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Tony Tuckson

by John McPhee

Kathleen Petyarre

Retrospective

MCA's Elizabeth

Ann Macgregor

talks collecting

Deborah Clark on

Solander's

Joy Warren

PLUS • Rex Butler: Aboriginal art meets its maker • Terry Ingram on the GST
• Ashley Crawford on Melbourne's Medicis • Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula Obituary
• Bruce James on Katie Cox • Geoffrey Maslen previews the Autumn-Winter auctions and much more

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KATHLEEN PETYARRE

DREAMINGS COMETRUE



Kathleen Petyarre, *My Country (Bush Seeds)*, 1998. 122 x 152 cm.
COURTESY: MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

WITH THE FIRST MAJOR SURVEY OF THIS IMPORTANT INDIGENOUS ARTIST ABOUT TO OPEN, THE MCA'S CURATORIAL LIAISON FOR THE SHOW, **RUSSELL STORER**, INTRODUCES THE ARTIST AND HER OEUVRE...

The work of Kathleen Petyarre is among the most distinctive in Australian art. Its galaxies of fine dots, layered carefully in whirls of deep colour, provide dazzling and deeply moving representations of the artist's country and Dreamings to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike. Her work has been shown throughout Australia and overseas, including exhibitions in Germany, Indonesia, Ireland, the Netherlands and the United States. She has won a number of awards, including the 1996 Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award, the 1997 Visy Board Art Prize, and the People's Choice at the 1998 Seppelt Contemporary Art Awards at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Her work is represented in most state collections, as well as numerous public, corporate, and private collections both in Australia and abroad.

Born circa 1940 at Atnangker to the north west of Utopia station, 275km north east of Alice Springs, Petyarre belongs to the Eastern Anmatyerr language group. She began making artworks in 1977, producing batiks along with a number of the other women at Utopia. In the late 1980s, Petyarre began painting with acrylic on canvas, and

Petyarre is one of the most prominent artists from Utopia, a community long renowned for the work of its artists, particularly the women.

since then has gradually developed her signature styles, refining her technique of layering very fine dots in thin acrylic paint so that they soak into the linen. This pristine, even surface is carefully prepared by the artist, resulting in works of remarkable depth and complexity.

Petyarre, along with her sisters and brothers, is owner or custodian of several Dreamings, including her central Dreaming, *Arnkerrthe, the Thorny or Mountain Devil Lizard*. This small, spiky lizard roams over a wide area, with its travels through Petyarre's country depicted regularly in her works. It is country that is constantly changing, like the chameleon-like lizard, from place to place and over time. Petyarre uses different colours and shapes to depict sandhills, watercourses, rockholes, hailstorms and sandstorms. The imagery is simultaneously macro- and microcosmic. The fine dots might represent clouds of sand, sheets of hail, spinifex and flowers, or the bush seeds that scatter over the land, providing food for its inhabitants. Using the 'aerial view' typical of the work of the region, Petyarre's recent paintings also have a strong sense of movement. Petyarre describes this sensation as "...looking down from a little plane, looking down from sky... like looking down



Kathleen Petyarre, *Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming*, 2000. 122 x 122 cm. COURTESY: MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

on my country during the hot time, when the country changes colour – you know, like looking right down onto the top of big sandhills. I love to make the painting like it's moving, travelling, but it's still our body painting, still our ceremony." ¹

The seductive and shimmering layers of dots also provide a series of fine screens that overlay the Dreaming portrayed by Petyarre. Dreamings can only be depicted, and often only be viewed, by their owners or custodians. The sacred meanings of Petyarre's Dreamings remain intact, suggested as "a barely tangible, shadowy palimpsest, overwritten, as it were, by the surface colours and movement." ² The careful observance of these laws by Petyarre indicates a highly disciplined artist who is eager to share her visions of her country with others without transgressing sacred codes.

The MCA's exhibition, organised with curatorial assistance from Dr **Christine Nicholls** of Flinders University, will be looking at the whole of Petyarre's career, with a particular emphasis on works from the mid-1990s to the present. It will feature batiks and early prints,

Petyarre at Market

Jane Raffan, General Manager and Head of Aboriginal Art at Phillips International Auctioneers, believes Kathleen Petyarre's MCA retrospective "won't send prices through the roof but will instead ratify the market for Kathleen which has been performing strongly and consistently." Raffan said Petyarre's market status sits "a bit below Emily (Kame Ngwarreye) and around the same level as Queenie (McKenzie), depending upon the work, obviously." Petyarre's art does not appear at auction often, but when it does it attracts prices beyond estimated sale prices (a 1992 work fetching \$13,800 from an estimated range of \$6,000-\$8,000). "Currently works are selling in the \$10,000-\$25,000 range but people are holding on to them," notes Raffan. "She's enjoying popularity on the academic as well as the critical circuit and the collectors I speak to tell me they're very happy to hold on to them for a couple of years yet and wait for the market to mature."

Sotheby's Aboriginal art expert, Tim Klingender notes that very few Petyarres have come through his hands. "We did offer one major work last year, a 1992 *Awelye* which went for \$13,800 against an estimate of \$6,000-\$8,000. It was a significant work, a transitional work which had been exhibited at the 1993 Asia

"Currently works are selling in the \$10,000-25,000 range but people are holding on to them."

Pacific Triennale in Brisbane and it was part of an important collection, the Hunter Collection. She's not overly prolific but she's terrifically popular. People love her works and tend to hang on to them, but now with this major show perhaps we'll see some of those works come on to the market."

