

Utopia in the Spotlight

An essay by Dr. Marie Geissler

This exhibition invites us to think about Aboriginal art from Utopia, a cluster of small desert communities roughly 250 kilometres northeast of Alice Springs, and how this art, which first entered the fine art galleries of the world some forty years ago, is now being celebrated in London's prestigious Tate Gallery. This show of Utopia's most famous Matriarch, Emily Kame Kngwarreye, has been curated by Kelli Cole and based on a show curated by Cole and Hetti Perkins for the National Gallery of Australia. (1) A spectacular solo exhibition, it opened at the Tate in July this year.

FireWorks Gallery's *The Ancient Present II* exhibition, assembled by Michael Eather, pays tribute to the extraordinary significance of Emily, and the mapping of her artworld obscurity to that of global fame which I will briefly explain, as well as the art of the other major artist of the exhibition, Kathleen Kngale (c.1930–2021), and that of Polly Ngale (c.1936–2022) and Angelina Kngale (b.1947). FireWorks first began exhibiting artists from Utopia through Utopia Art Sydney in 1991. (2)

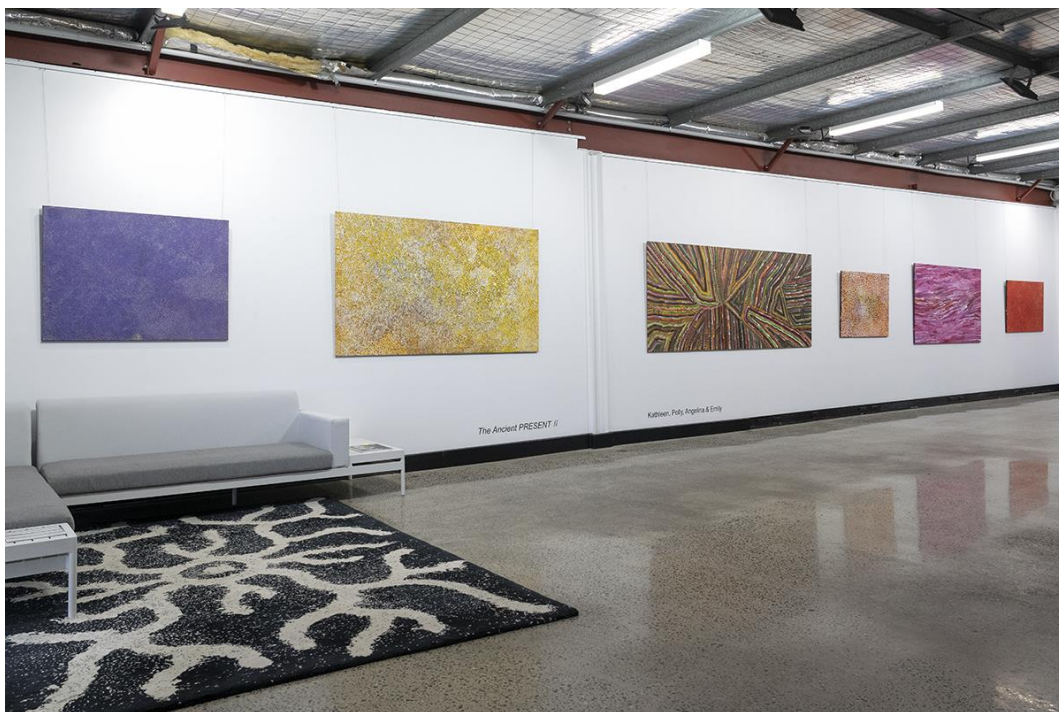
Several works of Emily Kngwarreye's in this exhibition are representative of the "Ancient" in the title. In representing the "Present", to illustrate how Emily's influence was brilliantly transformed by her descendants, we include an inspiring selection of work by her niece, Kathleen Kngale, covering several stylistic genres and distinctive colour palettes. These were collected by Annie Gamble Myer over many years and include a few paintings from Emily's other nieces, Polly and Angelina Kngale. The hang of Kathleen Kngale's paintings provides the pre-eminent context for this exhibition.

