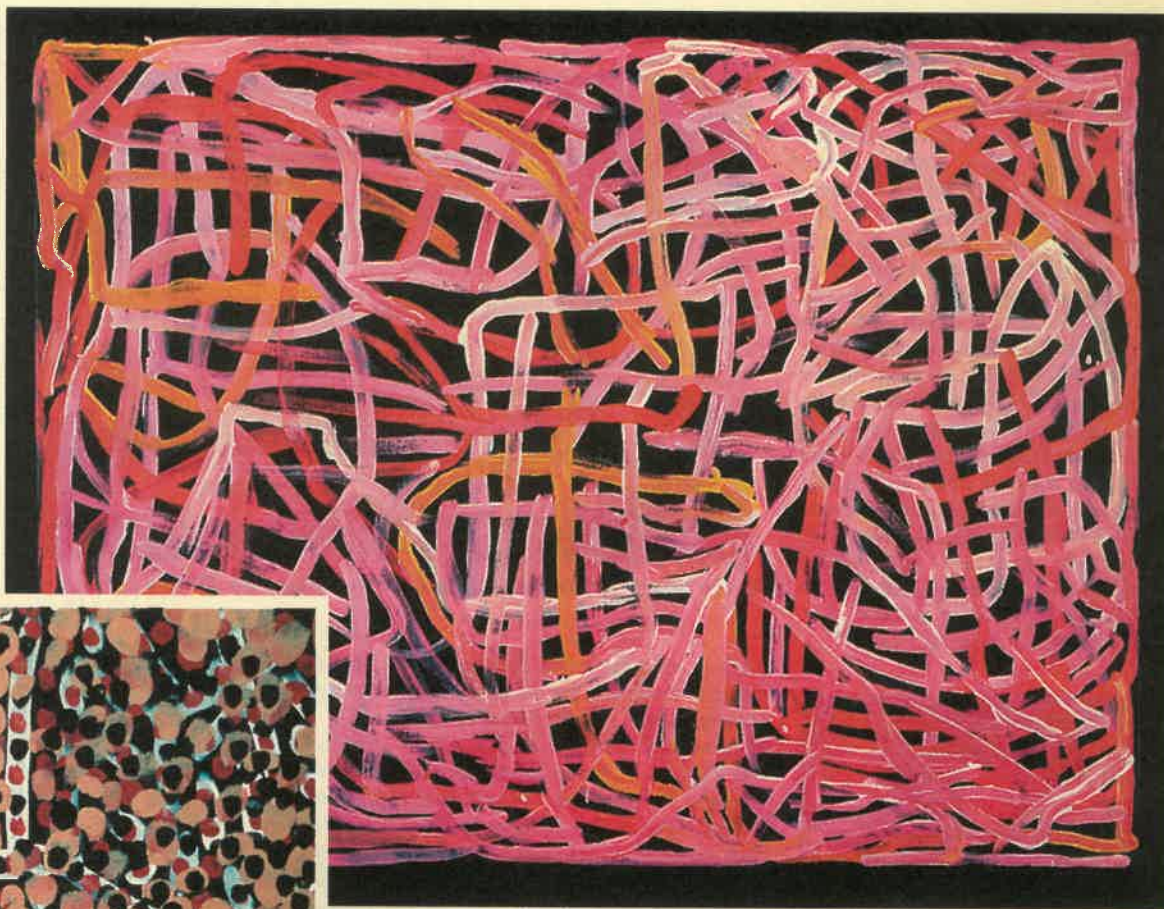


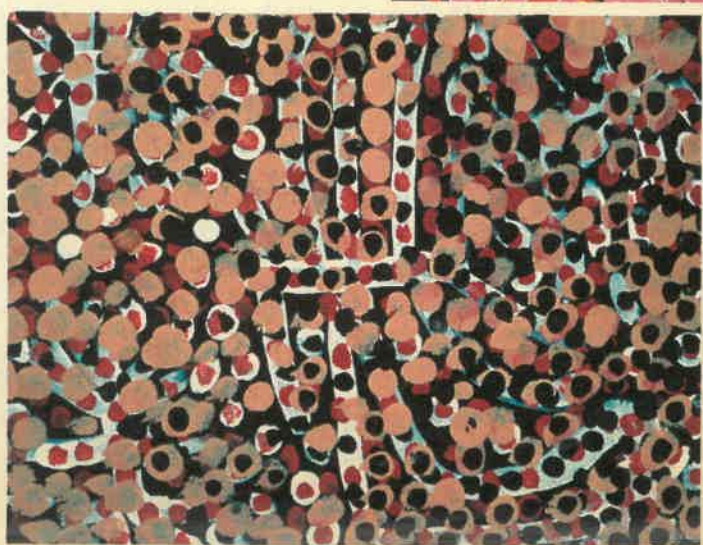
with Phil Brown

## Utopian ideals

Two exhibitions pay tribute to Aboriginal artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye



