

ANNA HYLAND
Remembering Namatjira

ABSTRACT

Albert Namatjira was a pioneering Aboriginal artist who achieved unprecedented fame for his watercolour depictions of central Australian landscapes. In central Australia, there are artworks, monuments, landscapes and cultural sites that are marked as sites for remembering Namatjira. Drawing on Chris Healy's *Forgetting Aborigines*, this essay examines the visual, spatial and material qualities of these memorials to consider what is remembered and forgotten about Namatjira. It suggests that recent cultural projects offer new ways of understanding and remembering Namatjira's life and artistic legacy.

Introduction

In July 2012, I visited the Hermannsburg Potters' Arts Centre as one of eleven students completing a field-based subject at the University of Melbourne called 'Aboriginal Art in the Northern Territory'.¹ We crowded into the little studio where the artists were working and flicked through catalogues, asked questions and manoeuvred awkwardly around half-finished pots. One pot was moulded into a tumble of dingo pups. On another, a flock of black cockatoos cruised through the distinctive Hermannsburg/Ntaria landscape.²

Interrupting our nervous chatter, senior artist and founding member of the Hermannsburg Potters, Judith Pungkarta Inkamala began to speak quietly about the Potters' work. Judith told us that she and other potters had grown up watching Albert Namatjira paint. She drew attention to Irene Entata, who was also working in the studio, and to her pots that depict scenes of life on the Lutheran Mission at Hermannsburg. As Judith spoke, she began painting a distant line of hills in mauve under-glaze on a new pot. She told us, 'There is a lot of memory in these pots.'³ Watching her work, it struck me that many of these memories were linked to Namatjira, through the subject matter or style of these pots.

Judith's words stayed with me as our group of students travelled around Alice Springs and Hermannsburg. There seemed to be 'a lot of memory' of Albert Namatjira not only in the pots, but also in the built fabric of Central Australia. Memorials appeared in the names of major roads (Namatjira Drive that runs parallel to the West MacDonnell Ranges), a gallery (the Albert Namatjira Gallery at Araluen Arts and Cultural Centre) and an electoral subdivision (the huge Namatjira Electorate that surrounds Alice Springs). Tourist brochures invited us to remember Namatjira by visiting his grave in Alice Springs or the Hermannsburg Heritage Precinct. These monuments and sites seemed to contribute to a public performance of remembering

¹ I am grateful to Dr Susan Lowish for the opportunity to participate in this unique subject, which is taught on location in Alice Springs, Darwin and surrounding communities. An earlier draft of this essay was originally submitted as assessment for this subject. Thanks to the staff of many organisations who met with our student group, especially Steven Williamson and the Hermannsburg Potters. Thanks also to Sophia Marinos of Big hArt for her corrections and for providing photographs of artists on-set.

² Hermannsburg/Ntaria is referred to as Hermannsburg for the remainder of this essay.

³ Hyland, 2012b.

this artist in central Australia.

Albert Namatjira has been called ‘Australia’s first popularly known Aboriginal artist’.⁴ A Western Arrernte man who grew up on the Hermannsburg Lutheran Mission, Namatjira was introduced to watercolour landscape painting by the non-Aboriginal artist Rex Battarbee.⁵ In 1944, anthropologist CP Mountford described Namatjira’s work as ‘showing better than those of any European artist I have seen, the brilliant colour of central Australia – the rich reds, the deep violet blues, the golden-yellows – colours that Southerners find difficult to believe until they have seen them with their own eyes’.⁶ Reproductions of his work hung in suburban homes in south-eastern Australia. He was introduced to Queen Elizabeth II and in 1957 he became the first Aboriginal person to be granted citizenship rights.⁷ In 1958, he was convicted of supplying alcohol to a relative and by the time of his death in 1959, he was depicted as a tragic figure and a ‘wanderer between two worlds’.⁸ More recent public exhibitions in 1984, 1992 and 2002 have recast him as a pioneer who achieved genuine cross cultural exchange while navigating a path between a non-Aboriginal art market and maintenance of cultural connection to the land.⁹

This essay takes Judith Inkamala’s words as a starting point and examines memorial sites and projects that I encountered during our field trip. While his artwork is not the primary focus, I do not intend to approach Namatjira merely by reference to his social or political context. Memorials can include artworks, monuments, landscapes and cultural sites and can have visual, spatial and material dimensions. By examining these dimensions, I hope to draw out different ways of engaging with and understanding Namatjira’s art. By paying attention to what is remembered and forgotten in these sites, I seek to identify new possibilities for collective remembering of Namatjira.

