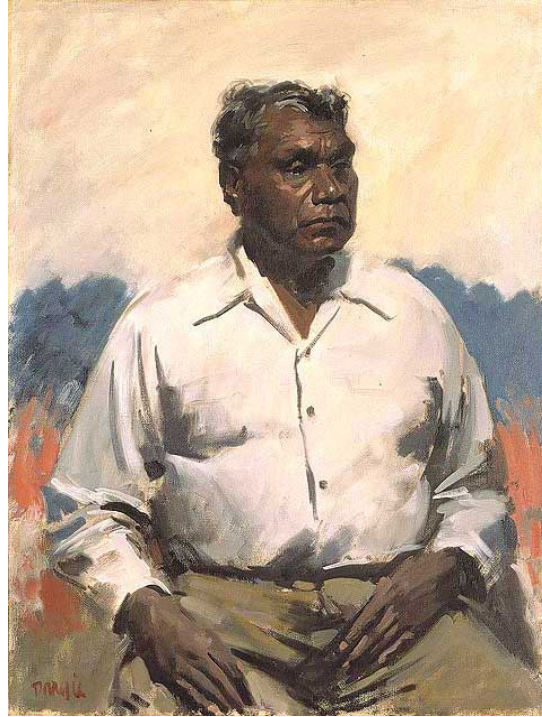


# Albert (Elea) Namatjira

1902 – 1959



**Portrait by William Dargie 1956**

Albert Namatjira, born Elea Namatjira, was a full-blooded member of the Western Aranda (Arunta) tribe and one of Australia's great artists. His birth was registered at the Hermannsburg Lutheran Mission on July 28, 1902. His style of watercolour painting led to the development of what came to be known as the Hermannsburg School of Aboriginal art. While his work is obviously the product of his life and experiences, his paintings are not in the highly symbolic style of traditional Aboriginal art, but rather richly detailed depictions of the landscape. They normally show rugged geological features, stately old white gum trees surrounded by twisted scrub and native fauna (and occasionally fauna). While his colours are the earthy ochres used by his ancestors his style reflects the aesthetics of western art.

Little is known of Albert's early life. It is known that he attended the School for Aborigines at the Hermannsburg Lutheran Mission which was supervised at that time by the Superintendent Rev. Carl Strehlow, who was well respected by the Aranda, for his

thorough command of the Arunda language and his great interest in anthropology, especially the culture of the Aranda. Under Strehlow's direction the Aranda people were encouraged to use their own language while being taught the basics of their own language



**Hermansgeurgh Mission: photograph, 1933**

For part of his early life, Albert lived in the boy's dormitory at the Mission. He regularly attended the Mission Church, and is remembered as "a quiet youth who was a quick learner, intelligent, self-assured and thoughtful". The children in the dormitory were provided with rations from the Mission meat house.

The Mission aimed at self-sufficiency by operating a cattle-run. Rations were provided for "the old, the infirm, the children and those who were willing to work". The aborigines at the Mission were also given the opportunity to learn various trades, and Albert was "quick to learn the skills of carpentry, saddlery, leatherwork and blacksmithing, and was considered a very capable shearer and stockman."

At various times Albert left the Mission to go walkabout with his relatives and other members of his tribe, and at the age of thirteen disappeared on one of these walkabouts for six months. During this time the elders of the Aranda tribe took Albert to distant ceremonial grounds for initiation into manhood. Here he was taught the strict, timeless, unwritten laws of the tribe. In later life he was not drawn into the

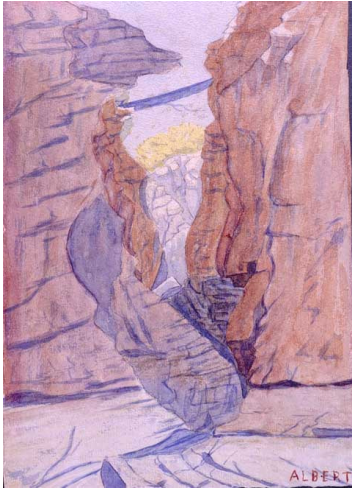
secret and sacred ceremonies, however he did remain conscious of the basic principle on which all Aboriginal law and social structure was built - the principle of "sharing".



