2 Images of Albert Namatjira in Australian Popular Culture of the 1950s

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This essay examines images of the Aboriginal artist Albert Namatjira in the Australian media during the 1950s. The focus is on the print media and to a lesser extent on film, both documentary and dramatic (Nile, 1998, p. 1). Both forms of media helped to shape Australian culture in the 1950s although there were, of course, many other important forces at work as well. The forms of popular print media used here include travel and other non-fiction books (White 1997), journals, magazines and newspapers all of which were a vibrant part of the consumer culture of the time. They all enjoyed broad distribution and were widely read by the so-called 'ordinary Australian'. Distribution was primarily through outlets such as local newsagents and general bookshops in city, suburban and country shopping centres and local subscription or municipal lending libraries, which were used with great frequency across the country at the time. The sources used for this paper were mostly those that addressed a general rather than a specialised audience and readership. Many were specifically aimed at 'ordinary Australians' such as travel books that were immensely popular (White, 1997). General availability and accessibility by a wide range of people is the key to the concept of 'popular culture' used in this paper. Similarly, the films discussed in this paper were those that had a general distribution in Australian city, suburban and country town cinemas that catered for a general rather than specialised audience. These were people who attended cinemas regularly and frequently before the advent of television. The photographs and other images of Albert Namatjira described in the course of the study all had a wide and repeated exposure in the Australian popular media, especially in newspapers and weekly magazines. In the print media of the 1950s, illustrations were as important as words in conveying meaning and instant recognition to the reading audience in the public arena.

Albert Namatjira, who painted luminous watercolour landscapes of his home country in Central Australia from the late 1930s until the end of the 1950s, was the first Aboriginal artist to enjoy and sustain major success in mainstream Australian society. Forsaking the traditional geometrical art of his forbears and region – circles, half-circles, spirals and straight or curved lines – and inspired by a visiting European artist, mentor and teacher, Rex Battarbee, Albert Namatjira eventually developed a thriving creative business, painting delicate, technically sophisticated scenes of the remote MacDonnell Ranges with their dramatically resonant mountains, trees, cliff faces and 'striking colours'.

By the 1950s, Namatjira's art works found their way throughout the nation into Australian households, schools, public art galleries and commercial enterprises. Most often these were prints but on odd occasions they were originals (Burnum Burnum, 1988, p. 264, Berndt, p. 18 & 68). They became such familiar icons that the artist himself was turned into a major celebrity of popular culture. The name of Albert Namatjira is still better known than that of any other artist in the country. His fame has created a multitude of popular

images in the imagination of the Australian public. Many of these were derived from stereotypical and superficial accounts by journalists. Even *The Women's Weekly* devoted a page to him in 2000 in *The 20th Century in Pictures ...A Souvenir of Our Time* (Swain, 2000).

After his death in 1959, simplified popular images appeared and reappeared in different media:

> I only met Albert once – that was at a luncheon given in his honor by a lot of literary and artistic people. They all had the very best of intentions, but all their good intentions did was to kill poor Namatjira. One speaker after another got up and praised the simple landscapist of the Never Never in terms, which would have been appropriate to a Titian, a Velasquez or a Leonardo. Albert understood not one plurry word of what they were saying but sat sipping his beer in dignified silence, only smiling softly and bowing gravely every time his name was mentioned. One speaker spoke, not without a touch of envy, I thought, about the astounding prices Albert was getting for his pictures. (Skinner, 1959)

This article by *The Bulletin* correspondent a few weeks after Namatjira's sudden death neatly brings together the central myths of the popular and tragic legend of his life as expressed repeatedly in the popular print media: that he was literally hounded to death by fame, celebrity, the media hype and uncritical praise; that there was the irreconcilable gap between two opposing cultures of black and white; that he lacked understanding of the English language and consequently of the mainstream Australian culture; that he was addicted to alcohol which destroyed his health, and that his spirit was irretrievably broken. Many aspects of these popular myths were downright falsehoods that have perpetuated themselves to the present day while others were simplifications or distortions of the historical truth. Most were originally espoused to assuage the white man's growing guilt over the treatment of Aborigines and to justify in simple terms to the general public the difficult situation Namatjira was in before his death.

