

A Crown of Teeth and Fur

Some people, when you meet them, seem destined for greatness. The first time I properly introduced myself to Vincent Namatjira was at the Mparntwe/Alice Springs airport, my home. We had both flown in from Naarm/Melbourne, and I was with my uncle, a distinguished Aboriginal elder. I decided to introduce the two, at which time, Vincent declared, "My name is Vincent Namatjira, and I'm a famous artist. I fly all over the world for my art." His words carried a confident conviction, and he was right.

A year later, in 2025, I was at the opening of Emily Kam Kngwarray's exhibition at the Tate Modern, London, preparing to give a speech. I was there to acknowledge our Country and thank everyone who assisted with the exhibition. As I looked out at the 800 people in the crowd, I took a moment to acknowledge Vincent Namatjira, who was among them, and announced that he, too, is a famous First Nations artist from Australia.

A Powerful Artistic Lineage

As a descendant of Albert Namatjira, one of Australia's first celebrated First Nations artists, Vincent carries a powerful artistic legacy. However, Vincent chose not to follow his greatgrandfather's path of painting watercolour landscapes. While he honours his Ancestral connection to Country, he also creates politically charged portraits that comment on power, wealth, Australian history and First Nations sovereignty.

The Royal family is a prominent subject in his work, a theme that directly connects to his great-grandfather's history: Albert Namatjira met Queen Elizabeth II in 1954 and was awarded the Queen's Coronation Medal. Vincent uses this lineage and connection to insert himself into historical moments from the Royal family's tours of Australia. With a wry sense of humour, he uses satire to place himself alongside these authority figures, re-examining the complex historical and present-day dynamics between First Nations peoples in Australia and colonial power.

The Power of Portraiture

Vincent is renowned for his portraiture, including an infamous painting of mining magnate, Gina Rinehart. When Rinehart attempted to have the portrait removed from public view, it gained international headlines. The painting was part of a series called *Australia in Colour* (2021), which was shown at the National Gallery of Australia in 2024. As Namatjira explains, he is interested in people "in a position of

power, people who have incredible wealth and influence". The series also featured his great-grandfather Albert Namatjira, and others who have shaped Australia, for better or worse, highlighting how some people use their power for the benefit of community and Country and others for personal gain.

Vincent's work also explores other influential figures from around the world. He often talks about the abuse of power, which he sees as more prevalent than ever with powerful leaders who act as dictators. This theme is evident in his 2018 portraits of Donald Trump. In these works, Vincent blends consumer culture and political messaging, using symbols such as the "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) hat and the McDonald's brand. In one piece, *Vincent & Donald (Happy Birthday)*, 2018, Vincent subverts the political slogan, shifting the focus to his own Country on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara lands (APY) with the phrase "Make APY Great Again" stitched on a hat.

Not just a vehicle for political commentary, pop culture is a part of Vincent's lived and painted reality. "I like Country Rock music," Vincent said when I asked about the references to music in the work, "in particular, the Australian Rock band AC/DC and, of course, the track *Back in Black* in my work *Rock Dingo*. It also reminds me of my nephew-in-law, Jeremy Whiskey, who is a guitarist in the Iwantja Band." Many First Nations people, including myself, grew up listening to country music. The deep reverence for its songs, and lyrics of love and loss, resonate strongly with many of us, and often feature prominently in our funeral playlists.

Grounded in Country

Vincent Namatjira is a man grounded in the strength of Country and raised on the shoulders of his Ancestors. For First Nations people, Country is a shared place of spiritual, social, and geographical origins, encompassing the lands, skies, and waters to which we have been connected for countless generations. It is from this foundation that Vincent draws the power for his paintings, which are teeming with iconic symbols. These include the Crown, a powerful statement of sovereignty, adorned with the Aboriginal flag. The flag, designed by my uncle, Harold Thomas—a Luritja and Wombai man and a wonderful landscape artist in his own right, who became the first Aboriginal man to graduate from an Australian art school in 1996 – is imbued with the spirit of Country.

The Aboriginal Flag remains a potent symbol of First Nations sovereignty. Each colour holds a deep meaning: the red represents the earth and our spiritual connection to Country; the yellow is the sun, the giver of life; and the black represents Aboriginal people, a colour that holds true regardless of the lighter skin tones many of us have as a result of the devastating impacts of colonisation, assimilation, and the Stolen Generations. Aboriginal people often have a distinct,

dark (black) sense of humour to help us make light of the formidable obstacles presented by colonisation. This resilience is often celebrated in art, sport and music where Black excellence provides an opportunity for success and a pathway to a better life. These heroes, who likewise draw their power from Country, are also represented in Vincent's works, with their achievements celebrated to encourage younger generations to follow.

Displacement

After losing his mother as a child, Vincent was placed into foster care.

It was only as a young adult that he was able to return home and reconnect with his family and the two Countries that align with his Aboriginal heritage: the Country of Albert Namatjira, out to the west of Mparntwe/ Alice Springs and Indulkana, to the south, where he now lives and paints at the Iwantja Art Centre. The worried child, who was once displaced, has grown into a man of quiet substance, grounded in his identity and his art. This personal history directly informs his creative process. In his portraits, he paints his subjects within his own Country, removing them from the comfort of their usual environments. By displacing them, just as he was once displaced, Vincent forces a re-examination of their power and authority.

A Crown of Teeth and Fur: The Sovereignty of King Dingo, pillar of strength and resilience.

The works in *King Dingo* boldly reimagine history. These paintings are a primal, powerful expression with a playful twist. They act as a reflection of the past and a tribute to a new kind of strength. Using the dingo as the central figure, Vincent creates a kingdom, or perhaps den, of First Nations sovereignty. The dingo, a creature of intelligence and wild cunning, reclaims its place as a symbol of resilience and a deep connection to Country. The traditional trappings of authority are replaced by the undeniable power of teeth and fur.

These paintings are a conversation with the present, pulsating with raw energy and offering a direct response to history as it lives in the past and the present.

"Throughout my career and my status and everything that I've become, I look to the dingo. I'm connected to the dingo," says Vincent. "I look to the dingo to give me strength, pride and resilience."

In his outstanding work, *The Royal Den*, Vincent depicts three Royal Dingos standing proudly on the iconic balcony of Buckingham Palace. This location is a fitting choice, as a space exclusively reserved for the British monarch and their

family. The painting makes reference to the traditional annual Royal parade, known as 'Trooping the Colour', marking the British Sovereign's official birthday.

The Royal Dingos are adorned in Royal regalia and stand beneath a powerful reinterpretation of the Aboriginal flag, with the flag's central yellow sun replaced with a royal crown. Here Vincent challenges the very notion of the British monarchy's authority over Australia, asserting a new sovereign presence in the place of traditional power.

Vincent, these works remind me of the lone dingo that walks my fenceline at dawn and dusk; a powerful, solitary presence moving through the landscape of our history. These works are not merely painted canvas; they are the embedded spirit of our story, moving with the quiet strength of our Country and the rising sun.

Always Was Always Will Be

Written by Kelli Cole