

## Artist Spotlight: Vincent Bear



*Vincent Bear. Mowanjum art studio, August 2016*

Desert River Sea recently held a watercolour workshop at Mowanjum art centre near Derby in the North West Kimberley. Known widely for their ochre and acrylic canvases featuring images and themes from local rock art for which they are the custodians, artists here were keen to extend their painting skills into a new medium. For many it was their first experimentation with these luminous colours and radically different techniques; the brush strokes of one man, however, immediately stood out.

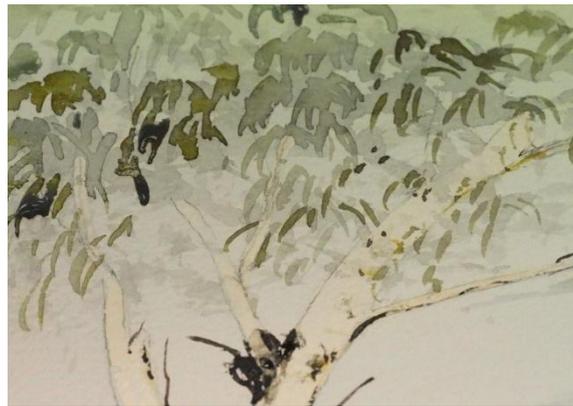
Vincent Bear was born at the erstwhile Derby Native Hospital in 1947 (a period when medical treatment of Aboriginal people of the Kimberley was segregated). He is descended from the Ngarinyin language group on both his mother's and father's side. He lived at Napier Downs station for the first three years of his life. His mother Koko passed away when he two and a year later he moved to Kimberley Downs station, some 70 kms east of Derby, with his father and stepmother Maisie Bear.

Children from Kimberley Downs were bussed to school in Derby, which Vincent attended to year 5. After this he was expected to begin learning station work, a life he committed to until his late 60's. He remembers his first pay as a young adult, about three pounds a month for seasonal work which was without break for about five months of the year. This would have been a little before the introduction of equal wages for Aboriginal pastoral workers in 1968-9, when the decades-long practice of indentured labour in the Kimberley began to be finally extinguished by legislative changes.

The consequences of these early moves for equality were not as positive as expected however. Many workers lost their jobs and the pastoral industry moved away from being labour intensive towards increased mechanisation. In his early twenties Vincent embarked on the first of several trips around Australia, working as he went – a highly unusual step for a young Aboriginal man at that time. As he says himself, he was 'the odd person out'.

He continued this maverick streak by obtaining a bus driver's license and training, with the encouragement and support of the station manager, for a helicopter pilot's license when he was 26, in order to maintain a relevant skill in the swiftly changing pastoral industry. This was partly necessitated by a riding accident when he was 21, when he broke his neck in a fall on Kimberley Downs. After spending eight months in Fremantle Hospital he returned, against medical advice, to riding and stock work.

Vincent married in 1974 and has a number of children including a son who is a musician. He himself is a self-taught guitarist and sings in his own band in Derby. He is the only one in his immediate family who also paints however. In his mid-teens he discovered the work of Albert Namatjira and was so profoundly affected that he determined to teach himself how to paint. He was unable to obtain paints at first so used crayons instead, and says he studied Namatjira prints closely to emulate his techniques.



*Detail, artwork in progress V. Bear 2016*

Vincent isn't the first Aboriginal artist to identify Namatjira as the initial inspiration behind their painting practice. Many of his generation have claimed this – not just for the rare degree of success and positive attention he experienced for a time, but for the powerful depictions of Namatjira's own country and their particular aesthetic appeal. Most commentary on Namatjira centres on his contested impact on mainstream audiences and art history; it would be salutary to consider his effect on Aboriginal artists since the 1940s, and his place within the development of the contemporary Aboriginal art movement since his death in 1959.



*Detail, artwork in progress V, Bear 2016*

Vincent has produced watercolours consistently in the decades since that first discovery. His work is in the western landscape tradition and imbued with a love of the swathe of Kimberley country he knows so intimately from years spent working on cattle stations. Some of these places are not so easily accessible now but Vincent reproduces them referring to photographs or his memory with ease. He also likes to paint scenes

from his imagination using a colour palette reminiscent of that used by Namatjira for his luminous central Australian works but more suited to the light quality, vegetation and geology of the north west.

He says he prefers to paint alone, in peace. The paintings he started at the Mowanjum workshop were taken home at night and brought back the next day completed. We were able to observe him apply background washes for earth and sky, then begin mapping out the placement of trees and hills but the final details of the foreground and background were added away from the clamour of the workshop.



*Detail, artwork in progress V, Bear 2016*

Clearly having mastered the particularly style which had so swept him away in his youth we wondered why he had come along to the workshop, but he said there were some techniques he knew had evaded him and wanted to see what additional watercolour secrets the tutor might be able to reveal. Different approaches to rendering clouds, for example, were keenly sought and we periodically heard satisfied exclamations emanating from under his stockman's hat when he easily duplicated a newly demonstrated technique.

Vincent says he takes about seven to nine hours to finish a painting. Occasionally he chooses to sell one but actually much prefers to give them away to friends and others who have shown interest. Indeed he surprised the tutor on the final day with one of his just-completed pieces, which he brought in already framed as a gift. It was a huge pleasure having the chance to learn a little more about him, and interesting to observe the independence he continues to reserve for himself by choosing to paint beyond the reach and hyperbole of the art market.