Australian Aboriginal artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye exhibition at Tate Modern

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The Tate Modern in London is currently hosting a landmark exhibition celebrating the art of Emily Kame Kngwarreye (c. 1914–1996), recognised as one of Australia's most significant visual artists of the late 20th century. The retrospective, running from July 10 to January 11, 2026, features 70 pieces—from her early batik designs and her first canvas in 1988 to her final works in 1996.

The show, the first major solo exhibition of her work in Europe, was organised in close collaboration with the National Gallery of Australia, the Utopia Art Centre, and Kngwarreye's descendants. It offers insight into her unique artistic vision, inspired by her profound connection to her ancestral country and culture.

Born and raised in Alhalkere, about 230 kilometres northeast of Alice Springs in the Northern Territory, Kngwarreye began her artistic career in 1977, initially gaining recognition for her batik prints. In the final six or seven years before her death, she turned to acrylic painting, creating more than 3,000 remarkable works. Kngwarreye's art draws from Aboriginal women's songs, ceremonies, communal body painting, and storytelling. The vibrant, intricate patterns embody her deep knowledge of Alhalkere, layering motifs that represent the plants, animals, and geological features of the desert ecosystem.

While the Tate Modern exhibition provides a valuable overview of Kngwarreye's impressive career, it is important to acknowledge earlier international recognition—most notably, her groundbreaking exhibition in Japan from February to July 2008.

Initiated by Japanese curator Akira Tatehata and Margo Neale, this audacious exhibition attracted record-breaking attendance at the National Art Centre, Tokyo. It remains the only large-scale survey devoted to an Australian artist by a Japanese museum and led to the annual "Emily Day" event held in her honour. The show played a crucial role in expanding international appreciation of Kngwarreye's extraordinary work.

Today we are reposting "Emily Kame Kngwarreye retrospective: The Art of the 'Dreaming'" by Susan Allan, a 1999 review of Kngwarreye's then-recent exhibitions in Australia. The article offers a Marxist assessment of the origins and legacy of her work.

Emily Kame Kngwarreye retrospective: The Art of the "Dreaming"

Alhalkere—Paintings from Utopia is a major retrospective exhibition of Emily Kame Kngwarreye just concluded at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra and previously on show in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. It constitutes both a tribute and insight into the life and work of this remarkable Aboriginal artist.

Kngwarreye, who was 86 years old when she died in 1996, is arguably one of the more significant Australian artists to have emerged in the last decade and a half, and one with a prodigious output. In the last eight years of her life Kngwarreye produced over 3,000 works on silk, cotton, paper and canvas—some canvases as large as three by eight metres. After being introduced to acrylic on canvas at the age of 78, she developed at least five different and distinctive styles in this medium. While the recent exhibition included only 89 of the works produced between 1981–1996, those on display reveal Kngwarreye's tremendous audacity and complexity of vision.

Some critics have compared her work to that of the great impressionist painter—Claude Monet—or abstract expressionists Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. Whilst there are similarities in the form, technique and medium used by Kngwarreye and many modern artists—the explosion of brilliant dotted colors, the broad brush sweeps with their inventive simplified forms, the rhythmic gestural lines—these comparisons provide little information about the cultural and religious content of Kngwarreye's work.

Emily Kame Kngwarreye was born in 1910 in Alhalkere, Utopia, Northern Territory, central Australia. Alhalkere, the Aboriginal name of Kngwarreye's country and the subject matter of all of her work, is situated on the north-west boundary of Utopia over 250 kilometres northeast of Alice Springs, and some 1,300 kilometres from the nearest coastline. Utopia's borders, which cut across the lands of the Alyawarre and Anmatyerre people, were drawn up in 1927 as part of a lease for a 2,000 square kilometre cattle farm.

Utopia is desert country. The soil is red and the land flat with rocky outcrops and low ranges. Dotted across this dry land is spindly scrub, spinifex and the occasional tree. To the untrained eye it appears almost without life. To the Aboriginal people this country yields a wealth of plant foods and wild life, and hosts many ceremonial and sacred sites.

For most of her life Kngwarreye existed, along with other Aborigines in this sparsely populated country, in virtual isolation. She lived in poverty, had no formal education and little or no knowledge of the contemporary world—let alone the world of galleries or art museums. Her first sighting of a white man was as a young girl digging for yams with her friend in a dry riverbed. The man appeared on horseback holding a whip guiding another horse with an Aboriginal man seated on it in chains with an iron collar around his neck. This was also the first time Kngwarreye had seen a horse.

Forced from their land and ceremonial sites by the cattle farmers, the Alyawarre and Anmatyerre people were pushed into small areas adjacent to the farming homesteads. Here they were exploited as virtual slave labor, the men as stockmen and the women as domestic labor. Kngwarreye, who first worked as a domestic servant, was later employed with her husband to lead camel teams carrying supplies between Alcoota and the Wolfram Mine on Mt Riddock Station. Kngwarreye received no wages but was paid in food rations—sugar, flour, tea—and old clothing.

