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The Wry Humour of Vincent Namatjira's Portraits

By Wes Hill – 19 December 2018



Vincent Namatjira, Tony Abbott, 2016, from the 'Prime Ministers' series, acrylic on canvas, 91 x 67 cm.
Courtesy: the artist and This Is No Fantasy, Fitzroy

Vincent Namatjira paints portraits, mostly from photographs, which ask us to look at pictures in a different way. His slow, localized and wry works effortlessly grab the viewer's attention, as if by accident. His themes – ranging from contemporary Australian Rules Football players to historical figures such as Captain Cook – seem as spontaneously chosen as they are painted: delivered in a vernacular storytelling style that is unmistakably Australian, but with colours and sparse backgrounds as breezy as any Alex Katz work.

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I'm a fan of Namatjira's paintings, in part, for the way they lull me into looking. I could write an account of how he raises caricature to a philosophical level (at once cubist and childlike), but such an inflated explanation is not completely true to my experience of the work. His painting of former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott (*Tony Abbott*, 2016), shown in the 2016 TarraWarra Biennial, makes me feel, simply, ecstatic. Based on a photograph, the painting perceptively captures Abbott's slimy, reptilian soul. As with the series, 'The Richest' (2017), which consists of portraits of seven of the wealthiest people in Australia, Namatjira's political leaders all look frozen, dull behind the eyes, whiter than white, and as if battling an internal war with their fakery and greed. Yet, these portrayals are not cruel or artlessly distorted so much as they are honest.

Namatjira was born in 1983 in Alice Springs, in the central Australian desert. As a child, he lived at Hermannsburg (Ntaria country), a celebrated region for Aboriginal art, but, after his mother died when he was six, he and his sister were sent to Perth in western Australia and were placed into foster care. When he turned 18, he returned to Hermannsburg to connect with his ancestral family (which included his aunt, Eileen Namatjira, a leading artist of the celebrated Hermannsburg Potters) and with the legacy of his grandfather, the legendary landscape painter and watercolourist Albert Namatjira (1902–59). Albert found success in the late 1940s not just on the basis of his extraordinarily accomplished work, but also as a figurehead of cultural assimilation: he was an Aboriginal artist who adopted a Western visual vocabulary and excelled at it. Adorning many a middle-class living room in whitebread 1950s Australia, Albert's paintings were presented as national gifts to Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip in 1954. Extraordinarily, three years later, he was the first Indigenous person to be granted Australian citizenship, a decade before federal law was changed to include all Indigenous people as citizens.

Rather than trying to outrun the complex legacies of his famous grandfather, Namatjira deals with its ironies head-on. This is, of course, the paradox of Aboriginal art more generally, which is often still obscured by polemical classification, as a product of either primitivist authenticity or cultural appropriation. In 1991, the late Queensland artist Gordon Bennett burst onto the scene with *Possession Island*, a painting that signals the start of a new era in postcolonial art in this country – one to which the younger Namatjira still belongs. Bennett's appropriation of an image of Captain Cook taking colonial possession of the land against a background of Jackson Pollock-style drips was an attempt to address the histories that allowed Indigenous art to be contained by the language of primitivism. Namatjira's cartoonish critique of structural racism is more laconic, but no less acute.

Like Andy Warhol's commissioned portraits, Namatjira's works are best viewed together. Collectively, they allude to Aboriginal art's entanglement with corporate and governmental bureaucratization. They are also representations of power in its quotidian guises, as seen in *Queen Elizabeth and Donald* (2018), which shows President Trump eating from a McDonald's takeaway bag alongside the Queen. I love that Namatjira's powerbrokers are shown as nothing but impotent buffoons, ultimately confronting us with the reality that it is these lifeless dummies who direct relations in our human zoo.