The same *Bulletin* writer's commentary had more than a tinge of the popular journal's typical lampooning racism about it, while it ambiguously recognises Namatjira as a dignified, 'dedicated' and 'real' artist who had become 'world-famous'. He was likened metaphorically to a tree planted in the wrong soil. In a completely negative way his kin responsibilities of sharing were raised. There was, according to this account and several others, "a grand jamboree of eating and drinking and fighting until everything [the earnings] was finished …". It was argued that his white well-wishers were wrong in uprooting him and "transplanting him to the snob soil of the great white cities" and it was "ridiculous" to give him "white man status" which put him into conflict with "tribal ethic" and broke "poor Albert's heart". As a consequence he was portrayed as a tragic man with "no roots left" (Skinner, 1959). Such stereotypical distortions have continued unabated since 1959 in newspapers, newsletters, documentary films, non-fiction books and the like in Australian popular culture.

In October 1958 in *Overland*, a left-wing magazine on sale in newsagents, Noel Counihan, an important Australian artist himself, had already portrayed Namatjira as a

tragic figure, the victim of both "exploitation and humbug". Counihan presented a well-argued defence of Namatjira as an artist at a time when he had begun to receive unfair criticisms for not "painting in the vigorous primitive traditions of his ancestors". He pointed out that Namatjira, as a watercolourist of outstanding ability, possessed "a wonderful eye and a sensitive disciplined hand". In a matter of two months of tuition by Battarbee in the 1930s he had mastered the English School of watercolour methods that had taken centuries to develop. Namatjira appeared to Counihan to be a "highly gifted sensitive man, occupying the unenviable position of the artist of transition, a bridge between two cultures", but not in no man's land. He recognised Namatjira as clearly being a pioneer of painting and opening the way "for the flowering of a school of black artists in no way inferior to others in the Commonwealth" (Counihan, 1958, p. 2). It was indeed an insightful and thoughtful observation from a magazine with overlap into the popular media in the midst of a plethora of superficial misconceptions.

Earlier in *Overland* in 1956, a poet identified only as B. J. M. (Overland, 1956), expressed similar sympathetic views in poetic form:

NAMATJIRA

The dark Arunta,
Outlawed, outcast,
Seizes in pigment
The land he has lost.

Whiteman, arrogant,
Standing apart,
Masters the landscape
With guilt in his heart.

Prisoner and trooper
While we remain,
Each wears a handcuff,
Each drags a chain.

Laurie Thomas, in his leading article in the October *Women's Day* 1958 dramatically entitled 'NAMATJIRA: Tragic symbol of a lost people', took the line and the by-line that "Australia's famous aboriginal artist has been set the impossible task of obeying two contradictory ways of life". He took the widespread popularist view that the artist's "tragic plight has deeply moved people everywhere". Thomas provides a rhetorical and sympathetic journalistic narrative of the recent public events in the life of the Aboriginal man that he depicts as being "broken in two" by forces stronger than himself that he should never have had to face alone:

> It is not long since Namatjira was taken to Canberra to meet the Queen. He was presented as the highest representative of his race. He had made a household word of his name as an artist. He was feted everywhere. As a

> person he was distinguished and the Commonwealth Government recognised this by granting him full citizenship rights.
> Then he was sentenced to gaol.
> How did it come about that this dignified, kindly and talented man suffered this degradation?
> The immediate cause was that he let one of his friends drink some of his rum.
> The trouble is that his friend has a black skin.
> That is the simple answer. But the real answer is far from simple.
> The official view in the Northern Territory is that aborigines are Stone Age children who must be protected against themselves. They are all, therefore, treated as wards of the State. Any white man caught supplying them with liquor is liable to six months' gaol without the option of a fine. Namatjira was made, technically, a white man by being given citizenship rights.
> ….
> His dilemma was that he was still black.
> His family was black. His relatives were black. His friends were black.
> No change took place in Namatjira's soul, or in his ties with his family and race, when a decree singled him out from his people.

So far so good. Thomas argues that Namatjira was asked to do the impossible: to live as a white man in a black camp but to refrain from exercising his freedom while there. And then Thomas evoked the well-publicised expert anthropological authority of Emeritus Professor A. P. Elkin of Sydney University who expresses the view that the selection of one tribesman for citizenship rights would not solve what he defined as the "assimilation problem". It could only be solved in his view by "a more general, slow preparation of the whole tribe for citizenship" – "they must all come up together", he was reported to have trumpeted (Thomas, 1951). *Women's Day*, while highlighting supportively Namatjira's dilemma, then takes the opportunity to support gradualism in the Federal Government's newly endorsed assimilation policy under Paul Hasluck.

