

60. EMILY KAME KNGWARREYE

(c1910-1996)

Ammatyerre language group
Untitled (Wildflower Dreaming) 1992
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
151.5 x 122.0 cm

inscribed verso: EMILY KNGWARREYE 92G002/ 92G002/ Emily Kngwarreye/ commissioned by/ Delmore

Provenance:

Delmore Gallery, Northern Territory (stock no. 92G002)
Barry Stern Gallery, Sydney, 1993
Private collection, Sydney
Private collection, Melbourne

\$30,000 - \$40,000

Emily Kame Kngwarreye's oeuvre is a collective expression of 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 Ammatyerre language), and attendant custodial responsibilities for nurturing the land and its bounty. Her genius stems from the individualities in her visual expressions of this nexus. In Kngwarreye's visual language, paintings are glorious manifestations of Country, *awelye*, and self – 'the whole lot' – a concept that was ever present in her work, across all styles and periods.

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.¹ Kngwarreye's tireless exploration of colour's potential 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 the present untitled work (*Wildflower Dreaming*), from 1992.

Janet Holt (Delmore Gallery) refers to 1992 as the artist's 'famous early period', and has written that Kngwarreye was inspired by her painting's ability to conjure the fertile energy of her country's life cycles, in particular the seasonal maturation of the *anooralya* (finger yam), an important element in *awelye*. In describing Kngwarreye's painterly lexicon, yellow is 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'.

Kngwarreye's own energy and focus exploring these themes has resulted in an extraordinary body of sublime and celebrated work, within which the present work is a commanding example. (*Wildflower Dreaming*), 1992, is both celebratory and reverential: a joyous expression of the promise of bounty within Kngwarreye's Country.

The present work shares its compositional structure with several works in Kngwarreye's oeuvre from 1992 that celebrate the natural increase of the yam, sometimes referenced as 'yam increase centre'. In these works, the energy of the radiating design is anchored at the centre, sometimes with the underlying yam design shown spiralling outwards, and at other times, and to different degrees, barely visible underneath dotted trailing lines of yam flowers.

The resulting compositions are suggestive of a powerful centrifugal force, which has physical manifestations and metaphorical meaning. The language employed by critics talking about this period demonstrates the emotive power with which these paintings radiate. Margot 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.²

Terry Smith also sees these works reflecting body marks that have 'cartwheeled into a plant form' and postulates that these centrifugal compositions are performative, where the yam is 'present as an absence', and made apparent by the design's suggestion of a 'reaching in, in a digging motion, a scraping and a clearing of dirt'.³

The present work also prefigures the artist's later transition from dot work to lines, and is a delightful example of Modernist Paul Klee's (1879-1940) assertion that 'a line is a dot going for a walk'.⁴

Kngwarreye's significance was acknowledged and celebrated with the prestigious Australian Artists Creative Fellowship award, bestowed in 1992. Her work has rightfully held pride of place in several international exhibitions of Australian art, 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.

Footnotes

1. Smith, Terry, 'Kngwarreye Woman Abstract Painter', in Isaacs, J., Smith, T., and Ryan, J., et al, *Emily Kngwarreye Paintings*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1998, pp.24-42
2. Neale, M., 'The Body' in 'Two worlds: One Vision', *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, National Museum of Australia, ACT, 2008, p.27
3. Smith, T., op.cit., p.33
4. Green, Jenny, 'Yam', in *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, op.cit., p.168

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