

PROPERTY FORMERLY FROM THE COLLECTION OF JOCK CHAMBERS, NORTHERN TERRITORY

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Emily Kame Kngwarreye

(c1910-1996)

Anmatyerre language group

Awelye 1996

(also known as *Awleye - My Story* and *Emily's Story*)

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

117.0 x 532.0 cm

signed verso: Emily

bears inscription verso: AWELYE

bears date and inscription underneath stretcher verso: EMILY KAME KNGWARRE/ "EMILY'S STORY"/ UTOPIA 1996

accompanied by a statement of authenticity from Donald Holt, Delmore Downs Station, Northern Territory

PROVENANCE

Commissioned by Jock Chambers, MacDonald Downs Station, Northern Territory, 1996

Acquired from the above, private collection, South Australia, 2008

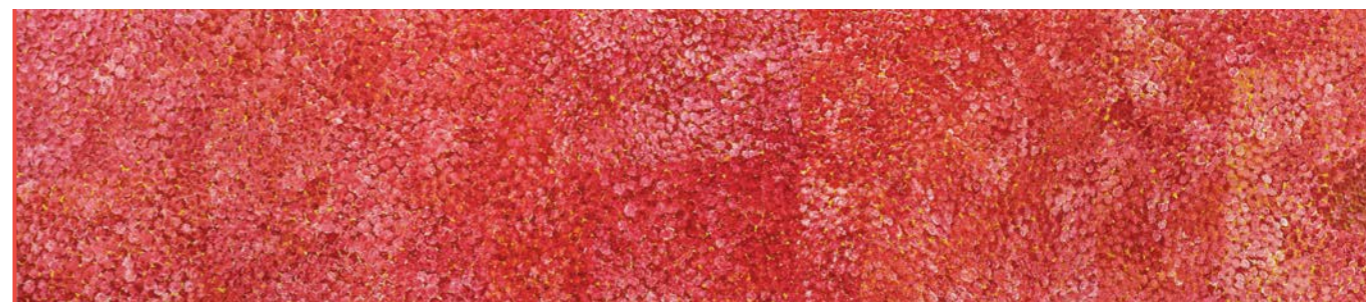
\$80,000 - \$120,000

Emily Kame Kngwarreye's magnificent oeuvre is a collective expression of the interconnectedness of her physical self and Country, *Alhalkere*, as well as the metaphysical associations of *awelye* (women's law ceremonies in *Anmatyerre*) and attendant custodial responsibilities for nurturing the land and its bounty. This fusion is evident in her naming: Kngwarreye's 'private one', her personal or 'bush' name, Kame (Kam), is the seed of the wild pencil yam, *anwerlarr* (*Vigna lanceolata*), that grows across *Alhalkere*.

As curator Kellie Cole has asserted, 'what came out of Emily Kam Kngwarray,¹ came out of Country.'² In Kngwarreye's visual language, paintings are glorious manifestations of Country, *awelye*, and self - 'the whole lot' - a concept that was ever present in her work, across all styles and periods. Her genius stems from individuations in her visual expressions of this nexus.

Kngwarreye's importance has been lauded in three posthumous retrospectives, each demarcating painting periods exhibiting distinctly different characteristics. While this is helpful in a stylistic exegesis, it is important to understand that the artist herself did not differentiate her works in this fashion,³ just as she did not differentiate between the craft of producing batik and the fine art of painting.⁴

In an essay accompanying the 2023 retrospective at the National Gallery of Australia, linguist Jennifer Green describes Kngwarreye's paintings and technique as 'temporal allegories'. She attributes Kngwarreye's layering of paint (and earlier, wax) and gestural fluidity to a life of cultural mark making, and in particular, sand drawing, wherein 'the accumulation of graphic elements is periodically erased as the narrative unfolds ... [signalling] changes in time and space ...'⁵