**Photograph of Albert Namatjira and his wife Rubina.**

In 1920, when he was about 18 years old, Albert eloped with Ilkalita. Several years later Ilkalita was baptised and given the name Rubina and their marriage was formally blessed. Their three children, two boys and a girl were also baptised into the Christian faith at this time, and given the names Enos, Oscar and Maisie. They were the first of ten children of Albert and Rubina - 5 boys and 5 girls.

Albert proved to be very capable of producing poker-work mulga wood plaques and began inscribing them with Biblical texts. He also decorated coat hangers, boomerangs and woomera. **In 1932** he received his first art commission from Constable W. Mackinnon. It was for a dozen pokerwork mulga wood plaques, for which Albert received five shillings for each. In 1939 Watercolour works produced while on walkabout were displayed in an exhibition staged in the State Art Gallery.



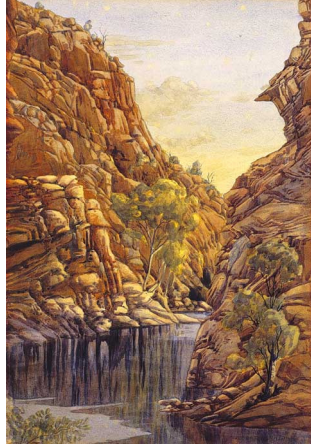
*Adjantz Waterhole*



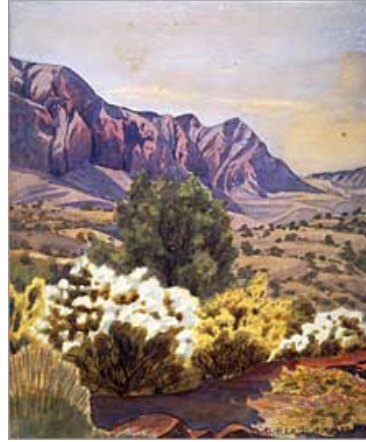
*Central Australian Landscap*

Namatjira's artworks are colourful and varied depictions of the Australian landscape. One of his first landscapes from 1936, *Central Australian Landscape*, shows a land of rolling green hills. Another early work, *Adjantz Waterhole* (1937), shows a close up view of a small waterhole reflecting the towering cliffs which surround it. In *Red Bluff* (1938). The landscape becomes one of contrasting colours - red hills and green trees - an approach often used by Western painters.

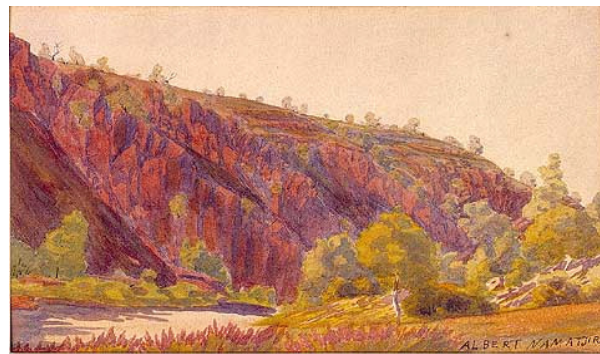
*Central Australian Gorge* (1940) shows detailed rendering of rocks and reflections in water while in *Flowering Shrubs* the artist contrasts the blossoming flowers in the foreground with the desert between them and the barren cliffs in the background. Namatjira's love of trees was often described so that his paintings of trees were more portraits than landscapes, which is shown in the portrait of the often depicted ghost gum in *Ghost Gum Glen Helen* (c.1945-49). His skills at colouring trees can be seen clearly in this portrait and Namatjira was fully aware of his own talent. When describing another landscape painter Namatjira said to William Dargie. "*He does not know how to make the side of a tree which is in the light look the same colour as the side of the tree in shadow...I know how to do better.*"



