Arts

Late desert flowers

Emily Kame Kngwarreye's retrospective reveals a born painter, says **Giles Auty**

IN the three years I have spent so far in Australia, I have come across a number of paintings by Emily Kame Kngwarreye in public and private collections but have previously seen only one important group of works: the paintings that formed part of the display chosen to represent Australia at last year's Venice Biennale.

In the meantime, the height of the esteem in which the artist is held has hovered like some ever-mounting cloud at the edge of my consciousness.

Emily Kame Kngwarreye died in September 1996 and it is to the great credit of all concerned that we are able to see a huge survey of her artistic achievements just 18 months later. Flying to Brisbane to view Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Alhalkere, Paintings from Utopia, I was conscious of claims that her work inadvertently echoed various modernist practices in painting but I had no idea what my own reaction would be in the face of this newly opened show at the Queensland Art Gallery.

Although the exhibition moves on to the Art Gallery of NSW in winter and to the National Gallery of Victoria next spring, I doubt it will be seen to greater advantage than at Brisbane, which is also cartographically and climatically rather closer to the artist's birthplace some 230km north-east of Alice Springs.

Kngwarreye was born about 1910 and did not see a white man until she was 10. She did not start painting in her mature mode until she was about 80, at which age she still retained much of the muscular strength she attained early in life from handling camels. At times her true story seems beyond even a romantic novelist's power to invent. I regret I did not meet the artist.

> She was instinctively conscious of nature's innermost rhythms

My own mother lived to a similar age to Kngwarreye and a superb German painter, the late Lotte Laserstein, used to insist in her last years that I sat next to her at functions in England where she would speak to me in a mixture of Swedish and German happily oblivious to the fact I understood very little of either. Those who knew Kngwarreye tell of her humour and sense of fun.

Although she first learned to paint as part of her youthful ritual education as an Aborigine, the paintings she produced at the end of her life more closely resembled the informal abstraction of western artists — in appearance, at least. Unsurprisingly, this last provides an endless source of discussion among pundits of modernism, luring some towards intellectual shipwreck on artfully concealed reefs.

Before discussing such matters, it is worth emphasising the physical beauty of much of the present exhibition, from her earlier sorties into the art of batik onwards. All the familiar marks are there, from tiny, densely interwoven dots the size of berries, to squiggles and whorls, uneven stripes and ropes of line, plump splodges and final broad brushstrokes. Many were painted on black-primed supports and canvases of unusual shape or proportions supplied by a variety of dealers. The black-primed supports related to body painting and marks made upon dark skins.

Spontaneous: *Untitled (Alhalkere)*, 1992, by Emily Kame Kngwarreye

Throughout her brief but highly productive, late-flowering career, during which she may have painted almost 4000 works in eight years, the artist depended, to a large extent, on the paints and supports supplied to her by others. Admittedly, if she felt weak or unwell, she specified that the latter should not be too large, yet there is clearly a major difference here with western practice, where the size, shape and surface of the support and colours chosen form a crucial part of creative decision-taking.

To this extent, the artist's actions were not entirely autonomous in her case. She also differed markedly from most western practitioners — Jackson Pollock apart — working flat on the ground. Her paintings do not strictly have a bottom or a top, which is another key departure from almost any western abstract aesthetic.

In short, although certain superficial resemblances may exist, Kngwarreye paintings spring from entirely different roots — in some cases quite literally — and systems of thinking. In a final analysis, they may tap into a collective unconscious common, if not to the entire human race, then at least to intuitive or spontaneous human mark-making.

But it is also worth noting that the release towards which many western abstract artists strove consciously was part of Kngwarreye's natural equipment. Because she had lived infinitely closer to nature from her earliest years, she was instinctively conscious of its innermost rhythms. This should hardly surprise us.

In many cases, western fascination with so-called primitivism in art is simply a reflection of our disenchantment with the absolutely unnecessary decadence of so much of what we produce ourselves. When we stray from art about life, to art about art a natural continuation of that line shortly brings us to art about nothing at all.

Our current artistic decline in the West is not imposed from without but is an illness generated from within. At its best, Kngwarreye's work is wonderfully varied and unforced and it is easy to regard her as a born painter. Yet it is doubtful whether her considerable talent would ever have come to fruition within the framework of traditional Aboriginal society.

The certainty and confidence of her most successful mark-making springs, paradoxically, from its absence of overt aesthetic aim.

The exhibition has been curated most sensitively by Margo Neale, who has chosen paintings with great care.

For those anxious to own work by a remarkable Australian painter, the Brisbane dealer Philip Bacon has put together a modest and varied collection of paintings.

Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Alhalkere Paintings from Utopia, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, until April 13. Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Philip Bacon Galleries, 2 Arthur Street, Fortitude Valley, Brisbane, until today.