

Emily Kame Kngwarreye

(c1910–1996)

Anmatyerre language group

The Anooralya Yam 1995

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

152.0 x 91.5 cm

bears inscription verso: 95H123/ Emily Kngwareye/ Commissioned by/ Delmore

bears inscription verso: 95H123

accompanied by a certificate of authenticity from Delmore Gallery, Northern Territory

PROVENANCE

Delmore Gallery, Northern Territory (stock no.95H123)

Chapman Gallery, Canberra, 1997

Private collection, Brisbane

\$100,000 - \$150,000

Emily Kame Kngwarreye's virtuoso oeuvre is a remarkable collective expression of the interconnectedness of her physical self and Country, *Alhalkere*, the complex inter-realm associations of *awelye* (women's law ceremonies in *Anmatyerre*) and attendant custodial responsibilities for nurturing the land and its bounty.

As curator Kellie Cole asserts, 'what came out of Emily Kam Kngwarray,¹ came out of Country'.² Often declared as 'the whole lot', Kngwarreye's paintings are manifestations of a metaphysical trinity: Country, *awelye*, and self – a fusion evident in her naming; Kngwarreye's 'private one', her personal or 'bush' name, Kame (Kam), is the seed of the wild pencil yam, *anwerlarr* (*Vigna lanceolata*), that grows across *Alhalkere*.

The 'whole lot' is an expression of intimacy; a Country/self-connection deemed unnecessary to explain. Linguist Jenny Green, who first knew Kngwarreye in her formative artistic years, understands this intimacy as 'a mnemonic for a broader metaphorical vision that encodes complex cultural and ecological knowledge while still staying true to its detail'.³ Every painting is, therefore, a textural matrix for Kngwarreye's atlas of custodial references.

Indeed, curator Stephen Gilchrist believes that Kngwarreye's legacy lies in her endowment of such 'cultural coordinates' ... 'that not only strengthen our understanding of her work but strengthen Country itself ... they show us what it means to be in, belong to and be affected by Country'.⁴

Kngwarreye's genius stems from individuations in her visual expressions of these coordinates. Her significance has been lauded in three posthumous retrospectives, each demarcating painting periods exhibiting distinctly different characteristics. While this is helpful in a stylistic exegesis, it is important to understand that the artist herself did not differentiate her works in this fashion. Whether it be the craft of producing batik or the fine art of painting,⁵ her artistic compass was always oriented from the position of Country, kinship and the cyclical

knowledge systems that underpin her practice, not Western art canon conventions.

The inaugural retrospective's curatorial rationale explored connections and linkages between Kngwarreye's first and last works: from batik in 1977 to her final painting in 1996. Revealing 'lines of continuity that reverberate' across her oeuvre, Margot Neale proclaimed Kngwarreye's stylistic virtuosity as 'shifting gears in a continuous trajectory linking time, place and image'.⁶

Reflecting on the 'whole lot' for the most recent exposition, Gilchrist posited that her dynamism and innovation hinges on this fluid temporality, wherein 'vitality and presentness [is] not of the past, but of the now and of the new'.⁷ This accords with anthropologist Jennifer Biddle's view that Kngwarreye's work is 'not about visuality at all, but is a kind of experience, a way of bringing into the world ancestral potency'.⁸

Green, too, has described this phenomenon in terms of temporal allegory, in which she attributes Kngwarreye's layering of paint (and earlier, wax) and gestural fluidity to a life of cultural mark making, and in particular, sand drawing, wherein 'the accumulation of graphic elements is periodically erased as the narrative unfolds ... [signalling] changes in time and space ... alluding to seasonal changes reflected in the land and in the plants and animals central to her practice'.⁹

The Anooralya Yam's ceremonial ties are testament to what has been described as 'mobilizing a realm of intelligibility that produced the Aboriginal world'.¹⁰ It is important to recognise that while Kngwarreye completed her first painting on canvas in 1988; her relationship with paint was intricately tied to *awelye*, wherein 'her fingers first touched the rough surface of ochre, and her hand swiped across her breast'¹¹ applying *Alhalkere* ceremonial yellow and red.

