

KING DINGO

Vincent Namatjira OAM

with Alec Baker & Eric Barney

31 August - 5 October 2024

This isn't Vincent Namatjira's first royal tour. Nor is it Alec Baker's first rodeo. With accomplice Eric Barney, these three desert painters have brought Indulkana to the big smoke.

Located close to the Stuart Highway in northern South Australia, Indulkana is the most eastern community on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands and is home to one of the country's most dynamic art centres - Iwantja Arts. The art centre's early days were synchronous with the 1981 APY Lands Act, underscoring the kinship between Country and culture for Anangu. Central to these early acts of self-governance was the leadership of senior artist Alec Baker. Together with his wife Angkuna, Baker campaigned for art, and for lore, with younger artists including Namatjira and Barney (as well as Kaylene Whiskey and Tiger Yaltangki), the inheritors of their advocacy.

Sovereignty is king in Indulkana, and it is king in this exhibition. Experienced in the collaborative paintings titled *Ngura* (Country) by Baker and Barney, and in Namatjira's latest series of paintings titled *King Dingo*, where royal subjects sport the heads of endemic apex predators, Aboriginal sovereignty is both ruler and royal. Inspired initially by the meeting between his great-grandfather Albert Namatjira and Queen Elizabeth II in 1954, Namatjira's predilection for the British Royal family inserts the 'personal' into the 'political'. In other words, Namatjira's own history, including his removal from his own family at an early age to be placed into foster care, allegorises colonisation. His paintings are, in response, a 'weapon' that can return fire.

In *King Dingo* (with skull) the vestments of the enthroned monarch are 'royal' blue. So too is Rutjipma (Mount Sonder) which dominates the background of this painting with its distinct and angular topography, locating the work specifically on Western Aranda Country. This is the home of Albert, his ancestors and his descendants, and a recurring totemic subject in generations of gentle watercolours.

In keeping with the conventions of royal portraiture, Namatjira's dingo king holds a traditional sceptre in his right hand and in his left, supplanting the coronation orb, is a human skull. This reminder of death, or 'memento mori', at once connects the work to the European canon of 'vanitas' paintings but also signals dispossession, gesturing to a history of bone collecting that fixated on Australia's First Peoples. By replacing the 'heads' of power Vincent slyly comments on the treatment of Aboriginal people as museum specimens.

SOVEREIGNTY IS KING

AMES YAVUZ

By inserting himself, and in this new series the dingo, into positions of power he extends a lineage of satire and subversion that can be traced to the first decades of the colony of New South Wales whereby Aboriginal leaders would don military garb in a parody of white power. As Vincent states, "these new paintings are about a reversal of colonial power and ownership. *King Dingo* represents Aboriginal strength, pride and resilience, and respect for Country, culture, and Indigenous leadership past and present. Long live the king!". Coronated by Vincent's brush, Country and culture are regaled and through this act, power is inverted.

Baker and Barney have been watching Vincent's rise with interest. Together they make their own magisterial and monumental mappings of Country. At more than ten metres wide their collaborations trace the *tjukula* (rock holes), *kalaya tjina* (emu footprints) and *punu* (trees) of their Yankunytjatjara home. The repetition and proliferation of the title *ngura* speaks to the expanded meaning of the word. *Ngura* is Country, campsite, home, a place of power, meaning and belonging. A place of sovereignty.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Dr Lisa Slade is the Hugh Ramsay Chair in Australian Art History at The University of Melbourne. Her recent curatorial projects include *Vincent Namatjira: Australia in colour*, curated with Nici Cumpston OAM and Gloria Strzelecki for AGSA's Tarnanthi Festival.