

Vincent & Erico

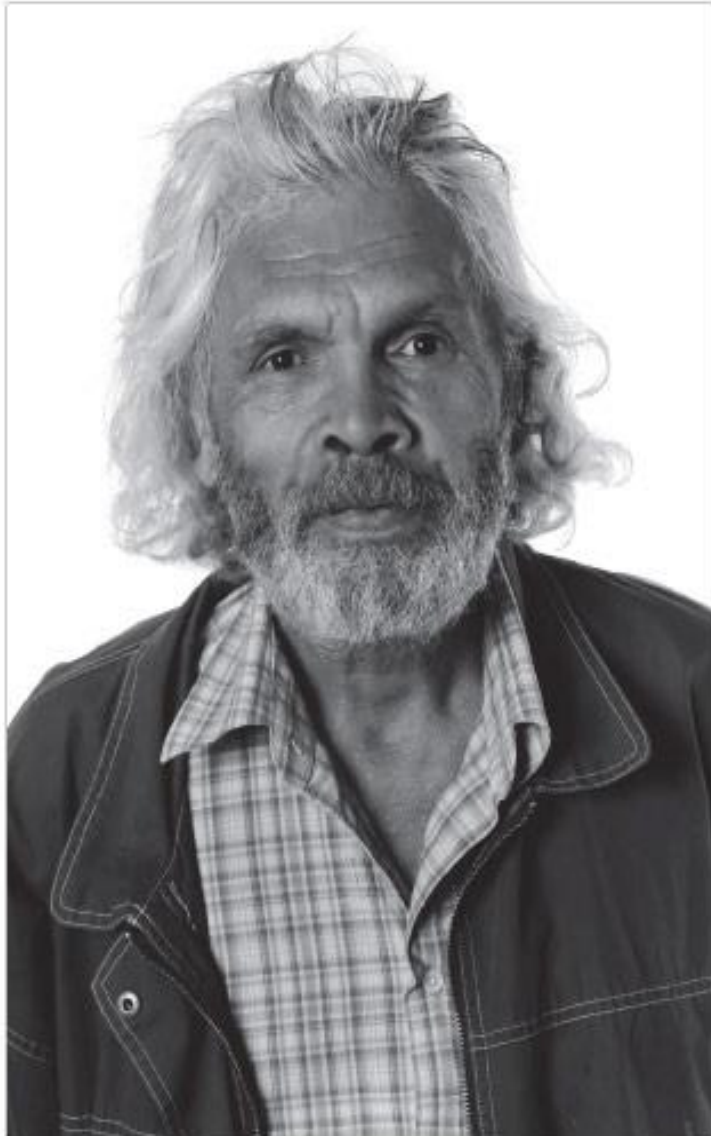
some people are stories





Vincent Perico

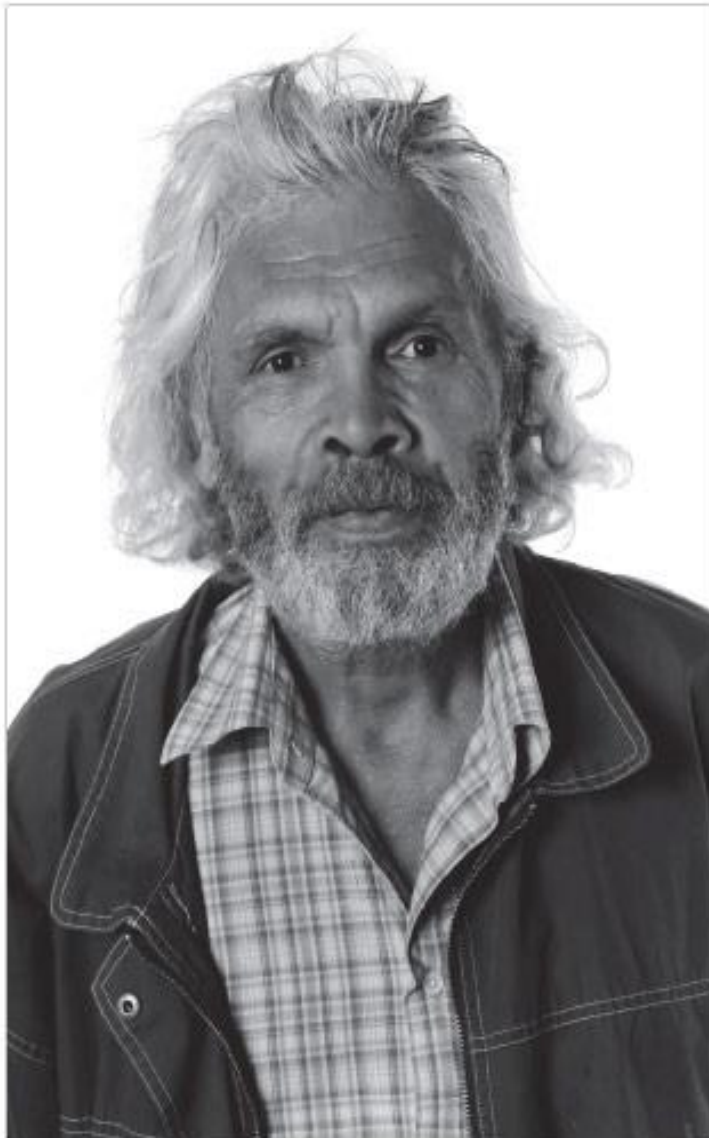
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Foreword

Some people are stories. The paintings of Vincent Serico come out of two deep wells – the history of Aboriginal people and their aspirations to live their daily lives as honest free people, and the history of the Australian nation, its origins, legacy, and responsibility. If a ‘black armband’ view of history can be claimed, so can a ‘white blindfold’ view, together in co-existence. No-where is this more evident than in the state of Queensland.

It was no accident that, after a first book dealing with the history of colonial contact in Tasmania, historian Henry Reynold’s second dealt with the same subject in Queensland. Further back, in 1968, W. E. H. Stanner in his influential Boyer Lecture of that year, *After The Dreaming*, spoke of the ‘great Australian silence’; about the ‘river of blood’ running through Aboriginal and colonial history. These are the rivers of Vincent Serico.



The rivers that brought us life also brought death in the cavalcade of colonial explorers, squatters, troopers, native police and government officials who followed them to claim, conquer and massacre. The consequent re-drawing of physical and social borders brought the 'shadow' reverse side to every official history embodied in the official, 'white blindfold' view of history - the vexed obsession of the revisionist 'history wars' of the Howard years [1996-2007].

