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The Saturday Paper

Artist Vincent Namatjira

Even as he forges his own style, Vincent Namatjira celebrates the traditions of his great-grandfather Albert Namatjira.

By Maddee Clark — July 2, 2022



Artist Vincent Namatjira. Meg Hansen

Vincent Namatjira's large-scale mural *Past- Present-Future* peeks out from the Museum of Contemporary Art onto the glamorous catwalk of Circular Quay in Warrang, Sydney Harbour. The intense colours and huge scale of Namatjira's portraiture of Aboriginal heroes such as Lionel Rose, Adam Goodes, and his father-in-law Kunmanara (Jimmy) Pompey are well suited to the heady mix of visual feedback on the quay, a place where it's easy to become overwhelmed and distracted by big city lights. At the nearest edge of the painting, passers-by can see a portrait of Vincent's great-grandfather, Albert Namatjira, in his famous green truck, with Vincent's painted figure standing on the roof and pointing out to the harbour waters.

Albert Namatjira and his truck make frequent appearances in Vincent's painting. The story of Albert's life was made into a series of biographical works by Vincent in 2014, and was adapted into a children's picture book published by Magabala Books in 2021. Albert and the truck are also the subjects of Vincent's upcoming major work for Adelaide's City Lights festival, and it promises to be another full-bodied and political incursion into an iconic big-city art institution. "It's like bringing the bush to the big smoke," Vincent tells me.

Two events in Albert's life as an artist have particularly fascinated Vincent: his receipt of the Queen Elizabeth II Coronation Medal in 1953 and his subsequent successful bid for citizenship in Australia in

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1957. This made him the first Aboriginal person to attain full citizenship rights, including voting rights and the right to buy and own land. As Bundjalung and Kullilli journalist Daniel Browning has pointed out, the granting of that citizenship occurred in the same year that the copyright to Albert's work was sold to Sydney art dealer John Brackenreg, which meant Albert's children and grandchildren were denied their inheritance for decades. The copyright was not returned to Namatjira's descendants until recently.

I saw *Albert's Story* hanging in QAGOMA in Brisbane in 2019, and immediately recognised how it reflects the position of many Aboriginal artists in so-called Australia, where fame is both a tool – an opportunity for some forms of individual and collective freedom – and a burden. Vincent reflects openly in his work on the complexities Albert faced. His success as an artist revealed the hypocrisy and injustice of the protectionist legal framework Aboriginal people lived under before the 1967 referendum. While he was granted citizenship in 1957 in recognition of his artistic achievement, his newfound citizenship rights and his artistic success did not protect him from becoming a target of the law, and Vincent's painting, and writing, about Albert's life pays critical and empathetic attention to how citizenship weighed heavily on Albert. "It must have been a strange and complicated time for him," Vincent writes in his children's book.

Albert died two years after being granted citizenship and eight years before the referendum. He was, as Vincent writes, "weary" from managing the contradictions of his fame and success alongside his own being as a Western Aranda man, and "some say he died of a broken heart".

Vincent was, like Albert, born at Ntaria (Hermannsburg), but was raised in Perth with his sister. He returned to Aranda Country at the age of 18 to live with his family. It was at this time he learnt more about Albert and his career. He began to paint in 2012 after moving to Indulkana with his partner. "My partner was the inspiration and also my brother-in-law, who passed away," he says. "They inspired me – 'You should come to work at the arts centre' – but it has always been in my blood, painting." As his distinctive style developed under the guidance and encouragement of Elders, artists and family at Indulkana, he spent time pondering Albert's life and legacy and created *Albert's Story* in 2014, chronicling Albert's life in a series of 13 large-scale paintings.

Vincent's artistic practice is frequently in conversation with Albert's. Albert's experiences, and his image, have shaped Vincent's creative practice, and Vincent's experiences at Indulkana gave him a strong moral and political compass that underpins his practice. However, his own style diverges from the watercolour tradition Namatjira established. Vincent is best known for his subversive and animated painting style and his interest in satirising figures of influence and power.

"I look up to my great-grandfather Albert Namatjira for how he became the famous watercolour artist for Australia, but I chose to do my own style instead of the old man's style," he says. "I chose the way I paint to be in the figurative style and portraits. I like to paint with acrylic rather than watercolour. Watercolour is very gentle, effective for different circumstances. My painting is more witty and bold."

Vincent's work sends up political figures, billionaires, people of influence and world leaders. They are his visual playthings. When he uses the images of these symbolic figureheads in his painting, Vincent gets to decide their meaning, not them. He's particularly interested in the royal family.

