

54. EMILY KAME KNGWARREYE

(c1910-1996)

Anmatyerre language group

Merne Alhalkere 1993

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

153.0 x 121.5 cm

inscribed verso with artist's name and Delmore Gallery cat. no.: 93K021

accompanied by original documentation from Delmore Gallery, Northern Territory

Provenance:

Delmore Gallery, Northern Territory, 1993

Collection of Mr Donald Holt, Delmore Downs Station, Northern Territory

Deutscher + Hackett, Melbourne, 27 March 2013, lot 11

Private collection, Adelaide

\$30,000 - \$40,000

Following her 1992 Australian Artists Creative Fellowship win – the first for an Indigenous artist – Emily Kame Kngwarreye's painting was filled anew with exploration, vigour and depth.

1993 is generally regarded as Kngwarreye's greatest colourist phase, the period in which her work became "more uninhibited and her palette encompassed colours across the spectrum."¹ This vision and practice culminated in the *Alhalkere Suite*, a major work comprising twenty-two panels, which was first exhibited in the inaugural invitational *Joan and Peter Clemenger Contemporary Art Award* at the National Gallery of Victoria (1993), and later acquired by the National Gallery of Australia.

Since then, Kngwarreye's talent and significance has been rightly acknowledged and celebrated with numerous acquisitions, exhibitions and publications, including several international exhibitions of Australian art, and two solo retrospective exhibitions, most recently *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, which toured Japan in 2008.

Author and art academic Terry Smith pinpoints Kngwarreye's use of colour in the period 1990–93 as key to her artistic motivation and innovation.² Within this painterly paradigm, Kngwarreye's seemingly tireless explorations of the possibilities of colour to enunciate personal narratives is astounding, both in terms of her vision and artistic virtuosity. This "high colourist" period produced a body of marvellous works exhibiting powerful synergies of energy and colour, such as *Merne Alhalkere*, 1993, the painting offered here.

Metaphorical language employed by critics talking about this period demonstrates the emotive power with which these paintings radiate. Margot Neale refers to the *Alhalkere Suite* as "the crescendo" in Kngwarreye's "Colourism" phase, revealing the "full symphonic range of nature's palette ... the way Emily may have experienced *Alhalkere* over a lifetime".³ Elsewhere, Neale makes the connection between Kngwarreye's lifetime of ceremonial dancing, singing and mark-making and the rhythm of her paintings, which often exhibit a circularity in their composition, akin to the way women's body marking is performed from breast to breast, arm to arm.⁴

Kngwarreye's oeuvre focuses on the interconnectedness of her physical self and Country – her home *Alalgura (Alhalkere)*, situated near Soakage Bore, Utopia, north east of Alice Springs

– as well as the metaphysical associations of *awelye* (women's law ceremonies in the Anmatyerre language) and attendant custodial responsibilities for nurturing the land and its bounty.

Merne in Anmatyerre refers to various edible vegetation, such as fruits, tubers and leaves. The luscious work being offered here, *Merne Alhalkere*, 1993, utilises colours inspired by the flowers and fruits of Kngwarreye's country, including the bush plum *alkwa* and bush tomato *akatjera*.

In Delmore Gallery's descriptions of Kngwarreye's painterly lexicon, blue has been linked to water that feeds the *Alhalkere* soakage and surrounds, 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". Kngwarreye's paintings of Country in this season are some of her most dramatic: her mark making reflecting the transformational power of rain in the desert. The plum does not fruit annually for example; it generates in response to rain, and when the plum is blue/purple, it is ripe and ready to eat.

Merne Alhalkere 1993 is thus both celebratory and reverential: on one level the painting is a joyous expression of the seasonal maturation of the bounty within Kngwarreye's Country, *Alhalkere*, and on another it speaks, or more appropriately, sings, about Kngwarreye's physical embodiment in the realm of *awelye*.

Footnotes

1. Ryan, J., 'In the Beginning is My End: The Singular Art of Emily Kame Kngwarreye', *Emily Kngwarreye: Alhalkere Paintings from Utopia*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1998, p.43
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. Neale, M., 'Colourism', *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 2008, p.232
4. 'The Body' in 'Two worlds: One Vision', *ibid.*, p.27

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