

STATS AND STORIES - CASE STUDY 4

**CIVIC
PRIDE**



DEAKIN
UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA
Worldly

Big hART THE NAMATJIRA PROJECT

THE IMPACT OF THE ARTS IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

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arts
AUSTRALIA**

WE WOULD LIKE TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE WESTERN ARANDA PEOPLE OF THE CENTRAL AUSTRALIAN DESERT. PLEASE BE ADVISED THAT THIS CASE STUDY REFERENCES ABORIGINAL PEOPLE WHO ARE DECEASED.

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Cover Image: Derik Lynch, Namatjira, 2010.

Photograph by Brett Boardman.

OVERVIEW

STATS AND STORIES: THE IMPACT OF THE ARTS IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

Stats and Stories: The Impact of the Arts in Regional Australia is a ground breaking project funded by Regional Arts Australia and The Australia Council for the Arts that calls for new ways to identify and respond to Australia's vast land, diversity and differences, including its challenges and opportunities in regional Australia, using the arts as the vehicle.

The Stats and Stories project covers five themes and five case studies. The five themes were developed from the literature on the regional impact of the arts. One case study is written on each of the five themes.

The five themes are:

1. Community connectedness
2. Economic regeneration
3. Social inclusion
4. Civic pride and community identity
5. Regional development

The five case studies are:

1. Animating Spaces
2. Silver Ball Screening Festival
3. In the Saddle; On the Wall
4. BighArt
5. First Coat

The research project was undertaken by academic staff at Deakin University in the Business School. The project was led by Professor Ruth Rentschler, and Dr Kerrie Bridson at Deakin University, as well as Associate Professor Jody Evans at Melbourne Business School. Research support was provided by Claudia Escobar, Emma Winston and Nick Cooke.

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Civic Pride & Community Identity: Bringing awareness of Aboriginal art through collective efforts to the notice of the community—regionally, nationally and internationally, building a sense of community through a single shared identity in a diverse population.

INTRODUCTION

Big hART's Namatjira project is an award-winning multilayered arts project that honours renowned Indigenous watercolour artist, Albert Namatjira.

Albert Namatjira is one of the pioneers of the Aboriginal art movement¹ and helped transform relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous people around the world.²

From 2009, the Namatjira project has showcased a variety of arts projects and community development initiatives that celebrate Namatjira's life and legacy, boosting civic pride and community identity for the Namatjira family and Western Aranda communities in Central Australia.

The Namatjira project includes the acclaimed touring theatre production *Namatjira* and a series of accompanying watercolour exhibitions by contemporary Western Aranda watercolour artists following in Namatjira's tradition.

The theatre production, *Namatjira*, told the iconic story of Albert Namatjira. A huge success in Australian theatres, the production won two Sydney Theatre awards and has been performed for over 50,000 Australians.³

In 2010, Jason Blake from the Sydney Morning Herald enthusiastically described the production's opening night:

*We rose to applaud Namatjira without hesitation on opening night, brought to our feet by this generous and enlightening production from BIG hART. And I think we were all moved to stand in acknowledgement of the artist Albert Namatjira, a great Australian by any measure.*⁴

After the production's success in Australia, the *Namatjira* tour, along with the accompanying watercolour exhibition, expanded its reach on an international level by heading to London where it was showcased over three nights at the Southbank Theatre. While in London, the Namatjira project exceeded expectations with the theatre production and exhibition selling out.⁵ Sophia Marinos, Big hART Creative Producer explained 'we got standing ovations.' She went on to say 'there is such a hunger for this story.'

The Namatjira project works at the grassroots level with Western Aranda communities to create social change and encourage community identity through workshops in watercolour painting, digital literacy and filmmaking, and movement and storytelling. The workshops have facilitated the development of 30 short films, an iPad app and a CD soundtrack.



