



‘Often when I’m painting... I’m purely in the process – I don’t even understand what I’m doing.’

Thea Anamara Perkins

Interview by **Pip Cummings**  
Photography by **Felicity Jenkins**





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On a crisp autumn day in the back streets of Eveleigh, all that can be heard is birdsong, an occasional car, the wind through the plane trees lining Wilson Street, and the steady pulse of trains flowing along the many lines that feed nearby Redfern Station and beyond.

That clickety-clack and thrum is also the sonic backdrop to an intense hive of creativity taking place inside the Clothing Store Artist Studios: part of the historic Eveleigh Railway Workshops that includes Carriageworks. Up two flights of stairs in the cavernous industrial space, 10 studios have been created to house a range of artists and collectives on a one-year residency.

Straight ahead is a corner room, its door shut tight. A vibrant screen-printed poster promoting the 2013 Mbantua Festival places visitors face to face with an arresting ethnographic photo-portrait, taken near Alice Springs more than 100 years ago. 'The Arrernte Nation invites you to the heart of our Country', it reads, above the man's direct gaze.

This is the studio of Arrernte and Kalkadoon artist Thea Anamara Perkins, and the poster points to many of her preoccupations: family, Country, archival photos, the preservation and creation of culture, and a life that revolves between the polarities of Alice Springs and inner Sydney.

As the only workspace with walls that meet the ceiling, Perkins was under the impression her studio was soundproof. This was revealed to be wrong, she explains with a self-conscious laugh, when the other artists commented on her enthusiastic singing as she paints. Listening to music 'is a very big part of getting into that flow space', she says, listing TV on the Radio, Viagra Boys, Idles and Australian rapper Genesis Owusu as current favourites.

The studio's small size suits the scale of Perkins' work, and she is grateful for the softer light and coolness that come with being on the south side of the building, as well as its wall of windows overlooking the tracks, sheds

Thea Anamara  
Perkins  
Rachel

Acrylic on board, 40.5  
x 30.5 cm. © Thea  
Anamara Perkins. Photo:  
AGNSW, Felicity Jenkins.

and passing trains. 'I love ambient noise,' she says. 'It's therapeutic and comforting. I love that vibe of people and movement around.'

Many years ago, her paternal grandfather Charles 'Chicka' Madden also worked at this site, during his long career on the railroads. A respected Gadigal elder, Madden was the subject of Perkins' 2020 Archibald entry, *Poppy Chicka*, recently acquired by the Gallery. 'That work to me is just an homage to him, because he is such a very, very special man, and he really is the rock of our family in many ways,' she says. 'He's always lived his life and conducted himself with amazing integrity - working on the railways for 50 years, and what he's done on a grassroots level for Aboriginal people, especially in the Redfern community.'

A local most of his life, Madden served the Aboriginal community as director of the Aboriginal Medical Service, secretary of the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council and director of the Aboriginal Hostels NSW. 'I think it's really important to celebrate people who are these pillars in their communities, but I also wanted to paint Pop because he is such a unique person: an extremely funny and loving man.'