*Central Australian Gorge*



*Flowering Shrubs*



**Red Bluff**

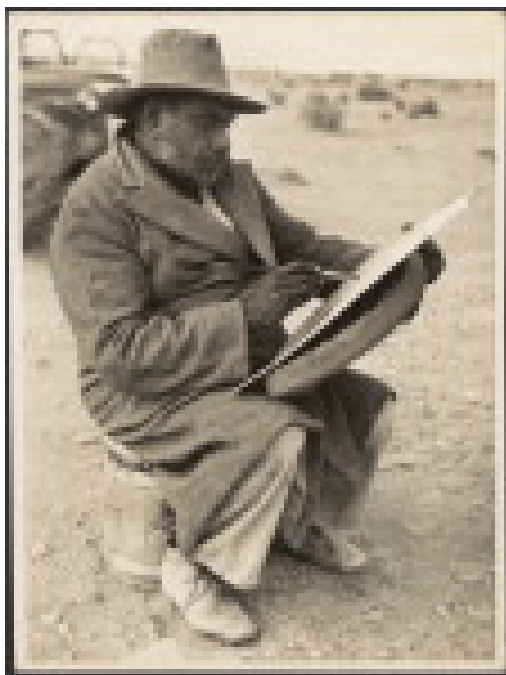


**Ghost Gum St. Helen**

There were to be more successful exhibitions - in Melbourne, Sydney, Perth and Adelaide. His work became increasingly popular and by 1945 Namatjira had enough money to to build a small cottage for his family a few kilometres from the Hermansburg Lutheran Mission.



**Namatjira's house, Hermansburg**



**Namatjira at work**

Albert continued with his painting, and now regularly took his sons, Enos and Oscar with him on his painting walkabouts. However, there was a "down" side to this success. During 1947, Albert received his first income tax assessment. He found this confusing and incomprehensible. It was the first of many anomalies regarding the rights of Aborigines that Albert had to confront. As a full-blooded Aborigine, Albert was a ward of the State and not a citizen of the Commonwealth and therefore was not subject to the laws that applied to white Australians. However, he was still expected to pay income tax.

More was to follow. Due to his increasing wealth, Namatjira found himself the subject of "humberging", a ritualised form of begging. According to aboriginal custom all members of the tribe are expected to share everything they own, and as Namatjira's income grew, so did his extended family. At one time he was single-handedly providing for over six hundred people. In 1951 he informed those in charge at the Hermannsburg Lutheran Mission that he intended to build a new and larger home in Alice Springs. He was told that this was not allowed, and his application to buy a building block was not granted. The law, he was told, decreed that "Aborigines were prohibited from remaining within the town boundaries after dark."

To ease the burden on his dwindling resources, Namatjira sought to lease a cattle station to benefit his extended family. Originally granted, the lease was subsequently rejected because the land was part of a returned servicemen's ballot, and also because he had no ancestral claim on the property. He then tried again to build a house close to Alice Springs, but was cheated in his land dealings. The land he was sold was on a flood plain and unsuitable for building. The Minister for Territories, Paul Hasluck, offered him free land in a reserve on the outskirts of Alice Springs, but Albert rejected this and he, his wife and children took up residence in a squalid shanty at Morris Soak -- a dry creek bed some distance from Alice Springs. Despite the fact that he was by this time regarded as one of Australia's greatest artists he was living in abject poverty. His plight became a media *cause célèbre* resulting in a wave of public outrage.

Namatjira's work continued to become increasingly popular and sought after. Queen Elisabeth became one of his more notable admirers. He was awarded the Queen's

Coronation medal in 1953 and met her in Canberra in 1954 when she presented him with his medal. Not only was he receiving critical acclaim for his own work – a portrait of him by William Dargie won the Archibald Prize in 1956.

However, Namatjira remained a man of the Outback.

Albert and his wife Rubina were eventually awarded full Australian Citizenship in 1957. He could now vote, drink in hotels, take bottled beer home, build a house anywhere he wanted, and demand the basic wage if he ever worked for an employer. But the anomaly existed that his children were still considered wards of the State and therefore if he wanted to build a house in Alice Springs, his children could not legally stay with him overnight.

