

The Canberra Times

Namatjira: a landmark exhibition

Sasha Grishin
Canberra Times
9 October 2002

Albert Namatjira's work is seen too often as formulaic; a new exhibition explodes that nonsense, Sasha Grishin writes.

BEFORE the explosion in the popularity of Aboriginal art over the last few decades, Albert Namatjira was the only Aboriginal artist whose name was widely known in this country.

What the National Gallery of Australia's exhibition, *Seeing the centre: The art of Albert Namatjira 1902-1959*, demonstrates is that it was only the name and the myth of Namatjira that were widely known and not his art. Very few of us, myself included, had ever seen more than a dozen or so Namatjiras assembled in any one place.

His watercolours, as reproduced endlessly on calendars, biscuit tins and place mats seemed a little formulaic, with a ghost gum in the foreground, blue, mauve and lilac hills in the background and some scrubland in between. This exhibition explodes this myth and the artist is presented in his full diversity from brilliant, colour-saturated paintings of the gorges through to the lush vegetation of Palm Valley, studies of grass trees, as well as curious figure studies and hunting scenes.

Namatjira certainly had more variety than many of his contemporary non-indigenous counterparts.

This exhibition casts Namatjira also within a broader cultural context of other visitors to Hermannsburg, who included Jessie Traill, Arthur Murch and Violet Teague, as well as the commercial watercolourist Rex Battarbee, who taught Namatjira the rudiments of the watercolour technique in his several visits to the Hermannsburg mission in the 1930s. The strength of Namatjira's art becomes more apparent when seen in the company of that of other indigenous and non-indigenous artists of this region.

The tragic life of Albert Namatjira is a subject for national shame. Born in 1902, Namatjira began to paint in the mid-1930s and his first solo show in 1938 in Melbourne was an immediate sell out. This was followed by a string of other commercial successes. He was presented to Queen Elizabeth II on her inaugural visit to Australia in 1954 as an example of a successfully assimilated 'full-blood Aboriginal' and three years later was granted full Australian citizenship with the right to vote, own property and buy liquor.

By 1959 he was imprisoned for three months for supplying alcohol to his extended family and died later that year, a broken man.

Generally Australian public museums and art galleries are suspicious of artists who are popular with the public, whether indigenous or otherwise. In Namatjira's case it was no different and, although the public snapped up his work, critics, curators and

public collections were wary of it. The distinguished curator, art critic and taste-maker Daniel Thomas saw him in 1968 as a 'lesser artist' whose fame rested on a popular or journalistic reputation. It was only by the 1980s that Thomas had reassessed Namatjira, who had been dead by then for quarter of a century.

The problem in a way was that people tended to see Namatjira as an indigenous person who had somehow learnt to paint in the Western manner. This missed the point, basically, on at least two scores. Firstly, Namatjira was a very fine watercolourist without any qualifications of race; he had incredible powers of observation and, at least by the 1940s, an exceptional mastery of technique. Many of the 50 or so watercolours at this exhibition compete favourably with those by Hans Heysen or Elioth Gruner.

Secondly, Namatjira was not mimicking European art but, in the same way as Papunya artists may employ acrylic on canvas to explore their own iconography, Namatjira employed European conventions to paint his own country.

As expressed beautifully by the Arnhem Land artist and chairman of the Northern Land Council, Galarrwuy Yunupingu, 'what non-Aboriginal people didn't understand, or chose not to understand, was that he was painting his country, the land of the Arrente people.

'He was demonstrating to the rest of the world the living title held by his people to the lands they had been on for thousands of years.'

This exhibition is not only an important re-evaluation of the art of Namatjira but is also exemplary for its painstaking scholarship and meticulous documentation. Alison French has spent more than two years at the Centre for Cross Cultural Research at the ANU, funded by the Gordon Darling Foundation and the ANU Endowment for Excellence, in undertaking this massive project.

It is a landmark exhibition that rewrites an important page in the history of Australian art. Albert Namatjira is one of the giants in Australian 20th century art and this exhibition begins the process of acknowledging his significance.

Seeing the centre: The art of Albert Namatjira 1902-1959, National Gallery of Australia. Until January 19, 2003.