white reproductions and on the website, because he has rarely been outside the communities in central Australia," McLean says.

"It was really touching to have him here and engaging with the work."

"When he first saw it, he basically just smiled and stood in front of it. He also talked to gallery visitors about remembering his grandfather to make sure that his story is kept alive and relevant, as a very relevant cultural story for the family. He has been working with country and community to revitalise that history and legacy.

"Vincent is a very witty and often subversive artist. He is really interested in exploring politics but also looking at people and history through portraiture. It has been a pleasure to watch him grow as an artist of notable importance, one of the younger rising stars of painting in central Australia."