When an Aboriginal woman Fay Iowa was killed at Morris Soak in 1958 Namatjira was held responsible by the Stipendiary Magistrate for bringing alcohol into the camp and was reprimanded at the coronial inquest. It was against the law for an Australian citizen to supply alcohol to a native. Albert was charged with leaving a bottle of rum in a place i.e. on a car seat, where a native, a clan brother and fellow Hermannsburg artist Henoah Raberaba, could have access to it. Namatjira was sentenced to six months in prison for supplying an Aboriginal with liquor. After a public uproar the Minister for Territories, Paul Hasluck intervened and the sentence was served at Papunya Native Reserve. The sentence was later reduced to three months imprisonment at the Papunya Native Reserve on light duties. His doctor and others at the Reserve became greatly concerned about his state of health and he was finally granted full remission for good behaviour and his sentence shortened to two months.

Namatjira was released from the Papunya Native Reserve on May 19, 1959, but appeared to have lost his will to live. He stopped painting and was in what appeared to be a state of severe depression. He accepted the offer of a small cottage at Papunya, but his condition deteriorated rapidly.

On August 8<sup>th</sup>, 1959 Albert Namatjira was admitted to the Alice Springs Hospital where he suffered a heart attack and with the onset of pneumonia it was to be only a matter



of hours before he died. Only two years after he had been granted citizenship he was buried in the Alice Springs Cemetery.

Soon after his death a major sale of his works was held in Sydney at Anthony Hordern & Sons Fine Art Galleries. The catalogue for the '*SALE OF ALBERT NAMATJIRA PICTURES*' lists seventy-nine works of which eleven are listed as painted by members of the 'Namatjira Family', and the remaining sixty-eight as produced by Albert Namatjira. His works were now commanding considerably high prices, especially for Australian watercolours, and the prices in this sale ranged from twenty-five to two hundred and twenty guineas. Since his death, his watercolour works have appeared in numerous sale exhibitions throughout Australia, and regularly appear in the major Art Auction House catalogues

At the time of his death Albert (Elea) Namatjira had painted a total of around two thousand paintings and two short biographical films had been made about him. However his unique style of painting was denounced soon after his death by many indigenous art "puritans" as being a product of his assimilation into western culture, rather than his own connection to his subject matter or his natural style. This view, although still held by some critics has been largely abandoned and Albert Namatjira is hailed as one of the greatest Australian artists of all time and a pioneer for Aboriginal rights.

.Namatjira's work is on public display in some of Australia's major art galleries, with some noteworthy exceptions. The Art Gallery of NSW rejected Namatjira's work. In the words of Hal Missingham, the then Director of the gallery: "We'll consider his work when it comes up to scratch".

However, in 1991 a major exhibition 'The Heritage of Namatjira' was organized and toured Australia. It commenced at Tandanya, the National Aboriginal Cultural Institute, South Australia where it was on show from November 10, 1991 to January 31, 1992. It moved on to eleven venues, including the National Gallery of Victoria in March 1993 and the Art Gallery of Western Australia in August 1993.



**Display during "Tandanya" - National Aboriginal Cultural Institute, Adelaide**

A supplementary exhibition with almost the same name was also organized by the Flinders University Art Museum to complement the Tandanya exhibition. This supplementary exhibition *'The Heritage of Namatjira at Flinders'* was on show at the Flinders University Art Museum from November 10 to December 18, 1991, and was drawn entirely from works of the "Hermannsburg School".



*Restored manse, Hermannsburg Historical Precinct.*

In 1992, to mark the tenth anniversary celebrations of Ntaria (Hermannsburg Lutheran Mission) being relinquished by the Lutherans, the Ntaria Council opened a gallery in the restored manse at the heart of the old compound. It housed twenty-five watercolours when opened, including works by Albert Namatjira, his sons, Oscar and Ewald and a work by Reuben Pareroutja.

For a time Namatjira's name drifted into obscurity, his achievements largely eclipsed by the 'dot painting' style developed at Papunya in the 1970s. Recent re-evaluations recognize his influence on Aboriginal artists in Central Australia and elsewhere. In 1994 members of the Hermannsburg Potters, led by his grand-daughter Elaine, acknowledged Namatjira's legacy by producing a terracotta mural for the headstone of his grave. The work is a landscape combining three sites in the Macdonnell Ranges which were the subjects of his paintings.



**Headstone on Namatjira's grave**

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