

Vincent Namatjira

Colourful optimism



Wes Hill

Vincent Namatjira

Vincent & Donald (Happy Birthday), 2018
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
Courtesy the artist and THIS IS NO
FANTASY, Diane Tanzer + Nicola Stein
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Opposite:

Vincent Namatjira

Albert Namatjira in Sydney—Yeah!
(from *Albert's Story series*), 2014
synthetic polymer paint on linen
Image courtesy the artist and Queensland
Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art
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Perceptions of colour cannot be trusted. This is something I know because I'm colour blind. Being colour blind means I'm mostly bored by the sunsets that other people enjoy (their vivid pinks just look like greys to me) and I'm also sceptical about the need for exactitude when naming what colour it is that one sees. No wonder the works of Vincent van Gogh first stood out to me. Here was an artist who used colour not to reproduce reality but, remarkably for the 1880s, as a conceptual tool, unafraid to use something like cerulean blue to render a corn field, every tone a metaphor for a particular life force ("What colour is in painting, enthusiasm is in life," he wrote to Theo in 1886).¹ Against the unstructured inclinations of his Impressionist peers, colour in a van Gogh painting is always in dialogue with his rigid, drawing-like forms, waging his own very different battle with the chromophobic tendencies of Western art, which, at least since the time of Aristotle, equated colourful extravagances with modes of vulgar, feminine, Orientalist, primitive or infantile excess.

Today, thanks in no small way to the twentieth-century avant-gardes, the dominant cultural perspective no longer automatically links indulgences in colour with ideals that are at once superficial and dangerous. But, as the artist and writer David Batchelor's ongoing studies of chromophobia reveal, a level of apprehension towards colourful decadence is still discernible



in contemporary life, in part because colour, especially in urban capitalist settings, "needs resistance and thrives on opposition."² Just as censorship makes transgression more pleasurable, gloominess and grime can make colour all the more luminous. Applying this to art, it is German artist Katharina Grosse's unusual use of dirt, sand and detritus that gives her in-situ colour-field works such intensity, in the same way that Philip Guston's fixation with grey makes his rusty orange daubs so sweet to the eye. Not only do we tend to notice colour by taking for granted the neutral tones that quietly play their oppositional and supporting roles, we also tend to overlook how subjective our experiences of colour are, often eluding semantic possession and differing wildly between persons and cultures.

It was the confident use of colour that first struck me when I encountered the work of Western Arrernte artist Vincent Namatjira. Like the other Vincent, he employs colour in an utterly bold yet totally supportive way. The colour that lurks in the background of his portraits—as the actual background—also, somehow, directs them. The great grandson of that supremely gifted and tragi-heroic figure of Australian art history, Albert Namatjira, Vincent was born in Alice Springs and raised in foster homes in Perth before moving to his great-grandfather's birthplace in the Central Desert region of Hermannsburg (Ntaria). When he was a young adult he relocated to the remote Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) community of Indulkana, 500 kilometres further south, where he is



still based. After trying his hand at the “dot painting” style advanced by artists such as Alec Baker and Wenten Rubuntja, since 2013 Vincent has focused largely on painting portraits of cultural figures. His unique style is not quite caricature but, upon first glance, it does conjure the perennially contentious and largely unavoidable categories of “self-taught” and “outsider” art (one critic has described his technique as “flamboyantly naïve” even if politically savvy).³ But such categorisations quickly dissolve when his larger body of work is encountered, as his highly nuanced palette and painterly sophistication become apparent. Vincent’s standout success over the last few years is testament to the fostering of individual expression at Indulkana’s Iwantja Arts, which has seen singular artists such as David Frank, Kaylene Whiskey, and Jimmy Pompey (Vincent’s father-in-law) adopt practices that use figuration,

autobiography, non-traditional colours and comical, pop-cultural motifs.

Vincent’s first foray into political portraiture was *John Howard Congratulating Tony Abbott* (2013). It is also an early masterpiece. The work shows a very basic, blobby-shaped, rendering of John Howard—cut in half by the left-hand frame—shaking hands with an even more unrecognisable Tony Abbott, modelled on a photograph taken after Abbott was elected Prime Minister in 2013. Above the two men in matching grey suits are two red-ochre Aboriginal paintings on the wall, separated by a blue clock. In this deceptively simple composition, Vincent’s themes are all laid bare. The ochre works in the background are like spirits on the wall; unnoticed, all-observing and invoking remote Aboriginal Australia’s distinctly different measure of time. They remind me of David Gulpilil’s quote from *Another Country* (2015): “whitefella culture never has enough time. We Yolngu, we have plenty of time.”⁴ As with much of Vincent’s work, this at first innocuous-looking painting slows everything down. Placing the symbolic politics of the handshake front and centre, the work renders this gesture of unspoken power and allegiance as a feeble whitefella act, part of a secret but ultimately impotent political ceremony. Given its topical subject matter, it would have been easy to overlook its sophisticated palette when it was first painted. Here, colour is used not





