

FORT GANSEVOORT ARTFORUM

CLOSE UP: THE QUEEN AND I

By Wes Hill – October 2019



Vincent Namatjira, *Queen Elizabeth and Vincent (On Country)*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 48 × 61".

LIVING AND WORKING in a remote Aboriginal community in central Australia, Vincent Namatjira may seem an unlikely oracle for the degenerative condition we call neoliberalism. Yet his paintings representing world leaders and the social elite possess a discerning frankness that exposes the paragons of power as hapless frauds.

In *Queen Elizabeth and Vincent (On Country)*, 2018, Namatjira depicts himself posing as if for a friendly photo op with the Commonwealth's longest-reigning monarch, Queen Elizabeth II. Behind them is his home: the red desert landscape of Indulkana, a community of some 250 people on the edge of a rocky range in South Australia. The stiff-looking queen offers him honey ants (tjala) while Namatjira, deadpan, hands her witchetty grubs (maku), which are classic "bush tucker." Such an exchange is not unusual in official Aboriginal "Welcome to Country" rituals, which are enacted to formally consent to the presence of visitors on ancestral lands. Viewers anticipating a sober postcolonial critique will be disappointed at Namatjira's lightheartedness. His painting neither lampoons his stately visitor nor takes pleasure in her cultural displacement. With her toothy grin, the queen, rather than an imposing colonial symbol, appears old and gawky, perhaps eager not to breach indigenous protocol. Her nervous expression contrasts with the phlegmatic gaze of the artist, who simply welcomes his guest to his homeland.

This comedic ambiguity has been key to Namatjira's powerful impact on the Australian art scene. Born in 1983 in Alice Springs, Northern Territory, and raised between Hermannsburg (Ntaria) and Perth, Western Australia,

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Namatjira began painting in 2011. He was inspired to do so by his then girlfriend, now wife, Natasha Pompey, and her father, Jimmy Pompey, who are both artists with Iwantja Arts, an Aboriginal-owned-and-operated center in Indulkana. He initially worked in the customary “dot painting” style synonymous with the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara region, but in 2013 he took up figuration, placing himself in scenes with business leaders, politicians, historical figures, and international icons, including Vladimir Putin, Captain James Cook, and the Australian mining magnate Gina Rinehart. His vignettes verge on caricature, but at its core his practice is subtle and diplomatic; the artist resists the temptation to ridicule his subjects outright and chooses instead to treat them as if he were actually in their presence. Namatjira foregrounds the act of posing for the camera, favoring compositions in which both parties look as though they’re at a public—relations meet and greet. Although a sense of the absurd is ever present, his paintings rarely feel over-the-top, even when they portray him trimming the hair of Kim Jong-un (Self Portrait After Henry Taylor, 2018) or sharing a birthday cake with Donald Trump (Vincent and Donald [Happy Birthday], 2018).



Vincent Namatjira, Self-Portrait After Henry Taylor, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 48 × 61".

Self-taught and living far from the centers of the art world, Namatjira could be regarded by some as one of curator Lynne Cooke’s “outliers”—the term is her proposed update on the category of “outsider artist” that questions the value of pedigree and encourages diversity. But he is also very much an insider, as is made apparent in Self Portrait (Miami Beach 2), 2019, which he based on his experiences exhibiting at Art Basel Miami, or Self Portrait (Looking for Henry Taylor), 2019, an homage to the titular American painter. Moreover, Namatjira’s canvases can be read as works of neo-Pop, upending the usual power dynamics and positioning the artist’s subjects as consumables themselves. In Queen Elizabeth and Vincent, Namatjira depicts the queen not only as a powerful monarch but also

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as a mass-media brand, her pearl necklace and crown signifiers of her wealth and nationhood. The Aboriginal flag pin worn by Namatjira in the painting is significant too, perhaps alluding to recent copyright disputes stemming from the 2018 sale of the flag's reproduction rights to a non-indigenous-owned clothing company, which plunged this revered symbol of Aboriginal sovereignty into an ethical quandary. Namatjira uses the Aboriginal flag in his work to draw on its cultural prestige, giving him equal footing among the power brokers he ensnares in his imagined biographical web. In other paintings, such as *Queen Elizabeth and Donald*, 2018, he undercuts personal style—in this case, Trump's long tie and the queen's hat—with the inclusion of consumer goods: You-know-who holds a McDonald's takeout bag, and Her Royal Highness a souvenir teacup imprinted with the Union Jack. Here, the meeting of two "great nations" is just an opportunity to hawk cheap wares.