In 1951 Paul Hasluck, the coalition Liberal Country Party Federal Government's minister for territories, had declared 'assimilation' to be the policy of all governments in the Federation of Australia, and yet even a decade later "much legislation remained that kept Aborigines in a special category" such as wards of the state (Rowes, 1987, p. 135). In practical terms this meant that segregation and discrimination remained powerful forces. It was in 1938 that the anthropologist A. P. Elkin had proposed the term 'assimilation' to solve the so-called 'Aboriginal Problem'. In 1951 a Commonwealth conference of state ministers of Aboriginal affairs declared "the Commonwealth and states, having assimilation as the objective of native welfare measures, desires to see all persons born in Australia enjoying full citizenship" (cited in Horton, 1994, pp. 68-70). The underlying aim in reality was the destruction of Aboriginal society to be achieved by the 'dispersal' of individuals and the breaking up of Aboriginal communities on a permanent basis. Hardly an Aboriginal family was not affected in some way, although policies and practices varied across the Australian states and in different time periods. Such 'assimilation' policies affected Albert Namatjira and his extended family profoundly.

Namatjira was also the innocent subject of hostile responses in popular publications. Tom Ronan, in *20th Century*, while recognising him as a "painter of talent" in 1957, pointed out incredibly that as an Aborigine of the Northern Territory and a ward of the state, he was a member of the "most favoured race of subject people in the world", entitled to free hospital and medical benefits, free education for his children, child endowment, and protection under civil and criminal law against "any potential white aggressor" as well as "mothering" by the government in every aspect of his life. His life, claimed the bigoted Ronan, was little short of paradise on earth. The prose continues to say more about the writer than his subject. Even more racist accusations flowed from the same pen (Ronan, 1957, pp. 232-4).

At the same time criticism of the treatment of Aborigines and of Namatjira in particular was growing in the cities on the eastern coast. Jean Underhill, a friend of the artist, in her article "Namatjira: a Man of Two Worlds" recognised the difficulties that he faced. Knowing him personally according to her account when she lived in Alice Springs, he described himself bitterly at the time as "the half-black, half-white man who was fit to be taxed but not fit to be trusted to buy beer". She pointed out the lack of truth in the widespread rumour because of the pressures of celebrity that Namatjira was not above painting "pot-boilers" (Underhill, 1960). Unlike European artists Namatjira, she wrote, never destroyed a painting as to him they all had a spiritual meaning despite the normal variation in quality that would occur in any professional artist's work.

The death of Namatjira was frequently dramatised in inaccurate and evocative terms adding to his popular legend.

> In 1959 the most famous… – Albert Namatjira the painter – died in a canvas-and-tin humpy on the dry banks of the Finke River in the Red Centre under sentence of imprisonment for giving liquor to the aborigines (honoured with citizenship he fell under citizen's laws).
> (Greenway, 1973, pp. 90-1)

So wrote visiting American academic anthropologist John Greenway. At least he was correct about the year of Albert's death. He did not actually die in a 'humpy' but at Alice Springs Hospital where he had been admitted because of a heart attack complicated by the onset of pneumonia. It was only a matter of hours before he died of a further and massive heart attack on 8 August 1959. He had been released from his sentence on Papunya Native Reserve on 8 May 1959, having served two months imprisonment in the form of an open detention at the Reserve. But from then on he had been seriously sick from long-standing heart problems accompanied by severe depression. He accepted the offer of a small cottage – not a "canvas-and-tin" humpy – at Papunya, but his health rapidly deteriorated and he lost some degree of interest in painting after a prolific, highly energetic career as the most publicly acclaimed artist in the nation. Namatjira had discovered a particular way to communicate his affinity with the land to a huge national and international audience through a re-invention of a Western painting tradition in his own unique style.

He did some painting, however, despite the myth that he did none in 1959, but he spent hours staring at and contemplating the hills and gorges around Hermannsburg, silent

and seemingly depressed. However, the act of observing and contemplating the landscape for hours before putting brush to paper was very much part of his technique in the creative act. From art critics he had received over a long public career of celebrity reactions ranging from high fawning praise to condemnation and disparagement, which had set a pattern for all of his later exhibitions in the 1950s. Despite some negative responses, at the twelve major exhibitions held between 1938 and 1959, all of his paintings were sold and he had been overwhelmed with private orders from prominent people (Namatjira, 2000, pp. 1-2; Aboriginal News, 1974, pp. 26-7). His public support as an artist was phenomenal and has been matched by no other Australian artist.