Opposite:
Vincent Namatjira
John Howard Congratulating Tony Abbott, 2013
 synthetic polymer paint on canvas
 Courtesy the artist and Queensland Art Gallery |
 Gallery of Modern Art
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Above (from top):
Vincent Namatjira
Prime Ministers series, 2016, The van Aanholt Family Collection; *Seven Leaders* series, 2016,
 Arthur Rowe Collection, Melbourne; *The Richest* series, 2016; synthetic polymer paint on
 canvas. Courtesy the artist, Iwantja Arts, Indulkana Community and THIS IS NO FANTASY,
 Diane Tanzer + Nicola Stein. Image courtesy Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art
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only to support his political jabs but also to make them into something more than just reactive commentary. In front of the work, I just can't help but rest my eye on that dirty-blue clock. All the other elements of the picture look busy making connections, but it sits there mysteriously blue, as if holding everything together.

In *Albert's Story* (2014)—which stages key moments in Albert Namatjira's life across thirteen works—and in an untitled series of paintings of Captain Cook that the artist refers to as a “timeline”—a desire to reconnect with history is prominent. Reconnection was, in fact, the impulse behind Vincent's very first attempts at making art, in an effort to reclaim lost time—including his relation to country—after being forced to spend his formative years estranged from his extended family in a foreign city. In many of the works, such as *Cook* (2015) and *Albert Namatjira Convicted of Supplying Alcohol—Long Finger of the Law* (2015), colourful monochromatic backgrounds focus attention on the overt dress codes of his subjects. Importantly, these large areas of colour are often painted after the central subjects have been completed, creating the impression that the figures have been extracted or erased from some preceding context. While appearing as frozen moments, these portraits belong less to the genre of history painting than to the imaginary—the artist's desire to make up for lost moments. Above all else,

they are about the magic of painting, presenting the medium itself as a powerful agent of historical fantasy.

Oliver Watts has claimed that “instead of finding relief in some perverse inversion” of history, Vincent Namatjira wants his contentious postcolonial subjects (such as the Queen, Captain Cook and various Prime Ministers) to live within contemporary society, interrogating them “as one would question a friend.”⁵ Interestingly, on an ABC television profile piece, the artist described a surprising admiration for Captain Cook, stating that: “to travel to here and to travel around the world, he was pretty courageous.”⁶ Evading the polemics of postcolonial revisionism, it is easy to detect a kind of Warholian openness in Vincent's approach, where Cook is as much a noble (even if ignorant) servant of the British Empire as he is a pirate or malevolent colonial ghost. Finding beauty in simple colour combinations and serial studies, his paintings recurrently provide ample breathing space for interpretation. In works depicting President Trump, such as *Vincent & Donald (Happy Birthday)* (2018), Vincent's larrikinism is turned up a notch—at once modest, mischievous and, if not apolitical, wary of towing party lines (is he celebrating with Trump, or about to stab him in this picture?).

The Queensland Art Gallery has made some astute purchases of Vincent Namatjira's works since 2014, and for the 9th Asia Pacific

Triennial of Contemporary Art they were responsible for hanging three previously distinct portrait series together as one, shown in such a way that each was improved. Paintings from the series *Seven Leaders* (2016), *The Richest* (2017) and *Prime Ministers* (2016) were displayed in a 7 x 3 grid, immediately conjuring Gerhard Richter's legendary *48 Tafeln* (48 Portraits) which was unveiled in the German Pavilion at the 1971 Venice Biennale. Richter's series, made especially for the Germanic architecture of the Venice locale, comprises black and white photo-realist paintings of historical figures whose achievements spanned literary, scientific, philosophical, and music fields. The subjects were reportedly chosen by Richter without any determinable logic, yet all are white, central European or North American males.

Aligning a crisis of national identity in Germany with a crisis of medium specificity in art, Richter's deadpan portraits invoke the serial neutrality of conceptual art and minimalism, as well as the gloomy, “fatherless” state of post-WW2 German culture. They are also the work of a supremely ambitious and paradoxical artist who lampoons individual genius at the sake of something more conceptually enigmatic—an incessant attempt to thwart his own signalling, as if in a cycle of confession and obfuscation. By contrast, Vincent's 21 portraits hide nothing. Whereas

Richter goes to painstaking lengths to blur his paint strokes and uniform his subjects, Vincent's are a celebration of their particularities. Although similarly derived from photographic sources, his figures are not fastidiously replicated. This is seen in the asymmetry of Malcolm Turnbull's face, which is evocative of George Condo's twisted portraits, themselves derived from Picasso's expressive cruelty.

Vincent's APT9 portraits centre on juxtaposition: an arrangement of Indigenous elders alongside an all-white (and arguably all-neoliberal) cast of politicians and the rich. But, although there is much pleasure to be had in seeing Tony Abbott, Kevin Rudd, James Packer and Gina Reinhardt rendered as buffoons, the works are anything but one-sided. In fact, it is their subtle details of colour that discourage a reduction of their meaning to a simple staging of the privileged alongside the disadvantaged.