Vincent Namatjira, *Queen Elizabeth and Donald*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 48 × 61".

The artist and the queen may seem worlds apart, but they are more connected than you might think. Many Australians know the work of Vincent's great-grandfather Albert Namatjira, an artist of mythic status. An Arrernte man raised in a German Lutheran mission in the town of Hermannsburg, approximately three hundred miles north of Vincent's current home, Albert was mentored by the white Australian artist Rex Battarbee, whose excursions to the central desert paralleled those Georgia O'Keeffe made to the rugged wilderness of New Mexico. Before Albert began painting watercolor landscapes in the late 1930s, the market for Aboriginal art, beyond anthropological collections, was virtually nonexistent. But by the late '40s, Albert Namatjira was a household name: Reproductions

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of his lilac ridges and ghostly gum trees adorned the walls of many a white middle-class home. In 1947, one of his paintings was gifted to the then princess Elizabeth of York for her twenty-first birthday, and the two were formally introduced during her 1954 coronation tour.



Albert Namatjira meeting Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, Canberra, 1954. Photo: Newspix/Getty Images.

The line Vincent draws between himself and his great-grandfather in Queen Elizabeth and Vincent extends back to his 2014 series “Albert’s Story,” in which he first grappled with the details of his forebear’s life and fabled legacy: from his first solo exhibition in Sydney to his tragic passing in near destitution in 1959, just two years after he became the first indigenous Australian to be granted citizenship rights. (Shamefully, these rights were not granted to the wider Aboriginal population until 1967.) In *Albert Namatjira Receiving Coronation Medal by Her Majesty*, 2014, the queen hands Albert his decoration of honor in a stark two-tone landscape; again, both face forward, as if posing for a press picture. Foregrounding a very different relationship to authority, *Albert Namatjira Convicted of Selling Alcohol, Long Finger of the Law*, 2014, from the same series, depicts two unsympathetic police officers arresting the artist’s great-grandfather, who was found guilty in 1958 of “supplying alcohol to an Aboriginal.” (Perversely, Albert, having been made an Australian citizen the previous year, was permitted to drink alcohol, but his Aboriginal friends and relatives were not, according to the punitive state prohibition laws.) Vincent only learned of his illustrious great-grandfather after relocating to the Northern Territory as a young adult, having been raised since the age of seven, when his mother died, by a foster family. Shadowed by the legacy of his familial predecessor, Vincent’s pictures often possess a magic-realist quality in which time bends and the dead haunt the living. The works in this series tenderly disclose Vincent’s desire to know his unknown family and to recuperate not only his personal history but also the indigenous narratives lost to uncontrollable forces (such as death) and sociopolitical suppression.

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Vincent Namatjira, Vincent and Donald (Happy Birthday), 2018, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 61"

Royalty being the apotheosis of genealogical power, Queen Elizabeth surely knows all about the entanglement of physical and symbolic selves. At the other end of the spectrum, Namatjira's perception of himself arises in part from his being subject to postcolonial authority. Instead of maintaining a cool distance from the symbols and sites of power, he uses them, and alters them, to tell his story, depicting himself repeatedly in the presence of authority figures, undaunted by the scale of their cultural and political clout. Somewhere between aspirational vision and reclamation, Namatjira's work doesn't denounce issues of cultural capital and biopolitical power so much as reimagine them in order to extricate his Aboriginal identity from the margins.

Somewhere between vision and reclamation, his work doesn't denounce issues of cultural capital and biopolitical power so much as reimagine them in order to extricate the artist's Aboriginal identity from the margins.

On country is a term used by Aboriginal Australians to describe both standing on and engaging with one's ancestral land. To bring British royalty "on country," as Namatjira does, is to draw power to oneself, rather than accept the obligation to seek it out, and to position such hierarchies as constructs. It is also to acknowledge, in the artist's words, "that this land belongs to us and it also owns us." Not coincidentally, the Indulkana ranges represented in the background of Queen Elizabeth and Vincent run directly between the eyes of its two subjects, emphasizing that it is the country, nature, that connects them. With their outstretched hands, Namatjira and the queen might be showing

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off local fauna, but they are also making conciliatory gestures, suggesting that there are rewards for the state in working collaboratively with indigenous people—and in understanding that land is far more than just a backdrop for politics.