

Some People are Stories

VINCENT SERICO

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In the early 1990s when I first encountered the extraordinary body of work by Queensland artist Vincent Serico, I was immediately impressed by his vision and commitment to ‘painting the stories’, but even more so, by his vivid interpretations of our shared social history. Vincent’s art touches people with an exceptional grace. For those who subscribe to any idealised egalitarianism, Vincent’s images may signal a challenge to them that this can often mask the ‘real life’ of Aboriginality. For others, more cynical and dismissive of Aboriginal culture and history, Vincent’s paintings provide salient visual testaments of a robust, holistic culture that has been, to a great degree, left in ruins. Vincent paints the mask but he also lifts the mask. His personal history combined with skill, his experiences and artistic perspectives, made him the ideal narrator.

Vincent, at four years of age, was separated from his immediate family by the white administration. During the 1950s he grew up on the Cherbourg ‘mission’, when the policies of segregation and assimilation were at their peak. Surprisingly, Vincent seemed comfortably resigned to his lot in life. He always retained a deep fascination of the stories, customs and spiritual beliefs of his forbears, and ultimately saw it as his mission to paint about it all.

After growing up in Cherbourg dormitories, Vincent recounts: “When I was about 14, I lived with the Old Fella for a couple of years in Brisbane. I was painting Aboriginal and Islander paintings for, they used to call them, the DNA, Department of Native Affairs. They used to do all the tourist stuff... When I was sixteen I started travelling, ring barking. Took off, me and the Old Fella couldn’t get on.”¹

Vincent endured many struggles in his own life — with poverty and with alcohol. Yet, as an artist, Vincent didn’t take the moral high ground. More often he chose to recall typical scenes of rural work, but he always fell back on his artwork, painting on canvas, board, boomerangs, skins, shells and occasional murals — usually opting to work in a classical ‘Cherbourg style’. The aesthetic of this period required the product to ‘look Aboriginal’. Prominent examples were executed in cross-hatched, mainly ochre hues, elegantly ‘tribalised’ drawing and patterning. Paintings such as *Lightning Man* (1992) were defiantly romanticised scenes, illustrating ‘known’ Aboriginal stories, depicting the yearning that displaced people feel about loss and longing.

By late 1992, Vincent rarely painted solely in the ochre palette, preferring a cross-over genre of bright primary and pastel colours — enmeshing Aboriginal motifs within a European perspective. This began a series of pivotal ‘cultural collision’ works which earned Vincent significant national recognition, culminating in acquisitions by the National Gallery of Australia, the National Museum of Australia, Queensland Art Gallery, Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery and Singapore Art Museum. During 1993–1995, Vincent began painting even more picturesque, though often melancholic and sombre scenes from his childhood, such as *Baramba Creek*, *Deaths In Custody*, *Be Your Own Man* and the memorable *Pension Day* series. Amidst these depictions, Vincent also painted the conflict, massacres and reprisals that ultimately led to a resignation of his people’s fate to the missions. Many of these are not romantic pictures, but rather bittersweet.

As the 20th century closed, Vincent’s artistic imaginings wandered further back through the history of cultural conflicts as he sifted the personal and political reservoirs. This led to the *Carnarvon* suite, the home of his Yiman grandfather in south-west Queensland. Between 2001–2006, Vincent’s work largely centred on grand landscapes of the Arcadia Valley.

In 2007, Vincent began a new series on Cape York and Laura (far north Queensland) imagery out of respect to his Kuku-Yalanji grandmother. Key works from this *Cooktown Miners* series, portraying the Palmer River gold rush, were acquired by Queensland Art Gallery at Vincent’s 2007 solo show at FireWorks Gallery, which formed the genesis for the 2009 print folio featured in *Some people are stories*.

Beneath the surface of Vincent’s astonishing visual combinations, we see an artist willing to cross the divides of both time and cultures, in order to extract the hidden tales this country still holds for many. *Thomas Mitchell looking for Leichhardt* and *Black Policeman meets the Jiman* take on gentle and sensitive treatments of the Queensland bush amidst Aboriginal and colonial figures crossing the 19th and 20th centuries. Meanwhile, Vincent’s cultural lifestyle works employ distinctive regional designs, announcing his own accumulated ‘troubadour’ experiences; depicting an essential pride in the peculiar Indigenous perspective, the macro and the micro of land and life.

Vincent was never afraid to tell it like it was. Whilst he never questioned his Aboriginal identity, he



certainly questioned where his culture was heading. Epic paintings lampooned the social problems he was ensnared within, setting his work apart from many of his peers unwilling or unable to cut through the politics, let alone grapple with a necessary technical prowess. The ‘real life’ issues he explored included the rorting of government funding (*A.T.S.I.C.*), the bitter dependence on welfare, the duplicity of black and white politicians, debates and political fallout, or the treacherous role historically played out by the black-troopers and others in the colonisation process.

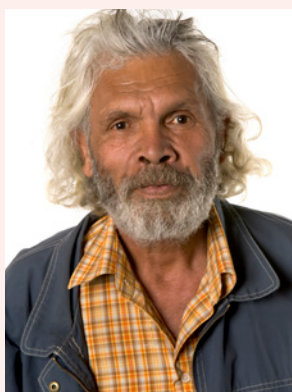
Vincent was always quick to acknowledge that his peculiar visions were gleaned from watching people, judging folks from the same rule book. He would just as quickly condemn greed and injustice from either side of the racial fence. Yet, over a painting journey spanning 40 years or more, Vincent never lost his humour or his humility.

In August 2007, we were travelling back from Darwin where his epic work *Carnarvon Collision*

(*Big Map*) was awarded Highly Commended in the national Telstra prize, and acquired by Queensland Art Gallery. Vincent was excited about his future, however he felt frail. I took him to hospital the next morning but he never recovered. Within a week he was transferred back to Toowoomba to be with his family. Vincent died in March 2008 with many blank canvases around him.

Vincent’s compelling and diverse body of contemporary artworks are held in public collections and scattered across the world in private homes. Unsurprisingly, his images are still finding resonance with new audiences today. For an outsider looking in, Aboriginal culture — as a matter of public debate — may often appear to be wallowing in political quagmire, but will we ever fully comprehend the personal dimension of this great divide upon which Vincent’s paintings shed their gentle and graceful light?

Michael Eather
Curator



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Some people are stories is a touring exhibition in partnership between FireWorks Gallery and Museums & Galleries Queensland. This project is supported by the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland. This project has also been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body; and supported by the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy, an initiative of the Australian Federal, State, and Territory Governments.

Cover: *Pension Day Bora Ring*, 1993. Acrylic on canvas, 106.2 x 78.8 cm. Private Collection. Photographer: Mick Richards. Courtesy FireWorks Gallery.
Inside: *The Road to Cherbourg*, 2009. Folio print reproduction. Archival inks on 300gsm Hahnemuehle rag paper. 62 x 87 cm. City of Ipswich Collection, Ipswich Art Gallery. Photographer: Mick Richards. Courtesy FireWorks Gallery.
Above: *Amphitheatre (Carnarvon Suite)*, 2006. Acrylic on canvas, 102 x 144 cm. Private Collection. Photographer: Mick Richards. Courtesy FireWorks Gallery.

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