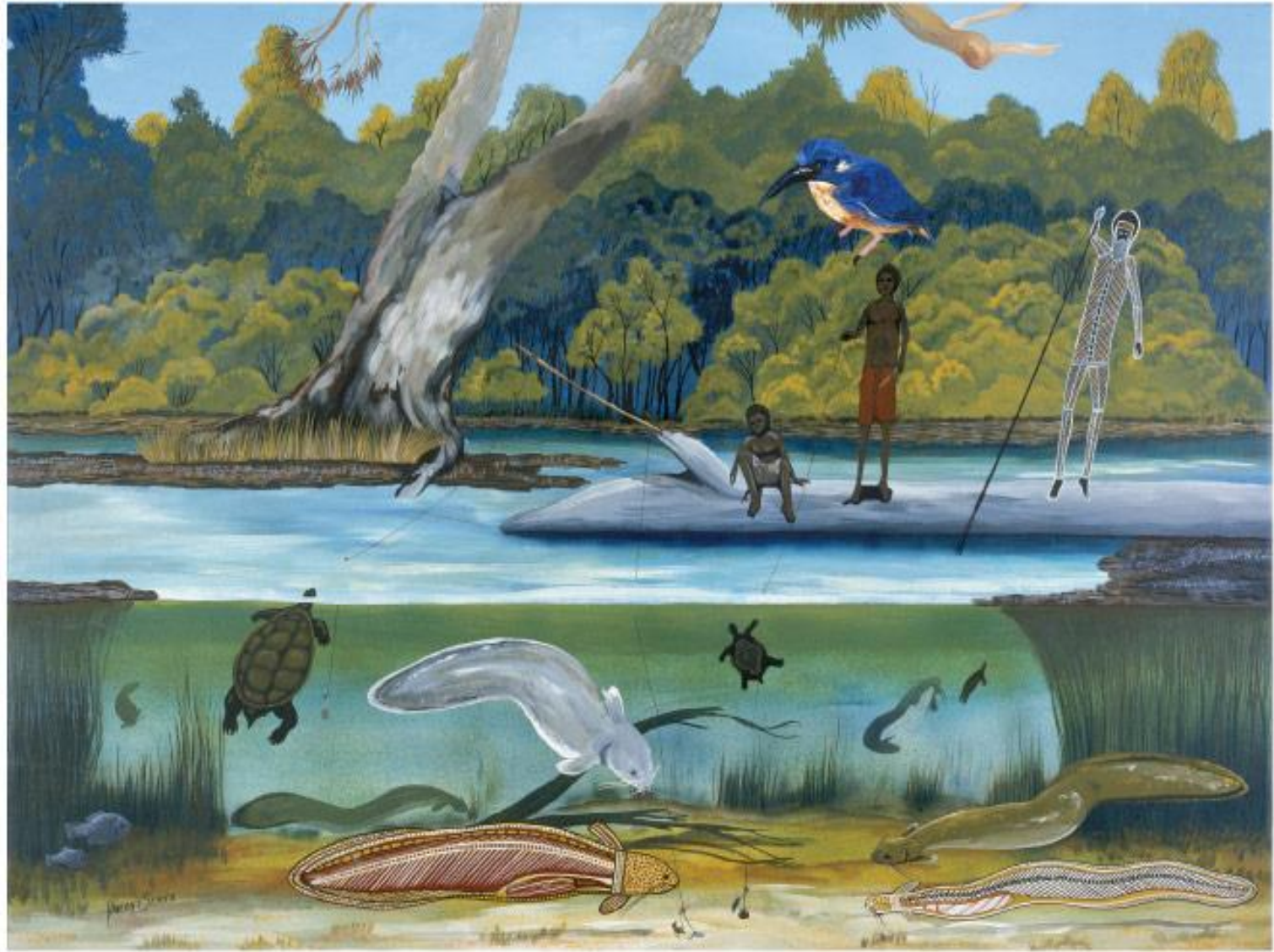
The artist's art is to acknowledge Aboriginal existence in a way that gives comfort, while recognising past pain, sorrow, longing and loss, and leaving a trace of them in the hearts of others. The artist's central attribute is to make the art 'sing' in a positive winning stroke, rather than creating a resigned memorial.

1. Baramba Creek 1994

Private Collection

I remember the days when I was young, of fishing and swimming at Baramba Creek. We learnt to catch fish in the traditional way with the barbed spear and waited for the catfish to build his stone nest in the shallow water. We cooked the fish and the turtle in the coals on the bank while the kingfisher watched over us. Every time I was looking in the water I was looking for the shadows of the old-fella's behind them because word was said that when it was dark, you can see the blackfellas in the water. The memories are of carefree days. Now another group of children are there and they too are learning the ways of Baramba Creek, in the sunshine and the shadow.

Vincent Serico brochure text, Baramba Visions 1994

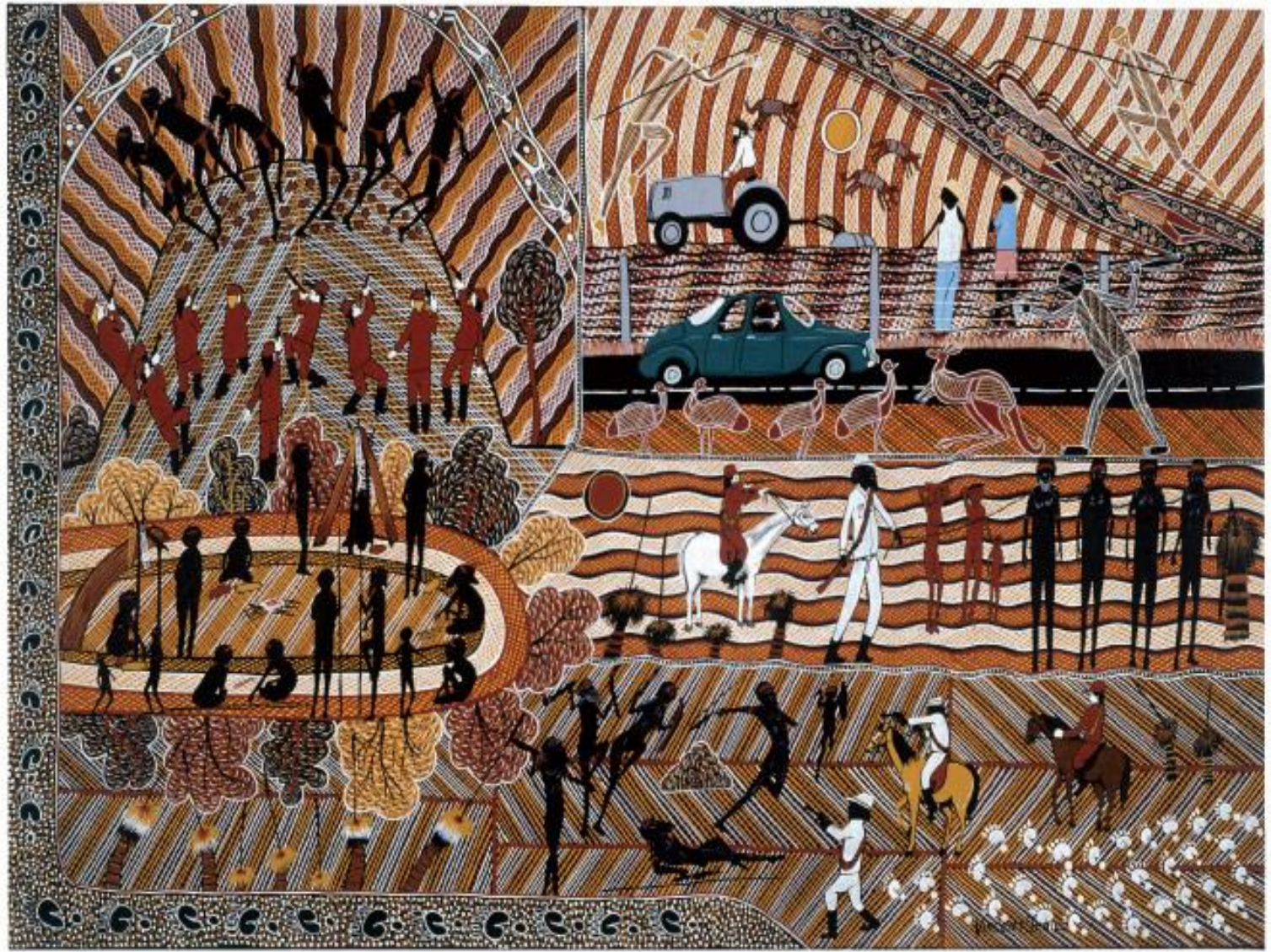


2. Toowoomba 1993

Collection: Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery

This is about the settlement of Toowoomba. First the bullocks and the early farmers. The people fight for their land, but troopers and the trackers come. The trackers are brought in from down south, the troopers know not to use local trackers. The young men make a stand on the Table Top, at the top of the hill. They escape for a while but the troopers bring them back in chains. The red sun is for the blood on the land, the people are dispossessed. All the local tribes are forced to march to Taroom. Some are sent to Woorabinda, Cherbourg, Baramba and mixed up with the Waka Waka people. Now the sun shines on the white man. The black people are gone but the land is waiting.

Vincent Serico brochure text, Baramba Visions 1994



3. Lightning Man 1992

*Collection: Queensland Art Gallery,
Gallery of Modern Art*

There are many stories of the Lightning Man I've heard all around the country. The spirit of the Lightning Man lives in deep waterholes. Much of the time he lives peacefully. The people of that area know he is easily angered. Then he leaps out of the water into the sky, creating ferocious storms and sends down lightning to frighten the people. In creation-time, the Lightning Man had two daughters who were promised to two old men of another tribe. These old men were too old for the daughters so they decided to run away and look for younger men who were more suitable as husbands. Their Father, who was missing the daughters, went looking for them, so he came as the lightning man. He came with thunder, striking the ground and trees with lightning (the lightning and thunder before the rain). Their Mother, fearful of what the lightning would do ran after him crying. This became the rainy season.