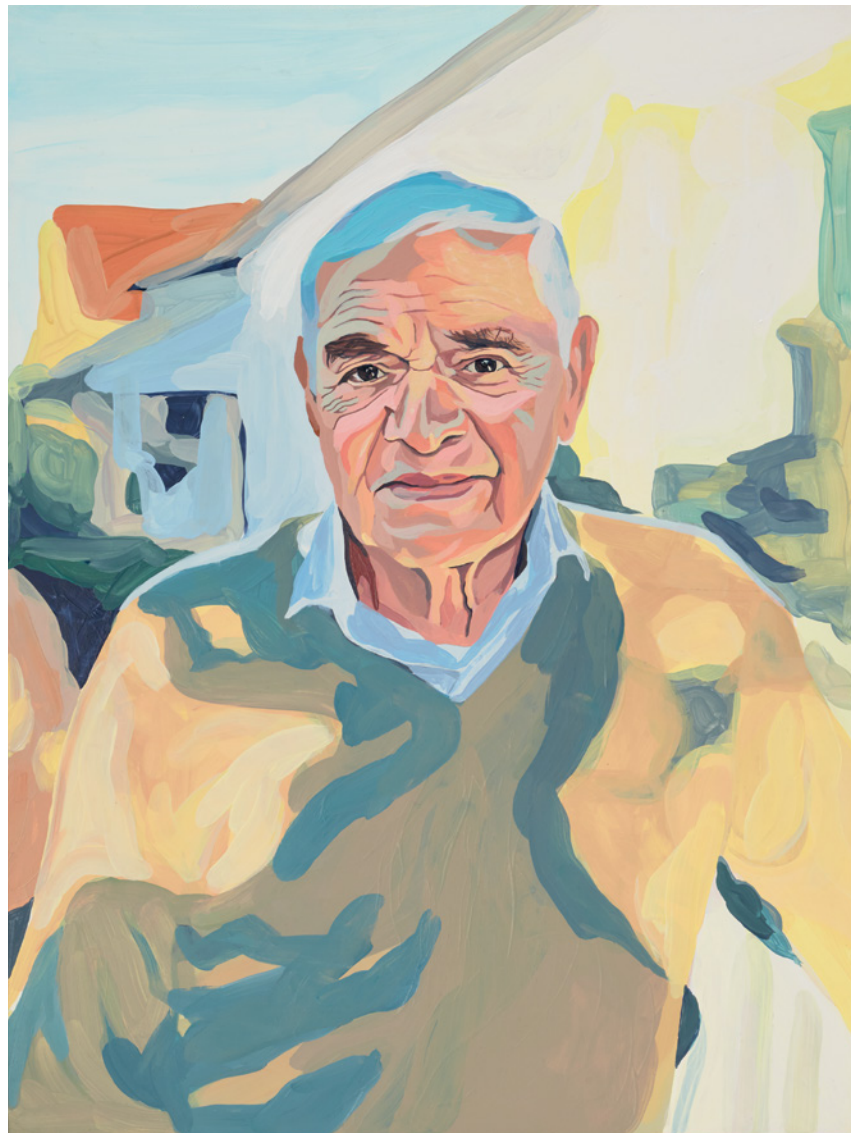
'As opposed to his more formal public persona, I tried to capture his gentleness,' she says, articulating a guiding principle of her portraiture, for which she is becoming known.

Perkins regularly draws on her family's rich photographic archive for source material, from which there is no shortage of inspiration. As well as the accomplishments of her 'Poppy Chicka', the artist's storied family includes activist Charles Perkins (her maternal grandfather), curator and writer Hetti Perkins (her mother) and filmmaker Rachel Perkins (her aunt and subject of her 2021 Archibald entry). In her own generation, her five siblings are already distinguishing themselves in acting, filmmaking, conservation, climate-change activism and athletics.

Perkins has been doing the family proud, too, distinguishing herself in the institutional art world at the same time as committing her talents to a range of community projects, from the restoration of the *Forty Thousand Years* mural in Redfern to a series of posters on climate change created in collaboration with the Town Camp artists of Alice Springs. For the 2021 Sydney Festival, she was commissioned to produce portraits of First >







Thea Anamara  
Perkins  
Poppy Chicka  
2020

Acrylic on clayboard,  
40.5 x 30.5 x 4 cm. Art  
Gallery of New South  
Wales. Purchased with  
funds provided by the  
Aboriginal Collection  
Benefactors' Group  
2020. © Thea Anamara  
Perkins.

of completion are leaning against the walls, lying on the desk or propped up on a pair of easels. Two long desks are strewn with enlarged photographs, large bottles of acrylic paint, screwed up paper, a spray bottle, dozens of brushes, rags, masking tape and pens and pencils. There is very little on the white walls, bar a couple of taped-up source photographs, and a small, exquisite landscape that earned her a finalist place in the Brett Whiteley Travelling Art Scholarship. A pair of low-maintenance potted plants sit on the windowsill, but other than these the room is unadorned – focused, ascetic, industrious. The ‘clutter’ is all work that is underway, unencumbered by the sentimental accretion of permanent occupancy or domestic spaces.