Body markings exist as a metaphysical thread binding all of Kngwarreye's works, across all styles and periods, illuminating



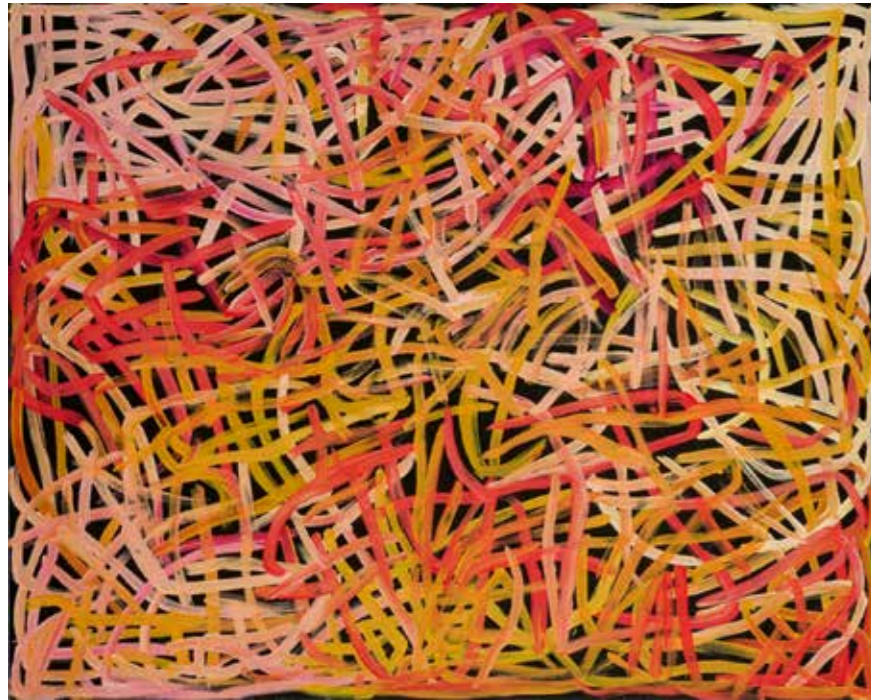


Figure 1
Untitled (Alhalkere) 1995
 synthetic polymer paint on linen
 122.7 x 152.9 cm
 Sold Sotheby's, New York, 25 May 2022, lot 52,
 US\$214,200 (including buyer's premium)

continuities of purpose, presence and place, of spirit, mind and being. They may be lines on bodies painted up for ceremony, or 'the linear scarring on women's upper arms from taking blood for healing'.¹² And the incorporeal realm of *awelye* anchors Kngwarreye's visual theory across all works.¹³ In particular, Margot Neale connects the *rhythm* of Kngwarreye's paintings with her lifetime of ceremonial dancing, singing and the corporeal action of bodypainting, where one breast is painted, then the other; one upper arm, then the other.¹⁴

Awelye is crucial for caring for country and the food staples it provides. Still seen by many as a harsh environment, the desert holds an abundance of resources readily available to those with intimate knowledge of the land. In dry time, water can be found in the roots of the desert oak, and wild yams lie nestled under the earth awaiting harvest. As Janel Holt records, 'the belief that good seasons always return – that the yam 'always comes back' – is fundamental to understanding the desert environment, and therefore survival.'¹⁵

For Kngwarreye, the life cycle of the linear-like pencil yam *anwerlarr* is inextricable from *awelye*. A reverent meditation on the yam burgeoning under the soil, *The Anooralya Yam* glorifies this intimate and sacred connection in its celebratory expression of the seasonal maturation of the yam, expressed in a palette of pinks, oranges and the *Alhalkere* ceremonial yellow and red.