Now, a short introduction to Emily's life. Emily was born on her Country of Alhalkere in c.1910 and lived well into her eighties. She lived outside the control of missions or government agencies and enjoyed a traditional bush life for most of her years, encountering the settler culture of the cattle industry when she worked as a cameleer and a domestic servant. Importantly, for her work, she maintained a deep connection to her traditional culture, so much so that she regarded herself as an embodiment of her Country. She married and had no children but raised artists Lily Sandover Kngwarreye and Barbara Weir as her own, and when she became a successful artist, unflinchingly supported many members of her extended family with the hundreds of thousands of dollars she earned from the sale of over 3000 paintings, created in less than eight years. This trailblazing career led a contemporary international art movement into the 21st century. (3) While the Kngale sisters worked closely with Emily and continued to paint for many years, others who benefited from Emily's leadership at Utopia were the Petyarre sisters, particularly Gloria and Kathleen, and Minnie Pwerle. (4)

Today, Emily's artistic career represents the most distinguished of any Aboriginal woman artist in Australia. Her works are held in the major art institutions all over the

nation and increasingly the world. Her success was an outcome of the impact of her stylistic innovation that was unparalleled at the time in its colourful expressive intensity, energy, versatility, spontaneity, sophistication and monumental scale. Its vitality tantalised audiences whose exposure to Aboriginal art had been dulled by the low-key palettes and repetitive, largely symmetrical 2-dimensional paintings of male desert artists at the time. That it was created by a woman in her late seventies who had received no formal training in Western art traditions seemed miraculous!

Particularly important was how her work paved the way for the recognition of the artistic talent of Aboriginal women, such as the other artists exhibited in *The Ancient PRESENT II*. Women's culture was now acknowledged as a subject of interest for Western art and female artists were encouraged to take up careers alongside the men in their communities. (5)



The Ancient PRESENT II Installation Views
Photo: Mick Richards

The early seeds for Emily's accomplishments were laid in the mark-making practices of her ceremonial culture. As an Elder and traditional woman, Emily had used painted markings to decorate her body, and designs drawn in the ground for ceremony over many years. It was a celebratory ritual, associated with sharing ancient knowledge passed down through storytelling, singing and dancing. When she painted for her patrons, it was always this cultural context that she drew from.

The first transformation of Emily's expressive language began in 1977 when, aged 69, she was introduced to the Javanese-originated art of batik in a government-funded art and craft program facilitated by Jenny Green and Julia Murray. It was introduced at Utopia to help re-skill local peoples. (6) The free-flowing organic imagery which she

painted in wax onto silk fabric led to the production of a series of batik works which made way for her rise to prominence when they were exhibited in Adelaide at Tandanya in 1989 in a group exhibition of 88 silk batik works. Importantly, she came to the attention of two men who would prove highly influential to her subsequent and continual rise: Rodney Gooch, who worked as an art advisor at the Central Australia Aboriginal Art and Media Association (CAAMA) in Alice Springs, and his friend, artist and dealer Christopher Hodges from Utopia Art Sydney. Called the *Summer Project*, they successfully introduced acrylic painting on canvas to eighty Utopia artists in 1988, resulting in 88 works. Here, Emily found an expressive freedom. The development of her 'abstract' stylistic innovations and contemporary flair were immediately acknowledged by Gooch as the factors that distinguished Emily from her peers. Later in 1989, she began painting at Delmore Downs in Utopia for station owner and dealer Don Holt and former Papunya Tula art centre manager Janet Holt (née Wilson), including a successful solo exhibition at Sydney's S.H. Ervin Gallery, with Janet fostering the unique atmosphere for Emily's expression to evolve.

The Utopia region did not have any official Aboriginal art centres, and therefore these private gallery networks—CAAMA, Utopia Art Sydney, Delmore Gallery, along with other gallery operations including DACOU and Mbantua Aboriginal Art Gallery—were highly influential to Emily's burgeoning commercial success. Emily created many private commissions for independent collectors and galleries in nearby Alice Springs.

