

28. EMILY KAME KNGWARREYE

(c1910-1996)

Anmatyerre language group

Desert Winter 1994

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

125.0 x 397.0 cm

signed and inscribed verso with Delmore Gallery cat. no.: 94FO54/ Emily [sic]/ Emily Kngwarreye/

Commissioned by Delmore

Provenance:

Commissioned by Delmore Gallery, Alice Springs (cat. 94FO54)

Private collection, Melbourne, since 1994

Related Works:

Alalgura Awelye I 1994, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 120.0 x 90.0 cm, The Holt collection; illus. in Isaacs, J., Smith, T., Ryan, J., Holt, D. & Holt, J., *Emily Kngwarreye: Paintings*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1998, p.120, pl.49

Alalgura Awelye II 1994, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 151.0 x 90.0 cm, The Holt collection; illus. in Isaacs, J., Smith, T., Ryan, J., Holt, D. & Holt, J., *Emily Kngwarreye: Paintings*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1998, p.121, pl.50

\$200,000 - \$300,000

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 – *Alhalkere*, (*Alalgura*) (situated near Soakage Bore, Utopia, north east of Alice Springs – and *awelye* (women's law ceremonies in Anmatyerre).

Kngwarreye's oeuvre is a collective expression of the interconnectedness of her physical self and Country, as well as the metaphysical associations of *awelye*, and attendant custodial responsibilities for nurturing the land and its bounty.

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.² As Anne Marie Brody has observed, 'metaphor is a strong feature of Indigenous intellectual systems ... stories can be present in a single person, rock or tree.'³ This fusion is evident in her naming: *kame* (*kam*) is the seed of the wild pencil yam *atnulare* (*Vigna lanceolata*) that grows across *Alhalkere*.

The present majestically scaled work, *Desert Winter*, represents 'the whole lot' in a remarkable way: the artist's physical and metaphysical passage through dry country – the desert in winter – is clearly visible in her technique. Painted in a drought year⁴ following her high colourist phase, *Desert Winter* is a celebratory meditation on the yam burgeoning under the soil.

The name Utopia originates from literature: a mythical oceanic paradise. In contrast, the region in Australia's arid desert heart was, for colonist settlers and explorers, a forbidding place to be feared and conquered. 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. *Desert Winter* glorifies this intimate and sacred knowledge in an expansive journey across place and metaphysical realms in Anmatyerre Country.

Desert Winter is also important academically for its transitional mark making. Stylistically, it prefigures and coalesces the artist's linear works of 1994-95, and the broader brushed final works of 1996.

As Kngwarreye worked the large canvas, one sees evidence of concentration and abandon in equal measure, attuned to

the life cycle of the yam, and her reverence of Country within *awelye*. Both Margot Neale – who describes Emily's stylistic virtuosity as simply 'shifting gears' in a continuous 'trajectory linking time, place and image'⁵ – and Judith Ryan, posit that this characteristic of her oeuvre is its chief distinction from all other central and western desert artists, and key to her acclaim and viewers' sensual engagement.⁶

Desert Winter is a glowing, glorifying expression of the yam's life cycle and promise of survival expressed in a palette of pinks, oranges and the *Alhalkere* ceremonial yellow and red. Kngwarreye arouses and animates the sacred synchronicity between yam and *awelye* in overlapping and distinct sections and passages of technical virtuosity, contemplation and artistic exploration.

Neale makes the connection between Kngwarreye's lifetime of ceremonial dancing, singing and mark-making and the rhythm of her paintings, which often reveal her practice of working in sections. She suggests this technique possibly derives from 'the method of body-painting where one breast is painted, then the other; one upper arm, then the other.'⁷

Body markings exist as a metaphysical thread and painted line binding all of Kngwarreye's works, across all styles and periods, illuminating continuities of purpose, presence and place, of spirit, mind and being. *Desert Winter*'s composition and stylistic variances reveal the nexus between physical and metaphysical planes, and is testament to what has been described as 'mobilising a realm of intelligibility that produced the Aboriginal world.'⁸

Christopher Hodges is definitive: 'In her terms there is no distinction between dot-filled landscapes and striped body paintings.'⁹ Lines and grid structures, most apparent in the left quadrant of *Desert Winter*, are thus *awelye* linkages between yam roots, mapping references, body markings ... Kngwarreye's 'whole lot', while elsewhere, body marks 'are loosened in space, laid next to each other like leaves of sword grass.'¹⁰ Shifting the essence of this practice to the poetic, Ryan offers T.S. Eliot's musing, 'In my beginning is my end ... in my end is my beginning.'¹¹ In *Desert Winter*, we see this ethereal statement made apparent.

Kngwarreye's oeuvre has found appreciation within academic explorations of representational landscape painting as well as abstract art, especially abstract expressionism.¹² While these genres may seem contradictory in the canon of western



modernism, philosophical thinking helps collapse these divergent critical paradigms and shines new light on her practice.

Sally Butler posits that Kngwarreye's art can usefully be considered in terms of the enigmatic, a discourse that 'embodies a dialectic of representation and resistance.'¹³ This accords with Neale's conjecture: 'that ceremonial engagement can take place with any of her paintings produces a major problem for any who see them as examples of abstract art,'¹⁴ noting that her visual theory was *awelye*, not the theory of modernist art critics.¹⁵

Butler's thesis ponders this problematic space, suggesting that 'the enigmatic object of discourse describes a complex relationship between Kngwarreye's artworks and a climate of reception that is coming to terms with the occasional opacity of cultural difference.'¹⁶ More recently, Tony Ellwood has stated that academic reflection has finally led to 'a new art history',¹⁷ which is supported by Ian McLean's declaration that 'it will be clear that this is contemporary art quite *inside* the realm of Aboriginality, and as modern as any other society.'¹⁸

Kngwarreye's focus exploring 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) has resulted in an extraordinary body of sublime and celebrated work, within which *Desert Winter* is a powerful example exhibiting the artist's 'organic uninhibitedness'¹⁹, as well as 'fluidity as structure.'²⁰

Roger Benjamin highlights approach as key to Kngwarreye's genius, especially her rare ability elaborating new styles 'pursued through a developmental series that contained tentative beginning, mature demonstrations, and a falling off of interest that merged with the nascent forms of her next work.'²¹ If there has been one work presented to the market that epitomises this cycle in a single vision, it is *Desert Winter*.