In addition, the script of the *Namatjira* theatre production has been published and placed on curriculum lists.⁶ In the final stages of the Namatjira project, Big hART embarked on a series of legacy initiatives from 2014. The website states:

*Never has it been clearer that this is the crucial time to harness the strengths of this community, and to ensure all of that profile and project success translates into real and lasting benefit.*⁷

This legacy phase includes the exhibition *Namatjira to Now: Five Generations of Watercolours in the Central Desert*, which showcased works by five generations of Albert Namatjira's descendants.

In 2014, this exhibition travelled from Araluan Art Centre to Parliament House in Canberra where it received recognition and realised the aspirations of the Namatjira family of 'teaching the young ones to paint' and 'keeping this fragile but iconic art movement alive.'⁸

The exhibition also provided the opportunity to raise awareness of social issues from within Western Aranda communities, petitioning for funds for cultural tourism infrastructure in Central Australia.

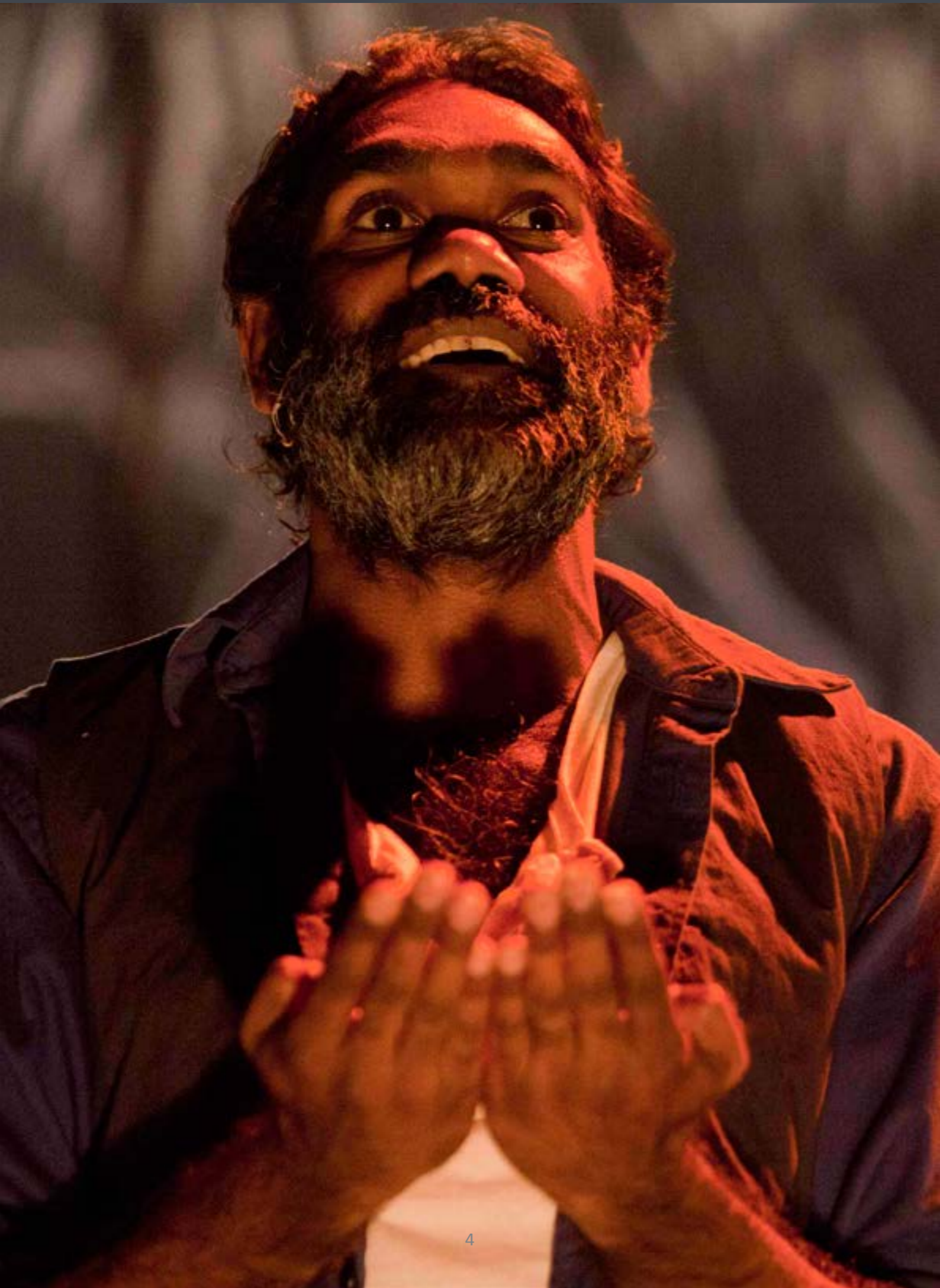
Scott Rankin, Big hART Creative Director commented:

We can go overseas and take the Namatjiras to perform in London and be invited to Buckingham Palace to meet the Queen, which happened this time last year. That's terrific, but you come back to Australia and it's still the same issue... If you look at it in historic terms, exactly the same issues that Albert struggled with, to feed his family, to house his family, to clothe his family, to buy materials to paint, it's exactly the same now for this extended family... These are serious issues of social policy that need to be considered very deeply...⁹

In addition to the exhibition the legacy phase includes finalising a documentary film, slated for release in 2015/16. The film explores 'whether friendship, risk and trust across difference can create a path to real reconciliation.'¹⁰

The legacy phase also includes intergenerational workshops in watercolours, cultural heritage and digital literacy at the Ntaria (Hermannsburg) School, and the establishment of the Namatjira Legacy Trust planned to provide ongoing support to the Namatjira family and the Ngurratjuta Iltja Ntjarra / Many Hands Art Centre located in Alice Springs.¹¹

Namatjira family, Namathira, 2010, Hermannsburg, NT. Photograph by Oliver Eclipse.



Namatjira's life and talent were used to educate up and coming Indigenous generations, which consequently transformed the central desert region into a prolific producer of watercolour art.

BACKGROUND

ALBERT NAMATJIRA

Albert Namatjira is known as a highly skilled convert to watercolour painting and as one of the early founders of the Aboriginal Art movement.

His watercolour paintings celebrated tradition and country.¹² Namatjira's precociousness quickly caught the attention of the art world and earned him a sell-out solo exhibition in 1938.¹³ Further sell-out exhibitions followed suit where his work was exhibited in front of the Queen and other dignitaries at the time.

One of his notable achievements include the bestowment of the highly prestigious Queen's Coronation Medal in Canberra during 1954.

The Namatjira project chronicles the artist's rich heritage where he became the first Indigenous person to be awarded Australian citizenship status, subsequently enabling the repositioning of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations.

This landmark event contributed towards the transition from the popular view of Indigenous persons as 'flora and fauna', as Indigenous Australians only achieved citizenship in 1967.¹⁴

Later in Namatjira's life, his talent was used to educate up and coming Indigenous generations, which consequently transformed the central desert region into a prolific producer of watercolour art.

This tradition grew after his death through inter-generational cultural exchange as a form of civic pride and community identity.

The Namatjira project is a significant example of Big hART's ability to achieve innovative change for regional communities.

THE NAMATJIRA PROJECT

The Namatjira project was launched in 2009, marking fifty years since Namatjira passed away.¹⁵

The Namatjira project originated from Big hART's community development program *Ngapartji Ngapartji*, a 'cross-cultural and social change project' in the Central Desert region, which has been working to promote a greater understanding for the importance of Indigenous languages and culture since 2005.¹⁶

The idea to share Albert Namatjira's story was first brought to the attention of Big hART Creative Director Scott Rankin by Elton Wirri, kinship grandson of Namatjira, who had been working on the *Ngapartji Ngapartji* program since he was 14 years old touring Australia performing his chalk drawings depicting Western Aranda landscapes.¹⁷

