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The Exhibition of *Albert Namatjira* at the Araluen Arts Centre in Alice Springs, 1984

Abstract

When Albert Namatjira's watercolour paintings were first exhibited in the late 1930s they were praised by the conservative art establishment. This acceptance of his standing as an artist was not shared by those who saw themselves as modernists who saw his popularity with both conservative artists and the generation public as a way of discrediting the conservatives and mocking the aesthetic values of ordinary Australians as 'uneducated'.

In 1954 his art was excluded from a selection of Australian art to travel to London for the Coronation. The same year the Trustees and staff of the National Gallery of Victoria rejected proposed acquisitions, calling them 'frightful' and 'absolute potboilers'.

In 1984, some years after Western Desert artists precipitated a new acceptance of Aboriginal culture, the once orthodox assessment of Albert Namatjira suddenly changed and he swiftly became one of the most honoured of all Australian artists. The trigger was the exhibition curated by Mona Byrne on the 25th Anniversary of his death, which was also the opening exhibition of the Araluen Arts Centre in Alice Springs. This paper examines both the circumstances of the exhibition and how it was strategically marketed to change the opinions of Australia's cultural elite.

I would like to thank Professor Catherine Speck for her erudite comments on this paper.

The Exhibition of *Albert Namatjira* at the Araluen Arts Centre in Alice Springs, 1984

In *They kill you in the end*, the 1973 memoir of his many years as Director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Hal Missingham gives examples of the kind of letters the lunatic fringe delights in sending to those in the public eye. One clearly deranged writer damned him for refusing to hang the work of the genius Albert Namatjira, while another racist praised him as 'no blackfellow from the wilds is going to supercede [sic] me as an Artist no matter how pretty his illustrations may be.'¹

Both attitudes were equally abhorrent to Missingham, whose attitudes were typical of progressive taste in Australia at the time. Albert Namatjira was seen as a martyr to the institutionalised racism of the Australian government, but his art was an embarrassment.² This after all was the artist whose clichéd gum trees were mass reproduced on place mats

¹ Missingham, 1973, p. 69-70.

² See especially Noel Counihan's *Albert Namatjira* (1959) linocut, which shows the artist crucified. NGA, Accession no. 84.1568

to be sold at gift shops. He was the artist for readers of *Womens Weekly*, not for people of discernment and taste.³

The reason for Albert Namatjira's questionable status had nothing to do with his actions as an artist and little to do with his art. As Charles Mountford made clear, Namatjira's art was always about 'his relationship to the country in which he was born, and to the people from which he came.'⁴ He had become an artist within a western tradition because of the example of two visiting artists from Melbourne, Rex Battarbee and John Gardner, and because Battarbee became an active mentor and teacher of watercolour technique. These two were not the only artists to travel to Central Australia in the years between the wars. Hans Heysen, Jessie Traill, Violet Teague and Arthur Murch all exhibited work showing the red heart and harsh beauty of the land beyond the coastal fringes. When Albert Namatjira's work was first exhibited in Adelaide it therefore fitted within an established narrative of the western canon.

It was initially well received. On 3 August 1937 Hans Heysen wrote to his daughter Nora that Battarbee had told him about:

a brilliantly clever Black at Hermannsburg who has taken to watercolours and within two weeks of watching him (Battarbee) paint, he turned out some remarkable watercolours, with good colour and a fine feeling for light – in fact he said he knows of no one in Australia who could paint light better! He has brought 3 of his paintings down with him and are on show at the Rooms.⁵

Heysen subsequently bought two Namatjira watercolours. The Director of the Art Gallery of South Australia Louis McCubbin gave his work an institutional imprimatur when he purchased *Illum-Baura (Haasts Bluff), Central Australia* for that gallery's collection. The Art Gallery of Western Australia also bought a watercolour in 1946, but the public galleries in the eastern states were less kind. Without understanding the details of the faction fights that governed aesthetic responses from the mid 1930s until the 1960s, the trajectory of responses to Namatjira's career appear incomprehensible. His first solo exhibition at the Fine Arts Gallery in Melbourne was opened by Lady Huntingfield, wife of the Governor of Victoria. Later, during World War II, the Melbourne based Bread and Cheese Club published the first monograph on his work, with Charles Mountford's text supplemented with a generous foreword by R.H. Croll, general secretary of Robert Menzies' favourite project, the Australian Academy of Art.⁶ Despite a wartime shortage of paper, the book was reprinted several times. It would therefore have been reasonable to assume a certain degree of acceptance by the visual arts establishment. The problem that Namatjira unknowingly faced was that in the 1940s there were two opposing establishments within the Australian art.⁷

³ AWW: 'SIX place-mats featuring Australian scenery painted by Namatjira, £6/15/-.', in '100 GIFTS TO BUY', 12 December 1962, p. 21.