*Dreaming: Small Yam IV, from the exhibition at Philip Bacon Galleries*



*Colourful: Awelye, one of the paintings at the Queensland Art Gallery*

HERE are a number of people who are instantly known by a single moniker: Elvis, Kylie, Madonna, Elle, Di, Bono ... the list goes on in the pop culture pantheon.

In the world of art it's somewhat similar. For example, the revered Aboriginal artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye, who died in 1996, is now increasingly known as just "Emily".

Confusion as to whom you are referring could arise with Brontë sister fans but to others, the Emily you mean is clear.

Right now the town is abuzz with talk of Emily as a landmark retrospective of her work begins at the Queensland Art Gallery. The exhibition, *Emily Kame Kngwarreye. Alhalkere: Paintings from Utopia*, is a fitting tribute to a unique figure in Australian art and has caused a flurry of correlating activity on the local scene.

A string of other related shows around town coincide with it. There's an exhibition of naïve art from Utopia at Savode Gallery and other Aboriginal exhibitions at Fireworks Gallery and Michel Sourgnès Fine Art at Ascot.

The most directly related show, however, is at Philip Bacon Galleries, where a small but exquisite selection of the artist's work is for sale.

After a journey through the QAG exhibition, the prospect of owning a painting by Emily will be an attractive proposition.

The work assembled by curator Margo Neale will leave you in awe of the artist's talents and transported

by the simple, transcendental beauty of her colourful paintings, works on paper and textiles.

Margo, who is the gallery's Curator of Indigenous Australian Art, has been working on the exhibition for several years and consulted widely with private collectors and the Utopia community to bring together the scores of works now hanging throughout the gallery.

She also consulted with the artist herself before her death and Emily gave the exhibition her imprimatur and even did a specially commissioned work for it, the 18-piece work *Utopia panels*, which adorns the wall behind the gallery's water mall.

As for the artist's personal details, a quick synopsis: Emily was born

around 1910 in her desert "country", Alhalkere, 230km north-east of Alice Springs.

That land is the main inspiration for her work, which consisted of traditional painting for ceremonial and sacred purposes until, in her late seventies, she started painting in a more Western fashion.

Emily then produced a body of remarkable work in an outpouring that is perhaps unparalleled in modern art. This derived from a meeting of cultures, a meeting of worlds — not to mention the existence of a market hungry for her creations.

"Kngwarreye's work derives its power and relevance in the wider arena from the intersection of many worlds; her own *Dreaming*, a shared cultural heritage, and the visual con-

nections with Western modernist art, accounting in large part for the universal acclaim of her work," says Margo.

But we shouldn't draw too many conclusions from her links with modernism, which were largely unconscious. Margo says her abstraction "neither belongs nor owes anything to the lineage of mainly male modernist artists who preceded her".

"The painter was elderly, black and female," Margo asserts. "Her life, work and artistic practice defy conventional attempts at definition. The paintings refuse to be categorised as abstract expressionist, minimalist, fauvist or to confirm other seemingly appropriate labels that might be used to describe them."

In other words, leave your intellectual baggage and preconceptions behind and just enjoy these glorious pieces which trace her development in those precious later years.

And to get a glimpse of what her country — the source of her inspira-

tion — is like, the gallery has set up a "Utopia Room" with pictures, video, text and objects from the desert. Elders of the Utopia community collected rock samples and sent them to the gallery so that the land can be physically present.

Meanwhile, if you're keen to get a work for your collection, a visit to Philip Bacon galleries might be appropriate. The small but exquisite selection of works enables you to get close up and personal with a selection of poetic pieces, including some delightful prints which resonate with her very physical love for Alhalkere, her country.

◆ *Emily Kame Kngwarreye. Alhalkere: Paintings from Utopia, until 13 April at the Queensland Art Gallery, Queensland Cultural Centre, South Bank, Open every day. Phone 3840 7303.*

◆ *Emily Kame Kngwarreye, until 7 March at Philip Bacon Galleries, 2 Arthur Street, Fortitude Valley. Open Tuesday to Saturday, 10am to 5pm. Phone 3358 3555.*

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