Remembering and forgetting

In focusing on ‘remembering and forgetting’, this essay draws on Chris Healy’s book, *Forgetting Aborigines*. Healy describes ‘public memory’ as performed through ‘a shifting, heterogeneous, partial and repetitive assemblage of acts, utterances and artefacts’.¹⁰ These performances take place in various spheres, such as popular culture and art. Healy likens these spheres to ‘contact zones’, where Indigenous and non-Indigenous people participate in and resist the public construction of ‘Aboriginality’.¹¹ Importantly, Healy emphasises that in all these zones there is a constant ‘dynamic tension’ between remembering and forgetting.¹² While not discussed by Healy, public spaces can also be a zone of public memory, constructed through patterns of naming, marking and use.

⁴ Caruana, 2003, p. 110.

⁵ ‘Arrernte’ is the modern spelling with other common variants including ‘Aranda’.

⁶ Mountford, 1944, p. 68.

⁷ Wells and Christie, 2000, pp. 120-21.

⁸ Batty, 1963, p. 11; Wells and Christie, 2000, pp. 126-28.

⁹ See for example Jones, 1986; Megaw and Megaw, 1992; French, 2002.

¹⁰ Healy, 2008, p. 9.

¹¹ Healy, 2008, p. 14.

¹² Healy, 2008, p. 19.

Monuments and memorials

Remembering in public spaces can also be understood within a broader literature on monuments and memorials. At least until the late twentieth century, memorials were rarely constructed to remember Aboriginal people or stories. David Hansen observes that only a few monuments to Aboriginal people were erected prior to 1988.¹³ Similarly, Gavin Malone identifies the first celebratory monuments in Adelaide as dating to the mid-1980s.¹⁴ The paucity of official Aboriginal cultural or historic markers would seem to reflect the broader absence of Aboriginal stories from public history narratives in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Healy argues that this absence maintained the fiction of *terra nullius* in the face of the actual presence of Aboriginal people in Australia.¹⁵ Similarly, Tony Birch observes ‘an almost total absence of an Indigenous past within the public history-making project of Western Victoria’ and argues that Aboriginal cultural and historical sites have been obscured or deliberately destroyed by colonial narratives.¹⁶ While Birch gives Victorian examples, David Brooks describes several examples of the deliberate destruction of important Aboriginal cultural sites in Alice Springs.¹⁷ This history of forgetting gives a context to the remembering of Namatjira that occurs in central Australia.

Since the 1980s, a range of memorial strategies have been used to acknowledge Aboriginal people and stories. Both Malone and Catherine de Lorenzo, looking at public space memorials in Adelaide and Sydney, suggest that while early memorials included generic or ethnographic representations of an Aboriginal past, more recent memorials acknowledge the continuing presence of Aboriginal people and stories.¹⁸ Bronwyn Batten and Paul Batten identify a range of memorial strategies used by Aboriginal communities including figurative monuments, natural materials and ‘counter-monuments’ that respond to pre-existing memorials and collaborative projects. They argue that this reflects the range of ways that communities think about their past and the functions that memorials can serve.¹⁹

It is important to acknowledge that some places may evoke memory, even if this has not been ‘officially’ recognised. This may be all the more apparent for Indigenous communities, where culture and history may be inscribed in the landscape and through relationships, rather than in constructed sites.²⁰

Namatjira and policies of assimilation

How Namatjira is remembered in contemporary Australia is shaped by how he was perceived during his lifetime and shortly after his death. A popular image of Namatjira is as a victim of social and historical circumstance, as John Ramsland and Christopher Mooney neatly summarise:

¹³ Hansen, 2012, pp. 238-39.

¹⁴ Malone, 2007, p. 163.

¹⁵ Healy, 2008, pp. 11-12.

¹⁶ Birch, 2005, p. 187.

¹⁷ Brooks, 1991, pp. 10, 16-17.

¹⁸ Malone, 2007, p. 135; de Lorenzo, 2000, pp. 135-36.

¹⁹ Batten and Batten, 2008, p. 113.

²⁰ Malone, 2007, p. 164.

that he was hounded to death by fame, celebrity, media hype and uncritical praise; that there was the unbreachable gap between two opposing cultures of black and white; that he lacked understanding of the English language and consequently of the dominant Australian culture; that he was addicted to alcohol which destroyed his health, and that his spirit was irretrievably broken.²¹

This sentiment was given visual form by Noel Counihan in his linocut *Albert Namatjira* (1959, Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria). Namatjira is depicted on a cross with his head bowed and face and chest in shadow. At his feet, an urban landscape including a church spire is evoked in linear shorthand. Behind the dark cross, swirling, hatched lines accentuate the dramatic and tragic moment of his death.