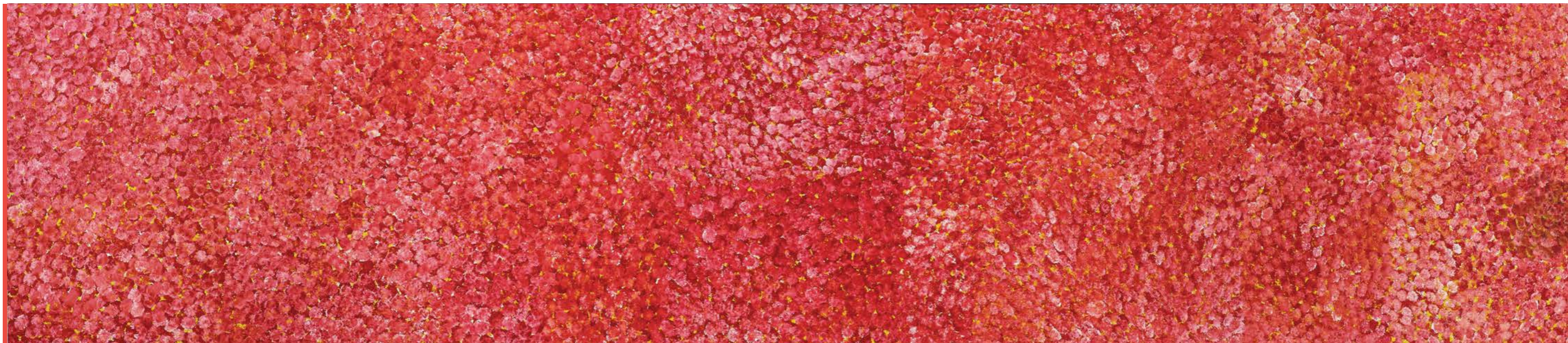




Figure 1
Untitled (Alhalker) 1992
 synthetic polymer paint on canvas
 166.0 x 481.0 cm
 Art Gallery of New South Wales collection, Sydney
 Mollie Gowing Acquisition Fund for Contemporary Aboriginal Art, 1992

Referencing Green, curator Stephen Gilchrist addresses this thinking in relation to the phrase 'whole lot', positing that Kngwarreye's dynamism and innovation hinges on fluid temporality, wherein 'vitality and presentness [is] not of the past, but of the now and of the new.'¹⁶ This accords with anthropologist Jennifer Biddle's view, documented in the 2008 retrospective, that Kngwarreye's work is 'not about visuality at all, but is a kind of experience, a way of bringing into the world ancestral potency'.⁷

Exploring the connections and linkages between the artist's first works in batik in 1977 and her last painting in 1996 formed the basis of Margo Neale's curatorial rationale in the first retrospective (1998). Revealing 'lines of continuity that reverberate' across Kngwarreye's oeuvre, Neale proclaimed the artist's stylistic virtuosity as 'shifting gears in a continuous trajectory linking time, place and image'.⁸ To illustrate this synopsis, Neale quoted T.S. Eliot's poetic existential summation: 'in my beginning is my end ... In my end is my beginning'.¹⁹

According to accompanying documentation, the present grand scale painting – *Awelye* (also known as *Awelye – My Story* and *Emily's Story*), 1996 – was commissioned by a family 'who had lived on Utopia and had known Emily all their life'. It features a poignant quote that resonates with T.S. Eliot's reflection and the present work's English subtitle:

When she had almost completed the work, Emily looked up and gestured over the faintly obscured dark image to the right of the painting saying: 'This me, all finish now and (gesturing over to the left of the painting) this my life – over now.'

Kngwarreye's revisionist practice is well documented.¹⁰ Janet Holt believes that in the early months of 1996, Kngwarreye took on commissions executed in earlier styles 'in the spirit of reviewing her life's work'.¹¹

Awelye 1996, recalls works produced in 1992–1993, among her most popular, exhibiting a similar range and approach, with brushwork that shows the artist's frontal dumping technique. It also reverberates with other mark making that echoes the directional impressions left in sand paintings from the movement of fingers pushing into earth.

This coalescence stems from a developmental period in 1991, when Kngwarreye produced a large painting with layers of dotting applied in a new expressive manner compared to the more highly controlled dotting of her previous works.¹² These 'larger, pixelated'¹³ dots varied in direction, shape, size and tonal make-up across the canvas field, and marked the beginning of what became generally known as Kngwarreye's impressionistic floral works.¹⁴ Described by Perkins and Cole as 'evoking blossoms in a time of seasonal change', the 1991 painting coincides with the expansion of the artist's toolbox of materials and technical approach, wherein a range of brushes were trimmed to achieve specific painterly effects.¹⁵

Jennifer Green records that the artist usually worked from the periphery of the canvas to the centre, with her reach extending an arm's length, augmented by her brush, and that later in life she was assisted with moving the canvas around.¹⁶ This practice of working in sections is apparent in the formal composition of the majestically scaled present work, *Awelye*, 1996. The same process is evident in one of the artist's early masterpieces, *Untitled (Alhalker)*, 1992,¹⁷ acquired contemporaneously by the Art Gallery of New South Wales. At nearly 5 metres in length, the 1992 painting discloses the artist's modus operandi, with intermingled yet distinct sectional passages of dotting in dusty warm peach pinks and umbers, accentuated with episodes of more intense contrasts using white and black.