Emily's painting moved through many different styles from then. Up until the early 1990s, it consisted of fields of linear form with over-dotting both in and outside the line-work of her image, sometimes obscuring symbols and animal tracks beneath. A more profuse and spontaneous dotting followed, evolving into her technique of 1992 when she adopted larger brushes and double-dipped her brush into different pots of paint to create a variegated, coloured daub when she applied it to canvas. Then in 1994, (7) the "line paintings" series appeared—their striations were executed in a series of parallel lines within vertical panels, evoking patterning of women's body design, rhythms of ceremonial dancing, and also travelling lines of Women Ancestors. With the consequent obscuration of individual lines came pulsating streams of dotted colour, as in *Earth's Creation* (1995).

In 1995, she created immersive works of "sheer sensation" with meandering, all-over matrices of line. These encoded ancestral knowledge associated with the swirling underground root mass of Kngwarreye's sacred wild yam totem which grew profusely in the Utopia region. Synonymously, this powerful expressive means reflected the interconnectivity of all things and Beings as understood from the culture's sacred narratives. (8)

In the last month before she died (August 1996), her works became reductive, luminous, light-filled surfaces broadly brushed in planar tonal colour. For these, she used larger brushes.

In 1997, Kngwarreye represented Australia in *Fluent* at the 47th Venice Biennale, along with Queensland artist Judy Watson and South Australia's Yvonne Koolmatrie. The exhibition was curated by Brenda Croft, Victoria Lynn and Hetti Perkins. (9) In 1998, put together by the National Museum's Senior Curator of Indigenous Art Margo Neale, the first major solo retrospective of her paintings was held at the Queensland Art Gallery and travelled to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the National Gallery of Victoria, and the National Gallery of Australia. In 2008, *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye* was the largest solo exhibition of an Australian Indigenous artist ever to be staged overseas. With Neale as the curator and with the determined encouragement of Japanese curator Akira Tatehata, it toured to the National Museum of Art in Osaka. Tatehata told the press it was the "most important show ever to visit Japan" and broke the 10-year attendance record previously held by Andy Warhol'. (10) It was then exhibited at the National Art Centre in Tokyo and finally at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra. (11)

When we think about the artists of this current exhibition within *The Ancient PRESENT* frame and reflect on how Emily's work has impacted the paintings of other artists in the show, there are many threads to explore.

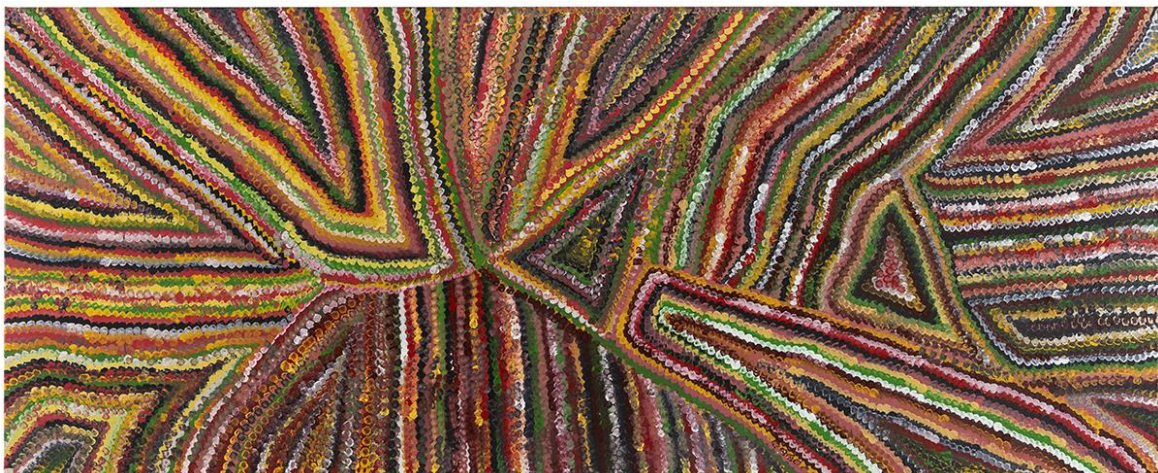
Pre-eminently, both of Emily's works in the exhibition showcase an organic, spontaneous, and rhythmic use of vibrant colour and a sense of boundless cosmic space, ceremony, the spiritual, and the interconnectivity of the natural world. This is expressed using an all-over network of lines or intense dotting.

