

Art for art's sake

And money for God's sake. Eighty year old Emily Kngwarreye is Australia's richest and most internationally acclaimed female painter. But her success has brought her friends she never knew she had. **SONIA HARFORD** reports.

EMILY KAME KNGWARREYE'S dots are like wattle when it brushes against your face. Shot through with the colors of the desert, her art shimmers with the heat of the land.

Broad, soft-edged images fill out the Dreaming story of this elderly Aboriginal artist who lives on Utopia station, north-east of Alice Springs. Collectors are calling her one of the finest painters in Australia's history. But down south in the dystopic art world, infighting and competition dog her career, and she retreats. Travelling to her home in the desert, we hope to meet her and watch her paint. We wait, but despite all our organisational endeavors, Emily has other places to go. She doesn't want the attention, and we return south, disappointed.

In Western terms, Emily's work is recognised as brilliant abstract expressionism akin to the work of Jackson Pollack. While enthusiasts try to seek her out, she works from remote small communities, producing hundreds of valuable paintings. Two huge, bold, remarkable works hang in the major galleries of Melbourne and Canberra. In less than a decade, she has become possibly Australia's richest female painter.

By white people's standards, Emily is an unlikely star of contemporary art. Now in her 80s, she paints flat on the ground on an outstation veranda, or in and around Alice Springs. Her home and people are on Utopia, a 2000-square-kilometre area of land returned to the Anmatyerre and Alyawarr people in 1979. Here, Aborigines straddle cultures — they work the land as a cattle property, and also hunt, gather yams and hold ceremonies, strengthening traditions.

Since the 1970s, Utopia has also spawned a significant group of women artists who were encouraged to transfer their ceremonial body designs on to silk and canvas. Emily is the most admired of this group. One critic says her status confers on her first-name recognition, like Rembrandt. Collectors boast of owning "an Emily".

Paul Keating is an admirer of her work, and an exhibition of her paintings was recently held at the Parliament House gallery, an honor rarely afforded an individual. Emily only began painting on canvas in the late 1980s but, by 1992, she had established a high enough profile to be given an Australian Artists' Creative Fellowship worth \$110,000.

Emily's success in a short time has been phenomenal. But with fame come brokers and friends she never knew she had. Suspicions and rivalry have cast shadows on her career. Doubt over the authenticity of some paintings offered up as Emily's last year held her reputation to ransom, and some dealers now film and photograph her at work. The amount of money she earns — estimated to be up to \$500,000 annually — means a large group of people want a piece of the old woman.

"Every single person associated with Emily has been accused of not looking after her," says Judith Behan, of Canberra's Chapman Gallery, which sells Emily's work.

The mutual suspicion surrounding Emily's success typifies the often loveless marriage between art and commerce. There are still those who argue that commercial sales have corrupted indigenous art. However, the stunning success of Aboriginal painting has given rewards, unconditionally, to an oppressed people, through the art market. Emily is caught in between — respected as a contemporary artist, she is also venerated as a senior keeper of ceremonial law in her community. She wears many crowns, and those who count themselves friends are worried about the pressures on her.

A tense relationship exists between those in the business of art — dealers, friends and family who all say they're protecting Emily. Whether anyone is manipulating or pressuring her depends on whose story you believe. It's no wonder, then, that she sometimes hides.

When *The Age* flew up to Alice Springs, then drove three hours across red dust to the Delmore Downs cattle station, Emily was expected. She often paints with friends on the veranda of the station building, owned by white pastoralists Don and Janet Holt. Sometimes she sleeps under a tree on the property, before turning to the canvases they have prepared for her.

This time, despite Don Holt's high hopes and predictions, Emily doesn't appear. Her closest friend, Lily Sandover — also a painter — asks her son to collect Emily from Alice Springs. Lily is ready to paint, as she usually does, but it is not to be. We swim in the homestead's pool, yarn with the jackaroos, and shoo the pet wallaby out of our rooms. Emilies from the station's collection are unrolled for our viewing. But the hours pass slowly. At 7pm, when the temperature finally drops below 40 degrees, we walk along the dry river bed, beneath broad white ghost gums. Still no Emily. After four days, it is a great disappointment.

But this is not unusual. Sometimes, when she tires of all the attention or any pressure, Emily hides away at one of the many nearby soaks or friends' homes in Utopia or Alice Springs. Sometimes relatives drive her to Adelaide. The contrast is acute between her self-confident act of creation and the glamorised exhibition openings of urban artists.

At Delmore Downs, Don Holt is diplomatic, but clearly there is mutual distrust between the Holts, some members of Emily's extended family, and Rodney Gooch, an Alice Springs art dealer who also supplies work to galleries.