During his lifetime, Namatjira was often judged in terms of his success or failure at assimilation.²² This tendency has been comprehensively analysed by Donna Leslie. Leslie describes how media, art critics and the public scrutinised Namatjira's words, behaviour and art in terms of his race and his ability to assimilate with white Australia.²³ For example, while some critics argued Namatjira's work showed keen observation and originality, others criticised it as repetitive, shallow, mere craft or even evidence of the imminent demise of Aboriginal culture.²⁴ Further, Namatjira's conviction for supplying alcohol to a relative was portrayed as a failure to assimilate and a breach of the trust granted to him as a citizen.²⁵

Sylvia Kleinert provides a more detailed analysis of the critical reaction to Namatjira's work. She observes that art critics misinterpreted Namatjira's work through varying western art historical ideas. Critics who were committed to the picturesque landscape tradition portrayed Namatjira as an artist genius who had grasped the correct way of depicting the landscape.²⁶ Other critics saw the landscape tradition as 'conservative, provincial and nationalistic' and interpreted Namatjira's work through the lens of modernism and primitivism.²⁷ They portrayed his work as lacking authenticity and power, as repetitive or as mere amateur craft.²⁸ Both attitudes assumed that Namatjira had abandoned Aranda beliefs, customs and ways of seeing the landscape in order to achieve success as a 'white' artist.

Re-evaluating Namatjira

Since the early 1980s, Namatjira's work has been re-evaluated in ways that attempted to avoid racial hierarchies or assumptions of assimilation. Exhibitions at Araluen

²¹ Ramsland and Mooney, 2006, p. 43.

²² The policy of assimilation was defined in 1961 by all Australian governments to mean 'that all aborigines and part-aborigines [sic] are expected eventually to attain the same standard of living as other Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians'. Commonwealth and State Ministers, 1961: <http://archive.aiatsis.gov.au/referendum/18801.pdf>; accessed 30 November, 2013. A key assumption in this policy was that Aboriginal people needed to relinquish their beliefs and customs in order to achieve advances in rights, privileges and standards of living.

²³ Leslie, 2008, p. 64.

²⁴ Leslie, 2008, pp. 87-89.

²⁵ Leslie, 2008, pp. 82-83, 85-86.

²⁶ Kleinert, 1992, pp. 219-21.

²⁷ Kleinert, 1992, p. 226.

²⁸ Kleinert, 1992, pp. 229-30, 234-36.

Cultural Centre in 1984 and Flinders University Art Gallery in 1992 generated new writing about Namatjira and re-positioned him within a history of Aboriginal art.

In particular, writers began to link Namatjira's practice with his knowledge of country. In 1986, Nadine Amadio acknowledged Namatjira's traditional knowledge of the land and his grounding in an Aboriginal aesthetic tradition.²⁹ She argued that Aboriginal and European traditions 'fused for Albert Namatjira into a powerful and effective force for his art'.³⁰ In the same book, Daniel Thomas observed that by the 1980s 'due partly to our heightened consciousness of Aboriginal land rights ... we now cannot but see Namatjira's paintings as a way of reaffirming his tribal territorial knowledge while simultaneously sharing with outsiders his pride in his land's great beauty'.³¹ In 1992, Sylvia Kleinert argued that Namatjira's watercolours, bark painting and Papunya acrylics all represent 'shifts in aesthetic conventions negotiated by Aboriginal artists in order to protect secret, sacred material ... [and the] considered response of Aborigines to white interest in Aboriginal culture'.³² She argued that Namatjira's use of a figurative style was a means 'to mask the secret, sacred aspects of Aranda culture' to enable cultural continuity.³³ New political and artistic realities created by the land rights movement and central desert acrylic painting forced a new way of engaging with Namatjira's practice.

Some writers have questioned this way of writing about Namatjira's work. For example, John Morton, in a chapter on Western Arrernte religious, economic and kinship systems, argues that it was driven by the desire of non-Aboriginal people 'to see something sacred in the land'.³⁴ JVS Megaw and M Ruth Megaw also question the 'new white orthodoxy' and stress that Namatjira was also ambitious, pragmatic and driven by economic imperatives.³⁵

In 2002, Alison French curated a major Namatjira retrospective at the National Gallery of Australia that brought together some of these themes. The exhibition acknowledged the influence of mission life and included mulga-wood plaques that had been produced for tourists.³⁶ At the same time, Alison French mounted a convincing argument for the influence of Western Arrernte belief systems and knowledge of country on Namatjira's practice.³⁷ The exhibition also acknowledged that Namatjira's 'creative legacy and ... commitment to country' continues through his descendants and the wider community of Arrernte artists.³⁸

The way Namatjira's life and work has been written about has changed over time. This could be thought of as a pattern of remembering and forgetting as different elements of his work have been made visible or obscured. These patterns reflect changes in government policies and in the markets and critical reception for Aboriginal contemporary art. In the next section, I consider how these patterns might

²⁹ Amadio, 1986, p. 2.