Emily's painting *Untitled* (1995) uses the linear approach of her later years to encode the interdependence of desert ecologies and her spirituality. Here, broad scatterings of 25cm linear brush marks evoke tall grasses swaying in the breeze and refer tangentially to the ripening of fruits and flowers of bush plants. The linear form also expresses transcendent elements, relating to women's ceremonial body designs and ritual songs.



Emily Kngwarreye *Untitled* 1995 acrylic on linen
122x300cm
Photo: Mick Richards

Emily's painting *Alalgura Winter* (1992) encodes the sacred knowledge of her yam dreaming and the custodial responsibilities associated with it. She deploys sequential lines of dotted paint to describe the cyclical and interconnected world of the plant and the seasonal palettes of the red, yellow and white transitions of colour associated with delicate yam flowering. The greens highlight its leaves. Her painted mosaic of patterns symbolises both its entangled subterranean life and its desert bloom. The work comes from an experimental period in 1992 when Emily was transitioning from using veils of dots to using flowing dotted lines. Here, they radiate from the centre of the canvas to define the organic pattern of the plant's growth.



Emily Ngwarreye *Alalgura Winter* 1992 acrylic on linen 122x300cm
Photo: Mick Richards

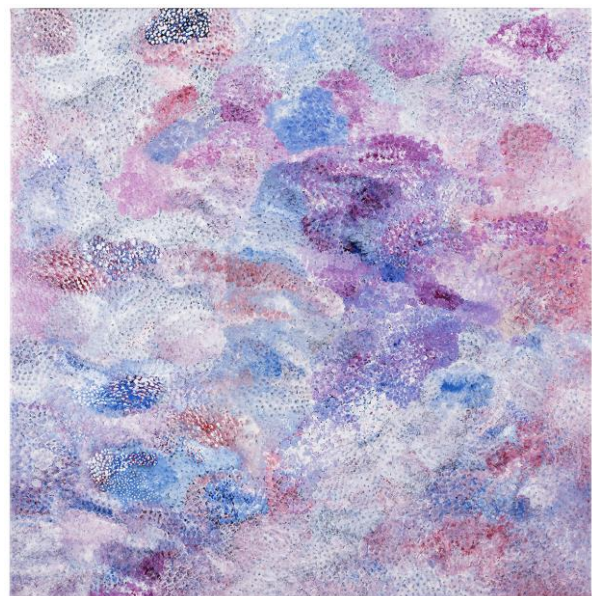
A near-identical sister painting, *Anooralya II* (1992), described the content of the painting as (12):

“The physical performativity of the harvest and ceremony is clearly displayed across the canvas of the present work. Physically, Emily ‘reaches into’ the centre, tracking lines of dots, reminiscent of the rhythmic digging and scraping of soil to harvest the yam. The rhythm of ceremonial dancing, repetition of song and linear body mark-making of *awelye* is reflected in her sequential dotting. Stepping further back again, the lines form an aerial view of fertile watercourses in Alhalkere, marking the past summer’s movement of water and the yam’s ensuing growth.”

Like Emily, each of the three other artists in the exhibition reflect, both culturally and aesthetically, how her work has influenced them, demonstrating the cyclical and dynamic familial exchange process of *The Ancient Present*. Of critical importance is the respect they share for their ancient knowledge and ceremonies that inform their

work. On an aesthetic level, all artists have drawn from Emily's all-over dotting technique and made it their own, each creating unique and brilliant re-adaptations of her organic and immersive tradition.