"Accusations fly left right and centre, and Don has copped a lot," said Judith

Behan. "He has had to live down terrible allegations. That has happened to Rodney Gooch too. And her family has come in for a bucketload."

There's recurrent fear raised by some of her admirers: as an Aboriginal artist, with limited English, but apparently plenty of savvy, is Emily being exploited? Her output is extraordinary, but the quality varies. Also, while most white living artists are represented by one particular gallery in each state, Emilies are supplied from many sources to many recipients,

most of whom claim some proprietorial role over her career. Don and Janet Holt appear to have an affectionate relationship with Emily and other artists who gather on their veranda. Don's grandparents established their station on the fringe of Utopia in the 1920 and he played with Aborigines as a child. Before marrying, Janet Holt was an art coordinator at Papunya, the Aboriginal community west of Alice, which, in the 1970s, produced perhaps the most famous desert art. She and Don commission works from Emily and others and donate or sell it to galleries and collectors.

Behan gets most of her Emilies from the Holts. "I have only seen Emily paint at the Holt's and I couldn't fault their treatment or consideration, and their gentle attitude towards her. I'm glad I saw it, I had the same scepticism as everyone else when talking about a golden goose."

ART dealer Rodney Gooch says there is "unbelievable tension" between those selling Emilies. He considers himself a close friend of Emily's and says his home is a refuge for her — the same claim made by the Holts. "She knows exactly what's going on," says Gooch.

"But sometimes she's under some

good, she won't use the color well".

Melbourne gallery dealer William Mora — who is exhibiting her work at his gallery until 30 March — believes Emily paints her best work at the Holt's Delmore Downs station. He agrees with others that her work is variable. She is certainly prolific. Dealers last year worked hard to protect Emily's reputation, aware there could be some truth in the rumors of fake Emilys, with works appearing from dubious sources.

The Parliament House exhibition certainly helped. The curator, Deborah Hart, said she was very concerned about the "art politics" at the time. "No artist, Aboriginal or other, could sustain the pressures that Emily has been under on a totally even keel... Everyone was saying 'She's a tough old woman, she can look after herself'. However, I could also see, as others could, that the constant demands placed upon her meant that there were examples of lesser works coming on to the market."

"Unfortunately there is always someone waiting in the wings to take up the bad work," says Judith Behan. "But collectors I know will rarely buy from just one dealer. They're very adept at working dealers against each other to get the best work."

Says Mora: "Emily is prolific, but no more than Sidney Nolan was or Arthur Boyd is. The best of her work will be seen to be up there with the major Australian paintings."

Mora has travelled to Delmore Downs to watch Emily paint. He, like many others, was profoundly impressed by her strength and energy.

"She's strong, Emily", says Lily Sandover at Delmore Downs. As a girl, Emily taught the younger Lily many things — women's ceremonies, places to dig for yams. And she brought killed kangaroos, looping the beast's arms over her shoulders as she walked, says Lily.

When she paints, she uses her whole arm, in wide sweeps across the surface, working on a small area with the stretched canvas on her lap. She sometimes uses both hands, and "loves a big surface" according to Judith Ryan, Senior Research Curator of Aboriginal Art at the National Gallery of Victoria.

Emily's dots, applied with her vigorous "dump dump" style as she jabbed the canvas, made her famous in the early 1990s. Sometimes they camouflaged lines beneath; in other works they swept across the canvas, whorls in the universe; evoking bush food, rain, wind and the earth — the "whole lot", as she has said.

More recently, she has created stark linear designs in black and white, or one color on black. Skeletal, bestial shapes emerge from the shapes within the pictures, as though the land is baring its bleached bones. Always, there is the yam coursing through the canvas.

Big Yam Dreaming, a large work the Holts donated to the gallery in December, is a glorious epic of Emily's Dreaming story. Three metres by eight metres, its bold white lines on a black background celebrate the growth of the *anooralya*, or finger yam.

Most curators insist that Emily's work, and that of other Aboriginal artists, be hung in contemporary art galleries to overcome the often demeaning notion of indigenous art as artefacts.