Just a handful of the works in progress are portraits, including a beautifully matt rendering of the cover of Charles Perkins’ 1975 autobiography *A Bastard Like Me* – bound for The Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards (NATSIAA) – and her entry for the 2021 Archibald Prize. With a knuckle-biting few days to go until the submission deadline, the background remains blank and she has sanded back one of the eyes, redoubling her efforts for similitude. ‘People are so attuned to facial features, so it could be a millimetre off and it doesn’t really look like them anymore,’ she explains, adding that she often finds herself sanding back minor details of a face until they are just right. Under a big deadline, Perkins prefers to work late into the night: ‘I find it takes my brain a while to fire up and get into the mode for painting, anyway.’

Since 2015, Rachel Perkins has been engaged in the Arrernte Women’s Project: an urgent undertaking to archive what remains in living memory of the Arrernte women’s songs – including the dances and stories and visual marks that accompany them. ‘Because I’ve been spending so much time with her in Alice over the last few years, I thought it would be a really lovely time to do a portrait of her and celebrate her amazing achievements.’

One of the songs recorded last year >

Nations people who had been integral to the event during Wesley Enoch’s directorship.

Already Perkins has been selected as an Archibald finalist three years in a row (her first portrait, in 2019, was of artist Christian Thompson). She won the Dreaming Award for an Emerging Artist in the 2020 First Nations Arts Awards, was a finalist in the 2019 Brett Whiteley Travelling Art Scholarship and was included in the 2019 Tarnanthi Festival at the Art Gallery of South Australia. In 2020 she was awarded The Alice Prize for a painting inspired by a photo of Charles Perkins with daughter Rachel during a land rights protest in Canberra.

‘It’s funny, often when I’m painting I’ll go with a compulsion of what to draw or what to paint and am purely in the process – I don’t

even understand what I’m doing,’ she says.

‘But I came across this term and it helps me articulate what I want to say about Aboriginal people and what we all know, as Aboriginal people, about our families – that they are beautiful and strong, and also to expand that narrative, because in a sea of bad news it is good to talk about what makes us strong.’

The term is ‘glimmer’ – the opposite, in psychological terms, of a trigger. ‘Where a trigger is something that’s stressful or traumatising, a glimmer is more about safety, connection, and regulation of the nervous system,’ she explains. ‘It’s a really beautiful concept, and something I definitely try and apply in my own work.’

In the studio, around a dozen small and medium-sized paintings in various stages



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particularly captivated Perkins with its lyrics – ‘I am a woman, I am in my dreaming and I am shimmering’ – a ‘powerful assertion’ that sparked a cascade of reflections for her, on energy and light, divinity and Country. For the portrait, Perkins first painted her aunt’s body in ochre with the designs that accompany that song, ‘a really beautiful moment’, before having her sit and producing source images for the composition. ‘I guess [this portrait] is also a gesture to the patriarchy that is so powerful in Aboriginal culture. Women really do hold everything together in just this extraordinary way, and have historically, and you have all these towering pillars of strength in our community – so it is also a nod to women.’ The powerful lyrics have also inspired the use of new materials, colours and subject matter in Perkins’ paintings, with the introduction of gold leaf and a fresh focus on landscape. On her return to Sydney from Alice

Springs, Perkins found herself at the beach at sunset. ‘There was a shimmer everywhere and I was photographing that,’ she says. ‘The beautiful thing about that concept and about the notion that the dreaming is omnipresent, is that even though the song is linked to Alice Springs and Country, I can experience it down here because it’s contiguous, it’s present.’ A landscape sitting in the corner of the studio depicts a harmony of sky, sand and trees, anchored by a powerful rock formation. ‘My grandfather was born at the [Alice Springs] Telegraph Station and it’s where he rests – where his ashes are – but it’s also where he spent his early life, because it’s where they had what was called the “Half-Caste Home”. ‘It’s totally linked to Pop, so all of us – if we’re ever in town – there’ll be a photo of it in the group chat because we all have a kind of pilgrimage to that spot.’ This is the third time Perkins has painted the location, including for her short-listed

entry to the Brett Whiteley Travelling Art Scholarship, and she is sure it won’t be the last. ‘It’s actually really nice going up to Alice Springs and working with the Tangentyere ladies and seeing how reiterative their work is. It’s often linked to telling the same story over and over and over, and it is so tied to family and it’s quite a beautiful thing. ‘I think there is a lot of pressure to always create something different, but they’ve been doing it for 30 years and it’s working for them.’

Pip Cummings is a Sydney-based writer.

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