

47. EMILY KAME KNGWARREYE

(c1910-1996)
Anmatyerre language group
Untitled 1992
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
150.0 x 122.0 cm
signed and inscribed verso with Delmore Gallery cat. no.: 921165/ Emily Kngwarreye/ Commissioned by Delmore Gallery/
Via Alice Springs

Provenance:
Delmore Gallery, Northern Territory (stock no.921165C)
Barry Stern Gallery, Sydney (label attached verso)
Private collection, Queensland

\$45,000 - \$55,000

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, north east of Alice Springs – and *awelye* (women's law ceremonies in Anmatyerre).

Kngwarreye often explained that her paintings were about "the whole lot", meaning that her existence and her Country were inseparable. This concept of self was always present in her work, irrespective of styles and periods. In Kngwarreye's visual language, paintings are glorious manifestations of Country, *awelye*, and self – a fusion evident in her naming: Kngwarreye's middle name, Kame (Kam), is the seed of the wild pencil yam *atnulare (Vigna lanceolata)* that grows across *Alalgura (Alhalkere)*.

Alalgura was the title of a suite of commissions for Delmore Gallery in 1992, described by Janet Holt as the artist's "famous early period". Of these works, Holt has written that Kngwarreye was inspired by her painting's ability to conjure the fertile energy of her country's life cycles, and in particular, the pencil yam *atnulare* and wild potato *anaroolya* (also referenced as a yam). Kngwarreye's own energy and focus exploring these themes has resulted in an extraordinary body of sublime and celebrated work, within which the work here is a striking example.

In describing Kngwarreye's painterly lexicon, yellow has been linked to the yam's "daisy" flower, while trailings of different coloured dot work may indicate seasonal rains, as well as various levels of plant maturity. The flush of new growth that appears across Country after rain Kngwarreye joyfully referred to as "green time".

Terry Smith, in assessing Kngwarreye as an abstractionist painter, fixes on Kngwarreye's use of colour in the period 1990–93 as key to her artistic motivation and innovation.²

Kngwarreye's talent has found appreciation within academic explorations of representational (landscape) painting as well as abstract art. While this may seem contradictory in the canon of western modernism, philosophical thinking about colour collapses these divergent critical paradigms and shines new light on her 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.'³ Kngwarreye's painting – her rendering of the colours of Country – reveals and revels in this nexus; her paintings are testaments to what has been described as 'mobilising a realm of intelligibility that produced the Aboriginal world.'⁴

Kngwarreye's paintings do speak to her Country's physical character, whilst being inextricably linked with the metaphysical. In the *Alalgura* works of 1992, including the painting presently under consideration, underlying delicate tracks of the yam are exposed with degrees of nuance through sumptuous layered fields of dotted colour. 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 an important element in *awelye*, and Kngwarreye's colours of Country, employed here, arouses and animates that sacred synchronicity.

Kngwarreye's work has rightfully held pride of place in several international exhibitions of Australian art, including the Venice Biennale in 1997, and her exceptional talent has been celebrated with two solo retrospective exhibitions, most recently *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, which toured Japan in 2008. Her position in 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. Smith, T., 'Kngwarreye Woman Abstract Painter', in Isaacs, J., Smith, T., and Ryan, J., et al, *Emily Kngwarreye Paintings*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1998, pp. 24-42
3. Ferrell, R., *Sacred Exchanges: Images in Global Context*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2012, p.25
4. 'Dreaming', *ibid.*, p.15

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