

Obituary – Kumantjai L Namatjira*

It is with great sadness that we share the passing of Kumantjai L Namatjira Lankin. Born in 1951 in the lovely country of Raggatt's Well near Glen Helen in the West MacDonnell Ranges, the fifth of twelve children of Oscar Namatjira, granddaughter of Albert and Rubina Namatjira. Kumantjai was the beloved mother of Theo, Melissa, Trevor and Kumantjai G Namatjira. Grandmother and great grandmother to many and matriarch of the Namatjira family. Kumantjai was a leading light for the Hermannsburg Watercolour Movement, yet this was just the beginning of her lifelong contribution to her family, her community and her nation.

Kumantjai grew up amongst her Western Aranda community in Ntaria (Hermannsburg), 107 kilometers west of Alice Springs. As a little girl she learned to paint from her enigmatic grandfather Albert, through the 1950s, when he was at the height of his fame and creative powers. Sitting with him under a tree, watching over his shoulder, inspired by those translucent colours as they flowed like magic across the white parchment. Until suddenly, when she was eight he was gone, this great man who held his family together, providing for hundreds of them through the sales of his art, gone before his time, into the blue.

Kumantjai grew to be a young woman, in the shadows of Albert's passing. Watching other Hermannsburg watercolour artists at work, her uncles, especially her father Oscar, son of Albert, painting, continuing this revolutionary artistic tradition. And then, like her father and grandfather before her, she committed herself to the brush, becoming a collectable artist and a tireless champion for her family, their art tradition and community it sustained.

And now she has left us. Like so many Traditional Owners across this continent, she has gone without being given the honour she so deserves for her tenacious efforts to strengthen and embolden her people culturally, as well as generously sharing her art with others beyond her Western Aranda country. Artist, entrepreneur, teacher, provider, cultural ambassador, gone.

It is a reflection on our whole country that this great women, died with so much less recognition than she deserved. No offer of a State funeral for this cultural leader. No Traditional Owner Hall of Fame. No monument in Canberra alongside others who have fallen fighting for their country. Instead she died in near poverty - despite her prolific output and its art collector's value – died while supporting her family against the ravages of brutal policy neglect. Gone, worn down by the enormous task she carried on her shoulders all those years to help keep the Namatjira painting traditions alive, keep the debilitating forces of poverty at bay, and to keep fighting for the rightful return of the copyright in her Grandfather Albert's

work. All this on her shoulders, while dealing with loss after loss from her children, her family and her community passing too soon. All this, while patiently waiting for Australia (which she loved) to understand the significance of the Namatjira tradition and to recognize the way we first heralded it, then exploited it, then trashed his name by wrongfully imprisoning him, then took his copyright, and exploited it further.

The word 'shame' rarely rings as true as it does at this moment, right now in 2017. Rings out like a bell tolling for the lack of National acknowledgement and support this woman of courage, this warrior, this indomitable spirit, who passed away while the ink was still wet on the legal documents that gave the Namatjira family back their copyright. Signed just days before she passed on with a sigh, her work complete. What have we done Australia? Why do we keep doing this? And let's refrain from the self-satisfied contemporary tut-tutting about things 'done in the past'. Let us instead have ears and eyes for our own responsibility and individual contrition for our own negligence now, this year, in our country, on our watch.

Yet there is also cause for joy and celebration beyond the grief, because Kumantjai was so instrumental in achieving this iconic copyright win for her people. One of the great motivating passions of her life was the respect that copyright ownership can and should bestow. Respect for her relatives, her children and grandchildren and those artists from the Namatjira tradition, who painted alongside her on country, or at her Iltja Ntjarra workshop, her brother Kevin, her friend Gloria and the many children she taught.

Kumantjai Namatjira could laugh, she could party up, she could fix you with her quick stare, clocking who you were, what sort of heart you had. She could choose to be silent or ebullient or cheeky and sometimes treat you like her servant. She didn't miss a trick, but she never failed to acknowledge work and favours done or promises delivered.

Even when tired and less agile Kumantjai would shuffle into meetings with the soft footfall of someone whose journey had been long. She would sit beside you and whisper her thoughts, her next steps, her plans, her requests. It did not look like a hero's journey, unless you were quiet, unless you were there to listen. It seemed a fragile existence as if she knew time was an enemy, or perhaps a scarce commodity, if she was to successfully steward her community, and successfully teach her grandchildren, if she was to lead her fellow artists, and open up new paths forged from the legacy of her Grandfather's art.

