

Uncle Jack Charles, oil on canvas, 60 cm x 80 cm, 2016 –2020

I approached Uncle Jack, via Facebook, in mid 2016, asking him to sit for a portrait sketch, and a few photos, with the goal of completing his portrait in line with the Archibald guidelines. He was too polite, to turn me down and little did I know that two well-known portrait artists would be doing the same thing, the same year (Stephen Jakamara and Ahn Doh on his Tv show!)

On the day, Jack said to meet him at Planet Earth in Smith St, Collingwood. I went there and ate lunch, waiting past the allotted time, but the elusive man could not be found. As I returned to my car, I saw an aboriginal bloke enter the side door of the pub next door. He seemed a bit larger than Uncle Jack, but nevertheless, on a hunch, I followed him through the door. Jack was with a couple of mates sipping a beer and discussing, an upcoming court case, due to the bloke having thrown a rock through the back window of a Taxi driven by a (racist?) Indian; and a charming barmaid who described herself as Black Swan. They all seemed very protective of Jack and asked me what I wanted with him. I explained that I was an artist and that I was hoping that Mr Charles would sit for a sketch. Jack pushed aside his half-finished glass and said, let's do it then. I followed him across the tram tracks to an Italian café. Uncle Jack described some of his history, eg, appearing in the doco. Bastardy -heroin addiction and burglary; and the childhood trauma of being taken away to the Box Hill Boys Home. This anger is evident in the portrait sketch (pastel) I completed at the time. (I did like the way I captured his wild hair and expression lines.) I also took some stills, capturing his moving hands – photo 1.

I'm not sure if I mentioned, at the time that I, like my mother, grew up in Box Hill, that my mother had previously seen his stage show (she described Jack as being a cheeky rascal); and that sadly my own family had experienced heroin addiction (tragic loss of my sis Lin at age 27). I think I did mention that I was an art teacher at Yirrara College in Alice Springs for a couple of years, teaching kids from the bush.

I began the portrait at Burrinja, in the garden room. I spent a couple of weeks on it. It had a few other smaller images of Jack, around the main one, at the time, as I was attempting to expand the narrative. At the end of the year, I went to see Jack's stage show, Jack Charles Vs the Crown, and after the show I met up with him, so he could sign the Archibald agreement form (you can see it in my pocket in photo 2. It didn't get into the Archibald, so I put the painting aside.

In 2020, after a few months, I remembered that Box Hill was where the Boys home used to be and I remembered the painting of Mr Charles. After a bit of a search, I found it rolled up in the back of my shed. I didn't like the smaller images anymore, it made the pict too busy. So, I cut it down, re-stretched it, then painted in the power lines behind Uncle Jack, matching the Aboriginal Flag colours of his jumper. I layered on some more paint in his hair and beard; and gave more emphasis to his eyes, adding more highlights to his brow and cheekbones.

In the final version of my portrait of Uncle Jack Charles, he looks slightly up at the audience, and out from the radiating lines of colour of the Aboriginal flag. In the use of colour and movement, especially in his hair and beard, I wanted to capture the seriousness of his story and also his charming, energetic nature. The angle of the portrait also references, renaissance frescoes of a wrathful god looking down upon mortals. I believe that Jack, through taking charge of his story, owning it if you will, and through overcoming his addiction, embracing his vulnerability through strength, deserves his place amongst the gods.

Because I believe this picture captures the spirit of the man, I am happy to give my portrait of Uncle Jack to Burrinja, to add to its collection of great Indigenous Artist's such as Lin Onus, so that more people honour Jack's story.