Kngwarreye's meandering linear yam motif in the present work first appeared on canvas in April 1995.¹⁶ *The Anooralya Yam* was painted at Delmore Downs in winter of that year in a well-documented period of intense creativity.¹⁷ Its emergence followed shortly after the artist's acclaimed five metre masterpiece, *Yam Awelye*, 1995, now in the collection of the

National Gallery of Australia, the creative context for which is vividly described in a Delmore Gallery account of the period.¹⁸

Three yam paintings produced in July/August of the 1995 winter are reproduced in the 1998 monograph. While *Yam Awelye* has been described as 'furious in its intensity' revealing the 'expressionist edge' of Kngwarreye's paintings, *The Anooralya Yam*, in contrast, is closer in tenor to another of the winter works, *Wild Yam I*,¹⁹ with *The Anooralya Yam* presenting a calmer, lighter, more meditative touch. This is very much in keeping with Judith Ryan's summation of Kngwarreye's maturity as an artist – deliberate, measured and unhurried – wherein certain paint layers appear almost translucent.²⁰

Judith Ryan assessed the work of Kngwarreye's maturity, 'her end', as being 'anchored in her beginning'.²¹ Characterised as 'an art of free gesture and wandering line', the artist's spontaneous and imaginative batik antecedents are apparent in *Yam Awelye* and the present work, *The Anooralya Yam*.²² In *The Anooralya Yam*, Kngwarreye arouses and animates the sacred synchronicity between yam and *awelye* by overlapping and interlocking the 'meanders' – one of the artistic 'glyphs' from her batik practice²³ – with technical virtuosity.

Kngwarreye's focus exploring the fertile energy of her country's life cycles, and in particular, the pencil yam, has resulted in an extraordinary body of sublime and celebrated work, within which *The Anooralya Yam* is a beautifully composed and balanced example, exhibiting the artist's 'organic uninhibitedness'²⁴ within the confines of a picture plane, a formal resolution coined 'fluidity as structure'.²⁵

'Radical and idiosyncratic',²⁶ Kngwarreye's exceptional talent was rewarded during her lifetime with the 1992 Australian



Figure 2
Yam Awelye 1995
 synthetic polymer paint on canvas
 152.0 x 490.0 cm
 National Gallery of Australia collection, Canberra
 Gift of the Delmore Collection, Donald and Janet Holt, 1995

Artists Creative Fellowship, and her work has rightfully held pride of place in high profile Australian and international exhibitions since, including the Venice Biennale (1997 and 2015). The subject of three touring retrospectives (1998, 2008, 2023), including one to Japan, Kngwarreye's genius was most recently showcased from July 2025 to January 2026 at London's Tate Modern, where it was hailed a 'revelatory joy'.²⁷

FOOTNOTES

- The artist's name has undergone curatorial/linguistic revision in recent years, from Emily Kame Kngwarreye to Kam Kngwarray; both versions are used here; as 'Kngwarray' when a reference has used this spelling. The same applies to other Anmatyerr words, such as *Alhalkere/Alhalcker* and *awelye/awely*.
- Cole, K., quoted in Healey, E. & Holden, K., *The Exhibitionists*, Northern Pictures Productions, Sydney, 2022, 2:53 minutes, referenced in Gilchrist, S., 'I Am Kam', in Perkins, H., Green J. & Cole, K. (eds.), *Emily Kam Kngwarray*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2023, p.168
- Green, J., 'The Life and Legacy of Emily Kam Kngwarray', in Perkins, H., et al., op. cit., p.158
- Gilchrist, S., 'I Am Kam', in Perkins, H., et al., op. cit., p.168
- For a detailed essay on this topic, see Hodges, C., 'Alhalkere', in Neale, M. (ed.), *Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Alhalkere, Paintings from Utopia*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1998, p.33
- Neale, M., 'Alkalkhere, Her Only Subject: Theme', from 'Marks of Meaning: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye', in *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 2008, p.224
- Gilchrist, S., 'I Am Kam', in Perkins, H., et al., op. cit., p.169
- Biddle, J., quoted in *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, op. cit., p.246
- Green, J., in Perkins, H. et al., op. cit., p. 157. For an eyewitness account of this in motion, see Holt, J., 'Emily Kngwarreye at Delmore Downs 1989-1996', in Isaacs, J., Smith, T., Ryan, J., Holt, D., & Holt, J., *Emily Kngwarreye: Paintings*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1998, p.158
- Ferrell, R., 'Dreaming', in *Sacred Exchanges: Images in Global Context*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2012, p.15
- 'Emily Kam Kngwarray – Highlights', National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2023 (accessed February 2026): <https://nga.gov.au/stories-ideas/emily-kam-kngwarray-highlights/>
- Green, J., 'Interpretations and Significance', from 'The Life and Legacy of Emily Kam Kngwarray', in Perkins, H., et al., op. cit., p.158
- Neale, M., see 'Spirituality' in 'Two Worlds: One Vision', *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Alhalkere Paintings from Utopia*, op. cit., pp.29-31
- Neale, M., 'The Body' and 'Spirituality' in 'Two Worlds: One Vision', *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Alhalkere Paintings from Utopia*, op. cit., pp.27, 29
- Holt, J., 'Emily Kngwarreye at Delmore Downs 1989-1996', in Isaacs, J., et al., op. cit., p.155
- The Anooralya 'yam', anwerlarr/atnular*; the thin pencil yam *Vigna lanceolata*, has