⁴ Mountford, 1945, p. 23.

⁵ Speck, 2011, p. 58.

⁶ Mountford, 1945.

⁷ Haese, 1981, pp. 37-59, writes of the complex politics of this time.

The bitter divisions between the advocates of modernism and their older opponents have been widely recorded.⁸ The well received publication of Lionel Lindsay's anti-modernist polemic *Addled Art* was countered by the active support for modernism by the newspaper proprietors Warwick Fairfax and Sir Keith Murdoch. Divisions between the two camps soon evolved into bitter personal attacks, and for both groups the art of the opposing side was seen as being without merit. Both modernists and traditionalists used mockery as a weapon.⁹ Because Namatjira was so actively feted by the older artists it was an easy default position for the modernists to denigrate his art without due consideration.¹⁰ Margaret Preston was a notable exception to this almost blanket condemnation.¹¹ She had a long and considered response to different tradition of Aboriginal art both in her own work and in her advocacy. An equally important reason was that Preston, although a modernist in the way she made art, refused to take a factional stance and even exhibited with the conservative Academy.

By the early 1950s modernism had become the new orthodoxy within the arts community, including the state gallery directors. Albert Namatjira was the most popular artist with the Australian people, but the new art establishment regarded their verdict as an error of taste. Instead of addressing the reasons as to why *hoi polloi* found his art so enticing, he was ignored. Bernard Smith gave one passing reference to him as a follower of Hans Heysen.¹² Robert Hughes did not mention him in *The Art of Australia*.¹³ The deliberate exclusion of Namatjira from the main narrative of Australian art came to the notice of the general public in 1951 when his work was not included in the Jubilee exhibition of Australian art that travelled to London. When members of the public complained, Charles Lloyd Jones, convenor of the Plastic Arts Committee of the Commonwealth of Australia Jubilee responded by saying 'Namatjira's art has nothing of the original outlook— it is purely Europeanised'.¹⁴

This absence highlighted a curious division within the arts community. Three years after his work was so decisively excluded from display, Prime Minister Robert Menzies facilitated the gift of a Namatjira painting to Queen Elizabeth when she visited Australia.¹⁵ On this occasion Namatjira was flown to Canberra where he was presented to the Queen.¹⁶ This visit was his first trip to the southern states and he was feted in both Sydney and Melbourne. On at least one occasion he had to be rescued after he was mobbed by an

⁸ See especially Haese, 1981 pp. 129-154; Mendelsohn, 1988, pp. 189-215; and Chanin and Miller, 2005, pp. 45-52.

⁹ Haefliger, 1945.

¹⁰ R.H. Croll, general secretary of the Australian Academy of Art, wrote the foreword to Mountford, 1945.

¹¹ Edwards, 2005, p. 220.

¹² Smith, 1962, p. 115.

¹³ Hughes, 1970.

¹⁴ SMH: 30 June 1951.

¹⁵ NSS: 1 April 1954.

¹⁶ SMH: 13 February 1954.

enthusiastic crowd.¹⁷ In September 1954 the artist was granted honorary life membership of the Royal Art Society of NSW.¹⁸

Ian McLean has noted that for European Australians Albert Namatjira was long seen as a symbol of assimilation.¹⁹ This certainly goes some way to explain why his art was so decisively rejected by those political progressives who wanted an 'authentic' Aboriginal voice. Modernism has long admired the so-called primitive cultures whether they be African or from the Asia-Pacific. In addition his very popularity was seen as evidence that his work was of lesser quality.²⁰

Although the ideological intensity became muted in later years as the cultural warriors from both sides grew old and died, there was another factor acting against a fair consideration of Namatjira's

work. In 1957 Namatjira entered into a copyright agreement with Legend Press, owned by John Brackenreg of the Artarmon Galleries.²¹ Brackenreg was an artist and art dealer well trusted by older conservative artists. Under this agreement Albert Namatjira and his family were paid a 10% royalty for an exclusive licence to reproduce his work. Brackenreg's selection did not include the early paintings that had so astounded audiences in Adelaide and Melbourne and as the Legend press reproductions were widely distributed in a number of formats (including placemats) it was easy to treat them with less than respect. After Namatjira's death his estate was managed by the Northern Territory Public Trustee who in 1983 sold the copyright absolutely to Brackenreg who died in 1986. His heir is the current owner of Namatjira's copyright.²²