Vincent Serico brochure text, Baramba Visions 1994 and Vincent Serico gallery notes Fire-Works gallery 2006

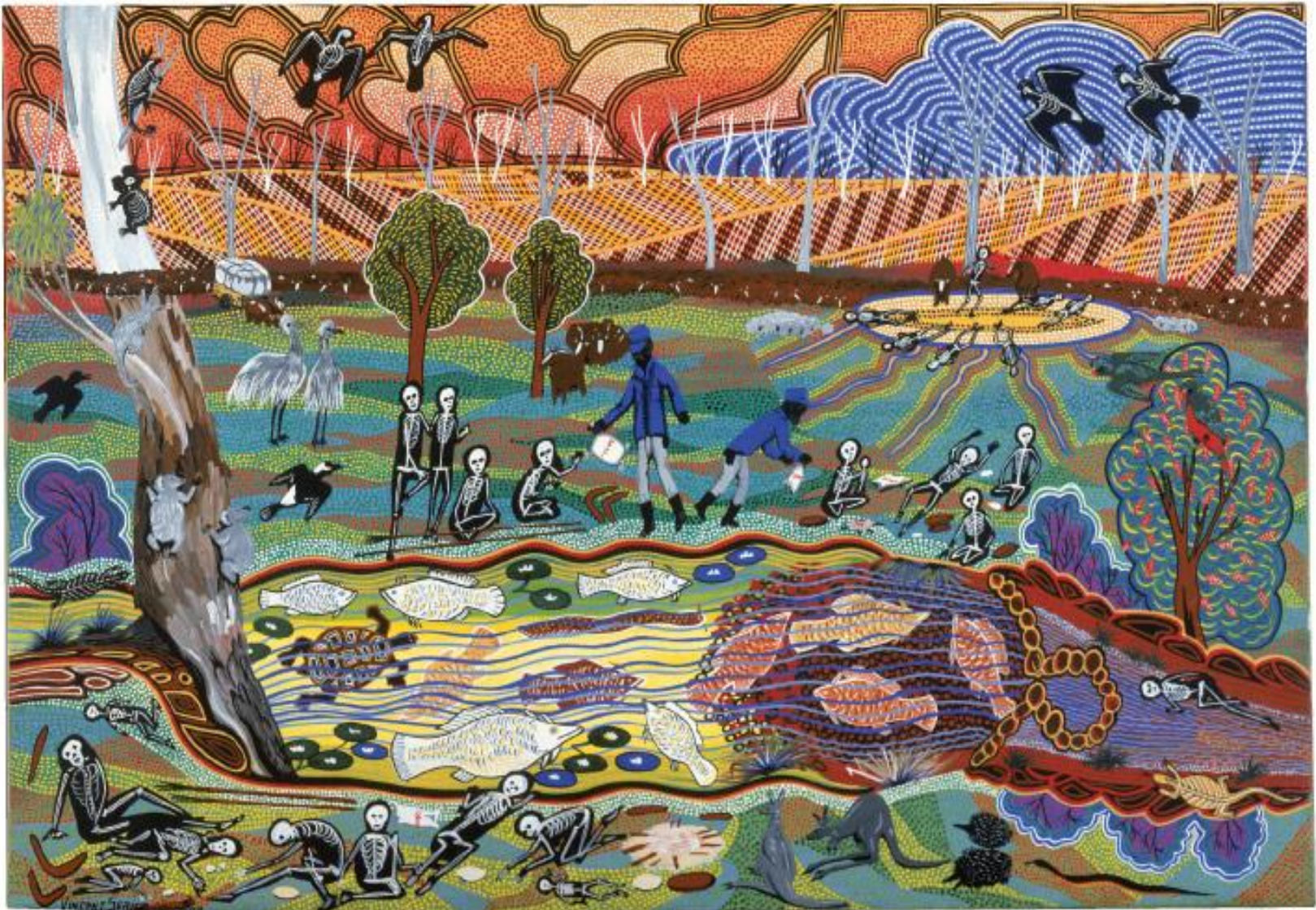


4. Kilcoy Massacre 1 1993

Private Collection

I get a lot of stories by reading history books and a lot of stories from listening to old people. This painting tells the tragic tale of guilt and betrayal by some trackers of their own people at Kilcoy in South East Queensland around the 1840s. Trackers were brought down from different tribes to hunt and trap those people who were fighting for their land. This was seen as causing trouble for the police and the white settlers. The tracker was responsible for giving the people rations of flour and sugar laced with arsenic. These deaths continued after the Kilcoy Massacre and caused revenge and resentment from everyone.

Vincent Serico brochure text, Baramba Visions 1994 and Vincent Serico interview with Michael Eather 1996



5. Deaths In Custody 1994

*Collection: Queensland Art Gallery,
Gallery of Modern Art*

When a person is confused or anxious, full of guilt and remorse, at odds with his Mother's love and Father's teachings, to place him alone in his anxiety brings despair. Mopoke the owl comes, he watches and calls to the lost one, then he is gone. All is quiet. Life is quiet.

Vincent Serico brochure text, Baramba Visions 1994

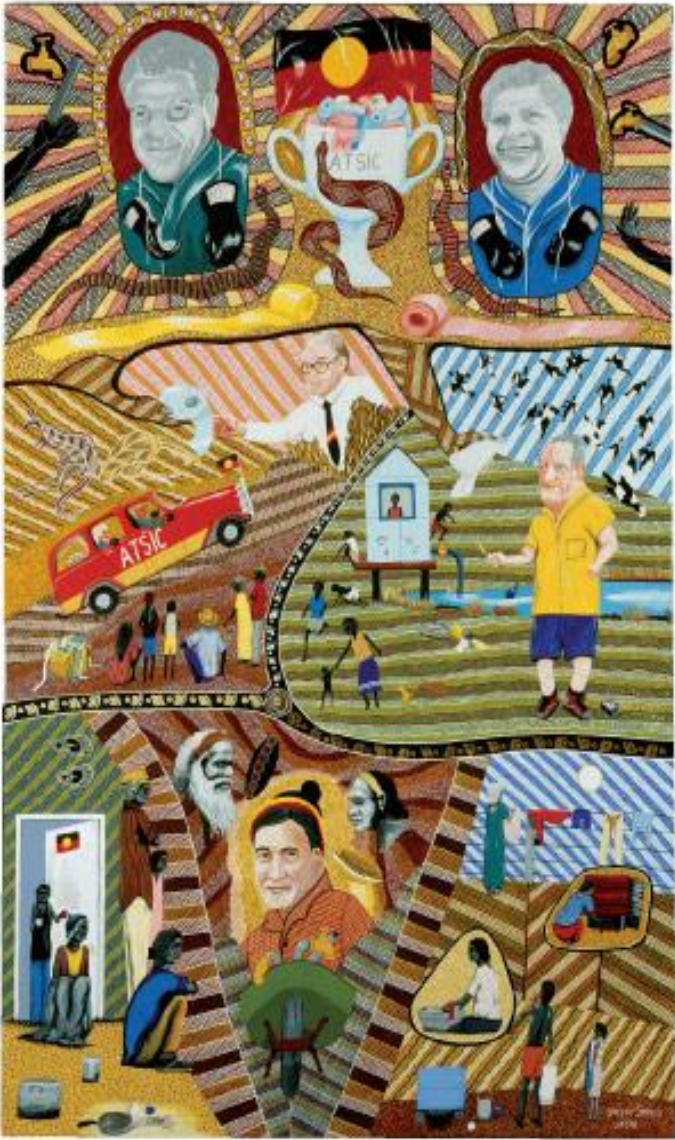


6. A.T.S.I.C. 1994

Collection: National Gallery of Australia

I painted this after watching a TV program where I saw Charlie Perkins and Lois O'Donoghue arguing about Aboriginal politics, leadership and money. They've got boxing gloves around their necks like prize fighters but we are fighting over a trophy full of toilet paper! That's what the budgets are worth. Graham Richardson is holding one he promised. Many of our people live in 'Third World' conditions. Some people have no running water and ATSIC bureaucrats drive past us in flash cars. I like to paint the old Aboriginal people and the current leaders of our country today. Some have let us down, some are trying hard to go forward.

