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Vincent Namatjira: Coming to America

By Tristen Harwood – 28 June 2019



Vincent Namatjira, *Self Portrait (Miami Beach 1)*, 2019, acrylic on linen, 122 x 91cm. Courtesy the artist and THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne

Vincent Namatjira's 'Coming to America' is presented in Melbourne fresh after the painter from Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara has made an exuberant impact internationally and throughout Australia, showing his bold, painterly and sharply perceptive work at Art Basel Miami (2018), Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), Melbourne and Asia Pacific Triennial at the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane, to name a few.

'Coming to America' includes paintings that respond directly to Namatjira's experience as an artist on the world stage. As with previous work, such as the self-portrait *Welcome to Indulkana* (2018) shown in the group exhibition 'A Lightness of Spirit is the Measure of Happiness' (2018) at ACCA, in paintings like *Hollywood Hills* (2019) Namatjira places himself at the centre of the narrative.

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With *Hollywood Hills*, the figure of Namatjira wearing an Aboriginal flag shirt is painted right in the centre foreground in broad acrylic strokes. Pictured behind the figure is the unmistakable 'HOLLYWOOD' sign set beneath the tranquil stillness of a blue sky. What marks this painting apart from a lot of Namatjira's other work is the absence of hand gestures – often in his work handshakes, thumbs-ups, and other hand-gestures are an expressive device – here the figure of the artist is cropped just below the shoulders, removing all limbs from the painting. Instead, this highly self-reflexive painting's flatness and the figure's inwardly-peering expression brings proximity into question – both the proximity of a viewer to the painted figure, and to the artist himself. The figure appears both very close (in the foreground) yet distant from the viewer (inwardly gazing, to the point of withdrawal). The painting raises interesting questions about the slippage between site, place-specificity and distance.



Vincent Namatjira, *Self Portrait (Hollywood Hills)*, 2019, acrylic on linen, 51 x 76cm. Courtesy the artist and THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne

Welcome to Indulkana, like much of Namatjira's work, represents displaced stiff politicians – here it's Trump and Putin alongside the artist in Indulkana – using incongruity to humorously subvert the very power the figures represent.

Namatjira explains, 'I'm fascinated by powerful figures, whether they're historical like Cook or current politicians and leaders – these subjects represent symbols of power, status and wealth... When I position powerful figures like Trump and Putin in the Central Australian landscape I'm placing them outside of their comfort zone, it's about taking away some of their power.'

There is tact and a delightful sense of revenge in such paintings that use bodily proximity and place-specificity to distort power, placing powerful figures outside of their circuits of influence and control, playfully inverting the dominant narrative of the 'landscape'.

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Similarly, Namatjira's Ramsay Art Prize 2019 winning painting *Close Contact* (2018), a life-size painted cut-out of himself on one side and Captain James Cook on the other, places the stark figure and agent of colonialism in spatial situations where the power balance is tipped towards the artist. Guest judge Russell Storer noted that Namatjira's witty and complex work was a 'startling self-portrait combining painting and sculpture, and as such represents a major shift in Vincent's practice'. Yet, 'the objectness of Namatjira's literal stance in the world beyond the [painted] canvas' is already present in works such as *Welcome to Indulkana*, in which Namatjira used a print of the sole of his shoe to insert his body into the image and materiality of the painting, suggesting the artist was already exploring the relationship between painting and sculpture.



Vincent Namatjira, *Self Portrait (Walk of Fame)*, 2019, acrylic on linen, 76 x 51cm. Courtesy the artist and THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne

Walk of Fame (2019) is a self-portrait of Namatjira squatting above a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. The artist is figured wearing an Aboriginal flag polo shirt, black cap and aviator sunglasses, very much in the style of an imagined Hollywood director. The dusty pink and gold star that he is perched above humourously reads 'VINCENT NAMATJIRA' instead of one of the famous entertainment industry names you would expect to see on the Walk of Fame.

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Unlike *Hollywood Hills* the figure's hands are central in this painting, over-sized and taking on a form like the foam hands that crowds wave at American sporting matches. There is a degree of novelty in the painting as Namatjira gestures with a massive pointing finger at his own star below his knee. Here, the out-of-placeness typical of Namatjira's representation of powerful figures is flipped. Rather than satirising himself, as he does politicians in his other work, Namatjira is playing with expectations as if to say, why not Hollywood? As he elucidates, 'I inserted the Aboriginal flag into these self-portraits to make sure they didn't just look like happy-snaps from a USA vacation – for me the flag is a symbol of pride and determination that travels with me wherever I go.'

In 'Coming to America' Namatjira places himself at the centre of his pictorial world, a consistent theme in his work. Instead of offering a window into an Indigenous life experience, Namatjira projects this outwardly, situationally and with an acute attention to materiality and bodily presence.