sometimes been conflated with the different tuber-producing species known as bush potato/wild potato/sweet potato, *anatyte (Ipomoea costata)*, but it is a distinct species, also known in English as Maloga bean and bush carrot. *Anwerlarr* is closely related to another pencil tuber called *arlatyey*, a different form of *Vigna lanceolata*

- Holt, J., 'Emily Kngwarreye at Delmore Downs 1989-1996', in Isaacs, J., et al., op. cit., pp.154-155
- Holt, D., 'Emily Kngwarreye Painting Yam Awelye at Delmore, August 24 1995', Delmore Gallery, Alice Springs, 2023 (accessed February 2026): <https://delmoregallery.com.au/blogs/news/75672901-emily-kngwarreye-painting-yam-awelye-at-delmore-august-24-1995>
- Holt, J., 'Emily Kngwarreye at Delmore Downs 1989-1996', in Isaacs, J., et al., op. cit. *Wild Yam I*, 95G087, pl.70, p.166-167 (painted July); the others being *Wild Yam II*, 95H104, pl.73, pp.172-173, and *Yam Awelye*, now in the collection of the NGA, 95H085, pl.72, pp.170-171 (painted August)
- Ryan, J., 'Paintings in the National Gallery of Victoria', in Isaacs, J., et al., op. cit., p.84
- Ryan, J., 'In the Beginning is My End: The Singular Art of Emily Kame Kngwarreye', in Neale, M., *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Alhalkere Paintings from Utopia*, op. cit., p.40
- Judith Ryan, quoted in Green, J., 'Interpretations and Significance', from 'The Life and Legacy of Emily Kam Kngwarray', in Perkins, H., et al., op. cit., p.146
- 'The iconography contained in her early composite batik works revealed the group of glyphs – dots, striae, grids and meanders – that comprise her artistic alphabet'. Curators Kelli Cole and Hetti Perkins, 'Telling the Truth', extract from *Emily Kam Kngwarray*, Tate Modern, London in association with the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2025 (accessed February 2026): <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-66-summer-2025/telling-the-truth-emily-kam-kngwarray>
- Ryan, J., 'In the Beginning is My End: The Singular Art of Emily Kame Kngwarreye', in Neale, M., *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Alhalkere Paintings from Utopia*, op. cit., p.40
- Smith, T., 'Kngwarreye Woman Abstract Painter', in Isaacs, J., et al., op. cit., p.31
- Green, J., 'The life and legacy of Emily Kam Kngwarray', in Perkins, H., et al., op. cit., p.158
- Shaw, A., 'Emily Kam Kngwarray at Tate Modern: "Helps Broaden Understanding of Indigenous Cultures"', *The Standard*, London, 11 July 2025

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