³⁰ Amadio, 1986, p. 13.

³¹ Thomas, 1986, p. 26.

³² Kleinert, 1992, p. 230.

³³ Kleinert, 1992, pp. 224-25.

³⁴ Morton, 1992, p. 57.

³⁵ Megaw and Megaw, 1992, pp. 7-8.

³⁶ French, 2002, pp. 4-7.

³⁷ French, 2002, pp. 28-29.

³⁸ French, 2002, p. 33.

be reflected in the memorial landscape of central Australia.

Remembering Namatjira in central Australia

Our field trip took us to several memorials to Namatjira around Alice Springs and Hermannsburg. All these sites were intended to remember Namatjira through their naming, through inscription, display of his artwork or interpretive signage.

The Albert Namatjira Gallery

In 1984, the Araluen Arts and Cultural Centre mounted a retrospective exhibition that was intended to ‘set in motion the process of evaluating Namatjira’s work, now isolated by the distance of time from the emotional debate during his lifetime’.³⁹ The exhibition aimed to present quality works of diverse subject matter to counter views that Namatjira’s work was repetitive and stereotyped.⁴⁰ Following the retrospective, former director Jonah Jones expressed the view that ‘a Namatjira museum should be built in Alice Springs to bring together a permanent collection of Namatjira’s painting and other documentation associated with his life.’⁴¹

While the memorial museum was never built, Araluen remains an important site for remembering Namatjira’s work and legacy. The building incorporates red, orange and ochre-coloured materials and furnishings and is surrounded by ghost and river red gums, Sturt’s Desert Pea and other native plants. Perhaps these allusions to the desert landscape prompted Amadio to write ‘nowhere else in Australia is it possible to see an artist and his environment so potently singing the same song.’⁴²

The Albert Namatjira Gallery within the Araluen Arts and Cultural Centre is one of two galleries displaying works from the permanent collection. This includes the Battarbee collection of watercolours by Namatjira, Battarbee and Arrernte watercolour artists.⁴³ Battarbee had also planned to build a museum showcasing Namatjira and western Arrernte art. While this museum never eventuated, Battarbee and his wife shared their collection informally with the public. For example, following Namatjira’s death they opened their sunroom to the public with a display of Namatjira’s paintings.⁴⁴ This collection emerged from an intention to remember Namatjira and is now a drawcard for visitors to Araluen.

During our site visit to Araluen in mid-2012, part of the Albert Namatjira Gallery was being used for temporary storage during work on an air-conditioning unit. Consequently, the large gallery was restricted to a single long room. In this room, around half the space was devoted to watercolours by Namatjira and other Arrernte watercolour artists. The remaining space was used to display a selection of early Papunya boards. The wall text had been temporarily removed during the air-conditioning works, so there was little contextual information. The curator Steven

³⁹ Jones, 1986, p. 17.

⁴⁰ Jones, 1986, p. 18.

⁴¹ Jones, 1986, p. 19.

⁴² Amadio, 1986, p. 6.

⁴³ Hyland, 2012a.

⁴⁴ The Australian Women’s Weekly, 1960, p. 11.

Williamson explained that this temporary display was intended to demonstrate the connections between these pivotal art movements. He described Namatjira's watercolours as significant because they represent white Australia's earliest engagement with Aboriginal art, forming the foundation for the success of Papunya acrylic paintings.⁴⁵ Williamson also referred to historical connections between watercolour artists and the Papunya movement. For example, in a previous installation, Williamson had placed a Namatjira watercolour beside a large Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri painting to illustrate an early encounter between the artists when both were working at Glen Helen.⁴⁶ This fairly circumstantial connection only seems to further emphasise the gap between Namatjira's realistic landscapes and Tjapaltjarri's practice.

This small, temporary display was consistent with the original purpose of the Albert Namatjira Gallery. However, Williamson explained that the role of the gallery had expanded, so that it was now used to represent the broad range of contemporary Aboriginal art from central Australia. He also drew attention to deteriorating sales of Arrernte watercolours and the difficulty of pushing realistic painting in marketable directions.⁴⁷ This sidelining of Namatjira and the watercolour tradition is not new. In 1992, Megaw and Megaw observed that Hermannsburg watercolours were left out of exhibitions of contemporary Aboriginal art.⁴⁸ Despite the re-evaluation of Namatjira's art and the continuance of watercolour traditions, it fits uneasily into the established canon of Aboriginal high art that retains central desert acrylic painting as a benchmark for authenticity and marketability.