Neale has declared that Kngwarreye made us see abstract art differently, but more importantly, that we now see the landscape differently. This shift is monumental: the desert is no longer the dead centre landscape of Giles and Warburton, but 'Kngwarreye Country'. *Desert Winter* is simultaneously a monumental view of the land, and its Anmatyerre voice.²²

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

1997 Venice Biennale, 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 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. Oft referenced; for full quote see Isaacs, J., Smith, T., and Ryan J., et al, *Emily Kngwarreye Paintings*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1998, p.31
3. Quoted in Neale, M., 'Two Worlds: One Vision', *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Alhalkere Paintings from Utopia*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1998, p.24
4. For reflections on the drought, see Donald Holt, 'Emily, a Personal Memoir', in Isaacs et al, op.cit., pp. 143-147
5. Neale, M., 'Alhalkere, her only subject: Theme', in 'Marks of Meaning: the genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye', *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, National Museum of Australia, ACT, 2008, p.224
6. Neale, M., 'The Body' and 'Spirituality' in 'Two worlds: One Vision', *Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, op.cit., pp. 27 and 29. See also, Judith Ryan, 'The Artist's Oeuvre', in 'In the Beginning is My End: The Singular Art of Emily Kame Kngwarreye', *ibid.* p. 41
7. Neale, M., 'The Body' in 'Two worlds: One Vision', *ibid.*, p.27
8. Ferrell, R., 'Dreaming', *Sacred Exchanges: Images in Global Context*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2012, p.15
9. Hodges, C., 'Alhalkere', *Emily Kame Kngwarreye*; op.cit., p.33
10. Smith, T., 'Kngwarreye Woman Abstract Painter', in Isaacs et al op.cit., p. 35, referencing another work from 1994, *We Paint Up Big* (94EO35), plate 53 (p.127). For other works with comparable transitional stylistic elements see, *ibid.*, plates 46 (p. 117), 49, 50 (pp. 120-21), and *Emily Kame Kngwarreye*; op.cit., plates 78, 79 (pp. 123-4)
11. Ryan, J., 'In the beginning is my end: the singular art of Emily Kame Kngwarreye', *ibid.*, p.39
12. See Benjamin, R., 'A New Modernist Hero', *ibid.*, pp. 47-54, and Smith, T., 'Kngwarreye Woman Abstract Painter', in Isaacs et al, op.cit., pp. 24-42
13. Butler, S., 'Emily Kngwarreye and the Enigmatic Object of Discourse', PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 2002, p.3
14. Neale, M., 'Spirituality' in 'Two worlds: One Vision', *Emily Kame Kngwarreye*; op.cit., p.29
15. Neale, M., 'The same, but different: Style' in 'Marks of Meaning: the genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye', *Utopia*; op.cit., p.232
16. Butler, op.cit., p.3
17. Ellwood, T., 'Reflecting on Emily: a personal response' in *Utopia*; op.cit., p. 0
18. McLean, I., 'Aboriginal Modernism? Two Histories, one Painter', *ibid.*, p.28 (emphasis added)
19. Ryan, J., 'In the beginning is my end: the singular art of Emily Kame Kngwarreye', *Emily Kame Kngwarreye*; op.cit., p.40
20. Smith, T., 'Kngwarreye Woman Abstract Painter', in Isaacs et al op.cit., p. 31
21. Benjamin, R., 'The Cult of Formal Development', in 'A New Modernist Hero', *Emily Kame Kngwarreye*; op.cit., p.48
22. 'Hers is not a view of the land, but rather its voice', Neale, M., 'Marks of Meaning: the genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye', *Utopia*; op.cit., p.247

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THE PRESENT WORK

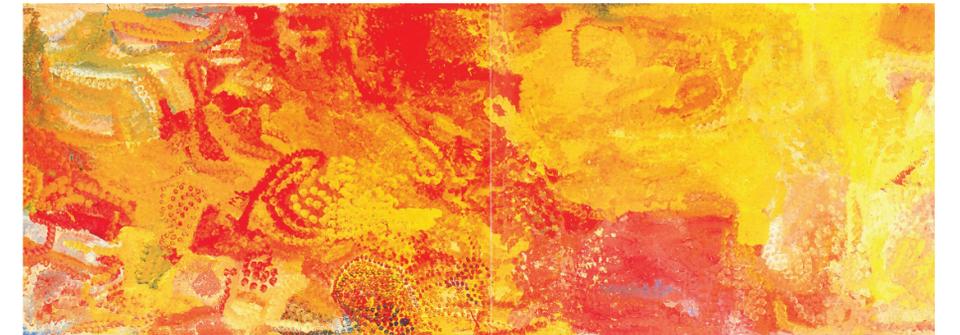


Figure 1
My Country 1993
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
Sold Bonhams, Sydney, 6 June 2017, lot 15,
\$414,800 (including buyer's premium)



Figure 2
Kame - Summer Awelye II
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
135.0 x 300.0 cm
Sold Sotheby's, London, 14 March 2018, lot 38, £309,000 (including buyer's premium)

