

ART FAIR

APY artist's take on power hits a nerve

On his first trip abroad, Vincent Namatjira is exhibiting at Art Basel Miami Beach, writes **Stephen Todd**.

"When you touch a paintbrush, it makes you bigger," reckons Vincent Namatjira. "It makes you gigantic, really." As the great-grandson of Albert Namatjira unveils 10 new paintings at Art Basel Miami Beach, word is he's about to become enormous. Namatjira, 35, paints vivid portraits of world leaders, often featuring himself in the frame – shaking hands with Donald Trump, giving Kim Jong-un a buzz cut, waving from an old pick-up truck as he drives past a shirtless Putin on horseback. Appropriating popular newsreel imagery, his blocky figures on flattened backgrounds become wry icons of power and wealth.

Namatjira works from a studio at the Iwamtja Arts centre in the remote community of Indulkana in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) lands in the far north-west of South Australia.

"When I see politicians, world leaders, royalty and other power players on the news, I see this huge disconnect between their world and the day-to-day reality of life in a remote Aboriginal community," he said in a recent interview with Australian curator Natalie King.

"A lot of my recent paintings are about the reversal of power structures," he says.

To get to Miami, Namatjira had to drive five hours north to Alice Springs, then fly east to Brisbane, then on to Los Angeles and



finally to Florida. This is the first time he's left Australia.

"My great-grandfather went to London and even met the Queen," he says. "I'm looking at this trip that way."

Albert Namatjira's Western art-influenced watercolours of outback landscapes made him a household name from the 1940s on. He was the first Aboriginal person to be granted Australian citizenship.

Despite his art star status and oeuvre of more than 2000 paintings, his final years were tumultuous and he died in near poverty, in 1959.

Vincent was born in Alice Springs and

spent his early years in the old Lutheran mission town of Hermannsburg. After his mother's death when he was seven, he lived in foster homes around Perth. It was only when he returned to live with extended family in the desert, aged 18, that he learnt about his esteemed forebear. "I was kind of shocked at the time to learn that I was related to a famous Indigenous landscape artist," he recalls. "I became fascinated by Albert's story and by his work, but I didn't immediately take up a paintbrush."

It was his partner, the painter Natasha Pompey, who introduced him to art. "At that time I was pretty much a stay-at-home dad, looking after our three girls while

Vincent Namatjira in his studio in the APY lands: 'A lot of my recent paintings are about the reversal of power structures.'

Natasha would go to the art centre to work. Eventually I began to get interested, and started doing dot paintings, like her."

But it was when he began painting portraits of his great-grandfather, in 2014, that Namatjira's work really came into its own. *Albert's Story* is a suite of 13 paintings depicting a narrative arc from *Being Initiated in the Bush* to *Albert Namatjira in Prison* to *Dies in Hospital, Broken Heart*.

A further three series depict other groups of influence: the seven Australian prime ministers during his lifetime (up until 2016, when they were painted); seven senior Anangu men, artists and cultural leaders from the APY lands (*Legends*, 2018); and the seven richest people in Australia – *The Richest*, 2017.

"All these works look at ideas of power structures and different concepts of leadership and influence," he says.

After six years of showing at Art Basel Hong Kong, the gallery representing Namatjira, This Is Not Fantasy, was invited to Art Basel Miami Beach (which last year clocked up a record 82,000 visitors).

"We have had a lot of feedback. Clearly Vincent's work hit a nerve," says gallerist Dianne Tanzer.

Namatjira's work is appealing for the political savvy that underscores his flamboyantly naive technique.

One of the most striking paintings he'll be showing in Miami Beach is *Vincent & Donald* (2018), a 122cm x 155cm acrylic on canvas depicting the artist with one arm around Trump's shoulder, the other wielding a knife. He's just taken a slice out of a huge gâteau iced with a goopy map of the world; his Republican-red baseball cap is emblazoned 'Make APY Great Again'. It's unclear whether he wants to stab Trump or fête him, but the irony is layered as thick as the icing.

"Trump and me share the same birthday," he says with a grin. "Isn't that weird? **L&L**"

Art Basel Miami Beach is on from December 6 to 9. Vincent Namatjira is represented by This is No Fantasy, 108-110 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, Melbourne. Tel: (03) 9417 7172

DESIGN MAKEOVER

Cosmos of cool

Bassike's boutique reflects the new chic aesthetic on Brisbane's James Street, writes **Stephen Todd**.

Brisbane's new Calile hotel dubs itself an "urban resort", a kind of one-stop R&R shop with all the buzz of inner-city living.