This gradual exclusion of Namatjira's work and Arrernte watercolours from a central place in the Albert Namatjira Gallery could be regarded as a kind of forgetting. The new focus gives greater support to emerging artists and educates the public about the diversity and energy of contemporary central Australian Aboriginal art. However, this means fewer opportunities for direct contact with Namatjira's work or nuanced assessment of his legacy. Despite the desires of Battarbee and Jones, there is no memorial museum to Namatjira in central Australia that remembers Namatjira's work, life and legacy.

⁴⁵ Hyland, 2012a.

⁴⁶ Namatjira asked Tjapaltjarri to carry on the watercolour tradition, which Tjapaltjarri declined: Hyland, 2012a.

⁴⁷ Hyland, 2012a.

⁴⁸ Megaw and Megaw, 1992, p. 12.



Fig. 1. Anna Hyland, *Namatjira Monument*, Hermannsburg, 2012. Photograph. (©Anna Hyland.)

Monuments and memorials

Leaving Alice Springs, our group headed for Hermannsburg. Even from the back of a crowded “troopie”, the landscape was breathtaking in its colour and variety. Not far from Hermannsburg, a brown sign directed us to a historic marker. The Namatjira monument is a simple, square cairn built from local stone (Fig. 1). It was constructed in 1962, just three years after the artist’s death. The memorial was unveiled by Paul Hasluck, then Minister for the Territories, witnessed by a large crowd, including members of Namatjira’s family.⁴⁹ On our visit, the site was empty and windswept. A small plaque read:

Albert Namatjira

1902 to 1959

This is the landscape that inspired the artist

Reminded, I dutifully took photographs of the view.

From the cairn, we had a clear view of Mount Hermannsburg and Mount Sonder, which are repeated subjects in Namatjira’s paintings, for example *Mount Sonder, MacDonnell Ranges* (c. 1945-53, Canberra, National Gallery of Australia). The 2002 NGA exhibition brought together multiple depictions of Mount Hermannsburg, illustrating great diversity in his treatment of light, shadow, colour and choice of viewpoints.⁵⁰ French interprets this as ‘intense and intimate scrutiny...of country.’⁵¹ In contrast, the plaque implies that the landscape is singular and knowable at a glance.

In the context of the wider history of memorials in Australia, this plaque is a relatively unusual early example of a public tribute to an Aboriginal person. However, the inscription points to the landscape, rather than the artist. It seems to encourage visitors to stop as I did, and in artist Wenten Rubuntja’s words, ‘take a photograph and say what pretty country it is’.⁵² This is a ritual more linked to tourism than to remembering. It recalls a way of understanding Namatjira’s images ‘more as souvenirs of a strange and beautiful landscape than as works of art in their own right’.⁵³ This pattern of consumption coincided with the marketing of Central Australia as ‘an authentic and unique Australia’ and an increasing reliance on Aboriginal culture ‘as a spiritual mediator between non-Aborigines and the harsh, dry landscape.’⁵⁴ Perhaps seeking such a mediator, tourists in the 1950s sought out Namatjira in the hope of photographing him or watching him paint.⁵⁵ This monument replicates that experience. Namatjira is forgotten as a person in order to be remembered as a tourist destination.

Ghost gums

⁴⁹ Batty, 1963, p. 10.

⁵⁰ French, 2002, p. 56.

⁵¹ French, 2002, p. 16.

⁵² In French, 2002, p. 29.

⁵³ Thomas, 1986, p. 22.

⁵⁴ Kleinert, 1992, p. 238.

⁵⁵ Ramsland and Mooney, 2006, p. 50.

Other sites are evidence of a more active kind of forgetting. Two ghost gums that grew next to the Larapinta Drive between Alice Springs and Hermannsburg were burnt in an arson attack in January 2013.⁵⁶ The gums had been under consideration for listing on the Northern Territory Heritage register since 2007 because the site was easily accessible, recognisable as a landscape that Namatjira painted and a place where it would be possible to ‘experience a bond with the painter and landscape, thereby acquiring a greater appreciation of his work and personal relationship with western Arrernte country’.⁵⁷ Newspapers reported that the gums were destroyed just weeks before the heritage listing could be confirmed.⁵⁸ Making Aboriginal history visible can make sites vulnerable. Peter Read gives several examples of Aboriginal memorials that have been destroyed with crowbars, dynamite and spray paint, arguing that this deliberate destruction is evidence of the ongoing consequences of racism and conflict.⁵⁹ These incidents demonstrate that ‘forgetting’ an Aboriginal past in public spaces is not passive, but can be enacted through aggressive acts of vandalism.