The white desert bloom expressed in the minimalist, finely dotted paintings of Utopia artist Kathleen Kngale are spectacular. They prefigure the ethereal, cosmic light in Kathleen's more vibrant paintings which feature lemon, watermelon, purple and orange hues of the same botanical subject. One way of interpreting the changing colour palettes within Kathleen's paintings is to view them as pictorial explorations of the impact of the changing seasons on the changing colours of the bush plum berries as they ripen from yellow and orange to pink and purple. (13)



Left: Kathleen Kngale Wild Plum 2008 acrylic on linen 120x120cm
Right: Kathleen Kngale Untitled 2008 acrylic on linen 120x120cm
Photos: Mick Richards

Like Emily, who had lifelong custodial rights and responsibilities to the ancestor of the same name and to her primary totem the pencil yam (*Kame*), which grew in her Country (Alhalkere), each of her nieces have painted their ancestral totem—namely the conkerberry, bush plum or wild plum (*Anwekety*). This is a delicious and edible sweet black berry that fruits on the *Carissa lanceolata* plant for a short two-week duration each year. These berries are dried and stored for later use, when they are reconstituted by soaking in water. The *Anwekety* Dreaming refers to ancient times when the winds blew from all directions, distributing the *Anwekety* seed all over the ancestral lands in Alhalkere Country. (14) The seeds grew where they fell, producing this vital food source, still used by the desert people today. Like Emily, the Kngale sisters' work encodes the knowledge of their totem in an immersive, aesthetic language and is given meticulous pictorial expression as an aerial landscape view. In their paintings, we see various interpretations of the carpet of changing seasonal colours, created by the plant's small berries as they ripen from yellow and orange to

pink and purple. Significantly, they deploy the fine dotting and over-dotting technique pioneered by Emily. Their imagery also touches on the plant's profusion and fertility, the local ancestral tracks, seeds, soakages and sacred topography. The artists often paint communally, teaching younger artists the exact locations of the favourite gathering grounds for the bush plum and explaining to them not only when to eat the fruit, but where they can find fruit after it rains.



Kathleen Kngale painting at Delmore Downs with Annie Gamble Myer,
2010

Photo: Annie Gamble Myer

Kathleen Kngale (c.1930–2021) is one of the most acclaimed artists from Utopia of recent years, whose formal layering technique owes much to the early years of the 1980s when she was involved in the Utopia batik movement. Like Emily, she began painting in 1989, but instead of the strong gestural approach of Emily, she developed one defined by an amazing control of her pointillist mark-making. While seemingly spare, the exquisitely painted surfaces that followed resemble translucent veils of pulsating, radiant and luminous colour. Intricately orchestrated, they consist of pale lavenders, reds, blues, creams, whites and green overlays that confer an expansive and serene spatiality. At the same time, Kathleen's paintings convey cultural information about her Country, including rock holes, sand hills, food sources and sacred sites, while also embodying understandings of the coloured ochre that is applied to the body in preparation for Women's Ceremony and dancing. Like Emily,

she grew up in the bush and was familiar with ceremonial life, learning the rich cultural ritual of how to paint women's bodies with oil and ochre.

While Kathleen's aesthetic lineage is inspired by that of Emily, it also draws on the illustrious tradition of Papunya Tula artist Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, who was arguably the first desert artist to transform the integral role of the 'dot technique'. (15)

Expanding her growing international artistic reputation, in 2000 Kathleen was exhibited by Stephan Jacob in Paris, followed in 2001 by the Songlines Gallery in San Francisco. She has exhibited in over twenty exhibitions in recent years and is represented in the collections of the National Gallery of Victoria, the Art Gallery of South Australia, the Art Gallery of Western Australia, and the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra. Kathleen has been a finalist in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Award (2000, 2008) and the Wynne Prize for Landscape Painting at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (2008) and is recognised by important private collectors around the world. (16)

In summary, the unique collection of art from Utopia—paintings of Emily created in the early 1990s and those of later generations, her nieces Kathleen, Polly and Angelina—show us how remarkable and inspirational the tradition of generational cultural transfer amongst these artists is. The mesmerizingly beautiful works of the Kngale sisters are a living testament to this. And how extraordinary to have the opportunity to view such a large collection of Kathleen's works. A truly immersive experience indeed!

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