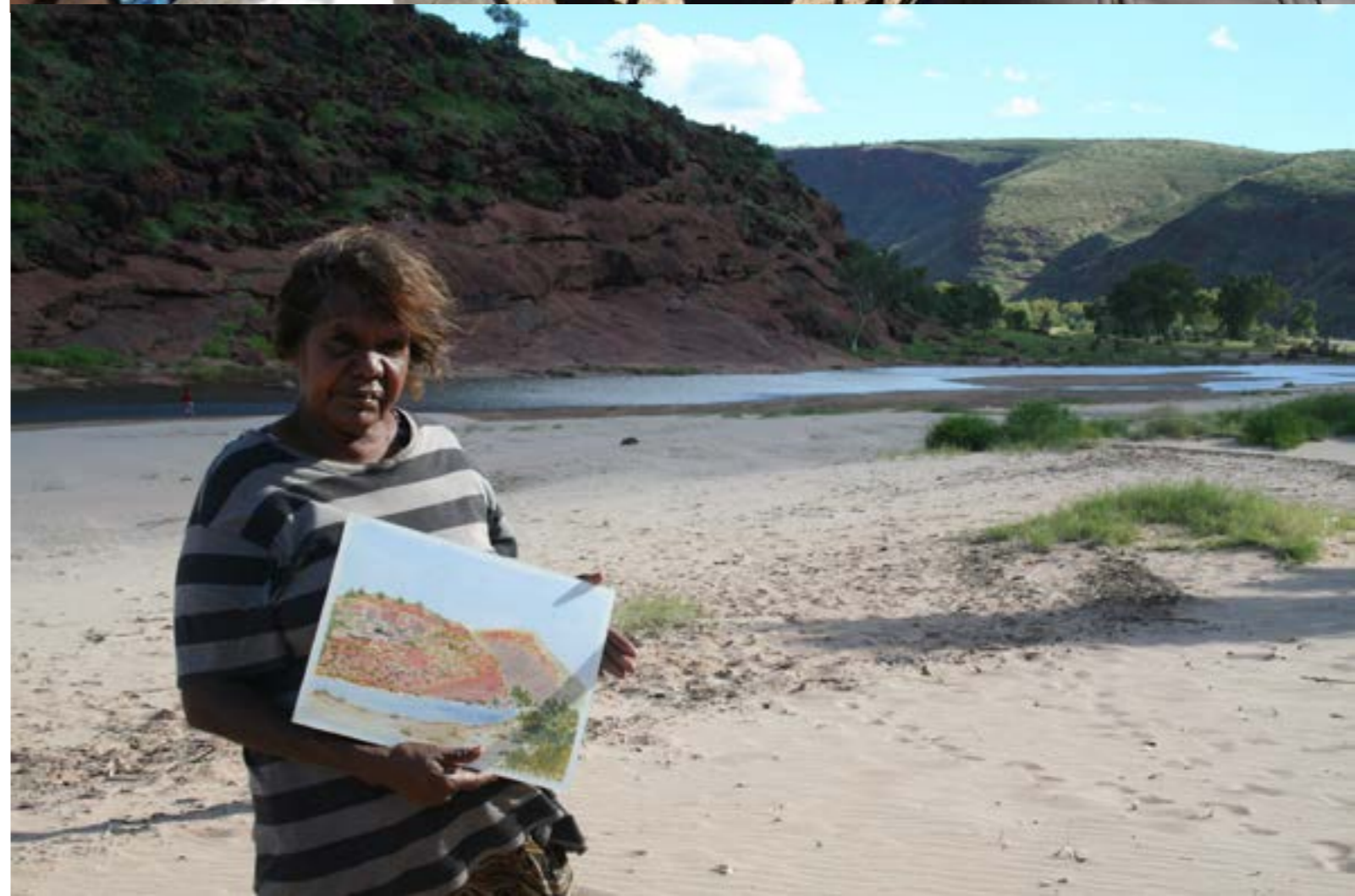
Big hART

Big hART is an arts and social change company with a strong national and international presence. Within Australia, Big hART's reach has included over 45 communities involving more than 7,500 people located in rural, remote and urban areas.¹⁸

The community work includes a range of skill building and cultural exchange programs to further invest in the people-focused strategies targeted at sustainable social outcomes.

