

***The Ntaria [Hermannsburg] Suite* [essay accompanying Speaking in colour exhibition, Newcastle Region Art Gallery, 19 March – 29 May 2011 ©Una Rey]**

The Newcastle Region Art Gallery's *Ntaria Suite* of twenty-seven watercolours by eleven artists was acquired in 2010. Painted between 1946 and 1953, the works offer a glimpse of the cherished country of the Western Arrernte<sup>1</sup> people, with a familiarity recognisable via the heritage of Albert Namatjira (1902-1959). As landscape images the paintings are content-rich, a form of *genius loci*, or portraits of place. Individually the paintings reveal rich variations in palette and stylistic modes of expression, while collectively the *Ntaria Suite* underscores the pictorial strengths and exceptional history of the Hermannsburg artists.

Due to the fugitive nature of the watercolour medium, it is rare to see mid-20<sup>th</sup> century works with the freshness and saturation of colour found in these paintings. Averaging 25 x 35 cm, the well-preserved works on paper were purchased from the estate of linguist and anthropologist Theodor George Henry Strehlow (1908-1978), son of Pastor Carl Strehlow. Born at Hermannsburg (now known as Ntaria), the site of the Lutheran mission established in 1877 on the Finke River in the James Range, TGH Strehlow grew up alongside the first wave of watercolourists, speaking the Western Arrernte language. Given his unique access to and appreciation of Central Australian Aboriginal culture, he amassed a considerable collection of artefacts and archival material over his lifetime.<sup>2</sup>

The *Ntaria Suite* constitutes a highly significant component of TGH Strehlow's extensive but lesser known collection of watercolour paintings which was dispersed after his death. These paintings may have been collected individually or in groups as they were produced in Hermannsburg or Alice Springs, or they may have been purchased from exhibitions or show-rooms interstate. Now preserved as a group and exhibited as a 'suite', they reflect Strehlow's interests and personal taste and provide a rare insight into this important aspect of Australia's national cross-cultural heritage.<sup>3</sup>

From 1932 Melbourne artist Rex Battarbee (1893-1973) began visiting Hermannsburg and painting from the landscape. In 1936 he and Albert Namatjira initiated an exchange that would have far-reaching consequences for the development of a Central Australian modernism and Australian landscape painting in general. This exchange involved Battarbee's mentoring in watercolour techniques in return for Namatjira's knowledge of, and access to, Western Arrernte country. In turn, other members of the Ntaria community were to adopt these skills. Namatjira's first solo exhibitions in Melbourne in 1938, and Adelaide in 1939 were both outstanding commercial successes and compelled his contemporaries to take up painting. While Namatjira is unequivocally acknowledged as the pioneer of The Hermannsburg School, the artists represented in the *Ntaria Suite* produced works that equalled and informed Namatjira's own artistic vision.<sup>4</sup> His grand-daughter Jillian Namatjira recalls watching the artists in the 1940s:

*I'd see the painters there [Hermannsburg] with their pencils and boards. I'd say 'What's this that they're doing?' They used to draw the mountains. I didn't know what they were doing, going all over the place and climbing the hills.*<sup>5</sup>

Embedded with secular and sacred knowledge, the distinct landforms of Western Arrernte country contain potent subject matter. Gorges, gaps and chasms are cut through rocky escarpments by ancient waterways. Eucalypt, desert oak, native grasses and shrubs frame panoramic views and lead the eye across country toward distant ranges. With skilled agency the artists use picturesque conventions to highlight important cultural sites in the landscape, just as they may disguise other sacred aspects within the same picture. A solid understanding of light, shade, colour, rhythm and scale are employed to capture the pictorial drama and narrative features of country.

Subjects range across the West MacDonnell Ranges, including Mt Sonder, Standley Chasm and Ormiston Gorge as well as the James Range and Palm Valley. Some sites are unequivocal, such as Standley Chasm; others are more generic or ambiguous, bearing in mind the different vantage points from which the works may have been made. Newcastle Region Art Gallery has worked with artists at *Ngurratjuta Iltja Ntjarra* 'Many Hands' Art Centre<sup>6</sup> to suggest probable locations for some untitled works, while eleven of the works retain original titles on verso.

