

Issue 287 / March 2016

ART MONTHLY

AUSTRALASIA



AU\$14.95
NZ\$16.00

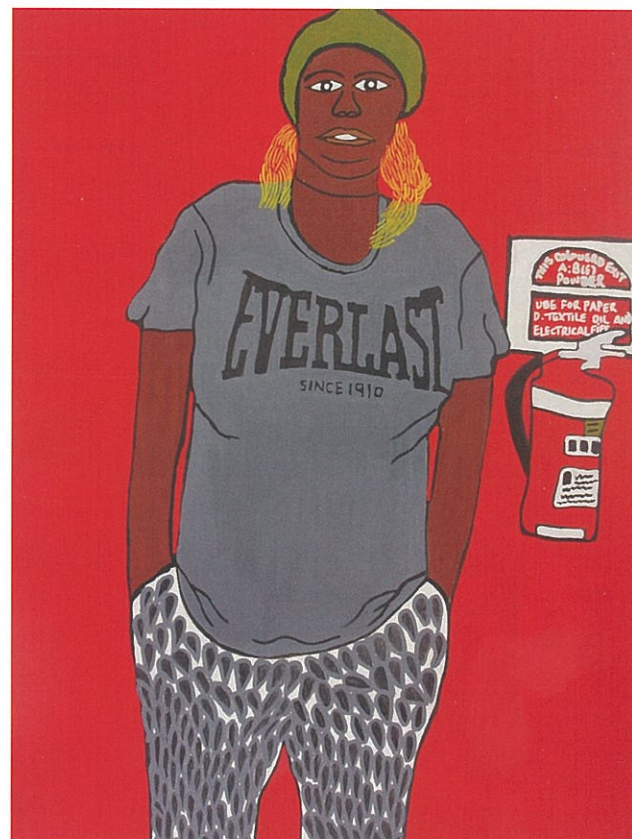


Special Asia bumper edition
Artist pages by Jumaadi
20th Biennale of Sydney

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From ceremony to selfies

Kieran Finnane, Alice Springs



Left:
Vincent Namatjira,
James Cook – with the declaration, 2014,
acrylic on canvas, 101 x 76cm, The British Museum, London;
image courtesy the artist and Iwantja Arts, Indulkana

Right:
Nerine Tilmouth, *Self Portrait and Fire Hose*, 2015, acrylic on board, 80 x 60cm;
image courtesy the artist and Tangentyere Artists, Alice Springs

Opposite:
Vincent Namatjira,
William Dargie painting Albert Namatjira, 2014,
acrylic on canvas, 76 x 101cm, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane;
image courtesy the artist and Iwantja Arts, Indulkana

New developments in desert figuration



In 2013 'Desert Mob' coincided with the federal election that saw Tony Abbott defeat Kevin Rudd (who had recently deposed Julia Gillard) to become Australia's 28th Prime Minister. Normally the two events would have seemed remote from one another, but there at the annual exhibition of work from desert art centres held in Alice Springs, on a metre-high canvas were Rudd and Gillard flanking Abbott, the latter looking priest-like and pleased with himself in the centre, all three against a backdrop of tall buildings. The work was by Vincent Namatjira of Iwantja Arts. In the 23-year history of 'Desert Mob' there had never been anything like it.

It wasn't that figuration was new, nor the representation of European Australians. Rather, it was the attention paid to identities on the national stage, their humorously and perceptively rendered relationship (this *before* the election result), and all without explicit reference to the artist's subject position. It was evidence of the penetration of mass media into desert communities, of its images and stories being thought about, and of a desert artist – though one who had grown up far from his traditional country, with foster families in Perth – striking out on a very individual path in concerns and style.

In that work Namatjira's characterisation is broad brush, cartoon-like, a portrait of power more than of individuals. He does both in *James Cook – with the declaration* (2014), a work acquired by the British Museum in London

and featured in its major 2015 exhibition 'Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation'. With the same witty perspicacity he roughs in a heroic portrait, western canon-style, but in a stroke undermines it by rendering the declaration as an extension of Cook's uniform. Here Cook is more servant than master, and someone for whom Namatjira feels sympathy, as shown by his work on Cook's facial expression.