A massive number of photographic and other visual images portraying the famous artist appeared in newspapers, popular magazines, travel books and other mass media, especially in the 1950s. They are mostly of the artist at work somewhere in a remote spot in the MacDonnell Ranges where he frequently camped in his beloved home country. He hated most aspects of modern urban life and only visited cities when he had to and then only briefly. His whole life was predominantly experienced in his tribal territory of the remote McDonnell Ranges amid growing tourism and an increasing Australian fascination with the so-called mysterious Red Centre. The insistent and persistent inroads of media journalism brought an ongoing, steady stream of people to him. He posed patiently in front of their cameras on innumerable occasions, treated them all with dignified politeness, despite the interruption to his creative work, and was extraordinarily generous in accepting interviews on the spot at his work camp.

Both factors, tourism and media journalism, started around Hermannsburg Mission and the physical attractions of the MacDonnell Ranges in the late 1920s and have continued to build progressively and dramatically to the present day. Between the mid-1930s and 1959 the visual material depicting innumerable portraits of Namatjira soon became a gathering, powerful force that provided instant recognition of the man and his work in the popular and collective imagination of the person in the street. In one sense the artist became a media creation. In the 1950s Namatjira was a tourist destination in himself and people travelled long distances in an attempt to find him, not always successfully, with both private and commercial motivations. Those that did recorded the encounter in visual terms. Photographs of the artist became nearly as popular as his paintings. They were certainly more massively multiplied in the print media. His photographic image had immediately superimposed on it a cultural, social and commercial value. Another form of prestigious recognition of Namatjira's singular achievement was the publication of a biography of the artist in 1944 (Mountford, 1944). The book had run into five editions by 1949 and was sold widely, appearing in many public libraries. Charles Percy Mountford, the South Australian ethnologist, also produced a documentary film, *Namatjira the Painter* in 1947 which was widely shown in cinemas and provided a sequence of compelling visual images of the artist at work in the open air of the majestic landscape surrounding the Hermansburg Lutheran Mission. The sixteen-millimetre film was made by the Department of the Interior and received widespread release in commercial newsreel and suburban cinemas throughout Australia during 1948 on the cusp of Namatjira becoming an even more significant national figure and legendary icon. At the same time as the making of Mountford's film, Namatjira became the first Aborigine to appear in *Who's Who in Australia* (Alexander, 1944, p. 622). He had arrived in a big way nationally. Clearly, the Federal Government was using him as a

success story of their freshly promoted assimilation policy through a bombardment of government media releases. They appropriated Namatjira as the flagship of assimilation without recognising that he valiantly maintained his cultural roots, his community and his kinship obligations.

With Lee Robinson, as director and assistant producer, and Axel Poignant as cameraman, Mountford produced *Namatjira the Painter* as a colour documentary on the artist's life in dramatic form. Namatjira, who played himself in the film, was forty-four at the time and at the height of his "considerable powers". He enacted in the film his first painting lesson with Battarbee in the mid-1930s and when