Vincent Serico interview with Michael Eather 1996

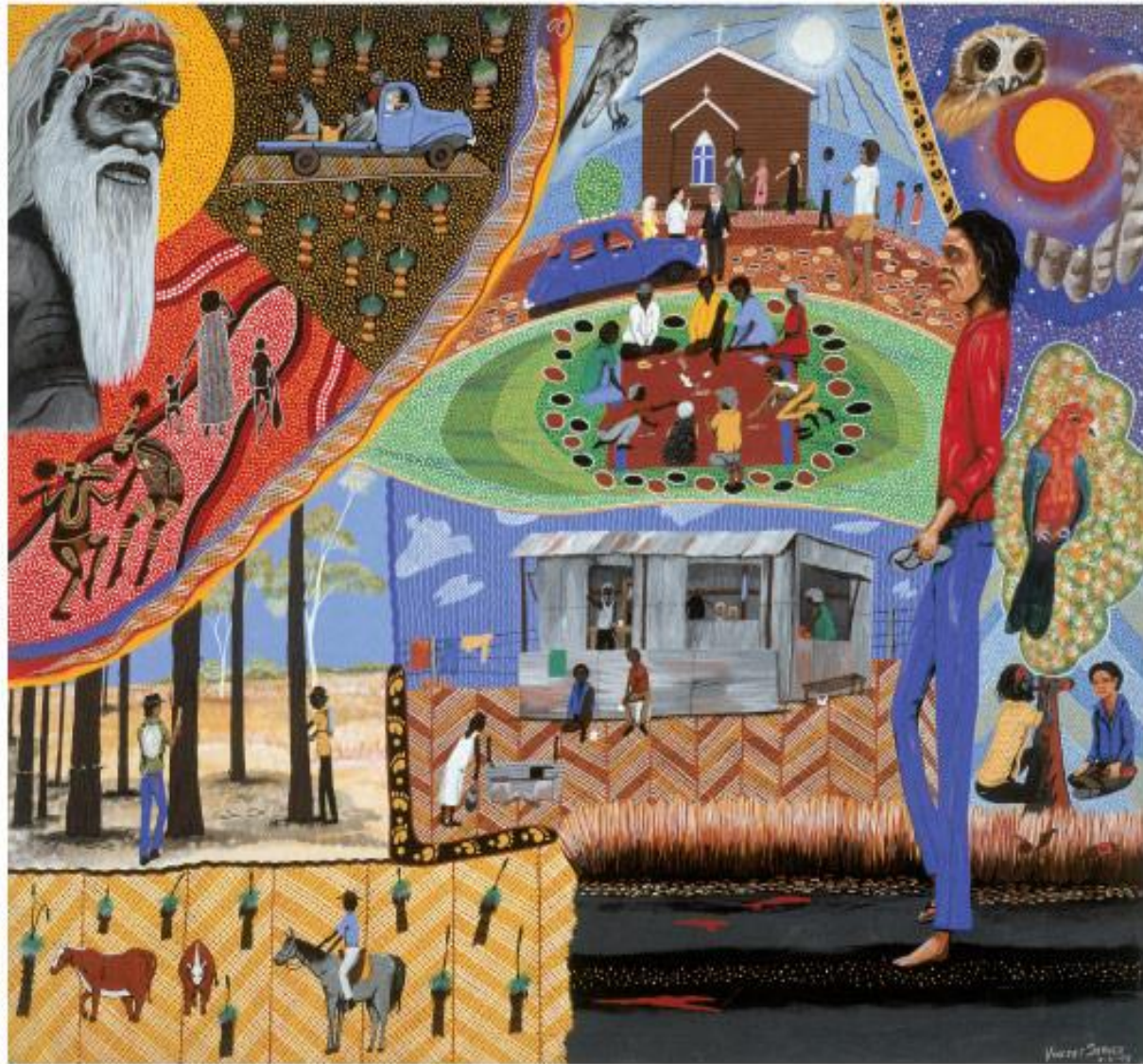


7. The Road to Cherbourg 1993

City of Ipswich Collection, Ipswich Art Gallery

These are the people getting taken away from out west, put on the cattle trucks, taken to the railway station and moved to Cherbourg. That's the church there. We spent more time gambling than we did going to church, because in those days you weren't allowed to go off the reserve. The white man, he did go to church with us but why did he keep us all under lock and key? This is our life cycle on the reserve: captivity, arrival, adapting and mock release. The wagtail is the messenger, the owl is death and the parrot represents happy times. [Actually] it's not the road to Cherbourg; it's the road to Murgon. That's a mate of mine, his thong was broken and it was about daybreak. We have the pine trees and that's where we used to sit down under the trees. We'd have a good laugh. But it was killing us, the alcohol. When we left the mission, some went to cattle stations. We were ring-barking; we'd end up in Charter's Towers, or down New South Wales, wherever the truck took us. Most of the time we slept in yumbas and shanty towns.

Vincent Serico transcript interview with Danica Eather 2007



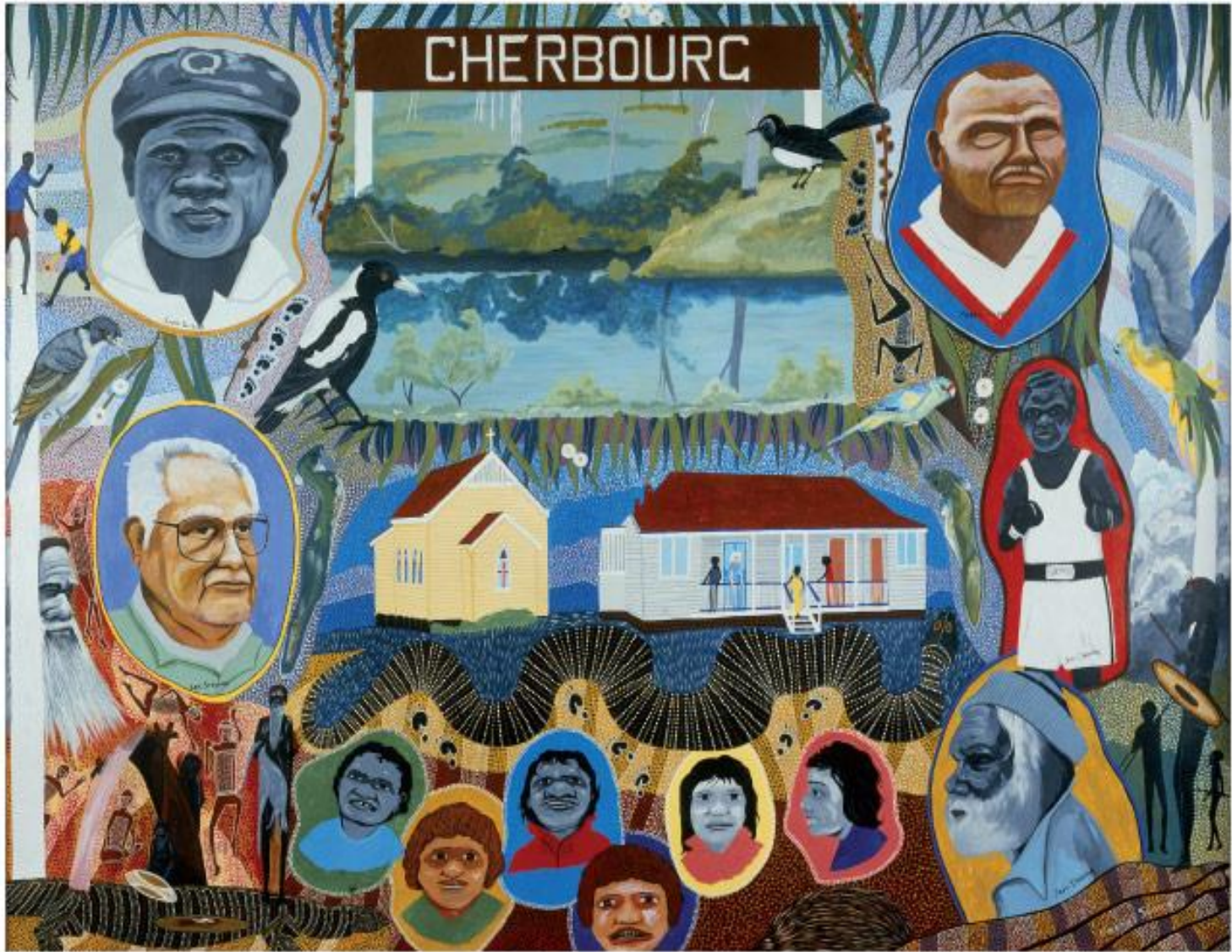
8. Cherbourg 1994

Private Collection

I was born in Brisbane and Dad took us back to Cherbourg when I was a baby. When my Dad got back to Cherbourg and they found he had leprosy he had to go to Phantom Island off Palm Island. This painting is about Cherbourg the mission as a place full of different people and families. We were all mixed up and looking for our mob. We were raised in dormitories and times were hard but we had our heroes, sporting heroes like Eddie Gilbert and story tellers who reminded us of life before the mission.

