

Why now is the right time for Thea Perkins to take on grandfather Charles' image



Thea Perkins with her work at N. Smith Gallery in Paddington.

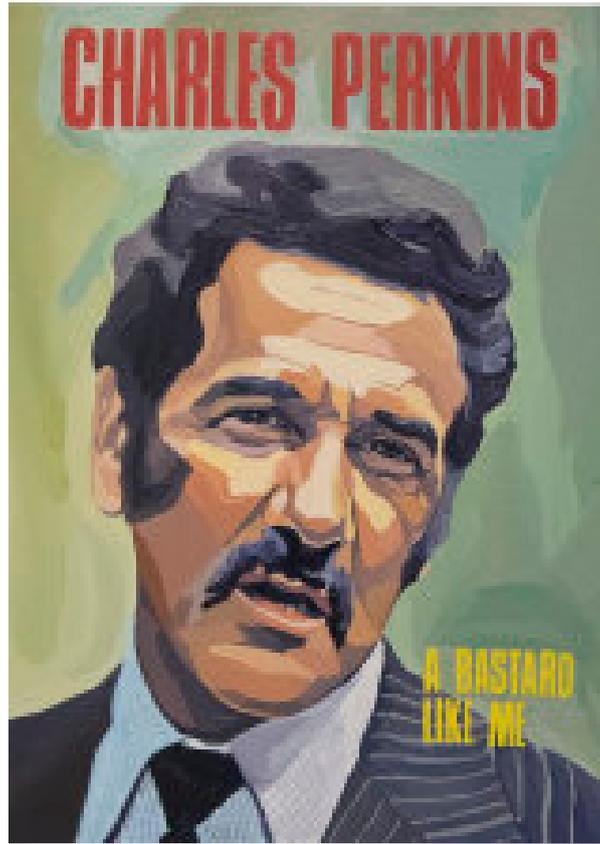
By Kerrie O'Brien
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For artist Thea Perkins finally making a portrait of her grandfather, Charles, has been a significant moment in her burgeoning career.

Charles is a towering figure in Australian history, a civil rights activist who led the Freedom Ride in 1965 to raise awareness of Indigenous issues. The first Aboriginal man to graduate from university, he went on to advocate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders throughout his life.

“It took me a long time to take the image on because there’s a lot to it,” says Perkins, an Arrernte and Kalkadoon woman. “It’s about my own personal connection to him and my understanding of him but it’s also about his legacy. And reconciling that with his public figure. I wanted to take this on because of what was happening politically, especially with the Black Lives Matter movement.”

She hopes the movement inspires a wider conversation but also conversations with more nuance. While hoping that momentum continues, she is not surprised to see change coming from citizens rather than politicians.



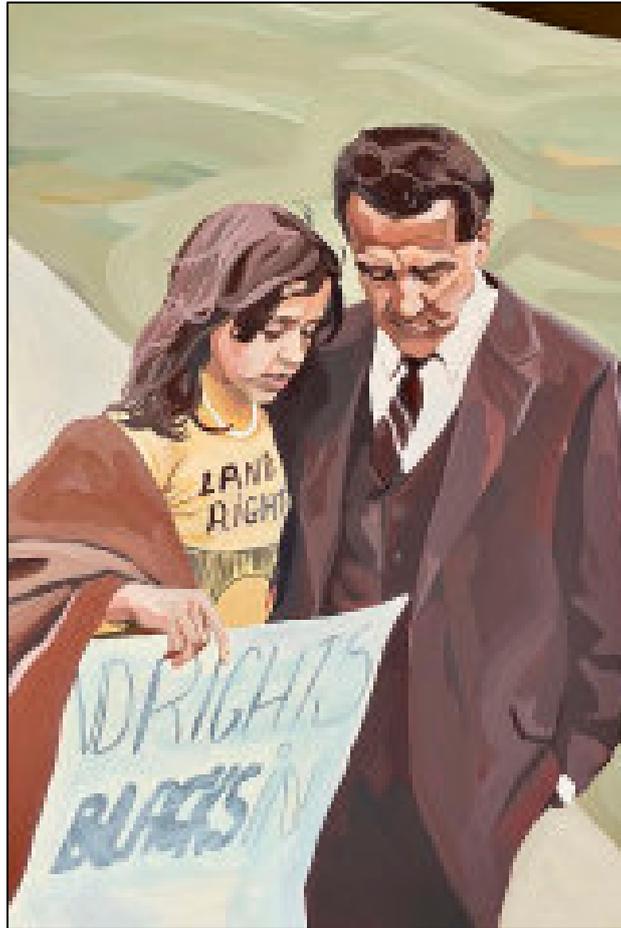
Thea Perkins' portrait of her grandfather, Charlie.