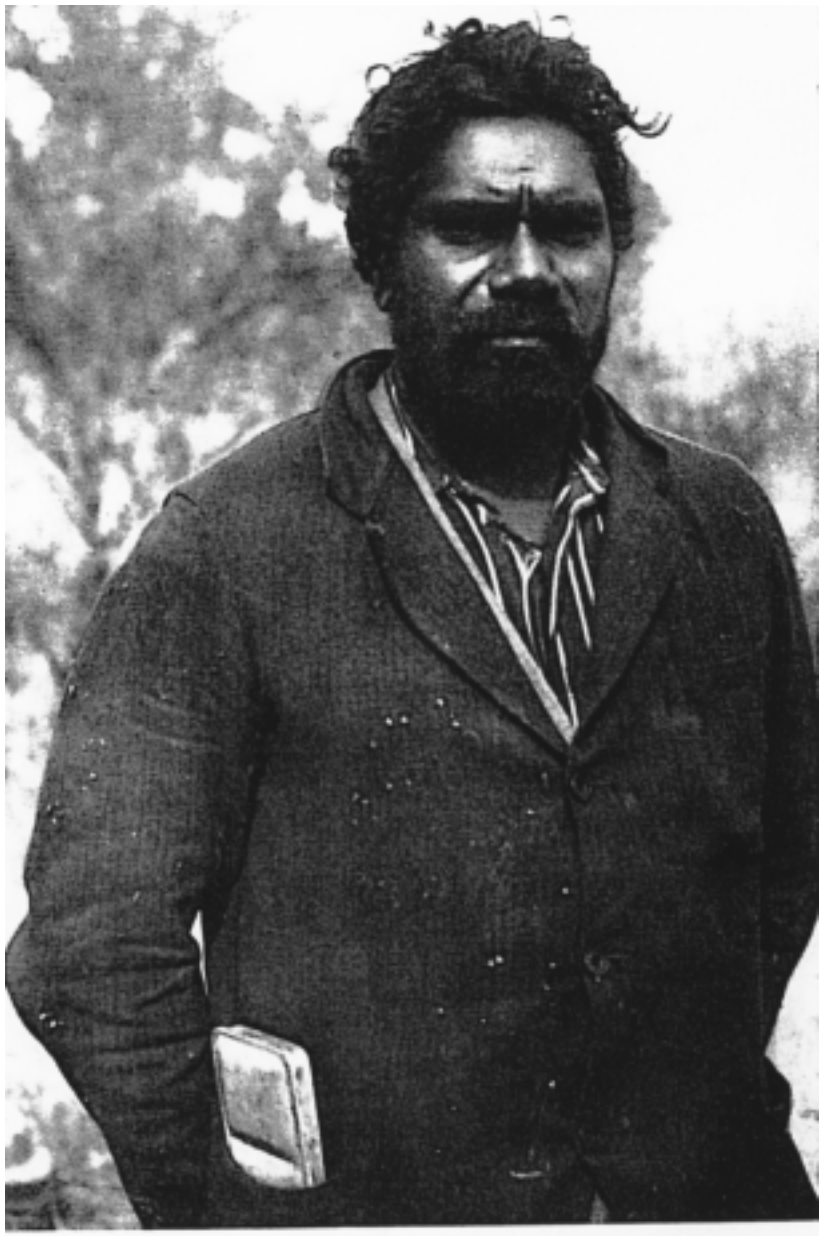
> the black hand falls on the white board it is with practised ease and the narrowed far-seeing eyes most conspicuously know the pathway for the brush.

In the film

> we see a large rugged man with a wide intelligent face, an air of gentleness but purpose, in brief a man powerfully at home in his world and in his chosen work. (Amidio, 1986, p. 5)

Albert also appeared in *The Phantom Stockman*, a low budget narrative feature film, which took twenty-six days to shoot in 1953, set in the hills beyond Alice Springs. It was an outback "western" murder mystery, designed solely as a supporting attraction or feature for commercial cinemas. It was the first film made by Platypus Film Production with George Heath and Chips Rafferty, the famous Australian actor, as joint producers. Briefly, the film concerned a hero-wanderer, the Sundowner, played by Chips Rafferty, who solved the mystery of a murdered station-owner on an isolated cattle station. Albert played a guest cameo role as himself, the famous artist, who was roughly inserted into the plot as a minor character. Aboriginal lore was included as the Sundowner used the Aboriginal 'bush telegraph' method of thought transfer and other traditional signals. Even such offbeat touches could not disguise a mild action movie with a plodding pace – a pale copy of the Hollywood B-Western with Rafferty as the stereotypical cowboy hero (Larkins, 1986, pp. 79-81; Reade, 1975, p. 199). Nevertheless, Namatjira enjoyed himself immensely in the making of the film. It earned money and received sound distribution on release in America, renamed *Return of the Plainsman*. In England it was titled more accurately *Cattle Station* and played prominently in various suburban and town cinemas to good audiences. The film was brilliantly photographed and Albert Namatjira's impressive physical image was conveyed widely to cinema audiences in Australia, England and the USA. It enhanced his national standing in popular culture. Namatjira was one of the few distinguished features of the very ordinary film. Lee Robertson directed both the Namatjira documentary and the feature "western".