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The *Ntaria Suite* features the work of brothers from three notable painting families: The Namatjiras, Pareroultjas and Raberabas. All of Namatjira's sons painted to varying degrees. Seventh born, **Ewald Namatjira's** *Untitled* 1949 exemplifies the use of contrasting colour to create sharp geometric patterns in rocky landforms. Adroit use of the raw paper illustrates a sweeping sandy riverbed. Elder brother **Oscar Namatjira's** single work, *James Range, Hermannsburg* 1948 shares his calligraphic fluency, circular branches and outcrops bisecting the picture plane in a series of dynamic arcs.

**Otto Pareroultja's** *Untitled [Standley Chasm]* 1946 invites the viewer into the vertical foreground space of the picture. Delicate brushwork highlights semi-abstract features in weathered rock surfaces and cliff-top vegetation, characteristic of Pareroultja's highly embellished landscapes and possibly alluding to totemic iconography or *tjurunga* designs.<sup>7</sup> Pencil outlines are clearly visible in many works, such as **Edwin Pareroultja's** *Untitled* 1946 where two 'kissing trees' are set against receding canyons, subtle gradations in colour implying atmospheric space between summits.

Contradicting the stereotype of a red centre, **Henoch Raberaba's** five works illustrate seasonal variation. In *Untitled [On the way to Hermannsburg]* 1946 grassy vistas drenched in soft greens and yellows suggest new growth after rain. **Herbert Raberaba** activates the middle-ground of *Untitled* 1950, deep maroon cloud-shadow evoking changes in weather and times of day, something also evident in **Richard Moketarinja's** near-nocturne, *Ormiston from the South* 1950 which glows with sunset light. His other three works are high-keyed geographic descriptions of escarpments, rocky profiles rich with anthropomorphic possibilities. Close observation reveals unmistakable human profiles, common to several works in the suite and in line with a spirituality based on a sentient, animated country.

In **Cordula Ebatarinja's** *Untitled* 1953 the three ghost-gums may have held special significance, representing ancestral figures or a family group. The only woman represented in the suite, Ebatarinja was unique in that she painted families at recreation within the landscape. A 1957 *Woman's Day* article referred to her as "the female Namatjira", but other Arrernte women also produced watercolours occasionally.<sup>8</sup> She and her husband **Walter Ebatarinja** played a significant part in the painting history of Hermannsburg and were close relatives of Namatjira. **Walter's** *Untitled [Namatjira Drive]* 1946 captures the crystalline blues of Central Australian distance. **Adolf Inkamala** shares a similar ultramarine palette in *Winembarkura and Anmatarkna* 1949, likely to be the distinctive landmark Winparku west of Haasts Bluff where Inkamala ran a commercial cattle herd after the war.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Arrernte' is used in this text as a common spelling for closely related language groups in Central Australia. 'Aranda' (also Arunta and Arunda) are older variants. 'Arrarnta' is in current usage by people whose country is located to the west of Alice Springs (including Hermannsburg). See relevant dictionaries published by IAD Press Alice Springs, [www.iad.edu.au](http://www.iad.edu.au).

<sup>2</sup> While his privileged knowledge and fluency in central Australian Indigenous languages made these acquisitions viable, Strehlow's latter years were marked by controversy associated with the release of restricted (sacred/secret) material from his collection into the public

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domain. His archives which include film, song recordings and photographs were purchased by the Northern Territory Government and are now held by the Strehlow Research Centre in Alice Springs where they form an important resource for historic and cultural study.

<sup>3</sup> Alison French, email correspondence with the author January 2011.

<sup>4</sup> French, Alison *Seeing the centre: the art of Albert Namatjira 1902-1959* National Gallery of Australia 2002 p.57

<sup>5</sup> Interview in Green, Jenny *Pmere: country in mind, Arrernte landscape painters*, Tangentyere Land Council, Alice Springs, 1988 pp. 6-8 cited in French, Alison *Seeing the Centre* p.29

<sup>6</sup> Descendants of the artists continue the water-colour tradition through *Ngurratjuta Iltja Ntjarra* in Alice Springs and ceramics and painting through Hermannsburg Potters at Ntaria.

<sup>7</sup> Hardy, Jane, J.V.S Megaw; M. Ruth Megaw (eds) *The Heritage of Namatjira: the watercolourists of Central Australia* William Heinemann Australia 1992, p.167

<sup>8</sup> Ibid; p.168

<sup>9</sup> Ibid; p.186