“All the big movements have always been people-powered and a communal effort,” she says. “But it is also reflecting on that time in politics when people did follow through on their convictions and follow through on the things they cared about, which doesn’t seem to be the case these days.”

Perkins says the image has been a big part of her family life for a long time – it appears on the cover of her grandfather’s 1975 autobiography, entitled *A Bastard Like Me*. She tried to capture many elements of him in the portrait. “There’s this bolshiness and cheekiness and boldness and also this undercurrent of sadness, which we do all share.”

A Bastard Like Me is a finalist in this year’s Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards, the country’s longest-running Indigenous art awards and one of its most prestigious. It showcases some of the best work by Indigenous artists, both established and emerging, traditional and contemporary. Usually awarded at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory in Darwin in August, the event will be staged online this year due to the pandemic.

Unveiling the work to show her mother, curator Hetti Perkins, and broader family was a big moment. “They all got a bit emotional. He was a very big family man and we have a lot of love for him, it’s very beautiful to show it to everyone.”



Tent Embassy by Thea Perkins, 2019, depicts the artist's grandfather Charles Perkins and aunt Rachel Perkins during a land rights protest outside Old Parliament House in Canberra.

The painting reimagines the book's cover, complete with the title, which Perkins knew she had to use in her piece. She hasn't used text in her work before. "A *Bastard Like Me*, it's been a really powerful phrase. It encapsulates that radical spirit, on a certain level, he never knew his father and it was definitely something he was called at the time, so it's shocking but to take that on self-referentially and make it this powerful thing, it's that spirit of the underdog and it really characterises his legacy. To take all of these things and give them back and own it in this humorous bold way ... it was amazing."

Perkins has had a busy 12 months, with her first major solo show at N. Smith Gallery, which explored the idea of "shimmer". The concept was gleaned from another project she's working on with her aunt Rachel, acclaimed writer, filmmaker and producer, best-known for *Radiance* and *Total Control*. Called Arrernte Women's Project, it involves recording the songs of the Aboriginal women from Alice Springs and surrounding areas in central Australia.

Shimmer is a concept that came through in one of the translations, words to the effect, "I am woman and I am shimmering".

"It's this idea of spiritual power, this beautiful joyful assertion of matriarchy. It's bringing those ideas to my paintings."

Perkins liked the idea of taking something ancient like the songs “and relating them to contemporary Aboriginal experience”.

“That’s the beauty of our culture, it’s this dynamic, adaptable thing,” she says. “Where you can have something ancient but what’s happening in the contemporary world also fits into it – it kind of bends but doesn’t break.”

In the past few years, Perkins has aimed to spend at least a month or two on country. Based in Sydney, her studio at Carriageworks has been shut down thanks to COVID; painting a landscape of Alice Springs in the first week of lockdown provided some relief.

In 2019, Perkins painted a portrait of Christian Thompson for the Archibald Prize. Thompson is also a finalist in this year’s NATSIAAs, with a work titled *The Meaning of Fire*, a four-panelled flower wall, measuring 2.5m by 2.5m.

“My work seems to be getting bigger,” he laughs. “The flower walls capture a lot of the motifs from my 21-year career. Historically I was wearing the flowers and now it’s like the flowers are wearing me. I’m immersed in the constellation.”

Based in Melbourne, Thompson created the piece immediately after lockdown last year. During that long-enforced pause, he “decided to add trauma to trauma” and watched the whole three seasons of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, then watched *Twin Peaks* again. “With the anxiety of counting the numbers every day and the mounting cases, you sort of had to go somewhere.”

That period “has gotten me back to a pure place, reiterated what’s important to me about my work.”

“You were disconnected with other people but it was an opportunity to connect with yourself.”

He says he knows a lot of people who after that experience last year are moving to the country or ending a bad relationship or changing their job. “People are making big decisions. Lockdown gave them a moment to go, is this where I want to be or who I want to be?”

That process is what inspired the name of his NATSIAA piece. “I got to reconnect with my own fire in my belly, the thing that drives you to do what you do. I needed that break in order for that flame to get brighter again.”

“For me, it reinforced and galvanised the connection I have with my own practice. When that ability to communicate was taken away, it highlighted how profoundly important my work is,” he says. “Once I could get back in the studio, I’ve hardly been out of it.”