

The legacy of Emily Kame Kngwarreye extends beyond her own community to enrich the aesthetic experience of all Australians

'That's what I paint: whole lot'

**Emily Kame Kngwarreye
Alhalkere**

Paintings from Utopia

By Margo Neale
Macmillan/Queensland Art
Gallery, \$45.95

JANINE BURKE

IT CAME late to Emily Kngwarreye. When everyone else was swooning over her extraordinary paintings earlier this decade, I remained unmoved. Her paintings seemed almost too good to be true: too competent, too slick, too sudden. I also found the hype that surrounded her disturbing. Dealers, rumors of fakes, celebrity-style articles and buckets of money were whirling around her like there was no tomorrow. It was only when I saw Kngwarreye's contribution to last year's Venice Biennale that the power and authority of her art struck me like a thunderbolt.

From a sequence of simply painted abstract panels, I learnt everything I needed to know about Kngwarreye's genius: about her ability to handle paint fluidly and casually; about how she suggested vast spaces with the rhythms of horizontal lines and created fields of pulsating energy with nothing more than a minimal arrangement of strokes.

The paintings exhibited at Venice were completed in 1994 three years before Kngwarreye died, when she was in her 80s. In fact, she only began painting when she was 80. The later work — if there can be "later" work in such a short career — is fearless, vibrant, edgy and beautiful. When she died, Kngwarreye seemed on the verge of a whole new period of lush, joyous paintings. Few artists peak so late.

Margo Neale, the curator of Kngwarreye's touring retrospective, has also edited this richly illustrated book with contributions from writers and scholars including Judith Ryan, Anne Marie Brody and Philip Morrissey. Neale is a passionate admirer of Kngwarreye's, as are the other contributors, and all writers address Kngwarreye's oeuvre with awe. Ryan speaks with the best and

clearest voice in a collection of well-written and researched essays.

Kngwarreye's is an astonishing story, not the least because it is true but also because it fits time-honored and stereotypical images of artistic genius. Kngwarreye did not benefit from conventional art training. There were no mentors, art books or influences on her journey as an artist. She didn't visit galleries and when she did — at someone else's insistence — it was only to see her own work. By that time, of course, she was internationally famous.

Nor did Kngwarreye discuss her paintings in artistic, personal or any other terms. Her one comment about her art, often quoted in the book, is

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both succinct and mysterious. "Whole lot, that's whole lot — (Awalye) my Dreaming ... mountain devil lizard, emu, green bean, yam seed ... That's what I paint: whole lot."

Kngwarreye grew up in one of Australia's most remote regions at the north-west corner of the Simpson Desert. Her country, Alhalkere, is the site of her origins, her dreaming and the stories she owns. It's a hard, hot, dusty, unforgiving bit of earth and Kngwarreye did it tough, working on pastoral stations, riding camels, not horses, to cover the distances.

She remained a single woman for a

long time, which she enjoyed. "You don't catch me," she used to quip. She was a strong woman, independent, perceptive, cheeky and smart. She married twice. She left her first husband because he wanted to take another wife. Her second marriage was a love match but she had no children.

Kngwarreye's first involvement with art came in the 1970s when an art adviser to her community at Utopia taught craft skills to the local women. The result was a series of gorgeous, glowing batiks and, for the next 10 years, Kngwarreye exhibited in Australia and abroad with the Utopia Women's Batik Group. But Kngwarreye's batiks were unusual: they were bold,



rough and highly individual. When she was introduced to canvas and paints in 1989, Kngwarreye hit her stride immediately.

She transferred to canvas the complex field of dots and shapes, established in the batiks, using a brilliant palette of colors. The obvious connections with a modern abstract painting tradition, reaching from Claude Monet to Jackson Pollock to Tony Tuckson, made Kngwarreye's paintings intelligible to curators, critics and buyers. Instantly, she had a sophisticated and responsive audience. But the ensuing success and its demands didn't impress her. She

wanted to relinquish painting: it made her "sick with worry".

Kngwarreye's heritage as an artist draws on the tribal ceremonies of body painting. She transformed this potent, tactile and abstract visual language into a highly realised and coherent artistic style. Kngwarreye paints space, a personal cosmology that refers to her world and her myths, without literally describing them, an energised space crammed with spirit beings, stories, songs and dances as well as people, trees, plants and animals. Representing this cosmology with bravura lines, strokes and dots, Kngwarreye leaves the ground of realism far behind.

Her painting is the meeting place between the tangible, physical world and the spiritual, symbolic world. Kngwarreye is like a medieval religious artist who makes art out of faith, who is versed in doctrine and also illuminated by it. What gives her paintings strength is that she is so very much in charge of what she paints. There seems no hesitation: only vigor, inspiration and command.

Aboriginal art appeals to us because it speaks confidently and unashamedly of the spirit and of sacred spaces, in an art world dominated by confusion and soullessness. Kngwarreye's paintings represent and define creativity by their sense of touch, surely painting's most precious and human element. By the marks Kngwarreye makes on canvas — dots, strokes or lines — she delivers her landscape to her audience by hand. Kngwarreye's light, flexible and sure brushstrokes are the signature of her style.

Finally, whether Kngwarreye's paintings are Aboriginal makes no difference. My experience of her work is based on its aesthetic merits. I have never visited the part of Australia she paints, and I don't understand the significance of the images and references she uses. Kngwarreye bestows in plenty the gifts of art: transcendence, illumination and sheer visual pleasure.

Janine Burke is a novelist and art historian. The exhibition Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Alhalkere, Paintings from Utopia will be at the National Gallery of Victoria from 8 September to 22 November.



Brilliant palette: *Untitled (Yam)* 1981: batik on cotton.