Neale has declared *awelye* to be Kngwarreye's visual theory, outside the lexicon of modernist art critics who see her as 'one of the twentieth century's most important abstract painters'.¹⁸



Figure 2
Desert Winter 1994
 synthetic polymer paint on linen
 125.0 x 397.0 cm
 Sold Deutscher + Hackett, Melbourne, 18 March 2020, lot 8, \$317,200 (including buyer's premium)

Gilchrist believes that Kngwarreye's legacy lies in her endowment of 'cultural coordinates ... that not only strengthen our understanding of her work but strengthen Country itself ... they show us what it means to be in, belong to and be affected by Country'.¹⁹ Neale is more succinct: 'hers is not a view of the land, but rather its voice'.²⁰ This understanding is further honed in Anmatyerre: 'her art is *arraty ilem* – telling the truth'.²¹

Kngwarreye's exceptional talent was rewarded with the 1992 Australian Artists Creative Fellowship and her work has rightfully held pride of place in high profile Australian and international exhibitions since, including the Venice Biennale (1997 and 2015). The subject of three touring retrospectives (1998, 2008, 2023), including one to Japan, Kngwarreye's genius will next be showcased at London's Tate Modern (July 2025).

FOOTNOTES

1. The artist's name has undergone curatorial/linguistic revision in recent years, from Emily Kame Kngwarreye to Kam Kngwarray; both versions are used here, with 'Kngwarray' used when specifically quoted.
2. Cole, K., quoted in Healey, E. Holden, K., *The Exhibitionists*, Northern Pictures Productions, 2022, 2:53 minutes; quoted in Gilchrist, S., 'I am Kam', in Perkins, H., Green J. and Cole, K. (eds.), *Emily Kam Kngwarray*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2023, p.168
3. For a detailed essay on this topic see Hodges, C., 'Alhalkere', in Neale, M. (ed.), *Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Alhalkere, Paintings from Utopia*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1998, p.33
4. Green, J., 'The Life and Legacy of Emily Kam Kngwarray', in Perkins, op. cit., p.157. See also, Holt, J., 'Kngwarreye Woman Abstract Painter', in Isaacs, J., Smith, T., Ryan, J., Holt, D., & Holt, J., *Emily Kngwarreye: Paintings*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1998, p.25
5. Green, J., in Perkins et al, op. cit., p.157. For an eyewitness account of this in motion, see Holt, J., 'Emily Kngwarreye at Delmore Downs 1989–1996', in Isaacs, et al., op. cit., p.158
6. Gilchrist, S., 'I am Kam', in Perkins, et al, op. cit., p.169
7. Biddle, J., quoted in Neale, op. cit. (2008), p.246
8. Neale, M., 'Alkalkere, Her Only Subject: Theme', from 'Marks of Meaning: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye', in *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 2008, p.224
9. Eliot, T., 'East Coker', quoted in Neale, M., 'Origins', op. cit. (2008), p. 45, and earlier by Ryan, J., 'In the Beginning is My End: The Singular Art of Emily Kame Kngwarreye', in Neale, M., op. cit. (1998), pp.39–46
10. Hodges, C., 'Alhalkere', in Neale, op. cit. (1998), p.37. Hodges records various 1996 commissions, and that the artist painted dotted works 'in other places' that year. He further records her bouts of 'furious' and 'intense' painting in 1995–96, p.45
11. Holt, J., 'Kngwarreye Woman Abstract Painter', in Isaacs, J., et al, op. cit., p.25
12. Termed 'seed paintings' by Margo Neale, in Neale, M., op. cit. (2008), p.240
13. See discussion of *Untitled (Alhalker)*, 1991, in Perkins, H. and Cole, K., 'Lanterns Magica: The Art of Emily Kam Kngwarreye', in Perkins et al, op. cit., p.187

14. *Untitled (Alhalker)* 1991 is documented in all three retrospective catalogues to illustrate this development: Neale, M., op. cit. (1998), pl.63, illus. pp.100–101 and p.233; Neale, M., op. cit. (2008), pp.92–93; Perkins, et al, op. cit., pp.68–69, p.187
15. Holt, J., 'Anmatyerre Artist', p.21 and 'Emily Kngwarreye at Delmore Downs 1989–1996', p.152, in Isaacs et al, op. cit.
16. Green, J., in Perkins et al, op. cit., p.157
17. Accession number 229.1992, illus. Neale, M., op. cit. (2008), with title *Untitled (Alhalkere)*, p.100–101, and Perkins, et al, op. cit., pp.66–67
18. Tatehata, A., 'The Impossible Modernist', in Neale, M., op. cit. (2008), p.31, and earlier, Benjamin, R., 'A New Modernist Hero', in Neale, M., op. cit. (1998), pp.47–54
19. Gilchrist, S., 'I am Kam', op. cit., p.168
20. Neale, M., 'Marks of Meaning', op. cit., p.247
21. The artist's family, quoted in Perkins and Cole, op. cit., p.195

Jane Raffan

Jane Raffan is an accredited valuer under the Commonwealth Government's Cultural Gifts Program. Her arts consultancy encompasses curatorial services, collection management, and a broad range of humanities-based research and writing.