Namatjira’s grave

In contrast, Namatjira’s grave was restored in order to enhance remembering of the artist. Until the early 1990s, Namatjira’s grave was marked only by a simple plaque reading ‘by the grace of God, I am what I am’.⁶⁰ In 1993, Ngurratjuta/Pmara Ntjarra Aboriginal Corporation sought to renovate the site to reflect ‘a man of such unique character and talent’.⁶¹

Ngurratjuta commissioned three Hermannsburg Potters to restore the grave – Kay Tucker, Namatjira’s granddaughter Elaine Namatjira and Elizabeth Moketarinja. In 1994, the artists produced a square mural that was set into a piece of local sandstone (1994, Alice Springs). Tucker moulded the terracotta relief and Elaine Namatjira and Moketarinja painted the mural in underglazes. The scene is dominated by a sinuous eucalypt that frames the top and left tiles. Several reddish-brown rocks and ridges float on a golden plain dotted with trees and soft-green spinifex. In the distance, a blue mountain range fills the horizon. While the colour palette is reminiscent of Namatjira’s work, the use of opaque underglaze makes the effect brighter and more stylised than his subtle watercolours. This conveys energy, warmth and vibrancy. The mural does not depict an actual site but rather ‘a compilation of three of Albert Namatjira’s dreaming sites in and around the Western MacDonnell Ranges.’⁶² This recognises Namatjira’s connection to country and hints at the possibilities of landscape being both ‘picturesque’ and ‘authentic’. It also indicates the more experimental approach to landscape that the Hermannsburg Potters rapidly embraced. As Margie West observed in 1996, the Hermannsburg Potters took an eclectic

⁵⁶ Skelton, 2013: <http://www.smh.com.au/environment/weather/fire-that-destroyed-sacred-gums-confirmed-as-arson-20130104-2c8wj.html>; accessed 21 June 2013.

⁵⁷ Northern Territory Government, 2013: http://www.ntlis.nt.gov.au/heritageregister/f?p=103:302:1038981621994473::NO::P302_SITE_ID:936; accessed 21 June 2013.

⁵⁸ Skelton, 2013: <http://www.smh.com.au/environment/weather/fire-that-destroyed-sacred-gums-confirmed-as-arson-20130104-2c8wj.html>; accessed 21 June 2013.

⁵⁹ Read, 2008, pp. 31-32.

⁶⁰ Batty, 1963, p. 155.

⁶¹ Alice Springs Cultural Precinct, n.d.

⁶² Alice Springs Cultural Precinct, n.d.

approach to subject matter, from ceremonially important themes, to places chosen for their scenic potential, places painted from memory and even imagined sites.⁶³ Not only does this mural form the centrepiece for a memorial to Namatjira, it indicates a turning point in the practice of the Hermannsburg Potters. Prior to the early 1990s, the Potters had depicted flora and fauna surrounded by dot-dot painting and daubed paint.⁶⁴ This mural is an early application of the Arrernte painting tradition to the Potters' ceramic practice. This stylistic shift more directly references the artists' connection to Albert Namatjira and other Arrernte watercolour artists. The mural acknowledges Namatjira's relationship to country but, as a composite image, also reflects an experimental approach to landscape that is a distinctive feature of the Potters' work.⁶⁵ The Hermannsburg Potters' reworking of Arrernte traditions could be seen as forcing a reengagement with Namatjira's work, acknowledging his continuing legacy and asserting the work's contemporary relevance.

The Hermannsburg Historic Precinct

Namatjira is also remembered at the Hermannsburg Historic Precinct. The Historic Precinct consists of buildings associated with the Lutheran Aboriginal Mission. When the site was listed on the National Heritage List in 2006, the schedule referred specifically to the heritage values that stemmed from the site's association with Namatjira.⁶⁶

We visited the Historic Precinct on a bright winter's day. A cold wind blew through the yard and the sun contrasted harshly with the mission buildings' dark interiors. A small museum contained artefacts and photos illustrating the work of establishing and maintaining the mission: sewing, building, drawing water, sieving gravel, planting vegetables. Aside from the museum, many of the buildings had little interpretive signage. In the maid's quarters, a single rusty chair slumped in a corner. At the 'Boy's Dormitory', an interpretive sign marked the dormitory's renovation in the early 1990s, but offered little information about the practice of separating Aboriginal children from their parents (Fig. 2). Neither was the practice mentioned in the interpretive map, despite it being described in the site's heritage listing.⁶⁷ Many of the buildings were empty and silent, although in the mission church, a small CD player played a recording of the Ntaria Ladies Choir singing in beautiful and haunting harmony.

⁶³ West, 1996, p. 11.

⁶⁴ McLean, 2007, p. 303.

⁶⁵ West, 1996, p. 11.

⁶⁶ Minister for the Environment and Heritage, 2006, p. 4.

⁶⁷ Hermannsburg Historic Precinct, n.d.; Minister for the Environment and Heritage, 2006, p. 4.



Fig. 2. Anna Hyland, *Former boy's dormitory, Hermannsburg Mission, Hermannsburg Historic Precinct*, 2012. Photograph. (©Anna Hyland.)