Vincent Serico transcript interview with Danica Eather 2007

CHERBOURC

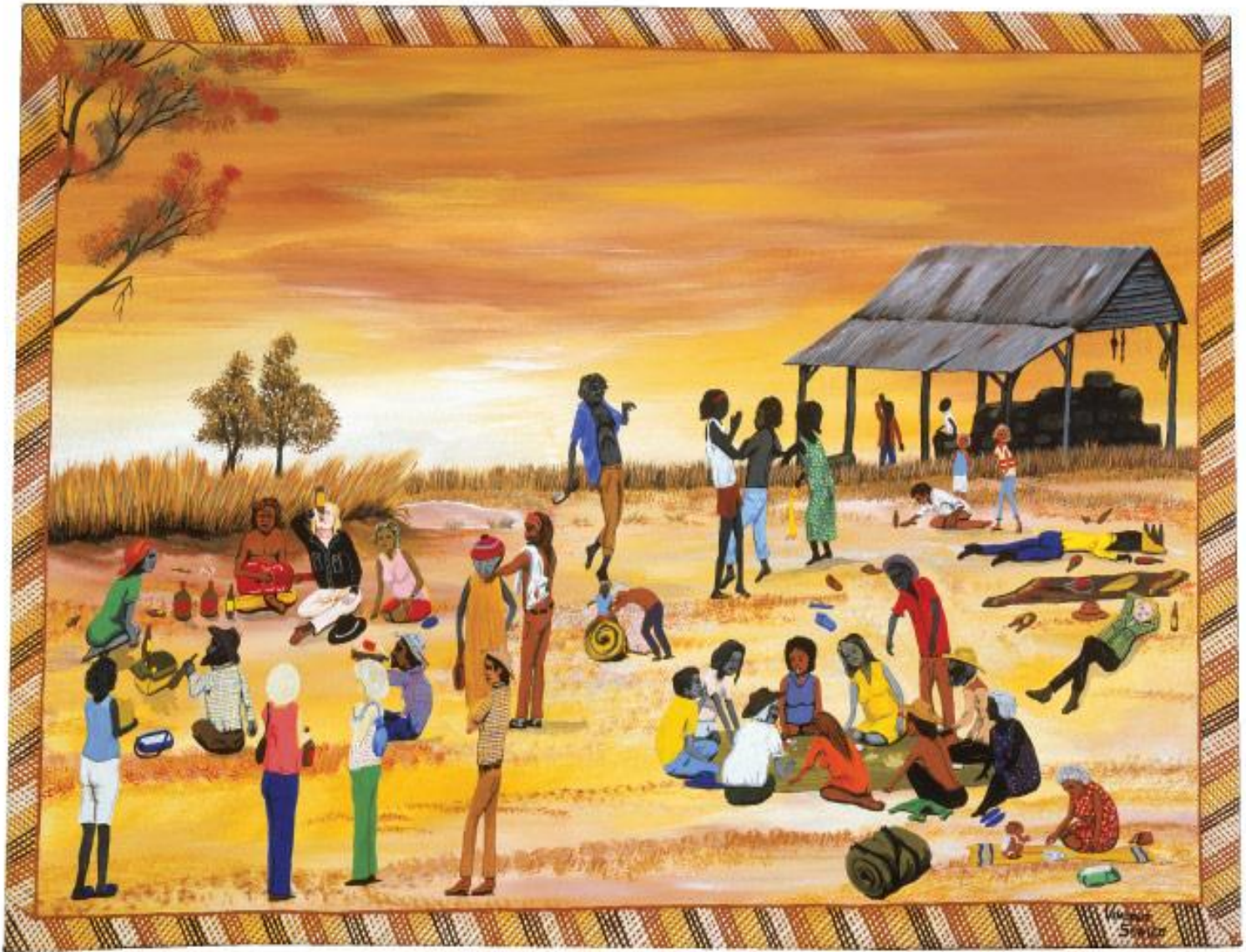


9. Pension Day Corroboree 1993

Private Collection

I call this painting "Pension Day Corroboree" because every pension day it was pay day for our women. They'd always have a card game going; someone would have a drinking party going, always a fight over women. You always see some blokes spewing up and the kids trying to roll him. Drunks lying around and if you look hard enough you always see a couple of boys on their own having a 'smallie'. It could be in Mornington Island or it could happen anywhere traveling around Queensland. That is what it was like in most of the towns that had 'yumbas' in them.

Vincent Serico transcript with Danica Eather 2007

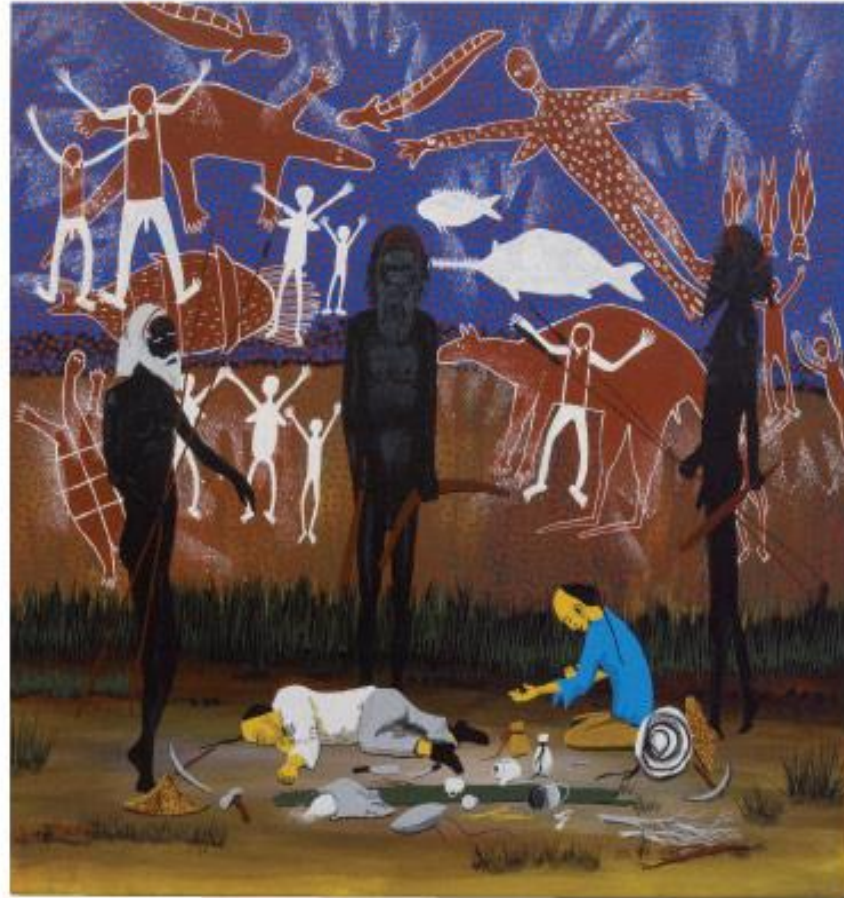


10a. Cooktown Miners I 2007

*Collection: Queensland Art Gallery,
Gallery of Modern Art*

You see when the miners left Cooktown to go up to the Palmer River, the troopers went first, the Aboriginal troopers and then the white miners and they made sure the Chinese were behind them because it was easier for the Aborigines to pick the Chinese off. Some of the Aborigines there were cannibals, so the white man said, 'you go behind us', because they knew the Aborigines were after intruders. The white man did not want to get eaten so he let the Chinese come behind them walking up those tracks. They were easier targets. When the Aborigines got the Chinese they used to break their arms and legs and tie them by their pigtail to trees or leave them in a cave to eat them later on. It was like a fridge, they would eat one today and tomorrow another one. That's why they broke their arms and legs, so they could not get away. I am only painting the truth.

