

FORT GANSEVOORT

OCULA

OCULA INSIGHT: Vincent Namatjira at THIS IS NO FANTASY + dianne tanzer gallery, Melbourne

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Vincent Namatjira, *The Queen and James Cook Shake Hands*, 2015. Acrylic on canvas. 91 x 122cm.

Bold, painterly and conceptually rich, Vincent Namatjira's work has gained significant recognition in Australia and abroad. In 2015, his work was curated into the 10th Mildura Palimpsest Biennale, and Tarnanthi Festival of Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at the Art Gallery of South Australia, where he exhibited a series of paintings that reflect on his heritage and pay tribute to his great grandfather Albert Namatjira.

In 2015 and 2013 he was a finalist in the John Fries Memorial Award; in 2013 and 2014, in the prestigious Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Awards; in 2013, the Outback Art Award, Broken Hill Regional Art Gallery. His work is held significant collections including the British Museum, Artbank, and Flinders University Art Museum and Queensland Art Gallery.

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In February Namatjira will open a much anticipated first solo exhibition with This is No Fantasy + Dianne Tanzer Gallery in Melbourne.

Your great grandfather, renowned watercolourist Albert Namatjira, is well known for his iconic images of Central Australia. I understand you never knew him. Tell me about your journey into art and decision to become a painter.

When I was very young my mother passed away in a car accident and I was sent away from my family and community of Hermannsburg to live with a foster family in Perth. When I finished high school I came back to Hermannsburg. I spent time reconnecting with my extended family, I had to relearn my language, I wasn't sure what to do with myself, where I belonged, who I was

During this time my uncles would say to me, 'don't you know who you are? Who your family and grandfather is?' This was the first time I learnt about Albert Namatjira, about his story, my connection to him and to painting. I would go and watch my aunty work at the ceramic studio in Hermannsburg. She would build and glaze her clay pots, I would sit and watch her working on the different stages.

I moved around a lot during this time, between Nyapari in the west of the APY Lands before coming to Indulkana. My wife and I had young daughters to care for at the time, whenever we could we would both paint at Iwantja Arts. My wife helped me to get started with painting, she has been a painter for a long time, she taught me the traditional ways of dot painting. A few years ago I felt ready to try painting a picture of my grandfather Albert Namatjira, it all started from there really.

You are well known for your big, bold, acrylic paintings and a distinctly playful style. Is there an underlying message you are trying to communicate?

Having just a little bit of humour can take the power out of a serious situation, whether something is happening to you right now, or it happened long ago. Painting some humour into a serious event or an important person let's you be in a little bit of control again, you can get a little bit of cheeky revenge.

You paint portraits, is this a deliberate attempt to forge your own identity, distinct to that of your grandfather's legacy? Or, is it perhaps a reflection of your own life and childhood experiences – largely in an urban environment?

I'm interested in people and their stories, and how someone from today is connected with the past. I like to paint people interacting with each other, or to paint familiar characters in unexpected places with other characters – this way the person looking at the painting has to bring a story too.

Turning to the subjects of your paintings, there seems to be repeated themes – Captain Cook, politicians, royalty and indeed your grandfather. What draws you to paint particular people and why?

I like to paint people who are famous, and paint them here in my community, painting them in the desert puts them into an unexpected place. The politicians, the royal family, Captain Cook; they've all had an impact on peoples lives in Australia, for good or for bad. I'm not being aggressive or saying they're right or wrong, I'm just looking at them, observing them. Taking the seriousness out of the past, taking the seriousness out of this countries achievements and mistakes. I also like to paint pictures of my family and friends in community, my family are very close to me, they are important people and should also be remembered by a painted canvas.

This is your first solo exhibition in Melbourne. Tell me about the works you have created for the exhibition.

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In this show there is a mix of paintings depicting Captain Cook, the royal family, and a few that include family, some friends, and myself. Some of the characters from the past and the present are painted together in one painting, so the stories are a bit mixed up.

You have quickly risen to become a leader in the younger generation of Indigenous painters from Central Australia with works acquired by the British Museum and major Australian Institutional Collections. What are your hopes as an artist?

I would like to keep doing my paintings, and learn new techniques by doing artist residencies programs to learn from other artists in Australia and from overseas. I would really like to travel overseas in the future to make new work and to exhibit paintings. I would like to be involved in more projects within Australia and also representing Aboriginal artists, Australian artists, to other countries.

What else have you got planned for 2016?

At the moment I'm making new works for the Telstra Art Award in Darwin, and the Archibald Portrait Prize, later this year I will be participating in the annual Desert Mob exhibition at Araluen Art Centre in Alice Springs, and the TarraWarra Biennial 2016 curated by Victoria Lynn and Helen Hughes.