In these buildings, it was difficult to find evidence of the life and work of Namatjira. 'Strehlow's House', now a cafeteria, contained a small room hung with Namatjira posters for sale while the 1947 film *Namatjira the Painter* played on a dusty corner television.⁶⁸ The former bishop's manse promised an extensive collection of Hermannsburg watercolours. The first room contained basic biographical information about Namatjira and Friedrich Albrecht, the Lutheran pastor at Hermannsburg during Namatjira's painting career. The adjoining rooms were crammed with watercolours by Namatjira and later Arrernte watercolourists, some bright, some badly faded and some with water or insect damage. The final room included contemporary watercolours and ceramic work by the Hermannsburg Potters. The rooms were very full, with multiple frames stacked in some corners. The labels contained little information aside from artists' names and dates.⁶⁹ As a result, it was difficult to see how life at the mission impacted on the work of Namatjira or other watercolour artists. In fact, it felt like there was a lack of stories generally in the precinct, making the overall impression one of emptiness, rust and sadness.

The Heritage Precinct seemed to represent a mix of remembering and forgetting. Through interpretive signage, Namatjira's artistic achievements were separated from the narrative of life on the mission. I was left with little sense of how Namatjira worked with and struggled against the economic, political and social limitations of mission life. This approach might stem from a desire to step away from readings of Namatjira's life in terms of the success or failure of assimilation policies. In addition,

⁶⁸ This house was occupied by Senior Missionary Pastor Carl Strehlow from 1894 to 1922, and Strehlow's successor, Friedrich Albrecht, between 1926 and 1952: Hermannsburg Historic Precinct, n.d.

⁶⁹ Hyland, 2012b.

lack of funding and remoteness undoubtedly limit the extent of the heritage displays.

However, it is clear from the work of local artists that there is no shortage of memory or stories about Namatjira or the mission. For example, Entata's pot *Mission Days* (2005, Brisbane, Queensland Art Gallery) animates the mission buildings with figures of women dressed in patterned clothes, babies, children and dogs. Namatjira appears in Entata's painting *Albert and Rex Painting* (2003, Brisbane, Queensland Art Gallery) at a camp on the Finke River amid a vibrant landscape of blue and red mountains, yellow earth, pink galahs and red and orange spring flowers. These artworks suggest a strategy for animating the Heritage precinct through the memory, stories and art of the Hermannsburg community.

Alternative ways to remember Namatjira

At the Hermannsburg Potters' studio, a photo of some of the artists performing as members of the Ntaria Choir was pinned proudly to the noticeboard. The photo was taken during a performance of the play *Namatjira* on an open-air stage outside the former mission church in Hermannsburg. Coordinated by community cultural development company Big hArt, the play was part of a wider project with many dimensions:

a creative community development process; a touring new Australian theatre work; a touring contemporary watercolour exhibition; a strategy to assist the Namatjira family to be able to take trips to paint 'on country' in important places; teaching watercolour painting to younger generations; a film and documentary process; working with, and recording the [Ntaria] Choir in Hermannsburg; and a contribution to social policy discussion around the vital role of Indigenous Art Centres and remote Indigenous communities.⁷⁰

Through these diverse activities, the Namatjira Project could be regarded as an example of an alternative strategy for remembering. The performance in Hermannsburg in particular seems a powerful setting for re-telling the stories that surround Namatjira, making clear his connection to country and family, and celebrating his ongoing artistic legacy.⁷¹

The play unfolds in a story-telling style, using Aranda, English and German. Trevor Jamieson narrates and plays multiple characters including Namatjira, Namatjira's father, Pastor Albrecht and Rex Battarbee. He dances, sings and tells jokes and is the straight man to co-star Derik Lynch's cross-dressing, comedic characters. Through small vignettes, Jamieson paints a complex picture of Namatjira as a boy raised in the mission, a poor man trying to feed his family, an evangelist, a stockman and eventually a painter. The play emphasises unique cultural exchange that took place between Namatjira and Battarbee. Far from a 'wanderer between worlds', the play depicts Namatjira choices as based on necessity, ambition, courage and friendship.

At several points during the play, the audience watches artists at work. In

⁷⁰ Rankin, 2012, p. x.

⁷¹ A film of the performance of *Namatjira* at Hermannsburg is available online: Tilt Vision, 2013: <http://www.vimeo.com/45425374>; accessed 25 November 2013.