Of the many still photographic and other visual images of the artist, some from the three decades until 1959 stand out. One of the earliest photographs of Namatjira (circa 1936) appeared in *The Aborigines Friends Association Quarterly Review* of September 1942 and was repeated in the same newsletter on several occasions over many years. It was



ALBERT NAMATJIRA—THE FAMOUS ABORIGINAL ARTIST

clearly taken earlier in the mid-1930s. A youthful Albert, holding two wooden plaques, looks directly and silently at the camera and the caption reads 'Hermansburg native water colour artist, who asserts that the life of a modern artist cannot be lived on the food of his Stone Age ancestors' (F.W.A., 1942, p. 15). In the accompanying article Namatjira, who was in an impoverished situation at the time due, it was argued, to the demands of his relatives, remarked dryly: "Cannot do much painting, if you have to live on Paddy melons and an occasional rabbit". The article claimed that

> His many friends had helped him through all his supplies, and then went home leaving Albert to do his work while living on scanty bushtucker, mostly collected by his wife. (F.W.A., 1942)

One of the most evocative and powerful photographs of Namatjira appeared in Charles Barrett's travel book *On the Wallaby* (Barrett, 1942, p. 176) which also appeared in 1942. Barrett described his meeting with Namatjira on a high bank after toiling through the hot, dry sand of the Finke River bed:

> I saw an aboriginal man and a boy near an old gum tree. The man was Albert Namatjira. He had been painting on a woomera, which leant against the tree; a paint-box, one of those black-enamelled affairs, showed above a pocket of his old, faded coat, a garment as pleasant to wear as any white artist's favourite studio jacket. Albert's striped blue shirt was wide open at the throat; bare-headed and bearded, his hair tumbled, he came toward me. A pleasant voice welcomed the stranger from Melbourne. We strolled down to the tents, where a billy was on the fire and a pot which, by the savour of the steam, contained euro-tail soup. Albert had no easel; his stool is a petrol tin. The aboriginal artist … speaks English well, and has a pleasing, modest manner. Success and a measure of fame have not spoiled him. (Barrett, 1942, p. 194)

In the photographic portrait, Namatjira is as Barrett describes him in this passage and is looking intently and directly at the camera (Barrett, 1942, p. 11). He never projected a subservient image.

The later portraits increasingly present Namatjira as a person with a sombre, isolated, almost tragic identity. Such images influenced and reinforced public attitudes. There is Mountford's close up photographic portrait with Namatjira looking steadily into the distance, also taken in 1942 (Mountford, 1944, p. 11). There is Groom's lonely portrait of the artist with an overcoat and hat sitting on a petrol can, concentrating on putting brush to paper with the arid semi-desert stretching out behind him (Groom, 1950, p. 8). Another sombre study of Namatjira beside his truck appeared in *People* in June 1950. There are other more tender optimistic ones as in *Walkabout* in October 1956 with the panorama in front of him. The caption reads:

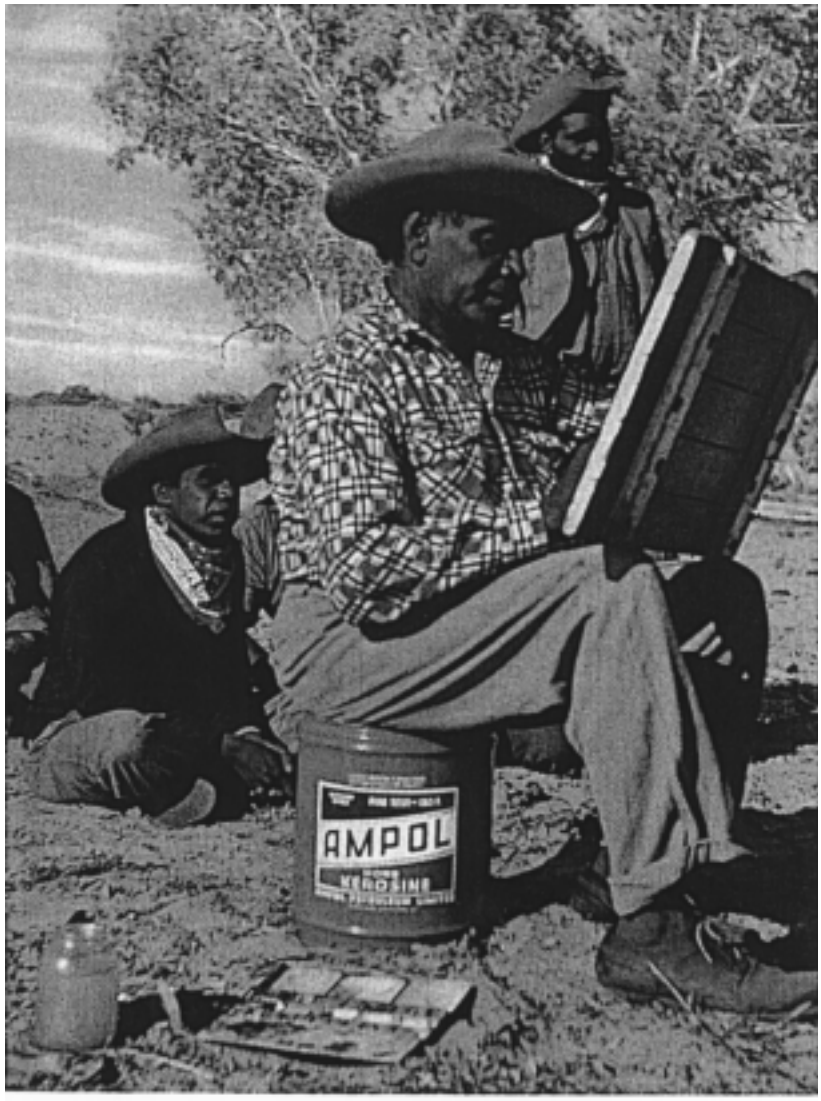
> Watched by a thoughtful little girl, the painter sketches in a scene in the MacDonnell Ranges of Central Australia. Namatjira was the first of the famous "Hermansburg School of water-colourists" to learn the rudiments of landscape painting from the well-known artist, Mr Rex Battarbee, and is now a comparatively wealthy man, his work being represented in most State Art Galleries, and commanding excellent prices. (Walkabout, 1956)