Vincent Serico transcript with Danica Eather 2007

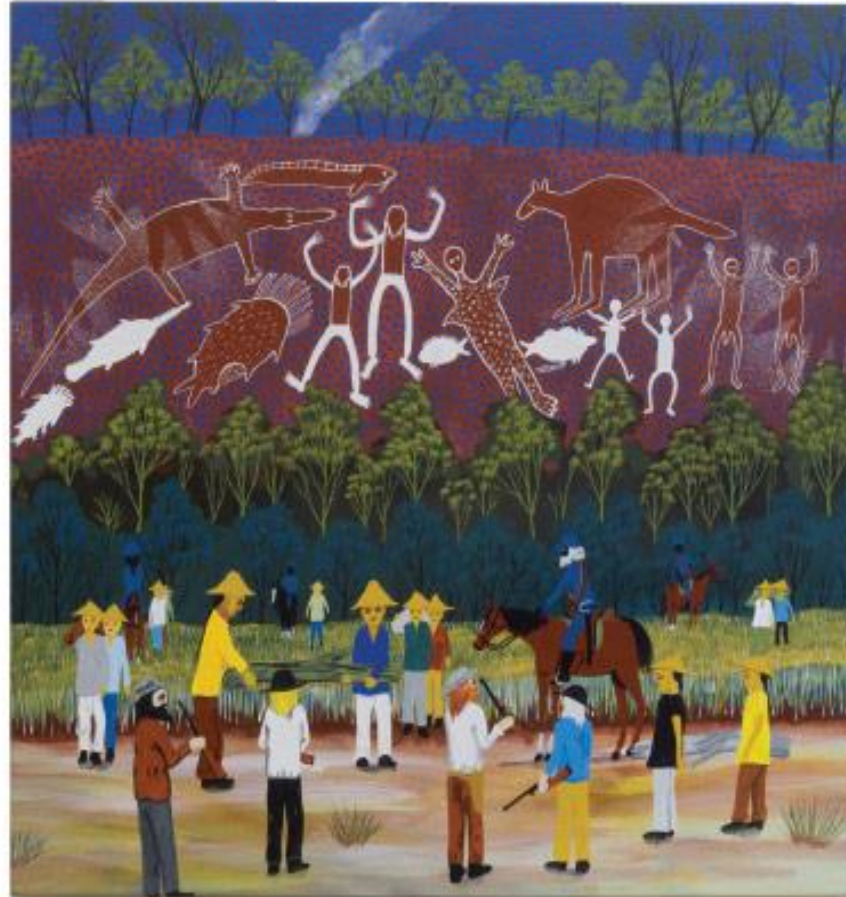


10b. Cooktown Miners II 2007

*Collection: Queensland Art Gallery,
Gallery of Modern Art*

That painting is about the miners going to the gold fields. The troopers they saw too much smoke on the escarpment and he told the white man that there were Aborigines around. They were up near the Laura River to get water and found big mob of Aboriginal footprints. Something's going to happen, they could see too much smoke on the horizon so they say to the Chinese, 'carry out all the logs and build a barricade'. Just before daybreak the Aborigines attacked them and they fought. In the background are Quinken paintings. They are all around the Quinken caves, paintings from the local Kuku Yalanji tribe.

Vincent Serico transcript with Danica Eather 2007



11a. Cooktown Miners III 2007

*Collection: Queensland Art Gallery,
Gallery of Modern Art*

The Aborigines from there have tied the Chinese to the tree for tomorrow's meal... legs broken, arms broken.

Vincent Serico transcript with Danica Eather 2007



11b. Cooktown Miners IV 2007

*Collection: Queensland Art Gallery,
Gallery of Modern Art*

They are coming back from the goldfield when the gold ran out. They did not make it. They did not find the gold. On the way back some were crawling on their hands and knees, no pick and shovel. They just wanted to get back to Cooktown but the Aborigines were still there. Some of them befriended the white miners and helped them get back to Cooktown.

Vincent Serico transcript with Danica Eather 2007



12. Black Mountain 1995

Collection: Singapore Art Museum

The mountain is certainly significant for the Aborigines. Kalkajaka is what they call it, the name meaning “the place of the spear” or more loosely translated as “mountains of death.” The Aboriginal stories of how it evolved certainly add to the mystery of this incredible mountain range. The Aboriginal belief is that the mountain originated in the dreamtime with a man, being similar to a medicine man and also a chameleon, who had the taste for human flesh. He killed and ate a young chief and so was banished and fled to the mountains, occasionally surfacing to eat a human or two from his own tribe. On his last venture out of the mountains he turned into a goanna to escape his angry fellow tribe members and had the misfortune of being struck by lightning. Being no ordinary goanna he exploded and left large piles of charred rock everywhere.

www.castleofspirits.com/blackmount.html



13. Carnarvon Collision (Big Map) 2006

*Collection: Queensland Art Gallery,
Gallery of Modern Art*

In "Big Map" I wanted to paint all the sites that I've been thinking about and heard about. It's my Grandfather's country. This is about how the white man first came down onto Jiman country. He came down along the Dawson and followed the path of where the Aborigines always camped. He settled into the Dawson, he brought cattle and sheep with him. The Aborigines found that they were easier to kill than the kangaroos. Most of these dots [concentric circles] represent different campsites along the Dawson. If you stand up from the escarpment and you look down on Arcadia Valley and look at the Dawson River flowing through it, you can see palm trees, grass trees, you can see all types of trees. This painting is like an Aboriginal map, and where the Jiman and Mandanangi tribal boundaries are.

Vincent Serico transcript with Danica Eather 2007



14. Black Policeman meets the Jiman 2003

Private Collection

When the black troopers went to my country, my old Grandfather's country, he came peacefully first. He came with the green leaf in his hand and a sword on the ground. The Aborigines did the same. He came with only bush in his hand, no weapon. They were friends. This painting is about that time. After the Hornet Bank massacre – or Hornet Bank payback - everything changed. They came with the sword in their hand and club in the other hand. They came to kill each other.

Vincent Serico transcript with Danica Eather 2007

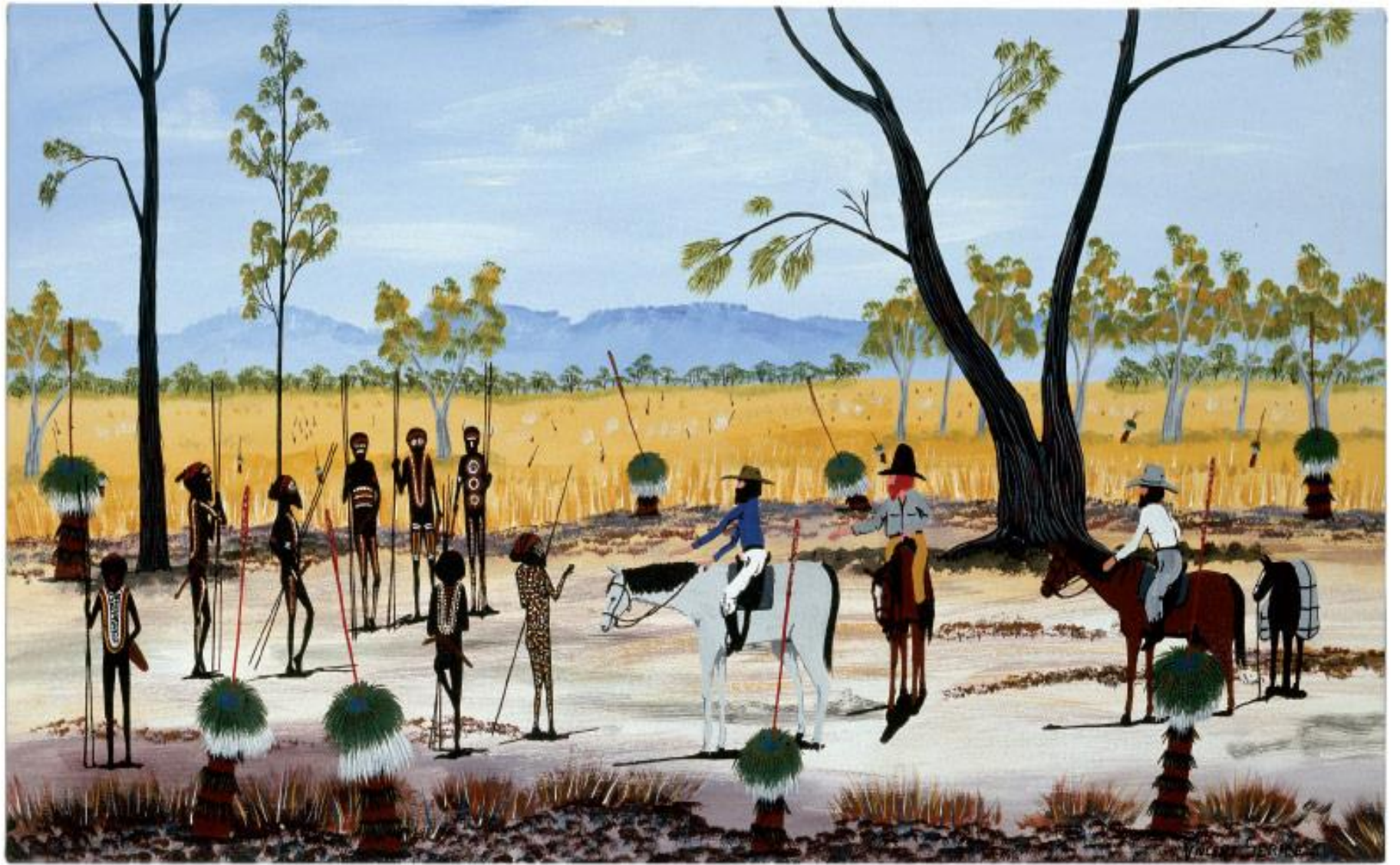


15. Thomas Mitchell looking for Leichhardt 2003

Private Collection

When Thomas Mitchell came onto Mandanangi country, the first Aboriginals to meet him were old Bussamarai and his seven sons. Thomas Mitchell had two more riders with him and that was the first time Thomas Mitchell and Bussamarai met. It was peaceful because Thomas Mitchell wasn't staying in the country, he was only passing through, and so they gave him permission to pass through. They weren't bringing sheep and cattle and going to live there forever. So they thought.

