

THE ARTS ON FRIDAY

Kngwarreye colours the world

By DAPHNE GUINNESS

ON the up: there's no better way to describe the progress of Emily Kame Kngwarreye, the 80-something Aboriginal artist from Utopia Station, 240km north-east of Alice Springs, who won a \$110,000 Keating Fellowship in October and whose work appears on the Keating Christmas card this year.

Her painting, *Seeds of Abundance* (1990), a zingy shower of wattle-yellow spotlets in synthetic polymer on canvas, which belongs to the National Gallery in Canberra, will grace the mantel-pieces of the world's famous (will Charles and Di have separate cards?) and is a real coup for the artist.

It quite puts into shade the accolade by Sir Hardy Amies, the Queen's dress-maker, that a shimmering golden Kngwarreye painting he admired would look gorgeous transposed to chiffon (and by implication, end up on the back of Herself?).

A few months ago only those in the know were really aware of Emilys, as her works were dubbed (usage being "come up and see my Emilys sometime"). But then a number of art books — such as Michael Boulter's *The Art of Utopia: A New Direction in Contemporary Aboriginal Art*, in which he described Kngwarreye's modus operandi — became in-reading for the uninitiated.

News filtered around that this and that group of European intellectuals had flitted through and gasped with delight and amazement at various Emilys; indeed had bought several to adorn the walls in that and this chic Paris/Rome/Madrid apartment.

Australian establishment names were quoted as being impressed with the work of this venerable artist (the hit of the Melbourne Art Show, she's changed from fauve to Kandinsky, claimed one savvy collector) who on no account must be compared with Grandma Moses, famous for her naive cottage scenic painting. Kngwarreye was more artistic, more talented, more gifted, they said. Trust them ... these were the knowledgeable talking.

So it is useful to recall that at the Hogarth Gallery in Paddington, Sydney, earlier this year, Kngwarreye's exhibition was in its throes when her neighbours and gallery suppliers, Donald and Janet Holt, hove to and in the hubbub announced that "we own Emily, we supply her with paint and canvas", words that were duly noted. As indeed



was Kngwarreye's thunderbolt announcement when, accepting her Keating prize in October, she declared she had "finished painting" and would produce no more.

Predictably, the reaction was shock-horror and excitement. "Sell, sell, sell while she is hot," went up the gallery cry, and stories abounded of \$6000 Emilys soaring overnight to \$7000 with no negotiation sought or offered. Suddenly the world was awash with buyers. Suddenly galleries not strictly in the pecking order for supply were begging for Emilys and somehow getting them.

At Leuralla, his country house in the Blue Mountains, Hogarth owner Clive Evatt, hearing that Kngwarreye was packing it in, roared, "no way is Emily stopping, she is making too much

money for us" and now may wish he hadn't.

Kngwarreye, who speaks no English, was reported as misinterpreted. What she really meant was she would have a rest then would come back and paint, but only when she felt like it; not when people pressured her to.

In Sydney she inspected her work at the Art Gallery of NSW, bought a few presents from St Vincent de Paul for her chums back home and attended a low-key cocktail party in her honour at the Utopia Gallery in Stanmore where, sitting on the floor with her shopping beside her, she received guests one by one until, nodding off, she murmured, "I wish they would all go home" or words to that effect.

"I told Emily not to paint again until

she felt ready, to take her time, be it 12 months or two years," says Christopher Hodges, owner of Utopia, where Kngwarreye was the first Aboriginal woman artist to have a solo show in 1990.

When it comes to representation of Kngwarreye in Sydney, Hodges believes he is Numero Uno. His exclusive supplier is Rodney Gooch at Alice Springs. Gooch, he says, has backed and supported Utopia Station since the year dot, and that includes Kngwarreye.

Hodges is forthright in his views on the Holts: he criticises their activities as entrepreneurial. Neither does he care for the Hogarth Gallery. "We've built an artist up, her work was in demand and they've got on the bandwagon. I've actually spoken with Ho-

Kngwarreye ... sending shock waves through the art community

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"They've doubled in price. I've sold eight in eight months, we've never had Aboriginal art here before," says Maunsell. "It's fabulous. She's kept this gallery open. Now I have Americans come in here drawing 'gawtenny Emilys'. People have heard of her as a famous Australian artist.

"I cannot say where I get them from. Sources, as Anne Schofield would say. I get them wherever I can and I'm on bended knee to anyone who has them."

As the price for Emilys soared, Ace Bourke found himself in a quandary. Torn between cashing in on the award here and testing a new market in the United States, he cancelled plans for taking 10 of his best Emilys abroad and settled for three priced between \$6000 to \$10,000. Sell, sell, sell he did: one to an established collector on the West Coast who had never collected Aboriginal art before ("that's what's good about it, if they like it and the price is right they buy, it doesn't go on and on"), one to an established Aboriginal art collector in New York and one to a young first-time collector who was knocked sideways by Kngwarreye's magical, instant appeal.

Now Bourke has a fresh quandary: what to do with the Aboriginal bark paintings now on his hands? A million dollars' worth, someone assesses. They must be joking.

But that's the art world for you. Claim and counter-claim. Paranoid. Secretive. Drop clients' names and the opposition pounces. Drop clues to the next Kngwarreye opening and the opposition cashes in.

While the Hogarth dithers and Utopia says it will probably show mid-1993, ditto Pizzi in Melbourne, the National Gallery of Victoria appears to have pipped them all. Kngwarreye will join a select band of Australia's best-known artists at the glamorous invitation-only Peter and Joan Cleminger Triennial Art Exhibition in February 1993. Another feather in the artist's cap.

What she will show there is a mystery. Word is out that Kngwarreye is painting again. Phooey — news to us, say close contacts, piqued. Trust us, respond the know-alls, cock-a-hoop.

For, indeed, Kngwarreye has been very busy. Only yesterday at the Hogarth Gallery, Ace Bourke was unpacking a surprise consignment from Utopia Station. Inside were a dozen Emilys, seven painted before Keating's handy little sweetener and five completed post-fellowship. Two big stunners in pinks, greens, ochres, three smaller gems in shimmering blues — \$10,000 to \$12,000 — to go on display on January 5.

"We are beside ourselves," Bourke crows, finally out-scooping everyone.

garth and expressed my displeasure at this. They'd be able to confirm that."

At the Hogarth, director Ace Bourke sighs. "We think we are the most important outlet," he says. Gabrielle Pizzi, whose gallery in Melbourne is, as far as she knows, the sole representative for Kngwarreye in that State, is also supplied by the Holts and puts in her bit.

"The Hogarth has been in Aboriginal art for years and their heart is in the right place," she says. She wonders where galleries such as Coo-ee in Oxford Street, Sydney, get their Emilys. The grapevine has it that Coo-ee siphons them to the Barry Stern Gallery in Paddington, where Dominic Maunsell just sold one for \$8750 and yearns to get his hands on more.