Eloquence Art Prize 2026
OUR FORESTS IN DANGER

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SELF-PRESENTATION
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Mohamed Khadra is an emerging artist and a final year Master of Fine Art student at the National Art School. His art uses figurative landscape to examine the hidden and the evident in the context of cultural, spiritual and historical connection with land and beauty.

OUR FORESTS REMEMBER OUR STORY

Theodore Rousseau (1912-1867) and Albert Namatjira (1902-1959).

Figure 1 Massacre of the innocents. 1847. 95x146.5cm. The Mesdag Collection.

Figure 2 Ghost Gums - Central Australia (c 1950) Albert Namatjira. 26.5x36.5 cm. Watercolour on paper.

Our forests remember our story: A comparison of the art of French artist Theodore Rousseau (1912-1867) and Australian artist Albert Namatjira (1902-1959).

Despite living on opposite sides of the world, a century apart, from opposite social circumstances and from vastly different cultures, French painter Theodore Rousseau and Australian Arrente artist Albert Namatjira both, created paintings that advocated for forests and their trees knowing that their semiotic significance and endurance is an essential component of cultural identity and historical solidity. For both painters forests and trees carries history, human belonging and cultural memory.

Rousseau turned his back on academic painting early in his career to paint the living landscape, especially, of the Forest of Fontainebleau with its ancient oaks, many of which were over 1000 years old. Industrialisation and the development of Paris required wood, but Rousseau saw the logging of oaks, and the planting of vast swathes of fast-growing pine in their place as an act of destruction, not only environmentally, but of French values and culture. He described himself as *La Voix de la forêt.* An example of his advocacy is the painting, *Massacre of the Innocents* (1847), (Figure 1), which draws an analogy between logging of the forest and the killing of children by King Herod (*Matthew 2:16-18*). His relentless advocacy caused Emperor Napoleon III to arrest the logging and to declare the Forest of Fontainebleau the world's first nature sanctuary in 1861.

Albert Namatjira was an Arrente painter from the MacDonnell Ranges of Central Australia. A colonised man, he sought, through art, to preserve and teach the stories of country and the sacred traditions of his people. Namatjira's watercolour works may appear at first naturalistic and even naïve, but they are deeply rooted in what is termed, *tjukurpa* (sacred ancestral traditional knowledge). They reclaim and encode his sacred connection to country and to traditional law. An example of his paintings is the portrayal of the twin Ghost Gums (*Corymbia aparrerinja*), located about 19 km southwest of Alice Springs (Figure 2). These trees are linked to creation stories of the Arrente. In 2012, in an act of racial violence, the trees were destroyed in. Namatjira's paintings of these trees are the only visual image which records their existence.

For both Rousseau and Namatjira, trees represented their link to culture, tradition and sacrosanct memory and while their paintings are naturalistic in style, they are not mimetic. Rather, both artists use their paintings of place, landscape, and the trees within them, as an allegorical advocacy for ecological persistence and cultural sustainability.

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