Kathleen Petyarre was the subject of controversy in 1996 following her win in the prestigious Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award. Susan McCulloch Uehlin reported in *The Australian* that Petyarre's non-Indigenous husband Ray Beamish claimed to be not just a collaborator in her painting (a common feature of much Indigenous art production) but was centrally responsible for its conceptual development and physical execution. Petyarre vigorously denied the claims and an inquiry by the Board of the Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory found Beamish's allegations regarding authorship of the award-winning painting not proven. The couple have since separated. The controversy has had little subsequent effect on the art market's confidence in her work.

- Michael Hutak

Kathleen Petyarre, *Thorny Devil Lizard Dreaming (after sandstorm)*, 1996. 122 x 183 cm. COURTESY: MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

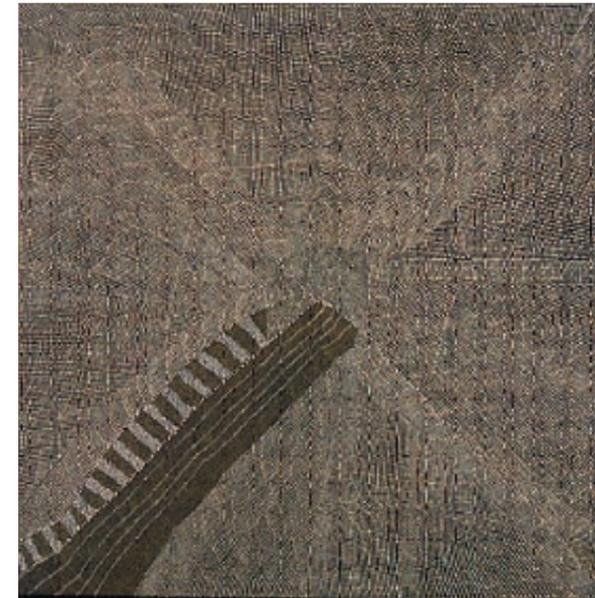


"The imagery is simultaneously macro- and microcosmic. The fine dots might represent clouds of sand, sheets of hail, spinifex and flowers, or the bush seeds that scatter over the land, providing food for its inhabitants."

as well as a wide range of paintings and works on paper, following the development of the different threads of the artist's motifs and styles. Works have been loaned by various private and public collections throughout Australia and overseas, and include several new works produced specifically for the exhibition. The exhibition will occupy the entire Level 4 Galleries, the project spaces used to highlight the work of major emerging and mid-career artists. Previous artists featured on Level 4 include Guan Wei, Dale Frank, Mikala Dwyer and Isaac Julien.

The MCA was keen to feature a major exhibition of Kathleen Petyarre's work for several reasons. As a museum which houses three significant collections of Aboriginal art, and which has long been committed to the promotion of Indigenous art practice in Australia, the MCA sees an in-depth survey exhibition of this major artist as significant and timely. Petyarre is one of the most prominent artists from Utopia, a community long renowned for the work of its artists, particularly the women. From their early batiks, through their print series and now their paintings, the works of artists such as Petyarre's aunt, Emily Kame Ngwarreye and her sisters, Gloria, Violet and Ada Petyarre, have become some of the most recognisable and admired art in the country. Petyarre is a great leader in her community, from having been involved in the successful claim for title over the Utopia lease, to acting as a mentor to the younger women artists, ensuring that they work to her characteristic high standards.

Furthermore, Petyarre is a great innovator. While working within Anmatyerr law, she has developed a powerful and unique visual language that has broadened the perceptions of



Kathleen Petyarre, *Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming*, 1998. 122 x 122 cm. COURTESY: MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

They are (at once) sumptuous and elegant abstract paintings; highly refined impressionist landscapes; deeply spiritual meditations of place; and complex and rigorous representations of the artist's Dreaming.

and possibilities for Indigenous art. Her fine dotting, subtle variations of tone and colour, and sheer, soft surfaces are unlike the work of any other contemporary artist in Australia. Her paintings defy simple categorisation and operate on any number of levels. They are sumptuous and elegant abstract paintings; highly refined impressionist landscapes; deeply spiritual meditations of place; and complex and rigorous representations of the artist's Dreaming. Petyarre's dedication to her painting has been a sustained and constantly evolving process, resulting in a remarkably consistent and extremely powerful body of work.

Produced concurrently with the exhibition will be the first monograph on Petyarre's work, commissioned by ArtSA with texts by Christine Nicholls and Ian North. Nicholls discusses the inseparability of the artist's life and work, while North will situate Petyarre's work within the context of international art movements, with reference to both bio-aesthetics and psychoanalysis.

Kathleen Petyarre, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 9 May to 22 July 2001. ■

1. Kathleen Petyarre, personal comments, July 1997, published in Christine Nicholls, 'An Introduction to the women painters of Utopia, Northern Territory,' *Journal of the Anthropological Society of South Australia*, Vol. 32, Nos. 1 & 2, Adelaide, December 1999.

2. Dr Christine Nicholls, 'Kathleen Petyarre: An Artist for our Times,' in *Paintings by Kathleen Petyarre*, catalogue, Gallerie Australis, Adelaide, 1999.

NB: I would like to acknowledge the writing of David Cossey and particularly Dr Christine Nicholls for information about Petyarre's life and work, and about the forthcoming book.