After some decades of seeing his work exclusively in a less than edifying context it was perhaps not surprising that in 1980 the *Canberra Times* columnist Ian Warden wrote scathingly of the 'gruesome works of Albert Namatjira, Pro Hart and Rolf Harris and their shamelessly derivative daubing disciples.'²³

Although white Australians saw Albert Namatjira as an unfortunate symbol of assimilation, this attitude was not shared by Aboriginal communities, nor by the artist himself. In 1954, at the height of public adulation for his art, Namatjira gave an interview which made it clear that he actively supported rights for Aboriginal people, including the right to live away from reserves. 'We are tired of walking around reserves like animals,' he said in a newspaper interview. ²⁴ Long after his death in 1959 Albert Namatjira remained a beacon, a sign of hope for Aboriginal people. The way he was treated by the Northern

¹⁷ MAIL: 27 February 1954.

¹⁸ SMH: 28 September 1954.

¹⁹ McLean, 2011, p 29.

²⁰ An example of this can be seen in Daniel Thomas's review of Alan McCulloch's *Encyclopaedia of Australian Art* when he questioned the inclusion of Namatjira as he was an artist with a 'popular or journalistic reputation'. Thomas, 1968.

²¹ Rimmer, 2003.

²² Recent reproductions of Namatjira's work are often accompanied by the claim that this dealer was a close friend of the late artist. See also McLaughlin, 2003.

²³ Warden, 1980.

²⁴ SH, 28 February, 1954.

Territory government shocked non-Aboriginal Australians in the southern states, but Aboriginal people knew that victims of the white legal system were hardly unusual. He gave hope to Aboriginal people over many generations because he showed that it was possible for an Aboriginal person to be a famous artist. Over 40 years after his death Brenda L. Croft wrote that 'for Indigenous artists today it [Namatjira's legacy] is present in the long shadow of his spirit, cast over their shared history.'²⁵ The people of the Centre especially continue to honour Albert Namatjira and tend his grave.²⁶

In 1979, Jonah Jones who had spent six years owning a farm in the Mallee country of north western Victoria after some years as the national marketing manager for Sheridan sheets, applied for a position at the Araluen Arts & Cultural Trust in the Northern Territory. He had undertaken some part time work with the Australian Schools Commission, developing local arts programs, but nevertheless it was a leap of faith from both sides to make this appointment to manage the creation of a major multipurpose arts centre in Alice Springs.²⁷ Jones describes himself as, 'I'm not the great curator. I'm an operator. I put things together.' This is perhaps a little understood quality in managers, but its value should not be underestimated. Jones' career has been based on working with communities. In the late 1980s and 1990s he worked with the arts community on developing the Moët & Chandon Art Prize and the Melbourne Art Fair. In the Northern Territory the main communities he worked with included the Aboriginal people who dominate the population of Central Australia, centred around the multicultural centre of Alice Springs. According to Jones:

[In] Alice Springs is ... you can have groups of Aboriginal people passing each other on the footpath, locals who couldn't communicate with each other because they had no English but different Aboriginal languages. And there we were, with a whole lot of languages, people who couldn't necessarily communicate with each other. Some could of course, but very few white people had Aboriginal languages and the mix of Central Australia, there's supposed to be 12 languages, and God knows how many dialects.²⁸

When the Araluen Arts Centre was completed at the conclusion of Jones' five year contract, the opening exhibition was the first full-scale retrospective exhibition of Albert Namatjira's work.

In terms of the local people, it was almost like a memorial exhibition 25 years on. It was exactly a quarter of century since he died. And so for local people - white people who'd been there for a long time and for Aboriginal people of course - it was like a memorial service.²⁹

The local Aboriginal and white communities were adamant that Namatjira's painting was the exhibition that had to open the gallery. This was even though they realised their

²⁵ Croft, 2001.

²⁶ Monument Australia.

²⁷ Jones, 2013.

²⁸ Jones, 2013.

²⁹ Jones, 2013.

decision may have meant the exhibition would be ignored by the southern critics. In the early 1980s the contemporary art establishment was newly excited by the work of Aboriginal artists from the Western Desert who were now reworking their traditional designs in canvas and paint. The Papunya paintings especially were increasingly being seen as the new orthodoxy of Aboriginal art in 'progressive' taste. However as Jones noted:

Namatjira essentially had never had an exhibition in Alice Springs, not a proper exhibition. He'd had tin pot little corner store, corner shop exhibitions, although he'd exhibited in Melbourne and Sydney as you know. And in Adelaide of course. But never at 'home'. And so it was important in opening a major arts centre in Alice Springs that Namatjira be part of it.³⁰

The Araluen exhibition had one great advantage in locating actual works of art. The curator, Mona Byrnes, was an artist who was one of the community activists behind the establishment of the arts centre. She had been born at the Hermansburg mission and had known Namatjira since she was a small child. She therefore knew the location of many key works that had not been seen since they were first exhibited. The exhibition was therefore able to show the best that Namatjira could ever be, and so showed an artist who was significantly different from the one portrayed through the Legend Press reproductions.

