From Alice Springs to Buckingham Palace: the fight for Albert Namatjira’s legacy

A new feature film on the Indigenous Australian painter traces his family’s quest for justice after losing the copyright to his work

Stephanie Convery
5 August 2017

“This big girl’s got a nice place,” says artist Lenie Namatjira, looking up at Buckingham Palace. It’s 2013, and she and her cousin, Kevin Namatjira, are about to meet Queen Elizabeth and present her with a set of their watercolour paintings. They are following in the footsteps of their grandfather, Albert Namatjira – one of Australia’s most famous painters, and the first Indigenous man recognised by the colonial government as an Australian citizen – who did the same almost 60 years earlier.

Their journey is being filmed for a documentary feature – the final element of the Namatjira Project, a sprawling, long-term social justice and cultural development project led by arts organisation Big hART. In the space of eight years, the Namatjira Project has spawned an award-winning theatre production, internationally touring sell-out exhibitions, painting masterclasses, workshops, and the development of a charitable trust to support Namatjira’s artistic legacy in his own community.

But there is a deep irony to this moment: Kevin, who lives in government housing in Alice Springs, is about to be kicked out of his home. While the Namatjira name is
intimately associated with Indigenous Australian art and internationally resonant – last week, for example, Google recognised Albert Namatjira’s 115th birthday with a Google doodle of a painting by another of his granddaughters, Gloria Pannka – the Namatjira family have been left with very little by way of a material legacy. In 1957, Namatjira gave Legend Press the exclusive licence to reproduce his works for sale, for which he (and after his death, his family) would receive a 12% royalty. But when that agreement expired in 1983, the public trustee managing his estate sold the copyright to Legend Press, and the family’s income stream was cut off.

Albert Namatjira learnt to paint through his relationship with Rex Battarbee, a landscape painter from Warrnambool who had retreated into central Australia after the first world war, ending up at the Hermannsburg Lutheran mission. There, he met the young Namatjira, who was working as a cameleer. Namatjira expressed an interest in painting after seeing Battarbee’s works, and with the support of the local pastor, an informal six-week apprenticeship followed – the sum total of his formal training.

Kevin Namatjira sketches a landscape. Photograph: Greer Versteeg/Supplied: Big hART

Namatjira’s works were incredibly popular when they first came to public attention. His first exhibition – at Melbourne’s Athenaeum in 1938 – resulted in the sale of every single exhibited painting. A follow-up show in 1939 also sold out. Over the following decade his profile grew, leading eventually to the artist receiving an audience with a young Queen Elizabeth in Canberra in 1954.

But it wasn’t just the upper crust who saw something special in Namatjira’s work. The ordinary public were drawn to it, too.
“There was something romantic about the fact that he was an Aboriginal man who was painting in a way that [audiences at the time] perceived as similar to the way that European Australians painted the landscape – using watercolours,” says Judith Ryan, senior curator of Indigenous art at the National Gallery of Victoria.

While his work was informed by European styles, Namatjira wasn’t painting with a European eye. “He was painting sites from inside the land,” says Ryan. “These were sites that were in his country, to which he belonged. He was painting his own being. He was painting himself. This was his identity, in the land.”

“He was a very knowledgeable, very soft man, very powerful,” says actor Trevor Jamieson, who played Namatjira in the Big hArt theatre production about the artist’s life. “These paintings gave an insight – they were certain little windows he shared [with] the rest of the world.”

But Namatjira’s art was also an entrepreneurial project through which he could provide for his family. At a time when Indigenous people were not even recognised as citizens of their own country, it was unheard of for an Indigenous man to be independently wealthy. Yet the money he made from selling one painting would have taken him more than six months to earn through cameleer work.

Namatjira was the first Indigenous Australian to be offered citizenship rights, but these rights did not include the right to purchase property. He was, however, allowed to purchase alcohol, and Indigenous custom meant that his family and friends expected him to share any that he bought. In 1958, he was charged with supplying alcohol to wards of the state after rum was stolen out of his truck. The prison sentence that followed effectively broke him, and he died shortly after his release in 1959.