Big hART projects are committed to the arts and social change, and working with disadvantaged communities. Big hART uses art in different forms to communicate civic pride and community identity through art exhibitions, theatre and film.

The Namatjira project is a significant example of Big hART's ability to achieve innovative change for regional communities.



*Top: Kevin Namatjira & grandsons, 2012.
Photograph courtesy of Big hART.*

*Bottom: Lenie Namatjira, 2011, Finke River, NT.
Photograph courtesy of Big hART.*



ACHIEVEMENTS

Big hART has received awards for artistic merit and their contribution to social and cultural development through the Namatjira project.

In 2012, Big hART received the Helpmann Award for 'Best Regional Touring Production' for the *Namatjira* theatre production.¹⁹ Kieran Finnane from the *Alice Spring News* remarked:

*It was a gratifying moment: a Helpmann Award trophy, won by the production Namatjira... The national awards recognise excellence in live performance and Namatjira won the Best Regional Touring Production category, against competition from the likes of Bell Shakespeare.*²⁰

Namatjira was received with critical acclaim. Scott Rankin, Creative Director and Executive Producer of Big hART received Best Australian Work at the *Sydney Theatre Awards* for *Namatjira* and Derik Lynch who plays a range of supporting characters in the production was named Best Newcomer.

Similarly, the production received auspicious reviews, with *ABC NSW* commenting: '*Namatjira* is a remarkable production on all fronts.'²¹

Elly Varrenti from *The Age* wrote:

Namatjira is confident, articulate and beautifully made theatre that owes its legacy as much to indigenous storytelling as it does to Banjo Paterson... Scott Rankin's project is as astute as it is deeply poetic.

*Its extensive research and development, rarely expositional, is hidden, rather, within the layered richness of the text. And there's not a moment of ill-pitched lambast.*²²

In the same year, Australia's leading online portal for the arts industry, *Arts Hub* recognised Big hART's efforts through an award for Contribution to the Australian Community.

The most recent accomplishment placed the company as a finalist in the *Deadly Awards* in 2013 for Cultural Advancement.²³

*Namatjira, Hermannsburg, 2012, NT.
Photograph courtesy of Big hART.*



The Namatjira project has brought a community together through a sense of pride and achievement.

CIVIC PRIDE AND COMMUNITY IDENTITY

The Namatjira project and the large scale success of the *Namatjira* theatre production has developed pride and a sense of identity for both the Namatjira family and Western Aranda communities. Civic pride and community identity are core to the Namatjira project. By telling stories that resonate with audiences regionally, nationally and internationally the change agent role of the project becomes evident. Creative Producer Sophia Marinos told us:

I really strongly believe in the arts to assist in social change. It opens the door to having conversations to change social policy and make positive changes for communities. There are so many examples of how art has had a positive impact on individuals and communities.

Civic pride and community identity has the ability to re-shape regional communities through culture-led regeneration, which is strengthened by a 'collective sense of local identity.'²⁴

Bailey et.al. (2004) expands on this idea, stating: 'Culture-led regeneration perhaps provides a framework within which... local people can re-establish ownership of their own sense of place and space and, perhaps more importantly, of their own sense of history.'²⁵

Marinos perceives the regional arts scene in Australia as 'vibrant' and 'alive and well', however she told us 'regional arts stories are not always heard.'

She described the story of Albert Namatjira as 'quite symbolic of a lot of invisible stories from Indigenous Australia and beyond.' 'It is an iconic Australian story that many people do not know, apart from knowing his name or having a watercolour painting on their wall' said Marinos. She stated:

The story of Namatjira is not only an Indigenous story, it is an intercultural story. It is one of friendship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. It was a driving motivation for this project to give insight into intercultural exchange and how vital intercultural work can be.

Big hART works with regional communities towards developing an international presence for their community projects.