However no matter how good the art, now matter how well written the curator's essay, the exhibition stood little chance of being taken seriously unless key opinion makers within the arts community openly changed their attitude towards Albert Namatjira as an Australian artist of significance. This is where Jonah Jones' marketing and managerial skills became a key factor in the exhibition's success. For many years Mona Byrnes had worked as a guide to many artists who travelled to Central Australia. One of the artists she had guided was Sidney Nolan. In the 1970s she had helped Elwyn Lynn when he was writing his book on Nolan, showing the critic what his subject had seen, and he remembered her well. In 1984 Lynn was the Editor of *Art & Australia* and national art critic for *The Australian*. The exhibition had a small budget, but Jones had also ensured that it was sponsored by an airline so that there was travel for interstate visitors of significance. Lynn was invited to visit Alice Springs, to see previously unknown paintings by Albert Namatjira in the land where he painted them – and to write a brief foreword.

Although best remembered for his advocacy of abstract art and pro-American modernism, it should not be forgotten that Lynn also was one of the great contrarians of Australian cultural life. He had in the 1970s edited *Quadrant*, the conservative magazine of ideas, even though that put him at odds with many of his politically progressive colleagues in the Power Institute at the University of Sydney. In January 1984 he made a scathing assessment of Papunya paintings, claiming 'they have very little to do with Aboriginal art'.³¹ Lynn's introduction to the exhibition catalogue is dated February 1984 so it is not unreasonable to assume that he had Namatjira on his mind when he saw the Papunya works. Lynn would have been very aware of the significance of someone in his

³⁰ Jones, 2013.

³¹ *Weekend Australian* 28-29 January 1984. McLean, p. 36.

position in giving the imprimatur of a foreword in the small glossy catalogue that accompanied the exhibition. He wrote that 'Albert overcame the problem of letting light flow across the surface to give location and contour and by allowing it to seem to illuminate them from within.'

He added:

Albert was to see the country afresh through a western medium, but it remained his own, his native land. Some commentators seemed to find something reprehensible in Albert's pursuit of a western approach: the framed-up scene on a rectangular format and a Renaissance perspective in contrast to traditional bark painting. That I find ironic, as I do not think that the aesthetic importance of those bark paintings has yet been truly appreciated.³²

The opening of the Araluen Arts Centre building was a major event for the Territory. The building was opened by the Governor General, Sir Ninian Stephen, with many distinguished guests including the Federal Minister for the Arts, the Premier of South Australia and Charles Perkins. Sponsorship from TAA encouraged distinguished visitors to fly from the southern states free of charge. Visitors also saw the Namatjira exhibition which was opened by the artist's nephew Gus Williams, chairman of the Hermannsburg Council. Jones says 'he looked exactly like Namatjira'. The resemblance was reinforced by the presence of William Dargie's Archibald Prize winning portrait. The Friends of the Araluen Arts Centre conducted an open forum on Namatjira's art, with Lynn, Byrnes and Professor Vincent Megaw from Flinders University as the speakers. The strategy was to give the artist academic credibility and so to place him as a key figure in Aboriginal art.

Because the opening of Araluen was such an important event for central Australia Jones was able to persuade his old university friend, Patrick McCaughey, to travel north and experience the landscape. From there it was a small step to look at the Namatjira exhibition and see anew the art he had long despised. McCaughey had once been the acerbic art critic of *The Age*, but in 1984 he was the Director of the National Gallery of Victoria, one of the two most influential tastemakers in the country. On 11 July 1984 *The Age* published what has to be one of the most remarkable art critical *mea culpas* ever published. McCaughey wrote of the Namatjira exhibiton:

It should change minds and dent accumulated prejudices. One cannot imagine a better case being made for a drastic re-evaluation upwards of Namatjira's art.

After outlining the way in which Namatjira was abused by the legal system, McCaughey addressed the way in which his art had become to be seen, and why.

During his lifetime Namatjira's work met with stiff resistance from the white art world. More than one State gallery director of the day went on record refusing his work and dismissing his achievement.

³² Lynn, 1984

Namatjira was taken up by the more conservative elements of the white Australian art world. Rex Battarbee, R.H. Croll and Sir William Dargie were all admirers and sponsors of his work. The reaction against Namatjira during his lifetime was partly influenced by those factors. The push for acceptance came from quarters that one didn't want to acknowledge or legitimise.