Vincent Serico transcript with Danica Eather 2007

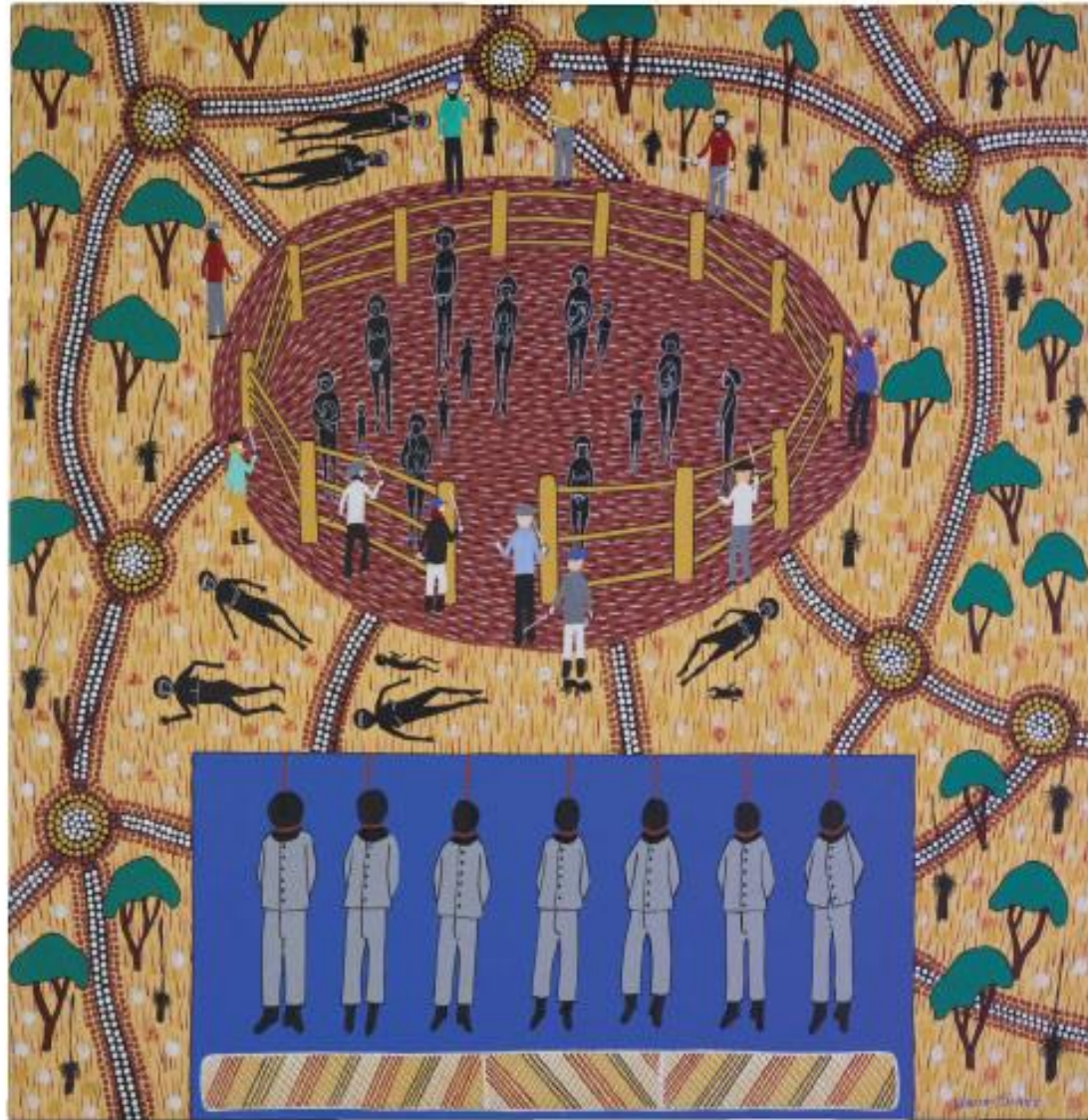


16. Myall Creek Massacre 2002

Collection: National Museum of Australia

There were many massacres that we know something about, some we know nothing about. The massacre at Myall Creek down in New South Wales in the 1830s was reported and you can read about it as well. Everyone knew about this. It shows the dead Aborigines lying around, women and babies cut down by swords. It shows the white men who were found guilty and were hung for their crime.

Vincent Serico in conversation with Michael Eather 2004



17. Hornet Bank Payback 2006

Private Collection

This story is about the massacre at Hornet Bank station in 1857. You see, the Fraser brothers, or Fraser family, they owned Hornet Bank. After work they would go down and take one of the young women, drag them back to the stock yard and rape her. So, after a while, the Jiman people couldn't take it. They told the boy, who worked on Hornet Bank, they warned him to keep his mouth shut and to kill all the dogs. The boy went and killed all the dogs. The Aborigines came then. It was not an all out war, it was just payback time and they killed the family that lived there, the Fraser family. They raped the women too! Only one boy got away. He rode back and he told people. I think it was Ipswich where he came from. That's how come they massacred most of my Grandfather's people, the Jiman people. So with just one payback and they called it a massacre? It was a real massacre, they massacred us. It was just payback to us.

Vincent Serico transcript with Danica Eather 2007



18. Min Min Light 1995

Private Collection

Some Aborigines up around the Mt. Isa area that I was talking to came from Lake Nash and they were telling me about the Min Min light. I'd never seen one but a man told me that the Min Min light is looking after us and he said that's why we don't run. He said when you walk towards the Min Min light it's got figures around it dancing. The Aborigine and his missus are looking at the dance of the Min Min light - the hand and the eye represents the Min Min light that you're looking at. Nobody can hold him but he's looking at you all the time.

