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JOHNATHON WORLD PEACE BUSH

In less than a decade, **Johnathon World Peace Bush** has progressed from struggling with straight lines to showing at Frieze London and The Armory Show in New York.

WORDS | LARA CHAPMAN



OPPOSITE: Installation view, Johnathon World Peace Bush. National Gallery of Victoria, Narm/Melbourne. PHOTO: TOM ROSS. COURTESY: THE ARTIST, JILAMARA ARTS, YERMALNER / MELVILLE ISLAND AND THIS IS NO FANTASY, NARRM/MELBOURNE.

RIGHT: Johnathon World Peace Bush. COURTESY: THE ARTIST, JILAMARA ARTS, YERMALNER / MELVILLE ISLAND AND THIS IS NO FANTASY, NARRM/MELBOURNE.



Less than ten years ago **Johnathon World Peace Bush**, often known as Jon Jon, began painting as part of Jilamara Arts and Crafts Association, on a remote Tiwi Islands 80km north of Darwin. At the beginning in 2016, he describes “messing around with different techniques but I couldn’t do the lines right”. Despite this, the poet, activist and now painter persisted, driven by “a passion for making designs that would show the lessons of old to the lessons of new – to hold the memory and pass it on to the future”. In the following nine years, Bush mastered lines, developed a unique style and achieved exactly that – spreading stories of Tiwi culture through exhibitions in New York, London, Melbourne and beyond.

His paintings are created in colours derived from the Tiwi Islands’ ochres – red, yellow and white – and use a distinctive approach of blending the centuries-old Tiwi visual language with Western religious imagery and popular or historic figures. This approach has caught the attention of curators, collectors and communities. For instance, he was one of the four artists invited to produce work for the inaugural

Country Road + NGV First Nations Commissions in 2024. Alongside his cousin, mentor and artist **Pedro Wonaemirri**, he delivered a series of three paintings and tunga (basket). The paintings speak of his grandfather’s experience of enforced migration and colonial violence.

His most recent body of work, *Walking Between Two Worlds*, was developed for a major solo exhibition at London’s Frieze No.9 Cork Street in early 2025. In this series of paintings, Bush depicts historical Western figures such as **Pope Francis**, **Queen Elizabeth II** and the Statue of Liberty. Bush says the collection “is a story full of different people from different places”. His decision to paint the royal family, for example, was informed by relatives in the UK, including an elder from his father’s family from Borrooloola, who went to Great Britain and his aminayi (grandfather) from Annandale who is in Scotland.

Bush’s *Statue of Liberty painting*, meanwhile, grew from his 2024 trip to New York when he exhibited his work at The Armory Show with *This Is No Fantasy*. “I saw the Statue of Liberty. It is a statue for peace for everyone, but that city is full of people living on the street everywhere,

poor people living rough. It is no statue of liberty for them.”

In London, Bush describes “the biggest mob who came to the artist talk. Good people were there, people from the Royal Academy – which was at the end of the street – and people from galleries from all over the world.”

Now, Bush is developing a solo exhibition that will take place at *This is No Fantasy* in Melbourne in 2026. “They took me to New York, they took me to London and Sydney. It will be good to have a show in their place in Melbourne,” Bush says of this opportunity.

Having already had his work collected by a number of institutions (including Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia, USA; Art Gallery of New South Wales; National Gallery of Victoria; and Art Gallery of South Australia), Bush’s ability to share his stories to audiences near and far continues to grow.

In this widespread sharing is a strong form of activism for his community. “The future is bright,” he says. “I have already done the hard job and opened the door for the future generations of the four [Tiwi] tribes to have a say.”