By early 1980s not only were many of the key cultural warriors of the modernist wars dead, but a new generation of curators and theorists was seeing merit in the work of the once derided conservatives. It was time to bring Namatjira in from the cold.

In the end, what convinced McCaughey of the sheer significance of Albert Namatjira to Australian art, was the experience of seeing this art in the context of the land which was its ultimate subject.

Although it's dangerous to argue the case, seeing Namatjira in his own landscape makes you realise how good he is. He got two essential aspects of the landscape absolutely right: the cleanness of the air and the clarity of the light. Unlike most white artists painting the landscape of Central Australia, he didn't melodramatise it.

Well before the exhibition opened Daniel Thomas, then Director of the Art Gallery of South Australia, was also in the process of re-assessing Namatjira. When he had been appointed senior curator of the National Gallery in 1977 he had seen the clean bright tones of watercolours long in storage from the days of the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board, and later had been responsible for the purchase of *Mt Hermannsburg, Finke River* – which was included in the Araluen exhibition. Thomas may also have been influenced by Ian Burn's 1983 commentary on the display of Australian art at the new National Gallery, which he had supervised.³³ Burn pointed out that if it was reasonable to show Margaret Preston appropriating elements of Aboriginal art, why did the gallery not also display Namatjira's appropriation of western visual language?³⁴ Jones pays credit to Thomas's encouragement when the exhibition was being mounted, but his greatest significance was in the aftermath.

An exhibition is an event fixed in time. If it is in a remote city it can easily be forgotten unless there is a substantial publication associated with it. A book based on an exhibition is not so easily put aside. Although the Albert Namatjira catalogue was slight, two years later a book based on the exhibition and its contents was written by the arts journalist Nadine Amadio, with supporting essays by Jonah Jones, Anne Blackwell (Archaeologist in Residence and Director of Research at Hermannsburg) and Daniel Thomas.³⁵ Jonah Jones sees Thomas's essay in this book as a key document in making the arts community accept that

Namatjira was a black fella, and he was simply painting his *country*: he couldn't go over the range and paint whatever's next door, he can't go anywhere else. This was his only option. And those two ghost gums are incredibly important to his culture

³³ Thomas since has credited Postmodernism for this changed attitude. Thomas, 2013, p. 228.

³⁴ Burn, 1983.

³⁵ Amadio, 1986.

anyway, and so was Haasts Bluff and a lot of other ranges that – McDonald Ranges, and Hermannsburg of course. So that notion, that myth of this very popular painter who just painted sweet little ghost gums for old ladies in Adelaide, was blown away.³⁶

Thomas wrote with the authority not only of his unparalleled knowledge of Australian art but as the Director of the Art Gallery of South Australia. He gave the history of the partisanship that had marred previous assessments of Namatjira's work, and pointed out that it was the white world's problem that Namatjira's reputation suffered after he left Hermannsburg in 1951. In a deliberate understatement he wrote: 'There is usually suspicion from the professional art world when art or artists are taken up by the worlds of fashionable society, diplomats or royalty.'³⁷ He also recalled his own childhood encounter with the artist who had spoken of capturing light in shadows. Thomas concluded that:

His art, which we perceived in its day as European, is now re-Aboriginalised. Our altered understanding permits us now to admire it more fully, and to be moved by it.³⁸

In the following decades there were several exhibitions and publications placing Namatjira at the heart of Australian art. The most important of these was a survey exhibition by the National Gallery of Australia, which included the Araluen Arts Centre as a part of its national tour in 2002. The substantial catalogue published in conjunction with this generously funded exhibition was able to give a context to Namatjira's life and art in far greater detail than the earlier publications.³⁹ In particular the curator, Alison French, gave a detailed analysis that proved Mountford's earlier observations that Namatjira painted his own country. In 2010 the National Gallery opened a new wing, which enabled the gallery to give a greater emphasis to Australian Indigenous art. A first floor gallery, separated from the rest because of the fragile nature of its contents, is named as the Gordon and Marilyn Darling Gallery for the Hermannsburg School. Here Namatjira's work is both honoured and placed within the tradition he established.

Now that Albert Namatjira's place as a major Australian artist is a part of art historical orthodoxy, it is hard to remember when he was so easily mocked. It is worth reflecting on the apparently irrational opinions of the past, to see how intelligent advocacy can help change the national mood and open eyes to new ways of seeing, and to remember the exhibition that triggered the change in the wind.

³⁶ Jones, 2013

³⁷ Thomas, 1986, p. 23.

³⁸ Thomas, 1986, p. 26.

³⁹ French, 2002

Biographical note

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