

**Artful ways:** Alice Springs art gallery owner Michael Hollows holds a Kngwarreye lookalike, right; *Ariateye* (wild yam), below, by the late artist, bottom right

Pictures: Brett Faulkner and Michael Jones



*Kngwarreye's art brought such comforts for her people that they appointed a successor to maintain the output following her death.*

*Susan McCulloch reports that her legacy also includes a flood of fakes*

# TOO MANY DOTS

**I**T is a brilliantly lit central Australian morning, six days after the death of famous Aboriginal painter Kngwarreye in Alice Springs. The phone rings at Donald and Janet Holt's property Delmore Downs, which abuts the artist's area of Utopia, 270km north-east of Alice. Utopia painter Lily Sandover Kngwarreye is on the phone.

Taking the call, Holt, one of Kngwarreye's main art dealers, shrugs as he returns to our outside table. "Lily wants a new car," he says. "Fair enough — apart from anything else, she deserves it for all the time she spent looking after Kngwarreye. But others in the background were calling out — 'Three, tell him we need three.' The expectations are pretty high."

Lily Sandover Kngwarreye — close friend of the deceased painter — had been the older artist's most constant caregiver and painting assistant in recent years. She has just been accorded the dubious distinction of being named as the "new Kngwarreye" by elders of the community.

Sandover and Kngwarreye had a particularly close and warm friendship. As a painter, she was regarded as one of the most promising of the younger generation of Utopia women artists and held several promising individual exhibitions in the early 1990s.

However, circumstances, largely due to the time-consuming nature of the caregiving and painting role she undertook for Kngwarreye, intervened, with the consequent truncating of her own artistic development. Inherent now in her being named as successor is the expectation that she will continue to generate the same cash flow as her mentor.

But with success in the European art market based on more variable criteria, the chances for Sandover, although her art has indeed the potential to flower, to step instantly into the shoes of fame are highly unlikely. And to expect her to do so underscores some of the complexities of what became one of Australia's most lucrative single-person art industry.

"It's like heroin withdrawal — it can be

cold turkey or slow replacement — but it's going to happen," says Don Holt, discussing the impact of Kngwarreye's death.

"I'd say she bought some 500 cars for the community, as well as giving vast amounts of cash and other goods. A lot of people are hurting now that she's no longer around."

And, of course, it is not only those closest to her who are likely to suffer some hip-pocket pain or who are looking for ways to avoid it. This brilliantly creative artist had, in the space of eight years, unintentionally generated a vast industry in her name — major beneficiaries of which, even more than her immediate community, have been outside dealers and galleries.

Not that this is unusual or confined to Aboriginal art. One has only to look at the auction market to see just how much money can be made by those other than a work's creator.

In Aboriginal art, the only experience remotely akin to Kngwarreye's has been that of Albert Namatjira. Although painting a completely different imagery, like Kngwarreye, he was lauded by the Western art market — albeit at a less aggressive stage in its development.

Like Kngwarreye, he was a major generator of cash for his community (although its effects had a more personally devastating result on him than it did on Kngwarreye). And he, too, suffered damage to his artistic reputation through copies of his works being passed off as originals.

This, as almost anyone who deals in Kngwarreye's work will readily tell you (save for one Sydney dealer, Savah, who told me with all sincerity that he had never yet seen a fake Kngwarreye), remains a problem. And uncovering the possible truth in the minefield of rumour, mud-slinging and backstabbing that litters the world of Aboriginal art dealing is something of a tall order.

It is a subject many don't want discussed at all. Even some representing the genuine material would prefer not to see too much public discussion, as any such debate, they say, reinforces doubt and hence is "negative" for the art.

However, wishing it did not exist does not make this issue go away. This was in

evidence in Alice Springs, where some interstate dealers had flown in the week following Kngwarreye's death.

On the Friday of that week, a trip to Utopia had been organised by Kngwarreye's adopted daughter, Barbara Weir (one of the "stolen generation" who had been taken from her family at Utopia at the age of about nine in the 1950s, returning 10 years later) and her son Fred Torres, whose Adelaide gallery DACOU (Desert Art Centre of Utopia) deals in the work of Kngwarreye and other Utopia artists.

Melbourne dealer Hank Ebes had hired a minibus to take Weir, Torres, two Utopia residents, Gloria and Nancy Petyarre, and another eight Europeans to Utopia.

On board were the photographer and me from *The Weekend Australian* (we had

***"It is tragic that such wonderful work has the potential to be sullied. She was a genius and her work should be given that status"***

been invited as the only media representatives), Ebes's local representative, Savah, Adelaide's Anima gallery director Robert Steele, Torres's two gallery partners and an individual collector. Alice Springs-based Michael Hollows and his family, whose Aboriginal Desert Art Galleries operates in Melbourne, Sydney and Alice, followed in two four-wheel drives.