And so she worked on. She straightened out time-wasting and self-destructive parts of her life and worked on. Creating a children's book 'Namatjira' with Ntaria school with David Roennfeldt; teaching painting to young people at Ntaria school; taking them out on country; passing on cultural stories; teaching them the pride needed to be strong in their culture, to carry forward their heritage and to be who they already were and always had been for over two thousand generations.

All this and more, for Kumantjai was also a cross-cultural navigator. A diplomat, an entrepreneur like her grandfather, warm, friendly, honest and shrewd. She was adamant about sharing her family's story with all, so as to reclaim this legacy protect its future heritage.

That is why her eyes lit up when she found a new platform from which to speak by working with Big hART. She helped guide the story-making for the theatre show Namatjira, and came on tour across the country. Each night she'd help create enormous landscapes live onstage with members of her family while Trevor Jamieson performed the story of Albert Namatjira and Rex Battarbee's complex friendship to audiences in their tens of thousands. And each night theatre goers would laugh and cry suddenly understand the injustice that had been done and sign up to become a 'Friend of the Namatjira family,' and put their name to supporting the effort to recover the copyright. On it went, the weary work, the tirelessness, the loneliness, the stark hotel rooms away from country, all the way to London, to a private audience with the Queen, speaking strongly to the same woman who met her grandfather as a tentative young queen. All the while working to create a documentary to tell more of the story and reach more people in her tireless quest.

Kumantjai was a practical woman of serious intent, she was on the board of her Art Centre. She worked internally for the watercolour painters to have control over their own Art Centre and Gallery, and was instrumental in its incorporation in 2016. With Gloria Pannka and Big hART, Kumantjai was also instrumental in the establishment of the Namatjira Legacy Trust, navigating complex legal structures. She assumed her role as cultural executive producer on the documentary and with her collaborator Gloria, helped Big hART to navigate the complex Aboriginal systems, cultural landscapes and permissions, so important to intercultural film making. As a tireless public speaker on behalf of her community and fellow artists, she generously spoke in English rather than her first language, overcoming shyness and the discomfort of the curious audience stare necessary to achieve her goals.

All this was done with the staunch and determined goal of supporting her community into the future, and she brought clarity and calm when advocating for the importance of legacy and support being for both the family and the whole community. In this and many other ways she showed herself to be a visionary.

Kumantjai, our dear friend, was fun, she could catch a rabbit in her bare hands, she was cheeky and welcoming, inviting us into her family and into the safe public dimensions of her deep and multifaceted cultural world, teaching us stories and language, caring for our children as if her own. She was genuine and grateful for the exchange that cut through the false barriers of difference, preferring instead to embrace hearts of goodwill and stumble together down paths new and unmapped.

Perhaps the return of this odd 'copyright thing', this strange quirk of white law, was her parting gift. With uncanny timing, as she lay sick in hospital grieving the passing of her son who should've outlived her, the news came through. Blinking away some of the last tears of her life, she grasped the significance of what had been achieved, and knowing there were others with the strength to build on her work, others who would seek justice and compensation, Kumantjai, allowed herself some rest and quietly slipped away.

And what are we to make of ourselves in the light of her life? Gone at sixty-six. The iron-will unbroken, this high-achieving woman. How many of us can say we have left the world a better place than when we entered it because of our vision and fortitude. How many of us could achieve these things while also fighting for our very survival, fighting the dullest of enemies - grinding poverty and the government's blind eye? How many of us would have the faith to fight it without hate in their heart? What are we to make of ourselves, in the shadow of her passing.

It is a privilege to be asked to write a few words at this time, as it was also a privilege to write Albert's story with the Namatjira family into a theatre performance. That play ended with four simple words capturing Albert's last moments, 'gone, into the blue...' And now another grand life has finished, not in the defeat some saw in her grandfather, but with determination, with grit, after creating the chance for many more Namatjira canvases to flow from new generations. Kumantjai Namatjira, we thank you, we cherish you for the life you lived, with all its flaws and all its fullness as you fought to ensure a brighter future for you Western Aranda community... for enduring all those seemingly fruitless moments that finally paid off... so as to let you find some rest... gone, into the blue.

Sophia Marinos and Scott Rankin.

*Kumantjai is used in place of a name, out of respect for those who have passed.