

Vincent Namatjira OAM

Desert Songs

5–28 October 2023

Vincent Namatjira is one of Australia's most important contemporary artists and a proud Western Aranda man. For his latest body of work, *Desert Songs*, he has created incisive portraits that transport notable figures onto Country, short-circuiting our assumptions about history, power and politics.

Namatjira's much anticipated debut exhibition with Yavuz Gallery celebrates the trailblazers and originators of Australian country and Aboriginal rock, painting iconic musicians Archie Roach, Frank Yamma, Slim Dusty, and Warumpi Band frontman George Rurrumba Burarrwanga. Often heard reverberating through Namatjira's studio, their songs champion the stories of Aboriginal life that have so often been stifled. His portraits honour their soulful and defiant legacies at a time when recognising Aboriginal leadership is as vital as ever.

"For me, rock music is escapism – it was for me as a teenager in the foster system and it still is now", shares Namatjira in his forthcoming Thames & Hudson monograph. *"In the Iwantja Arts studio we often play Aboriginal music. It makes us proud to hear Aboriginal voices, Aboriginal stories and their music that can hit you right in the heart. Music and painting are similar like that – they can cut through and grab your attention, make you feel something, make you think."*¹

The exhibition is anchored by a wall-spanning self-portrait in which the artist explores a new medium, drawing in thick oil-stick across four landscapes. With the desert visible between the contours of his face, this work is a monumental tribute to Namatjira's connection to Country. In another major painting *Vincent and Vincent*, an encounter between the two well-known namesakes – Namatjira and van Gogh – is both playful and subversive, adding a cheeky new passage into the Western art historical canon. Namatjira's humour is disarming, using unexpected cameos, and collapsing the past and present to imagine an alternate version of events.

The artist also continues his examination of Australia's entanglement with the British Empire. He presents himself in ceremonial dress and paints on vintage commemorative posters from Queen Elizabeth's royal tours. By painting himself, his Country, and his pet corgi Dingo alongside the late Queen, Namatjira disrupts the power of her pageantry.

Namatjira paints a diverse assessment of leadership in *Desert Songs*, with a moving portrait of his great-grandfather Albert Namatjira sharing the same space as Vincent van Gogh, Archie Roach, and King Charles. By placing them all on equal footing, he invites us to reflect on who we expect to see in our annals of leadership, and who we should find looking back at us.

¹ Vincent Namatjira in *Vincent Namatjira*, published by Thames & Hudson Australia, p.89. Available 31 October 2023.

Keith Munro, Director of First Nations Art and Cultures at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, says of Namatjira's new body of work:

The artist has spent a decade refining and extending his modus operandi, drawing connections across geopolitical spheres. In Desert Songs, Namatjira places members of the British royal family into painted ancestral landscapes that are familiar to him, bringing the colours from his country alive with a vigorous intent.

Well-known local and nationally regarded Australian musicians have also been included in the Desert Songs tableau. Within the minds of Aboriginal Australia, and many members of the broader public who are fans, their status is legendary. They have collectively been a source of pride and have made an immense contribution to the music industry. As a contemporary visual artist, Namatjira elevates their stories and histories by choosing to paint them into this new body of work.

The exhibition in many ways is a play on the metaphorical songs that are heard around the campfire, over the radio or digitally throughout communities, and echoes the ancient cultural songs that are sung on country and that have been shaped by grander narratives.