For the Namatjira project, Marinos told us 'there was an intention set early on in the project by the Namatjira family to take this internationally. The fact that Albert was an international superstar kind of set those expectations and horizons.'

She expressed the international demand for this story:

There is kind of a European amazement at not only Australian stories, but Indigenous stories. The themes that we address are really universal and we're really interested in making those connections wherever they resonate.

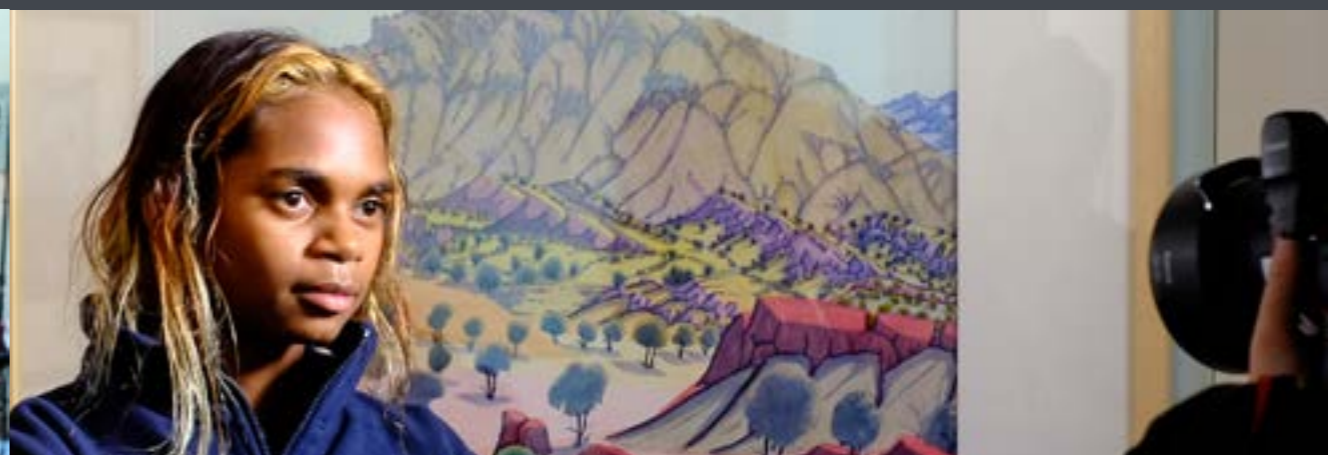
Taking the production to London and meeting the Queen gave the artists an opportunity to form international networks and industry contacts. 'This production has created economic and employment opportunities that are culturally appropriate' said Marinos.

She explained: 'People from within Western Aranda communities are linked to country, culture and language, therefore these benefits have the effect of improving health and wellbeing for those communities.'

Marinos described how the international success of the *Namatjira* theatre production and exhibition has impacted the community, saying there was a 'palpable sense' of 'this is our story' and 'look at the depth, gravity and beauty of it.' 'It was something to be really proud of' said Marinos.

The Namatjira project has also had significant impact for the artists involved. They are becoming 'teachers and mentors for each other and the young ones in their community, but they are also given exposure as artists from their international success' said Marinos.

She explained 'their artwork is their livelihood so that impact has definitely been felt.'



GRASSROOTS MOVEMENT

The Namatjira project works directly with Western Aranda communities in Central Australia. Big hART facilitates workshops, skill building exchanges and large scale events in partnership with Ntaria (Hermannsburg) school and Ngurratjuta Iltja Ntjarra / Many Hands Art Centre.²⁶

Marinos expanded on the project's grassroots movement:

At the grassroots level this project has been about working with the Namatjira family and extended Western Aranda communities on a skill building process that provides access to industries and pathways to income, and ways to capitalize on this incredible story that they are custodians of.

An important aspect of the Namatjira project is to facilitate access to professional development opportunities for Namatjira family artists. Marinos explained the project allows them to become 'holders of their skills' as 'highly skilled masters of the watercolour painting tradition.' The project also facilitates the passing on of these skills to the next generation of artists.