Not only did Kngwarreye live thousands of kilometres from the great art centres of Paris and New York; but the cultural heritage that animated her work, lay thousands of years in her ancestral past.

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Kngwarreye's vibrant images evoke the characteristics and stories of the land of her origins—its serene spiritual beauty and harmony, its harsh and primitive rawness. An artist of very few words who regarded talking about her work as "other peoples business"[1], Kngwarreye was asked in 1990 to explain what she painted. She told the interviewer that she painted her country, in all its aspects:

"…Whole lot, that's whole lot, Awelye (my dreaming), Arlatyeye (pencil yam), Arkerrthe (mountain devil lizard), Ntange (grass seed), Tingu (a dream-time pup), Ankerre (emu), Intekwe (a favourite food of emus, a small plant), Atnwerle (green bean), and Kame (yam seed). That's what I paint: whole lot.…"[2]

In other words, far from Kngwarreye striving for a non-objectivist art, as many abstract painters do, she strove to nurture, celebrate and express nature in her paintings. The content and aim of her work was to express her Aboriginal Dreaming—the stories of her ancestors, their spiritual beliefs and their relationship to the land.

Aboriginal culture and spirit-beliefs date back 50,000 years, originating in the primitive society hunter-gatherers. As the Russian Marxist Georgi Plekhanov explained in 1899–1900, one can only understand primitive art, the development of its aesthetic values and beliefs, as an outcome of the hunter's way of life.

The most important part of primitive man's experience is associated with the animal world and therefore the motifs, icons and dance are borrowed from that world. Before primitive man painted animals on caves he hunted; before he began to imitate the animals in his dance—to relive the same excitement and energy of the hunt—he participated in the hunt. Just as there existed a division of labour in primitive society between men who hunt, and woman who gather roots and wild fruits, so there was a division in the selection of motifs and icons for body painting and ceremony—men selecting animals and women wild foods. For example, the dances of Aboriginal women depict the pulling out of nutritious roots from the ground.

As Plekhanov explained: "The art of any people is determined by its mentality; its mentality is a product of its situation, and its situation is determined in the final analysis by the state of its productive forces and its relations of production."[3]

The Aboriginal Dreamings or myths about creation, the development of the earth and cosmos, are presented as the outcome of journeys and activities of supernatural ancestral beings. The dreamtime stories, which outline definite customs and social laws, are also related to different regions. The Aboriginal people who reside in these areas are regarded as the custodians of these myths. Their responsibility is to pass them on through ceremony, ritual, song and dance, and to preserve and protect the land with its sacred sites. By enacting a dreamtime story Aboriginal people believe that they are activating the powers of ancestral beings, who will nourish and renew the land and all its inhabitants.

As an elder and leader of women's ceremony, Kngwarreye was obliged to pass on her knowledge and the stories of the land. For Kngwarreye painting was not some separate aesthetic exercise but another component of the Dreaming ceremonies. To paint was a spiritual act.

From ceremonial body painting to canvas

On display at the retrospective exhibition, is Kngwarreye's *Emu Woman*, her first work on canvas. The painting, one of 81 works created between 1988–89 by the Aboriginal artists of Utopia, was part of a community project initiated by the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association.

Emu Woman is based on painted body markings used in women's ceremonies (awelye). The body is smeared with animal fat and the breasts, arms and thighs are painted with powders ground from charcoal ash, red and yellow ochre and white clay. It is a unique and self-assured statement, consisting of striped and looped linear designs that are overlaid with bold marks of red, black, yellow and white dots.

By 1990–91 a shift in style began to emerge in Kngwarreye's work. The previously distinct body and breast markings, the tracks of the emu and the path of the yam in her work were shrouded in a storm of dotted colours, spreading across large landscape canvases.

In *Kame—Summer Awelye 1*, we are enveloped in glistening desert summer tones—gold, red, orange and yellow. Dot upon dot is applied with small brushes over a black background leaving only a thin black edge that acts as a frame, to encapsulate the growing warmth.

Adopting a similar technique in *Untitled (State of my Country)*, a myriad of tiny earth-coloured dots are applied, covering a splattering of soft blue—perhaps reflecting the desert's night sky with a deep feeling of infinity or the desert floor after a downpour of rain. In this work, and others, Kngwarreye reveals an exceptional ability to create works of natural balance and harmony. In contrast to the succinctly applied and controlled dots of other contemporary desert artists, Kngwarreye's works are immediate, spontaneous and free of inhibition.