Arts organisation Big hART became involved with the Namatjira family after creative director Scott Rankin and actor Trevor Jamieson met a young painter and Namatjira descendant, Elton Wirri, through another of their projects, Ngapartji Ngapartji. A performer in that project’s touring production, when Wirri was introduced to city audiences as a kinship grandson of Namatjira, the audience interest was palpable.

For Rankin, that audience response was significant: “We wondered … what was the meaning behind this? Was it just affection? So we looked back through the story and began to talk to the family.”

For Big hArt, telling Namatjira’s story involved a long, intimate community consultation process – firstly to gain the trust of the community, then to work with them to tell the Namatjira story respectfully and appropriately.

“There’s so many variations of the story at play,” says Rankin. “It’s easy, when you start the research to go, this is so rich, but then you’re going down one line which is only one third of the truth.”
But the project wasn’t just about storytelling: there were practical objectives, too.

“At the time, the whole family were living out of one house in Alice Springs, so we were thinking, far out, what can we do to help change this?” says Jamieson. “They did not trust anybody.”

Namatjira Project producer Sophie Marinos says: “The older Namatjira family members and artists really were desperate to connect with younger generations and to pass on knowledge and skills and the art tradition. That really shaped the community development process.”

The importance of the story, for Rankin, lay in how the Namatjira family’s experience could be seen as emblematic of the broader Indigenous experience. “Here’s a family struggling, here’s a family living in poverty and the copyright is owned by somebody else. Although that’s not a huge dollar value necessarily, it’s an incredibly powerful iconic injustice that could speak in much bigger terms if we got it right,” he says.

The kind of long-lead, deep engagement that characterises a Big hART project – never less than 150 weeks, spanning up to a decade, exclusively for the development of new work – stands in stark contrast to the standard 5-week rehearsal periods for performance production in Australia, and Rankin is scathing of what he calls “nauseating calico-costumed victim narratives” – he name-checks The Secret River, a
novel by a white author, adapted for the stage by a white man – that dominate theatrical representation of Indigenous cultures.

“Something like Namatjira is actually an experiment in an intercultural exchange,” he says. “It’s neither an Indigenous work nor a non-Indigenous work.” Rather, he says, it is a kind of reconciliation in action – a community telling a story together and using that story to bring about social justice.

The Namatjira Project happened with very little support from Australian government cultural funding bodies. A large proportion of the funding actually came from the UK, because, Rankin says, people over there could see “the decay at the heart of the Australian narrative” – the deep contradiction at the core of a story about an Indigenous man whose artistic legacy is so great and yet whose family and community are living in poverty.

 Jamieson, too, sees the collaboration between himself and Rankin as a kind of continuation of the artistic collaboration of Battarbee and Namatjira, who remained firm friends throughout their lives: “We’re trying to remind the rest of Australia about the injustices that were made through governmental decisions, and the way white people deceive us to this day.”
Producer Sophie Marinos says the feature film, which premieres this week at Melbourne International Film Festival, was developed as part of Big hART’s commitment to creating permanent change, and leaving a material legacy for the communities with whom they work. It tells not simply the story of Albert Namatjira, but the story of a community seeking self-determination against enormous structural obstacles.

“The ideal outcome is that the copyright comes back to the family via the Namatjira Legacy Trust,” says Marinos. “The trust would be able to support a continuing intergenerational transfer of knowledge that is happening, which is not just about the art movement; it’s actually about health and wellbeing for the community. Because there’s so much that happens in those moments of transfer – a connection to country, culture, language.”

“You’re needing to remake the way in which people think about the Namatjira story, so it’s not biscuit tins and tea towels,” says Rankin.

“This is a story that can change the way in which the country thinks about itself.”

*The Namatjira Project premieres at Melbourne International Film festival on 5 August and is showing in cinemas nationally from 7 September*