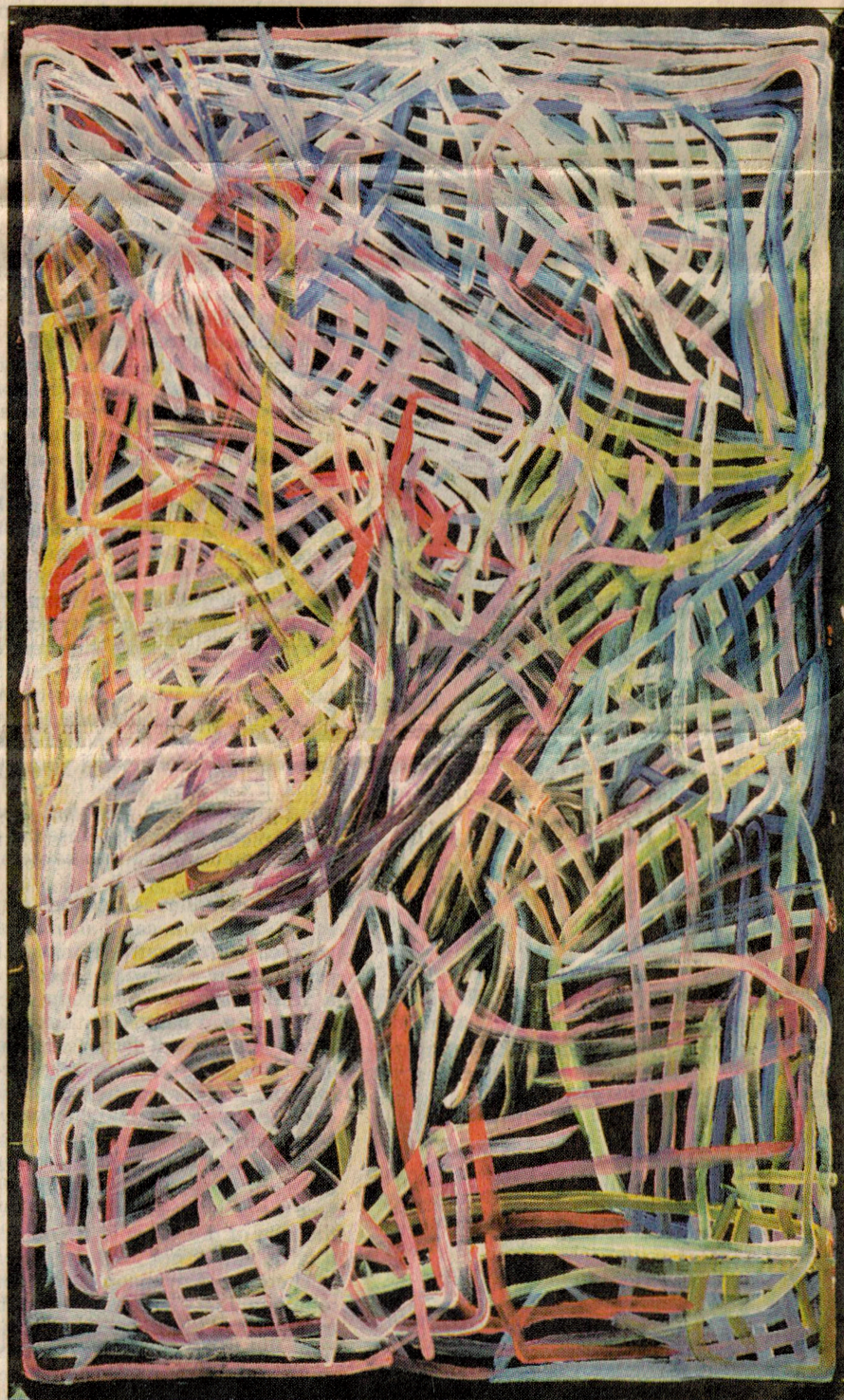
The commercial history of Utopia's art began in the 1970s when white art coordinators introduced batik to the local women. The women transferred to silk the body designs they painted on their breasts and limbs for ceremonies.

They continued their exploration on canvas, creating a landmark series of paintings that was bought by the Holmes a Court collection. These artists grew in reputation, and Emily emerged as the finest.

"She's done what would have seemed almost unachievable," says Dr Timothy Potts, the NGV's director. "She's taken Aboriginal art in a very authentic, traditionally based way on to another level where it engages with what is happening in international art".

"The best of her work has an amazing spontaneity and energy," says Judith Ryan. "She's in no confusion about where her next brush stroke is going. It's a very measured style."

Sonia Harford travelled to Alice Springs courtesy of William Mora Galleries.



The art: Yam Story V (June 1995).

stress and she goes and hides". Pressure is applied by both black and white people, he says, but "probably the pressure from her family is greater... If they think they can get another car out of Nana, they will," he says.

Like many aspects of indigenous cultures, it defies the judgment of white people. It is her money, and it's up to her how she spends it. Apart from money, quality is the word on everyone's lips. Gooch says it all depends on the day. "If she's not feeling

stress and she goes and hides". Pressure is applied by both black and white people, he says, but "probably the pressure from her family is greater... If they think they can get another car out of Nana, they will," he says.

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