From top:

Vincent Namatjira

Albert Namatjira Convicted of Supplying Alcohol—Long Finger of the Law (from *Albert's Story series*), 2014

synthetic polymer paint on linen

Courtesy the artist and Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art

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Vincent Namatjira

Albert Namatjira Becoming an Australian Citizen (from *Albert's Story series*), 2014

synthetic polymer paint on linen

Courtesy the artist and Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art

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Vincent Namatjira

Albert Namatjira Receiving Coronation Medal from Her Majesty (from *Albert's Story series*), 2014

synthetic polymer paint on linen

Purchased 2014. Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art Foundation

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Turnbull's white pinstripes against his mustard tie, Julia Gillard's dusty coral low-cut blouse and Keith Stevens' flannelette shirt striped in various shades of blue; each require a level of sophistication that only a colourist, not a satirist, could possess. Unlike Richter's work, the individuality of each "sitter" comes to the fore, no matter how stunted or farcical they might first appear. Vincent's detailing of the attire employs colour to signal a common desire for acceptance. Yes, Reinhardt might look lobotomised, but her delicately painted white pearl necklace, contrasting against a navy blue top, also gives her, dare I say it, a sweet vulnerability. Tony Abbott, rendered in flat flesh tones that blend from forehead and ear to

background, appears as the cretin that he is, but without bearing the artist's commentary. This is due to the care taken with every blend and stroke, which, if interpreted as commentary, would say something like: "even cretins want to be loved."

The legacy of Vincent Namatjira's great-grandfather will always hang over his work, in part because mainstream Australia has not come to grips with Albert's cultural significance, as a figure who opened up a space for diverse Indigenous voices, from Hermannsburg to Papunya and onwards. As the documentaries *Sons of Namatjira*, 1975, and the *Namatjira Project*, 2017, make clear, white Australia's prejudices are an integral part of the Namatjira story, the former exposing the white exploitation of Aboriginal art in the 1970s, and the latter showing the dogged, and eventually successful, attempts of his descendants to gain back control of the copyright to the nation's most notorious Indigenous art estate. Albert's reproduced central desert arcadias were, for many white suburban households in the 1950s and '60s, portals into the heartland of Australia. Whereas descendants such as Gloria Pannka and Lenie Namatjira continue to work closely in this tradition—attentively capturing its red sands, light pink ranges and mauve-hued skies—Vincent sees just as much artistry in his great-grandfather's manoeuvring between white and black worlds.

Notable for their absence of colour, Vincent's *Australia in Black and White* (2018) comprises 16 black ink drawings on watercolour paper of national icons such as Eddie Mabo, Ned Kelly, Cathy Freeman, Pauline Hanson and Angus Young, depicted with uncharacteristic rawness. Shown in *Just Not Australian*—a 2019 exhibition about contemporary Australian nationhood at Sydney's Artspace—the work is significant not just because the artist is adopting a medium associated with his great-grandfather, but also for directly linking his colour palette to the status of black and white relations in Australia. It is especially salient to me because its lack of colour paradoxically draws attention to the crucial role that it plays in his practice. Colour conveys Vincent's optimistic pluralism, side-stepping the easy polemics his sometimes loud subject matter would otherwise elicit.

Conflating local, national and global issues, Vincent's autobiographically driven works have as much to do with the intersecting narratives of President Trump and the Queen as his great-grandfather's watercolours had to do with German missionaries in Hermannsburg, or with early-twentieth-century excursions by American artists to the New Mexico deserts. His practice has everything to do with Australia, but it might have little to do with defining it, if by "defining" we mean cordoning off what is essential. When asked

for the Artspace exhibition to refer explicitly to Australia's cultural identity, it is telling that the artist stripped his palette back to black and white. Because for this only a black and white palette would do.

1 Irving Stone (ed.), *Dear Theo: The Autobiography of Vincent Van Gogh*, New York: Doubleday, 1937, p. 147__2 David Batchelor, *The Luminous and the Grey* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014): p. 60__3 Stephen Todd, "Vincent Namatjira unveils 10 new works at Art Basel Miami Beach," *Financial Review*, 6 December 2018. https://www.afr.com/lifestyle/arts-and-entertainment/art/vincent-namatjira-unveils-10-new-works-at-art-basel-miami-beach-20181203-h18mxv__4 Molly Reynolds (dir.), *Another Country*, Canberra: Ronin Films, 2015__5 Oliver Watts, John Fries Award 2015, catalogue essay, Sydney: UNSW Galleries, p. 13__6 Kerry Brewster, "Younger Namatjira breaks from family style with bold, fresh paintings," *Lateline*, ABC TV, 13 July 2015. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-07-10/namatjira-breaks-from-family-style-with-bold2c-fresh-paintings/6610260>.



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Vincent Namatjira

Australia in Black and White, 2018
ink on Fabriano watercolour paper
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Opposite:

Vincent Namatjira

Malcolm Turnbull (from *Prime Ministers* series), 2016
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
The van Aanholt family Collection
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