The Ntaria (Hermannsburg) School is currently a hub for the Namatjira project to mentor and develop digital literacy and watercolour painting skills among Indigenous art students.

Wendy Cowan, Teacher at the Ntaria School in Hermannsburg believes that the Namatjira project watercolour and film workshops presented myriad opportunities for students to learn how to paint and 'go off and explore country.'

Left: Ntaria School student, Namatjira App Workshop, 2012, Hermannsburg, NT. Photograph courtesy of Big hART.

'People connecting to family and country...people painting and being on country created a sense of collaboration' said Cowan.

As such, it was a means of bringing people together through collective efforts, thus building a sense of community. Lenie Namatjira, granddaughter of Albert Namatjira, runs watercolour workshops for the students at Ntaria (Hermannsburg) school. She discussed the pride she has experienced:

*Those kids are learning from us. I've been watching them working hard and watching their painting get better and better. I'm proud of the kids and what we have done for them.*²⁷

Mentoring provides an additional medium to enable community building whilst advocating the continuation of the Indigenous narrative by embracing digital communication platforms.²⁸

When considering the transfer of student skills into other areas, Cowan explained that the watercolour classes offer a pathway to greater competency working with digital technologies, saying 'digital technologies are going to be more useful in the future.'²⁹

In 2014 the project presented the *Namatjira to Now: Five Generations of Watercolours from the Central Desert* exhibition shown at Parliament House in Canberra.

The purpose of the exhibition was to highlight the past five generations of Albert Namatjira's descendants and continue the cultural heritage of the Indigenous community through a sense of pride and active civic dialogue.^{30,31}

As a part of this exhibition Aretha Namatjira, the great-great-granddaughter of Namatjira, had the opportunity to display an animation developed by her and students from Ntaria (Hermannsburg) School based on Namatjira's renowned watercolours.

Cowan told us the artwork being made 'front of centre' impressed students. The sense of community pride and resilience was realised through familiar artwork being exhibited in a prime capital city location that communicated 'who they are' and 'what they are doing'.

Gloria Pannka, a descendant of Namatjira and artist from the Hermannsburg school of artists discussed the significance of the exhibition, saying it is 'very important' for the achievements of the Namatjira family, including that of younger generations, to be seen by the general public.³²

She went on to say:

*We would like this movement to move forward, to teach our young ones... We don't want this legacy to end. The watercolours help to extract our memory, how our Albert used to go out on the country doing paintings. We're following in his footsteps.*³³

This exhibition was an example of how the Namatjira project is an 'investment in community' said Marinos. She told us the project developed 'a sense of access, heritage and pride' for the Namatjira family and Western Aranda communities, and gave them the opportunity to present their 'incredible resilience' to government in the capital of the country.

Marinos described the effect this exhibition had on students from Ntaria (Hermannsburg) School:

This exhibition has had a big impact on students... These students are incredibly shy and come from challenging living situations, but have just presented their work in Parliament House.

They have spoken to the Minister for Indigenous Affairs and made public addresses. They can now go home as leaders and role models for others in their school and community.

As part of the exhibition, a Trust to support the financial stability of the Hermannsburg Watercolour School and Western Aranda communities was publicly announced, to be launched in 2015. Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion commented: 'Projects and art centres like this are a vital part of life in remote communities and central to addressing our highest priorities of getting children to school, people into jobs and making communities safer.'³⁴ Marinos concluded:

Namatjira has always been about the multitude of layers that are within the project, from working at the grassroots, to telling big Australian stories, to putting those stories in the hands of policy makers to garner more support and acknowledgement, not only for the Western Aranda communities but how this translates to other communities in similar

Center: Gloria Pannka & students, Namatjira to Now, 2014, Canberra, ACT. Photograph by Greer Versteeg.

Right: Aretha Namatjira, Namatjira to Now, 2014, Canberra, ACT. Photograph by Greer Versteeg.

situations.

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Derik Lynch, *Namatjira*, 2012.
Photograph by Brett Boardman.





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