With the mourning ceremony kept strictly traditional, there had been considerable debate within the Utopia community over whether Europeans were permitted to visit the area during this time at all. Other dealers who had worked directly with Kngwarreye, such as Alice Springs resident Rodney Gooch, the

owner of Sydney's Utopia Art gallery, Christopher Hodges, and some of Kngwarreye's early dealers, such as Melbourne's Gabrielle Pizzi and Beverly Knight, felt it inappropriate to visit. Absent also, although they had been first mentioned as coming, were representatives of public galleries and other long-time outside friends.

So why did this group go? At one level it did indeed seem as presented — the chance for some who had shown or collected her work to pay respects to the community. But, as became clear, it was also the time for those who had benefited from the artist's work to come up with some extra cash. Having a whip around for cash or goods after an Aboriginal death is not uncommon.

With ceremony the preoccupation of all and involving many visiting, as well as close, relations, money, food and bedding are often needed, and given, at this time — and some who have regularly dealt with the art in this region had indeed quietly contributed in this way.

This, however, was on a different scale. The visiting dealers and collectors forked out around \$10,000 on the day. The Holts, who had also driven over to Utopia, gave a further several thousand in various chunks. Rather than give money, Hollows brought piles of doonas, blankets and food. Just before boarding the bus from Alice, *The Weekend Australian* was also asked for a cash contribution — "in the spirit of the day". We declined as a matter of policy.

At Utopia the mood, initially solemn on our arrival and during a round of handshakes between the white visitors and the 200-plus Aborigines, sharpened with the arrival of the Holts. Competition between art dealers and those who have access to this community has a history of being fierce.

Add a more than usual emotional state and almost instantly a fiery slanging match developed between some members of the visiting group and the Holts — Aboriginal elders and residents later pointedly conversing with both groups.

The atmosphere further tensed as blankets, food and money were distributed by community elders, with some vociferous complaints about who got what. Debates

between various cliques continued for a couple of hours until, at about 4pm, buses and cars headed off again for town. The next day in the closely knit Alice art world, stories of the events had spread, gaining in drama and hyperbole with each retelling.

At Hollows's gallery, a typical "problem" painting was brought out. According to Hollows, this particular painting had been brought in by a young Aboriginal man from Utopia who claimed it was a Kngwarreye. Unsigned, the brightly coloured work was reminiscent of the late artist's famous "dump dump" style, while lacking its subtlety. However, as Hollows says, if you were to see this work identified as hers in a Sydney, Melbourne or London gallery, would you know?

It is indeed the type of painting that art dealer Gooch, who as former art adviser with the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association in the 1980s worked closely with Kngwarreye and many other Utopia artists, described as seeing among dozens of examples of work attributed to her in a Melbourne gallery last year.

**H**E says that the artists who had done the paintings, or knew those who had, with whom he was travelling, were vastly amused at seeing their work thus redefined. "These artists are allowed to paint these stories in this way," he says. "It's not their fault if someone buys them from them and attributes them to someone else."

He adds: "There really ought to be something called the 'school of Kngwarreye' for paintings like this. There's nothing wrong with artists painting in a similar manner to each other — it's something the impressionists, for example, have become praised for — but there is something very wrong with their names being removed entirely and them being passed off as being by someone they're not."

As well as those works "in the school of" that may be passed off as Kngwarreye's, an

unquantifiable number of paintings in many of her other styles are also believed forged — mainly by white copyists.

The Holts, who own a large collection of Kngwarreye's work, are obviously similarly concerned with protecting her reputation. "There is something even more tragic that such wonderful work has the potential to be sullied in this way," says Don Holt.

"She was a genius and a wonderful person, and her work should be given that status. We're taking stock at the moment and have pulled back the pieces that were out on consignment."

What would he advise if one were contemplating buying a Kngwarreye at present? "Check the price carefully. Documentation, such as videos and photos, may be a help, although these aren't 100 per cent reliable either as sometimes she'd be asked to hold up dozens of works in a sequence — some of which may not have been hers — to have her photograph taken with each or asked to hold a paintbrush as if painting for a video."

"Best is to check the provenance [any previous ownership and, if possible, how the work came to the gallery] or talk to the person who actually saw her painting it. And, as always, buy from a reputable dealer."

Which is all very well — if those of us outside the industry can distinguish between the reputable from the plausible.

Yet above all, like a beacon cutting through the fog of desperate dealings, insatiable grasping for cash and accusations of exploitation, shine the luminous paintings of this small, strong old lady.

Both she and her art refused to be either compromised or reduced by the dealings in her name. This is something of a minor miracle and speaks not only of the power of great art but of the indomitable creative spirit that guides it.