The young artist (born in 1983) has been creating a body of work on Cook, a 'timeline' as he has called it – narrative scenes from Cook's life, including encounters with Aborigines. He has been doing something similar with his own illustrious great-grandfather, Albert Namatjira (1902–1959), who he has come to know through intensively studying photographs and portraits of him. In *William Dargie painting Albert Namatjira* (2014), he captures the gravity of the Dargie portrait with great force but without verisimilitude. In contrast, his etching *Portrait of Albert* (2015) is a fine likeness as well as character study. His placement of the figure low within the frame is unlike its photographic source, contributing much to its depth. Exposure to printmaking has revealed the young artist's drawing skills, with Namatjira admitting to being a 'better sketcher than painter'. He has been drawing since childhood, yet he seems to prefer painting. Why? 'Tradition' is the one-word answer from this artist who in so many ways has departed from it.¹

Namatjira is not alone in this at Iwantja, which reflects well on the centre's ability to nurture individual development. Coming to the fore around the same time as Namatjira have been two other artists also interested in novel explorations involving figuration: David Frank has been assembling a unique iconography drawn from his 15 years with the South Australian Police Force, evolving now into more narrative scenes, while Tiger Yaltangki's recent work shows the influence of animation on an imagination fired by desert spirit stories. Namatjira's interest in portraiture, in the character and context of an individual, however, has more in common with recent forays by artists from the town camps in Alice Springs painting with Tangentyere Artists.

Tangentyere's core artists have been involved with figuration for years, with a focus on storytelling from daily life – as it is now and as recalled from childhood. They made a splash in 2014 with their 'Desert Mob' satellite show, 'Selfies', where attention was on their own individuality – faces, bodies, bearing. They had been stimulated in this direction by a skills development workshop, starting with taking photographs of themselves and one another, but at first they were reluctant to go further. Louise Daniels reported her fellow artists being initially 'all worried', with some saying 'only white people do this, not Aboriginal people'.² They were encouraged, though, by the work's success. The show sold well, and six works were acquired by the University of Queensland Anthropology Museum in Brisbane.

In this first round some artists had already enlarged their take on the 'selfie', setting themselves in contexts that spoke about their lives. This broader direction informed the development of a new body of work which was recently shown at the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, as part of 'TARNANTHI: Festival of Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art'.³

In most of the new portraits figures remain dominant and particular (the artist alone, or with family members or fellow artists), but context has equal billing. In some it is the faithfully observed location of everyday life. Shops figure prominently, with signage, shelving, produce all depicted; these are the places where food-gathering is done now. Sally Mulda, for instance, has long been painting narratives of street life around the Piggly Wiggly supermarket; her self-portraits take her up close and even inside this place she visits

daily. Nerine Tilmouth has deeply absorbed the aesthetic of commercial art: she sets herself in a brilliantly coloured world of logos and manufactured objects.

In other images the artists are consciously working in the overlap between traditional and contemporary life. Margaret Boko spells it out as the 'two worlds' of supermarket and country where 'we still going for goanna you know'.⁴ Betty Conway projects a self-image strongly influenced by mainstream popular culture – her dyed red hair, sunglasses, her poses – yet insists on the importance of her Aboriginal heritage (the helicopter she paints is to take her on a survey of women's sacred sites). Joanne Wheeler shows her taste for boldly patterned clothing and large earrings, while setting herself in front of her own painting depicting a more traditional style of family on a hunting trip. Louise Daniels situates herself in the yard of her house (in the suburbs, not a town camp anymore) with its security grilles, high fence, airplane overhead, but with birds, too, and her signature intricate patterning which makes her think 'of the flowers and grasses found in country'.⁵

Although it frequently goes hand in hand with an emphasis on continuous connection to country and culture, this staging or study of the individual within desert portraiture is breaking new ground, distinct from the oneness with country – the *Tjukurrpa* or

Dreaming – that to date has been the central subject of desert Aboriginal art.



1. See Kieran Finnane, 'Desert imprints: Artists' new ventures', *Alice Springs News online*, 11 May 2015; www.alicespringsnews.com.au/2015/05/11/desert-imprints-artists-new-ventures/, accessed 14 January 2016.

2. See Finnane, 'The fertile space between us – Part 4', *Alice Springs News online*, www.alicespringsnews.com.au/the-fertile-space-between-us-part-4/, accessed 14 January 2016.

3. Curated by Nici Cumpston, 'Making Place' was exhibited from 8 October 2015 to 17 January 2016.

4. From Indigenous Art Code certificate (catalogue number 7138-15) accompanying Boko's *Going shopping at Coles* (2015), courtesy Tangentyere Artists.

5. From Indigenous Art Code certificate (catalogue number 7171-15) accompanying Daniels' *My Place – 4 Gilmore Place, Alice Springs* (2015), courtesy Tangentyere Artists.