Vincent Serico transcript with Danica Eather 2007

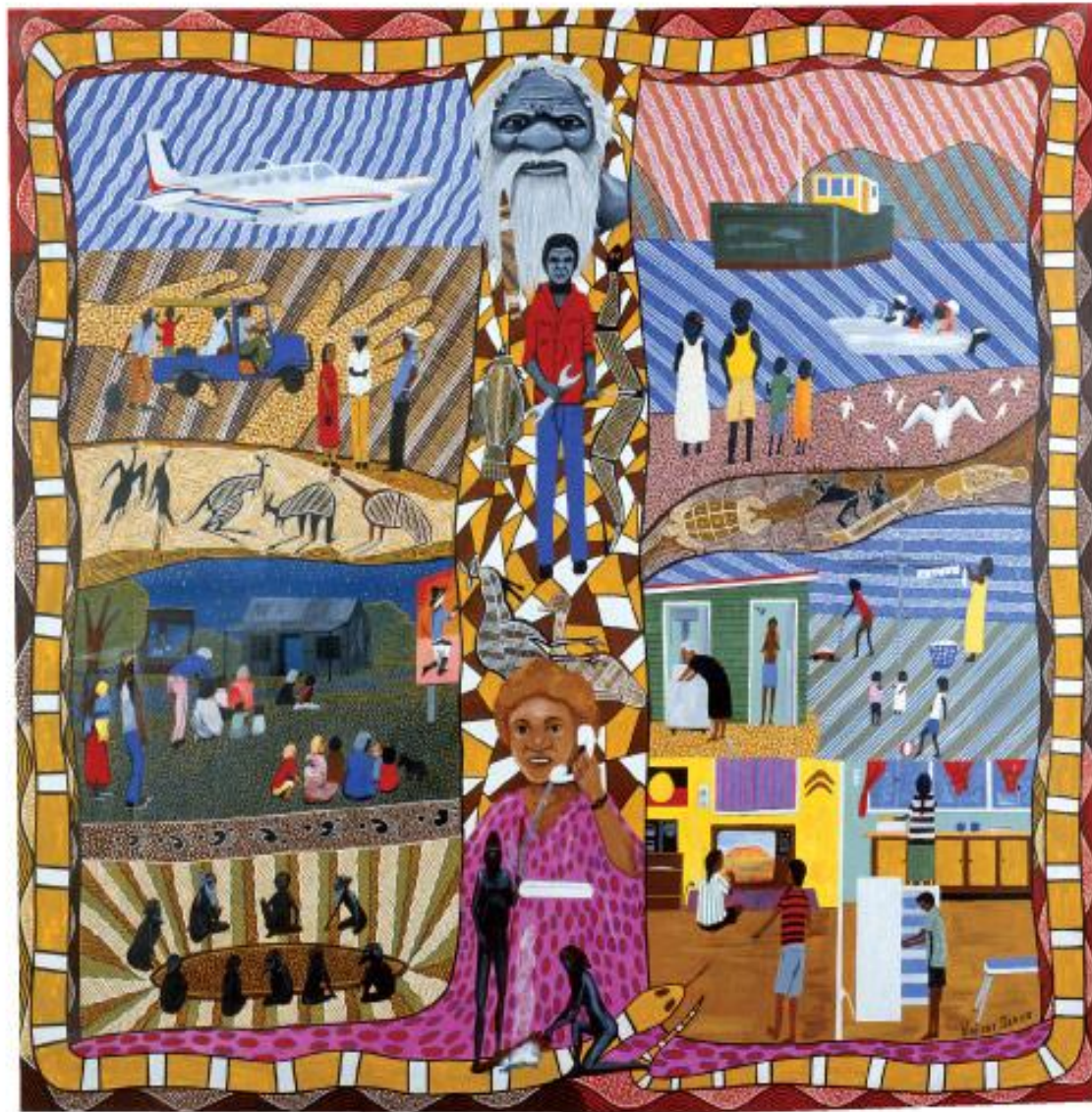


19. Technology 1994

City of Ipswich Collection, Ipswich Art Gallery

This is about how lifestyle has brought on so many changes for us. We used to have natural ways of living and now mechanisation has taken over. We use it, and we all live in this world of today and we talk about tomorrow but sometimes we are thinking of other worlds that belong to yesterday.

Vincent Serico in conversation notes with Michael Eather 1999

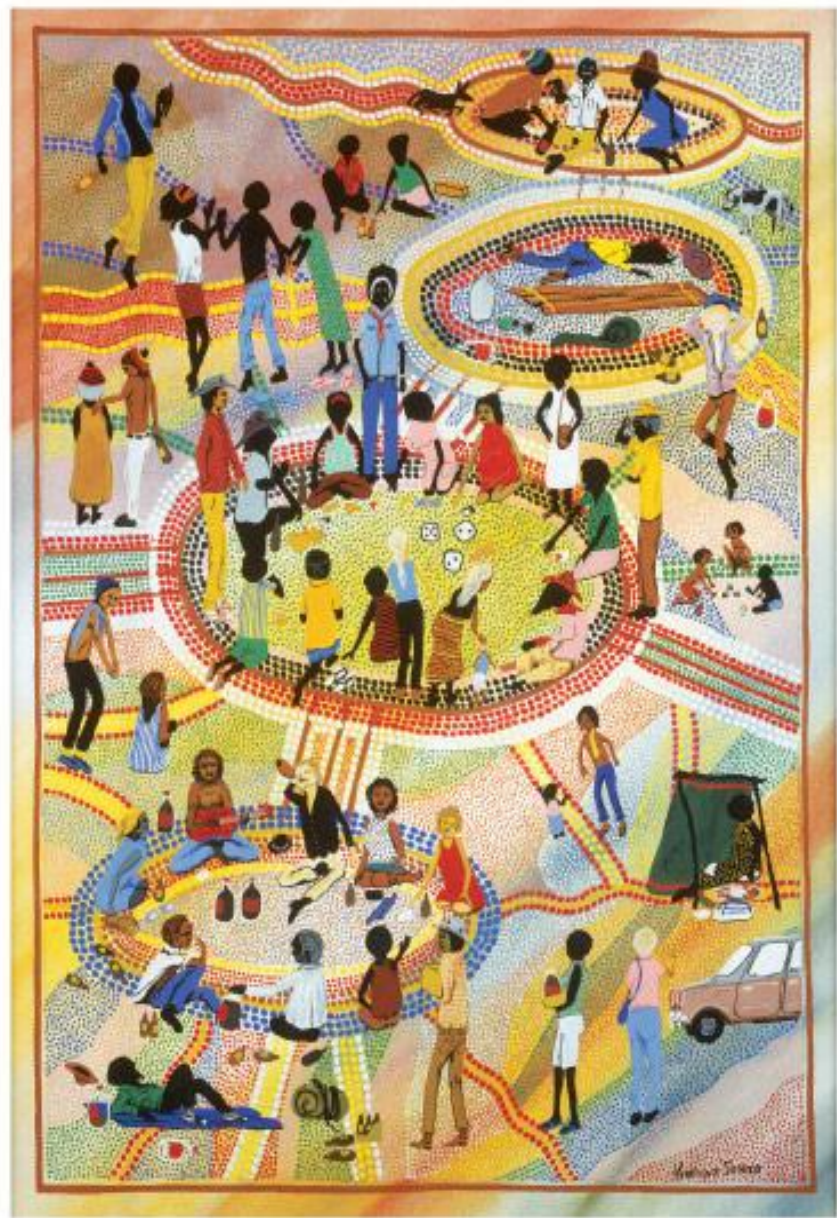


20. Pension Day Bora Ring 1994

Private Collection

When I was travelling around the communities and towns I saw how ancient ceremonial sites, the bora rings, are sometimes being used for drinking, gambling and fighting. Once these places celebrated meaning in our culture, now they are meeting places on pension day when cheques are cashed, grog and gambling are organised and this becomes the shared experience, the welfare ritual.

Vincent Serico brochure text, Baramba Visions 1994



Vincent Serico (1949–2008)

I was born in Brisbane and then taken to Cherbourg, but my Mother is from Palm Island, my Father from the Carnarvon... All my stories are about living in different parts of Queensland, working, traveling, painting, playing cards in old mission communities like Cherbourg, Palm Island, Mornington Island, Yarrabah, and Doomadgee. I just love painting. Painting gives me confidence in myself. I can relate to people with my painting by showing things I've done and seen, how I grew up, and where I'd like to go. Painting has always been with me. I started painting as far back as I can remember, I was always interested in it. I used to watch the older boys painting as I was growing up in the Boys Home. My Uncles and my Aunties, they all painted and naturally, I became a painter following them. As I grew older I started drifting around Queensland, moving around doing odd jobs, but I always fell back on painting...

Vincent Serico (1949–2008)

continued...

These paintings explain many of the stories that I have been thinking about over the years. Some are family stories about the area near the Carnarvon Ranges in Western Queensland, out near the Dawson River, Jiman country - my Father and GrandFather's country... My Mother's real country is up near Cooktown, I paint these stories from there too... All the figures and images relate to the country, my Mother and Father's country... the history, the Aboriginal side of life. I mix it up with European style painting as well... I paint old stories as well as what has happened to us recently. There is always the presence of a Creator Spirit in my work, but I also paint about how the white men came and dealt with our people. We can never get away from this.

Vincent Serico in conversation with Michael Eather, 2001, 2003, 2006, 2008 and Transcript Bronwyn Eather 2001

Acknowledgements:

All texts by Vincent Serico 1994-2007, except text for Black Mountain courtesy

www.castleofspirits.com/blackmount.html

All transcripts, artists' statements and interviews edited by Michael Eather 2008

References:

Baramba Visions (exhibition brochure) Vincent Serico with Paul Pitman 1994

The Timeless Land (exhibition brochure) Vincent Serico with Paul Pitman 1995

Some People Are Stories (exhibition catalogue) Vincent Serico & Fire-Works gallery 2007

Interview Vincent Serico with Bronwyn Eather 2001

Interviews Vincent Serico with Michael Eather 1995, 1996, 1999, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007

Gallery notes Vincent Serico at Fire-Works gallery 2006

Transcripts by Vincent Serico with Danica Eather 2007

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Further enquiries: fireworksgallery.com.au

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