The outstanding photographer Laurence Le Guay created a portrait of sombre power in 1956 (Ziegler 1957, p. 109). A very large portrait in *Women's Day* is equally as powerful,

sad and dramatically tragic (Women's Day 1958). Noel Counihan's sketch of Namatjira on the front cover of *Overland* in Spring 1950 conveys a similar impact (Overland, 1958).

Some portraits of the artist at work also revealed the detail of artwork that he was producing at the time and provide a valuable art history document for the researcher. This is the case with the magnificent photographic portrait that was reproduced in Eleanor Z. Baker's book *The Australian Aborigines*, a text written for children in America (Baker, 1968, p. 29). Namatjira is shown sitting on a large metal gallon drum with an up-turned kerosene tin beside him carrying his watercolour pallet. His landscape painting is exposed to the camera, while he is touching it finely with his brush. His work is clipped to a light wooden board that he holds in his other hand while looking at the distance to the right. He wears a jaunty, American cowboy's hat that he favoured and a bright, patterned shirt over

light duck trousers. The hills can be seen in the distance behind him. The whole photograph conveys to the youthful reading audience the very image of what a *plein air* artist is and does in the tradition of European culture. There is the consciousness of the great artist, intellectually separate from everyday life and absorbed in the act of creation.



ALBERT NAMATJIRA (died 1959), notable Australian aboriginal artist, received from Ampol a new utility vehicle and supplies to help him travel his country to paint the landscapes that won him wide renown.

A similar colour portrait appears in Colin Simpson's history of Ampol Oil Company in Australia (Simpson, 1961 p. 6). The caption reminds us that the company rewarded Namatjira with a new utility vehicle and supplies to help him travel 'his country to paint the landscape that has won him wide renown'. Ampol wish to take their due credit. Behind Namatjira sit young Aboriginal men of his kin dressed in popular cowboy dress. The artist sits on a kerosene tin with the Ampol logo prominently displayed (Simpson, 1961). Ann Stephen has already discussed Namatjira in his role as an elder statesman and the images of

the young Aboriginal men watching him work in this photograph reinforce the strength of this theme (Stephen, 1998).

There are at least two full portraits of Namatjira in oils in existence; one is William Dargie's Archibald Prize winning portrait. The artist sits nobly and a little stiffly and sternly. He posed for the painting in Sydney in 1956 while on a visit there and it has been reproduced in many popular books, magazines and newspapers. Another lesser-known oil was painted by Alfred H. Cook, a New Zealand artist who was a watercolourist, oil painter and etcher. It depicts Namatjira sitting on the ground, cross-legged, painting in the magnificent landscape of the Western MacDonnells (Amadio, 1986, p. 99). The painting has a panoramic effect. Again it conveys the great artist at work in the midst of his mystical home country for the benefit of the European eye.