"I'm making a painting now of Her Majesty. I've done the royal family before – I like painting her and Prince Charles – but it's been a few years," he says. "It all came from my great-grandfather Albert Namatjira when he received the Coronation Medal from Queen Elizabeth. That rang a bell to me that I might get involved with the royal family. To me, painting them is influenced by the idea of taking the

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power away from them and putting them into my canvas ... It's like I'm taking that power away from them and putting them in the comfort zone of normal people."

His engagement with the royals goes beyond pure satire: he has an aesthetic and sincere interest in them as artistic motifs. "I have an ambition that I would like to receive the Coronation Medal like my great-grandfather, and also to meet the royal family." He also relates a little to Prince Harry. "Prince Harry is a bit like me, I think, because he's young and sometimes is camera-shy, media-shy. With Prince Harry, it doesn't worry him if he's going to be the next king or whatever, and that makes me think about whether I want to be like my great-grandfather and stuff like that."

Vincent has a complex attitude towards the idea of inheritance. He's determined to keep the Namatjira intergenerational artistic legacy intact through his own children, but within the urgency of this project he's also interested in what it means to define one's own artistic vision.

"I have three daughters, one is 20, one 17 and one is 10," he says. "I'm really, really keen to get them involved with the art industry, taking up painting. That's been a generation-to-generation kind of thing and I want to keep that going. They are good sketchers, I feel certain of that. The eldest one is into painting, she likes to paint to my style mostly, looking at people, and then she turns and does her mother's cultural style too."

He insists on the importance of following one's own path through the world, of resisting what is expected. Like Albert, he has a very complicated relationship to fame. I suggest that, as with Prince Harry, lots of people probably want to take Vincent's picture.

"Pretty much," he says. "Sometimes it's good to have a picture or photo taken of me. I would also like someone to paint me. It's good to be a target for people, and sometimes it's a cautious thing with other people with my image too. I want to chase my career and share my artwork; I'm really keen to be getting out. It's my creation, my art, and it's what I want my mob to see hung on the wall or on the news. That makes my culture more comfortable."

Vincent's success as a painter has arguably paved the way for a host of other Indigenous portrait artists, particularly after his landmark win of the Archibald Prize in 2020. "The winning of the Archibald was a turning point for me and for my culture, other countrymen," he says. "Now it's becoming an even harder competition."

He loves the idea that he has inspired other painters. "I want to make something they can laugh at and then they can also pick up and be proud of. Sometimes I look at the web and see that people get ideas from me in the way they paint. I'll see a comment section referring to me, Vincent, saying 'Vincent has inspired me', from other painters. I want to encourage and support more young artists to come and get involved with the art industry, especially with painting, but also pottery or whatever there is to do with art. Our voices need to be heard. I'd like to see more young people get involved with that."

Vincent's painting, and writing, on Albert is very sensitive, with close critical attention paid to the complexities of Albert's life. He ensures that Albert's great talents as a painter and his experiences of freedom and agency when he sought "a simple life on his Country with his family" are celebrated. The motif of Albert's green truck, which appears in many of Vincent's portraits with either Albert or Vincent in the driver's seat, represents part of that experience of autonomy and freedom.

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Vincent loves Toyotas. He learnt to drive in 2017, taught by his partner.

“A good car like that means freedom, bush trips with the family,” he says. “For me that truck represents family, pride, recognition and going out bush, and that’s what I want my projection to show too.”

The green truck is a key part of the work that will be projected onto the old colonial vista at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. For the City Lights festival in Adelaide, Vincent is reworking his portraiture of Albert into a single-channel moving image work. Albert’s figure will be digitised, animated and projected onto the exterior of the North Terrace of the Art Gallery of South Australia.

Branching out into digital animation on this scale made Vincent nervous at first. “I had thoughts in my head like, ‘I don’t know what to do about this’, and it was all pretty new to me because I only paint on a wall, on canvas,” he says. “So this is a turning point for my career. I want something like this because I’m always willing to open my boundaries. I want to be *more more more*, just asking for more with my art.”

I’m struck by the clarity of Vincent’s ambition and his use of humour as a critical tool. To me, it is an approach that makes art accessible without taking away its immensity or political utility. “It makes people laugh sometimes. I like to see my painting on the wall and see a crowd laughing and smiling,” he says. “It takes away their normal look and puts a smile on their face.”

For him, the humour of his work is enhanced by the “magic” of animation and sound effects generated by the Illuminate Adelaide team for the City Lights project. He has experimented before with sound effects and digital manipulation on some of his portraits of Australian prime ministers with Iwantja Arts, and this work will be on a larger scale.

“It’s gonna be a little bit like that,” he says. “But it’s going to be even funnier.”

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