

MARSHALL ARTS

Vincent Namatjira

Born 1983, Alice Springs, N.T. Lives Indulkana, S.A. Art Centre: Iwantja Arts & Crafts

Selected biography

Vincent Namatjira is a young dynamic artist whose works are both loose and bold in their painterly construction, equally they are conceptually rich and diverse. As the grandson of the famous landscape watercolourist, Albert Namatjira, Namatjira's practise is an investigatory journey of self-discovery and search for identity.

As a child he lived with his family in the Indigenous community Hermannsburg within Ntaria country, which is situated between the picturesque Finke Gorge and the majestic West Macdonnell Ranges. However at just six years of age his mother tragically passed away, with no available family to care for him, Namatjira and his older sister were taken into foster care, relocating to Perth in Western Australia.

Namatjira and his sister lived together in Indigenous foster care families throughout childhood and while they completed high school. His sister however was unhappy with the foster living arrangements and ran away constantly, which added pressure to an already insecure home environment.

On reflection however, Namatjira recounts childhood as mostly a time of confusion and loneliness, unclear of his identity and a without a true sense of belonging:

"It was not my decision to leave Hermannsburg and go so far away, but I was just a child, I didn't have any voice. That life, my childhood memories, are not very good. Adolescence was hard for me, I was so lost. I had to figure it all out for myself."

When he was eighteen, Namatjira and his sister traveled back to their home land of Hermannsburg, accompanied by a lawyer and the local police, to search for their family. They were reunited with cousins from their mother's side who had believed the children had passed away many years before.

Namatjira lived with his newfound extended family and spent this time rediscovering his culture and the Western Aranda language, which he had not spoken since childhood. He also studied intensively for four years, working on the CDEP program (Community Development and Employment Program.) He then travelled to Darwin where he completed a land management course; a passion of his is for the future protection of his families' homelands of Ntaria country in the Northern Territory.

"I wanted to study the Land Management course so that when I get to be an old fella I can care for my grandfather's country and help to keep it safe."

Travelling across central Australia and the APY (Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara) Lands, Namatjira met his wife Natasha through friends at the Kanpi community, closely located to the Nyapari community, where Natasha's family have a long history of painting at the Tjunga Palya art centre.

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Namatjira was reintroduced to and encouraged to explore the painting medium by Natasha and her father, the painter Jimmy Pompey. Exploring traditional dot paintings of country, he learnt about colour and tone, shapes and movement. It reignited an interest in the traditional works of his mother, and in the classic watercolour landscapes of his grandfather; importantly, it also sparked an interest in the potential of his own painting abilities.

As a young couple, Vincent and his wife travelled back to his homelands of Hermannsburg to visit with family. During this time Vincent relished the opportunity to observe artworks at the Hermannsburg Potters studio where his Aunt, the artist Eileen Namatjira, worked. He became fascinated in observing the operations of a working art studio, and studying the manner in which she and the other artists firstly conceptualized then constructed their ceramic work and painting pieces.

"I would sit and watch my Aunt do pottery on the wheel at Hermannsburg. She would spin the pots on a wheel and put them outdoors to dry, later she would slowly paint on the colours. I never painted then, I was just watching, it was a time for me to be looking at art."

Namatjira and Natasha have lived within the Indulkana community for many years, and they now have two young daughters who attend the local community primary school. Working intensively at the Iwantja Art Centre, his work has progressively taken on an incredibly rich study of Albert Namatjira's turbulent life.

Namatjira paints the country often, not in his grandfather's style but his own. He prefers to construct portraits and re-create crucial scenes envisioned from his grandfather's life. He visualizes these stories onto canvas from the research and investigation he conducts from old photographs and newspaper articles; he intuitively utilizes the painting medium as his tool for discovery.

"When I'm painting I just think about how to make the story work, what I want to show, and I hope that it's a good one. I enjoy painting; it occupies me, it keeps me thinking and looking all the time."

Loosely marking out shapes and compositions onto a black background, Namatjira paints confident fragments of colour back into his canvas before boldly outlining characters and slowly building a narrative within his paintings. The works are simply laid out, allowing them to be simultaneously engaging yet estranged; there is dynamic naïve strength to his work, a courage and straight-talking defiance in his application of paint.

Just as Albert Namatjira approached painting with a contemporary and unmatched approach, so too do Namatjira's works excel in their unique conception and structure. He paints the connection between himself and the commanding vigil he holds for his grandfather's legacy. Finding strength and solidarity in holding the same profession as his grandfather, Namatjira paints the two men into a contemporary setting, building on the craft of his paintings and its innate challenges with a resounding nature; Namatjira is creating the epilogue to his grandfather's legacy, an anticipated culmination to the Namatjira story.

"I hope my grandfather would be quite proud, maybe smiling down on me; because I won't let him go. I just keep carrying him on, his name and our families' stories."

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Selected exhibitions

- 2013 Vincent Namatjira, Marshall Arts
Salon des Refuse Outstation Gallery Darwin
Mossenson Gallery Collingwood
- 2012 Raft Artspace Alice Springs
- 2011 Mossenson Gallery Perth

Awards & Honours

- 2013 Finalist, Outback Art Award, Broken Hill Regional Art Gallery
Finalist, John Fries Memorial Prize
Finalist, 30th Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award

Collections

- Berndt Museum
- Artbank