The dramatic events surrounding Namatjira's phenomenal celebrity in Australian popular culture of the 1950s have the faint murmur of distant history to Australians who were born at a later time. The question of Australian citizenship for Aborigines has since been resolved, at least in legal terms. No longer do adult Indigenous people have the disparaging official label of wards of the state as the great artist did for the majority of his life. Nevertheless, Namatjira as a well regarded and remembered public identity has a secure, sustainable place amongst the perpetual icons of popular Australian history and culture like Simpson and his Donkey, Les Darcy, Phar Lap, Donald Bradman, Weary Dunlop, Dawn Fraser, Roden Cutler and the like.

He seems to be the only creative artist whose public image has consistently maintained itself to the present day from the late 1930s in popular agreed knowledge. The 2002 retrospective exhibition of his work (the travelling itinerary of the exhibition included the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, The Araluen Centre for Arts and Entertainment, Alice Springs, The National Gallery of Victoria, the Art Gallery of South Australia and the

Queensland Art Gallery) provides further reinforcement, but accurately demolishes stereotypes and prejudices (French, 2002).

He has never been forgotten in the pantheon of great Australians. The trendy, fashionable chattering classes will no doubt refer to his work as being framed as prints and mounted on the wall of every neat 1950s suburban lounge room along with the inevitable flying ceramic ducks lined diagonally as features across the pastel walls. The average Australian with some sense of history will refer, however, almost inevitably to the tragedy of his life as a great realist watercolourist of the majestic and mystical Red Centre – art they can understand and appreciate – a tragedy wrought by the impact of too much instant fame, and fawning acclaim from the 'do-gooders' of the big southern cities, too many destructive financial demands made by his multitudinous Aboriginal kin and friends and the terrible effects of alcohol on his creativity. In fact, the archetypical tragic figure of history as it is popularly conceived in Australia.

Namatjira's life through the media portrayal took on all the trappings of a legend, before and after his death. Throughout his sometimes turbulent public career as a much feted if reclusive artist, he confronted successive crises – personal and political, physical and psychological – and he surmounted them better than the media gave him credit for. Their obsessive drive was to create simplified, stereotypical images to satisfy their readers' lust for the novel foibles of what was loosely regarded as the nature of the typical Aborigine. The ordinary public, nevertheless, still know Namatjira's name and sense his fame, his celebrity and his superstar status when he was alive.

The many books, articles, commentaries, reviews and reproduced visual images of Namatjira before and after his death in 1959 can be roughly divided into two main types: broad popular treatments that are long on gossip, sensationalised problems and drama, but short on facts and context, and the occasional specialised scholarly or genuinely insightful studies that are now inaccessible to the general reader and the public and have not had a sustained effect on the popular legend itself.

The purpose of this paper was to suggest a corrective by pointing to a need to reassess the popular legend so as to look for both truth and fiction in it and develop a sense of proportion, a sense of balance. While the legend makes it difficult to get at the historical truth, more attention needs to be paid to Namatjira's state of health during the whole of the 1950s and the private bereavements occasioned by the deaths of his two daughters in successive years and of his father that he silently endured while keeping a public face of dignity and gentility. As well, there were the major disappointments of not being allowed to establish a cattle station in the MacDonnell Ranges or even to build a home in Alice Springs – the insidious denial of the right to live in the town. There was also his grossly unfair arrest just after becoming a citizen, which the Federal Government had originally used to demonstrate the success of their assimilation approach. The legal problem exposed the aridity of their policy.

Albert's career and his narrative straddled major historical changes in Australian society, particularly in the 1950s and he was both affected by them and, to some degree, he affected them by becoming a national celebrity. He was indeed an artist of the transition. The narrative of his life and the multiple public images of him in the media open up broader questions about the current status of Aborigines. Today Australia recognises a number of Indigenous celebrities, including artists whose names are both nationally and

internationally known. But Namatjira was the beachhead, the pioneer, the catalyst of what was to follow more positively.

At his death there was a public outpouring of grief and an unsettling suspicion that white Australia was largely to blame. He was, after all, expected by white Australia to sever connection with kin so as to conserve wealth rather than use and expend it. But he never accepted such an expectation and remained absolutely faithful to the Aboriginal doctrine of sharing to what became in some respects the bitter end. By doing so he rejected the notion of assimilation that was being strongly promoted in government circles during the 1950s in favour of maintaining his cultural identity, responsibilities and heritage.

The many media portraits of Namatjira collectively meld into one. It is an imagining of what an artist is and does in Australian culture – a *plein air* presence and creative spirit in the arid beauty of the landscape itself: 'from deserts the prophets come…' (Hope, 1975, p. 13).

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