Hermannsburg, the play opened with Jamieson seated on a stool while artist Robert Hannaford sketched his portrait on a large upright canvas. This gesture focused attention on Jamieson and recalled William Dargie's *Portrait of Albert Namatjira* (1956, Brisbane, Queensland Art Gallery). Behind Jamieson, five artists worked on a large black and white backdrop. Jamieson introduced them as members of Namatjira's family, grandson Kevin Namatjira, granddaughters Lenie Namatjira and Betty Wheeler and Wheeler's husband Pastor Marcus Wheeler. At the beginning of the play, the backdrop is chalked with the bare lines of a landscape. Framed by two eucalypts, the view looks down over a plane to a mountain range of long sweeping ridge lines. It is immediately recognisable as the kind of stereotyped 'formula' landscape that Namatjira was accused of painting. However, as the play unfolds, these artists slowly fill the blank spaces with chalk drawings of trees, bushes, flowers, shrubs, rocks and animals (Fig. 3). Just as the play tells many stories beyond the 'great artist' or 'tragic victim' stereotypes, these drawings gently insist on a landscape that is not formulaic but intimately known. As patterns and textures fill the blank sweeping spaces, the land is revealed as vital rather than formulaic.



Fig. 3. Brett Boardman, *Kevin Namatjira in Namatjira*, Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney 2010. Photograph. (©Brett Boardman.)

The involvement of Namatjira's family also reminds us of Namatjira's legacy. At the beginning of the play, Jamieson tells the audience that he has been invited to tell these stories by members of the Namatjira family. In addition to family members working on stage, the play is accompanied by a display of contemporary Arrernte watercolour paintings. This emphasises that the practices that Namatjira pioneered are carried on into the present.

The play in the context of the wider Namatjira Project seems to be an illustration of social memory. The Project brought artists and community members together around diverse activities. These activities demonstrated the many facets of Namatjira's legacy. It also demonstrated how memory could be something more than a static monument, but could be performed through storytelling, songs and art. The performance at Hermannsburg cast a different light on the white-washed heritage buildings – no longer empty, they are enriched by living people, their memories and stories. Through

these diverse activities, the Namatjira Project acknowledged that there is ‘a lot of memory’ by the artists and wider community of Hermannsburg/Ntaria.

Conclusion

Despite the intentions of people like Rex Battarbee and Jonah Jones, there is no ‘Namatjira’ museum in central Australia. However, there are diverse memorials to Namatjira’s art, life and the landscape that he painted. Each of these memorials ‘remembers’ and ‘forgets’ different elements of Namatjira’s life. This pattern of remembering and forgetting is subject to change, as interpretive signs are removed or altered, or as the purpose of institutions shifts or through deliberate destruction.

Healy ends *Forgetting Aborigines* by encouraging the reader to “forget Aborigines”. Healy argues that the term “‘Aborigine’ is so general, so tied to hierarchies of race and history, so fundamentally concerned with the primitive other, so much a term tethered to dispossession and repressive governance that it seems at a deep level that it must be forgotten”.⁷² The history of remembering Namatjira seems to illustrate how a person’s biography can be dissolved, in the public imagination, into the broader category of “Aborigine”. In particular, thinking about Namatjira as an illustration of assimilation policies, has restricted the ways that he has been remembered.

Healy suggests an alternative strategy of remembering Aboriginal people as “friends, neighbours and strangers who live near and far; citizens marked by difference and sameness; people of varying predicaments, capacities and desires; people who, like all of us, live with the possibilities and constraints of being in history.”⁷³ All the memorials that we visited on our field trip told incomplete stories about Namatjira’s life and work. There is no one contemporary commemorative space in central Australia that brings together aspects of the artist’s life, work and relationship to country in a way that both acknowledges the trauma of the past and celebrates his achievements and continuing legacy. Perhaps it is unrealistic to expect that a gallery, a monument or a heritage precinct could tell all these stories.

However, as the Hermannsburg Potters’ work and the Namatjira Project illustrate, the Hermannsburg community remembers. Namatjira is more than a theatre project – it has drawn together the threads of this memory and the vital and creative practices of the contemporary Hermannsburg community. By supporting the Hermannsburg community, it encouraged non-Indigenous Australians to remember a shared past. Perhaps, more than museums or memorials, it is by coming together around stories, art and songs that we can truly remember Namatjira.

⁷² Healy, 2008, p. 210.

⁷³ Big hArt, 2013: <http://www.namatjira.bighart.org/>; accessed 25 June, 2013.

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Illustrations

Fig. 1. Anna Hyland, *Namatjira Monument*, Hermannsburg, 2012. Photograph. (©Anna Hyland.)

Fig. 2. Anna Hyland, *Former boy's dormitory, Hermannsburg Mission*, Hermannsburg Historic Precinct, 2012. Photograph. (©Anna Hyland.)

Fig. 3. Brett Boardman, *Kevin Namatjira in Namatjira*, *Belvoir Street Theatre*, Sydney 2010. Photograph. (©Brett Boardman.)