

EMILY KAME KNGWARREYE

(c1910–1996)

Anmatyerre language group

Of My Country, Alalgura I 1992

synthetic polymer paint on linen

124.0 x 96.5 cm

bears artist's name and inscription verso: 921062 Emily Kngwarreye

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

PROVENANCE

Commissioned by Delmore Gallery, Northern Territory, 1992 (stock no.921062)

Soul of Australia Gallery, Sydney (label attached verso, stock no.7692)

Private collection, Queensland

\$30,000 - \$50,000

The genesis of Emily Kame Kngwarreye's painting lies in a range of experiences and custodial obligations she shared with other women in caring for Country and presiding over the transference of law – one 'grows up' the land as one 'grows up' children.¹ Her genius, however, stems from individuation in her visual expressions of her Country – *Alalgura (Alhalkere)*, situated near Soakage Bore, Utopia, northeast of Alice Springs – and *awelye* (women's law ceremonies in *Anmatyerre*).

Often declared as 'the whole lot', Kngwarreye's paintings are a tangible representation of her interconnectedness with Country. This concept of self was ever-present in her work, irrespective of styles and periods. In Kngwarreye's visual language, paintings are glorious manifestations of a metaphysical trinity; Country, *awelye*, and self – a fusion evident in her naming: *kame (kam)*, is the seed of the wild pencil yam *atnulare (Vigna lanceolata)* that grows across *Alalgura (Alhalkere)*.

Of My Country, Alalgura I is from a suite of *Alalgura* commissions for Delmore Gallery in 1992, described by Janet Holt as the artist's 'famous early period', in which she witnessed Kngwarreye's paintings become 'looser and executed with aplomb and assurance'.² Kngwarreye's energetic explorations of her country's life cycles, and, the pencil yam *atnulare* and wild potato *anaroolya* (also referenced as a yam), has resulted in an extraordinary body of sublime and celebrated work. *Of My Country, Alalgura I*, painted in spring 1992, is a striking example of the artist's 'organic uninhibitedness'³ what has become seen as her 'fluidity as structure.'⁴

Of My Country, Alalgura I also displays important iconographic traits: trailing lines of multi-coloured dot-work connecting the burgeoning yam (bottom right) across Country in seasonal change. In Kngwarreye's painterly lexicon, yellow has been linked to the yam's 'daisy' flower, as well as various levels of plant maturity. The warm tones mixed from reds and yellows evoke 'dry time', while Kngwarreye joyfully referred to the flush of new growth that appears across Country after rain – most prominent in the present work top left – as 'green time'.⁵

Kngwarreye is acclaimed within academic expositions of representational landscape painting as well as abstract art. In assessing Kngwarreye as an abstractionist painter, Terry Smith fixes on colour in the period 1990–93 as key to her artistic motivation and innovation.⁶

While western modernism usually compartmentalises genres, philosophical thinking about colour can collapse such divergent paradigms, and illuminate Kngwarreye's practice.

Colour has been shown to affect the nervous system before being perceived cognitively and has been called 'an interaction between the body and the world.'⁷ Kngwarreye's rendering of the colours of Country rejoices in this nexus; her paintings are testaments to the phenomenon of 'mobilizing a realm of intelligibility that produced the Aboriginal world.'⁸

Kngwarreye's paintings are inextricably linked with the metaphysical realm of *awelye*. In the *Alalgura* works of 1992, underlying delicate tracks of the yam are exposed with degrees of nuance through sumptuous, layered fields of dotted colour; the resulting textural matrix being a veritable atlas of custodial references. Kngwarreye's painting is both a celebratory expression of the seasonal maturation of the yam and a work of reverence: the yam's life cycle is central to *awelye*, and Kngwarreye's colours of *Of My Country, Alalgura I* arouses and animates that sacred synchronicity.

Kngwarreye's significance was acknowledged early with the prestigious Australian Artists Creative Fellowship award in 1992. Her work has rightfully starred in several international exhibitions of Australian art since, including the Venice Biennale in 1997, and her exceptional talent showcased in two solo retrospective exhibitions, most recently *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, which toured Japan in 2008. Her position within Australia's pantheon of great painters is assured.

FOOTNOTES

1. Bell, D., 'Person and Place: Making Meaning of the Art of Australian Indigenous Women', *Feminist Studies*, Volume: 28, Issue 1, 2002, p.103
2. Holt, J., in Isaacs, J. et al., *Emily Kngwarreye Paintings*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1998, p.153
3. For an in-depth essay on the development of this aspect of her oeuvre, see Margo Neale, 'Two worlds: One Vision', in *Emily Kngwarreye: Alhalkere Paintings from Utopia*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1998, p. 23-31
4. Smith, T., 'Kngwarreye Woman Abstract Painter', in Isaacs et al. op.cit., p.31
5. Holt provides a more detailed account of the artist's choice of colour application and the use of yam lines in painting Country across the seasons in her essay, 'Emily Kame Kngwarreye at Delmore Downs 1989-1996', in Isaacs et al., op.cit., pp. 152-54
6. Smith, op.cit., pp.24-42
7. Ferrell, R., *Sacred Exchanges: Images in Global Context*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2012, p.25
8. Ibid., p.15

Jane Raffan

Jane Raffan is an accredited valuer under the Commonwealth Government's Cultural Gifts Program. Her arts consultancy encompasses curatorial services, collection management, and a broad range of humanities-based research and writing.