The \$100 million building, a white brick and concrete composition of zigzag geometries and elegant barrel vaulting was designed by local architects Ingrid Richards and Adrian Spence, who are carving out a niche for themselves as purveyors of an edgy subtropical modernism. Located in the newly groovy James Street precinct five kilometres from the CBD, The Calile is rigorous and crisp, confidently breezy – signalling a new Queensland breeze.

Richards refers to the style of the seven-storey, 175-room hotel as "gentle brutalism".

"There's a very distinct feeling about this part of Brisbane these days, which is heightened by the vibe at the hotel," says Deborah Sams, co-founder with Mary Lou Ryan of clothing brand Bassike, which devised The Calile's staff uniforms. If uniforms is quite the right word for elegantly crumpled Italian cotton shirts and linen chinos, as neutral in gender as in tone. Only a tiny brass collar pin, arced like the hotel facade, suggests who holds the key to the cocktails cabinet.

Bassike is one of a dozen fashion brands to take up tenancy in the street-level arcade around The Calile's lobby, a new rendezvous spot for visitors and locals alike. (The 26-metre swimming pool and private cabanas for guests only are on the elevated open-air podium at level two.)

Like the hotel spaces, the Bassike store interior employs elemental materials in a

finely honed manner, offsetting hard industrial edges with beautiful finishing. Within the structural concrete shell, a screen of customised breeze blocks filters daylight through double-height glazing; while pale oak floors and bespoke timber counters are softened by French linen drapery. It feels grand but approachable.

"We wanted the James Street store to be chic, but very urban," says Sams.

The Bassike boutique was designed by architect Kelvin Ho, principal of Sydney practice Akin Atelier, who also did the fitouts for the Dion Lee and Camilla and Marc shops along the same block. His skill is in conveying the essence of each brand while creating a strong united front.

In fact, Ho has designed all of Sams and Ryan's interiors since they opened their first Bassike pop-up in a weatherboard cottage in Avalon, an hour's drive north of Sydney, in 2006. That one has a distinctly "beachy vibe, not too elevated", according to Sams. The Balmain store in a heritage building "feels more inner city"; while the store in Venice Beach, California, designed by Ho in collaboration with Los Angeles studio Brook&Lyn is "almost just

In the store's interior, hard industrial edges are offset with beautiful finishing.



a box with an amazing courtyard".

"Having worked with Bassike since the beginning I have a good working knowledge of its core values," says Ho. "The challenge is to translate those and apply them to different contexts, creating a unique experience no matter the location."

Bassike's early collections were, as the name suggests, all about wardrobe essentials: the jersey T-shirts and loose separates with which the brand made its mark.

Twelve years and 11 stores later, Bassike produces four fashion collections a year – two for the northern hemisphere, two for the southern – and each month drops new trend pieces into store and at overseas stockists such as Lane Crawford, Hong Kong. "Consumers have an insatiable appetite for new product," says Sams, who also commissioned Ho to design her Whale Beach house.

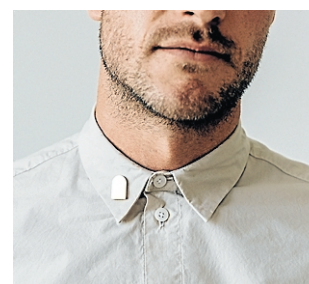
"Bassike already had a loyal customer base in Brisbane, many of whom would fly down to Sydney to shop or find us online. So when the opportunity arose to open our own store in such a vibrant new Brisbane precinct, we leapt at the chance."

James Street, once a downbeat light industrial zone is now abuzz with slick new cafes and bars. The foot traffic is conspicuously well-heeled, peppered with tradies who lunch (in drawstring shorts and baggy tees evoking prototypical Bassike attire.)

The transformation began 15 years ago when developers Michael and Cal Malouf decided to leverage Brisbane's burgeoning food culture to open the James Street Market, a savvy roster of some of the city's finest providores.

This hangar-like complex designed by Cox Rayner Architects (with a young Ingrid Richards as project architect) soon spawned specialty shops and food and beverage venues, often in neglected warehouses reconfigured and rebricked by Richards Spence.

By reworking the precinct in increments, using a consistent material palette and a constant, blocky architectural program, Richards Spence have created more than just a series of sexy leaseholds; they've coaxed a new neighbourhood into being. **L&L**



Clockwise from main: Bassike's store on James Street; the fashion brand designed staff uniforms for The Calile Hotel; swimming pool at The Calile. PHOTOS: SAVANNAH VAN DER NIET, SEAN-FENNESSY



Need to know

The Calile Hotel
48 James Street, Fortitude Valley, Brisbane

Bassike
Shop g/02, 48 James Street, Fortitude Valley, Brisbane