The use of dots or repeated marks, common to the work of Kngwarreye and other artists from the desert regions, have a number of origins and diverse purposes. Firstly, in one of the more ephemeral and traditional art practices of the desert—sand drawings and ground mosaics—designs are constructed and drawn onto the desert floor, sometimes as large as a hectare. The designs are created with a mixture of ground ochre and other natural materials, placed on the sand by hand, piece by piece, dot by dot, like a mosaic. The sand paintings are central to many Aboriginal ceremonies and are only considered a temporary setting for the performers, the image blown away by the wind after the event.

Dots or marks are used by Kngwarreye in her paintings to create a sense of luminosity, visual energy and vibration. This affect is powerfully achieved in much of her work. Of particular note is, *Untitled*, (1994)—a deceptively simple composition made up of red-ochre stripes on a white background overlaid with pale brown marks, creating the appearance of brilliant light emanating from the canvas.

In the following years, as Kngwarreye's artistic work and reputation became more widespread, she faced inevitable pressures to produce more paintings. And while she increased her output Kngwarreye moved forward with extraordinary vigour and confidence for a woman of her age. She experimented boldly, taking risks and developing new styles and innovative techniques.

Using larger, self-styled brushes—cutting down the hairs of the brush around its perimeter but leaving the central hairs long—Kngwarreye double dipped her colour and developed what was called the "dump-dump" style. Dipping into two or three colours, one after another, she would thrust the brush onto the canvas leaving the original splodge completely intact, other times giving the brush a final twist, spraying out the edges producing florets of colour.

Those who had the opportunity to observe Kngwarreye at work compared her painting action to the movement and gestures of a dancer with the brush acting as an extension of her hand, arm and shoulder. At times using one brush in her right hand, changing the brush to the left, and on occasions with a brush in each hand, double dipping, thrusting and dragging the brush across the canvas like a dancer's feet in the ceremonial sands.

Kngwarreye's work constantly reveals the direct and living connection between Aboriginal art and ceremony. When Kngwarreye saw one of her paintings on display at Sydney art gallery in 1992 she spontaneously began ceremonial singing.

As the retrospective catalogue relates: "She sang a painting… As her

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outstretched right arm pointed to the painting she began to quietly intone a thin, droning song at the harder edge of the voice… Gloria Petyarre, Emily's niece and fellow artist, began to drum with her fingers on a board at hand in a steady supporting rhythm."[4]

In the last two years of Kngwarreye's life, with failing eyesight, crippling arthritis and increasing ill health, her work took a number of diverse turns. From the simplified pure brushstrokes of colours that flow and bleed, to the tangled white on *Black Yam Dreamings*, to the furious translucent panels of movement and life—Kngwarreye not only revisited her beginnings, but challenged all that came after it.

In October 1994, Kngwarreye was awarded the Australian Artists Creative Fellowship by the then Prime Minister Paul Keating. She was the first Aboriginal artist to receive such an award and soon after, at the age of 84, announced that she wanted to retire. But the expanding international audience for Aboriginal art and increasing demands of art dealers and galleries forced her to continue painting right up until her death.

Evidence of the growing market for Aboriginal art is indicated by an auction last year at Sothebys in Australia. International bidders dominated the bidding with a record $3.35 million, $1 million higher than the previous year and easily matching prices achieved for works by non-indigenous artists. Kngwarreye's 1991 painting *Alalgura*, was sold for $145,500 and Billy Stockman Tjapltjarri's, *Wild potato (Yala) Dreaming* went for $200,500.

In contrast to the hundreds of thousands of dollars passing between the art dealers, gallery owners and the international auction houses, most Aboriginal artists and their communities live in poverty. As one art critic reported, paintings produced in the 1970s and 80s by well-known artist Johnny Warrangula are in major collections and sell on the private market for up to $50,000. In the mid-1990s, he was forced to make a living selling painted spears in main street of Alice Springs. Warrangula is not the only Aboriginal artist confronting this situation.

On 29 August 1996, four days before she died, Kngwarreye completed her last painting, the exquisite *Yam Awelye—Blue*. Unfortunately, it was not made available for the retrospective. This final painting, a vibrant vision of tranquil beauty with striking, electric-blue brush strokes on an infinite background of black, is a powerful concluding statement of the creative force of her artistic work.

For further information on the Kngwarreye retrospective at the Tate Modern and some examples of her work visit:
https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/emily-kam-kngwarray

Emily Kame Kngwarreye—Alhalkere—Paintings from Utopia, Queensland Art Gallery 1998, page 5

ibid, page 33

Selected Philosophical Works, Georgi Plekhanov, Vol. 5, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1976, page 295

op cit, Queensland Art Gallery, page 29

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[1] *Emily Kame Kngwarreye—Alhalkere—Paintings from Utopia*, Queensland Art Gallery 1998, page 5

[2] ibid, page 33

[3] *Selected Philosophical Works*, Georgi Plekhanov, Vol. 5, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1976, page 295

[4] op cit, Queensland Art Gallery, page 29

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