The Power of Omission

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Alison French
SEEING THE CENTRE:
THE ART OF ALBERT NAMATJIRA 1902–1959
National Gallery of Australia, $34.95pb, 175pp, 0 642 54136 1

Wenten Rubuntja (with Jenny Green)
THE TOWN GREW UP DANCING:
THE LIFE AND ART OF WENTEN RUBUNTJA
Jukurrpa Books, $59.95hb, 207pp, 1 864 650 42 7

LATE LAST YEAR at the National Gallery of Australia was a heady time. On the ground floor, singularly and magnificently, in its own sacred, light-filled space, Jackson Pollock’s Blue Poles was beating like the heart of art. Nearby was a chorus of Big Americans, as the show was called: Lichtenstein, Frankenthaler, Rauschenberg and others, whose maximal boldness of colour and gesture proclaimed an undisputed mastery of twentieth-century aesthetics. Upstairs, in an entirely different mood, was the exhibition I had come especially to see: the work of Albert Namatjira, who painted delicate landscapes in the tradition of representational watercolours. I knew them only from reproductions: those ubiquitous images that once signified this country, but which many have relegated to the attic of their affections or, more ruthlessly, to the suburban nature strip for the quarterly clean-up. Saying that I love the work of Albert Namatjira usually draws disbelieving smiles.

Between these two cultural spaces — the first an art of its time, the second a timeless art — it was advisable to recover from the visual and intellectual demands of the American giants, and to compose oneself for the quietude of Namatjira’s vision. The American artists’ expressions of supremacy, their expansiveness, their easy mockery of the niceties of painterly traditions, still dominated my imagination when I arrived at the Namatjira exhibition, titled Seeing the Centre. At a quick glance, I took in nothing but a roomful of vaguely familiar, embarrassingly old-fashioned ‘pictures’ of eucalypts and gorges, mountains and sky. Common reactions to Namatjira’s work — that it was simplistic, formulaic, chocolate-boxy — hovered in my mind.

From the late 1930s until his death in 1959, Namatjira’s shows were commercial successes. Many of those who could not buy an original settled for the reproductions. Prints of Namatjira’s work hung in lounge rooms, classrooms and offices. His Central Australian landscapes on coasters, trays, tins and tea towels graced the Australian home of the 1950s and 1960s. In the mainstream of the art world, this broad appeal was certain death. It became difficult to distinguish his art from its offshoots: the iconic status, the cliché and the domestic-touristic merchandise it engendered.

Alison French, the author of the exhibition catalogue, makes the point that ‘the tactile properties of Namatjira’s watercolour technique are hard to replicate, even in reproductions of the finest quality, let alone on a biscuit tin’. Regarding Namatjira’s reputation as an artist, French recounts several instances of prejudicial misconception.

In 1954 the National Gallery of Victoria rejected three of Namatjira’s submissions for acquisition. In 1968, when the critic and curator Daniel Thomas reviewed Alan McCulloch’s Encyclopaedia of Australian Art, he referred to Namatjira as a lesser artist, worth mentioning only because he was so extraordinarily popular. French explains that the critical reception of Namatjira’s work has been compromised by the fact that only a fraction of his estimated output of over 2000 paintings has ever been exhibited (most are in private collections). Furthermore, while each of our major galleries now owns a small number of Namatjira’s watercolours, these can never be displayed for long because they will fade from too much exposure to light.

Ten years after he dismissed Namatjira’s work, Thomas revised his opinion while visiting the Northern Territory and seeing one of the ghost-gum paintings. It seems that face to face with an original — in a situation that French terms ‘full visual engagement’ — something happens. Preconceptions fall away. She is quite right in suggesting that many of Namatjira’s ghost gums and river gums are much more than stereotypical elements of landscape art: they are portraits. Viewers respond to their age, their afflictions, their vitality, their rootedness, even their humour. These trees are like spirit guides, inviting us to enter the landscapes, to consider the conditions in which a tree, or any other being, grows up.

French argues that ‘the source of Namatjira’s art lies not in aesthetic imperatives that follow the particular dictates of...
fashionable trends in painting, but in a visual and spatial response to varied locations within country known intimately to him’. She suggests that ‘by comparing Namatjira’s different approaches to the same subject over time, it is possible to view his art as a journey through country’. In order to reassess Namatjira’s work, we are being encouraged to understand it in the context of indigenous Australian culture.

Curiously, despite Namatjira’s frequent representation of harsh terrain and awesome topographical formations — cliffs, chasms, monoliths — his works are friendly. Friendliness, I know, is hardly artspeak. Is there a better term? It has been said that the magic of Namatjira’s paintings — their luminosity, their religiosity, their integrity — depends on his deep understanding both of colour and of the effect of light on solid forms. By controlling the washes and the build-up of paint — and, according to French, ‘knowing how little was enough’ — Namatjira discovered ‘the power of omission’. Navigating visually between light and shade, between close-ups and the panoramic sweep, the viewer discerns a conjunction that defines Namatjira’s work: French calls it ‘site’ and ‘sight’. It is the rare talent for intimacy within generalisation.

The book is full of conjunctions and anecdotes: about his teacher and friend Rex Battarbee, about Hermannsburg, about alcohol, arrest and humiliation, about Albert’s singing voice, which was admired by the leader of the Vienna Boys’ Choir, stranded in Australia during the war. Perhaps the most important link created by Namatjira is that between his own pioneering status and the next generation of Aboriginal artists.

Wenten Rubuntja was born in the mid-1920s, at Burt Creek, north of Alice Springs. As a child, he used to take home the old paint tubes that Namatjira, his father’s cousin, had thrown away. He recalls: ‘I went and hid myself behind a rock to paint. I was remembering how that old man was painting — his handwork, his mixing and his ideas.’ Now, as an artist who paints in two strong styles — representational watercolours and Western Desert acrylics — and as a political activist for Aboriginal land rights, with a pivotal role in community relations, Rubuntja believes: ‘I’ve got to show myself for world history. I can’t die for nothing. I’ve got to leave something back. We’ve got to follow that old man’s tracks, Namatjira.’

The Town Grew up Dancing is primarily an oral history, based on twenty-five years of taped interviews and conversations, mostly between Wenten and the book’s co-author, Jenny Green. The narration is multilingual: in Rubuntja’s first language, Arrernte, as well as Aboriginal English and English. A rich textual synthesis results from maps, photographs and colour reproductions of his paintings, and, perhaps most poetically, from Rubuntja’s love affair with language and his awareness of the continuation of the past within the present — the effects of massacres, land grabs, religion, war or knowing there was once an important soakage and a group of mallee trees where there’s now a supermarket. In Wenten Rubuntja’s own words, ‘This book is really good — people have got to read it and say, “This is a really good story”.’