

THE GENIUS OF Emily Kame Kngwarreye

SHARED WITH JAPAN

The largest exhibition of works by an Australian artist to be shown outside Australia has been displayed at the National Museum of Art in Osaka, and at the National Art Centre, Tokyo, Japan.

Running from 25 February until 13 April in Osaka and from 28 May to 28 July, 2008 in Tokyo, *Utopia: the Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye* is an exhibition developed and presented by the National Museum of Australia, and tells the story of an extraordinary Australian, Kngwarreye, an Aboriginal artist who lived and worked in the desert in the centre of Australia.

The exhibition includes 120 works from over 65 national and overseas collections valued at more than \$30 million. A huge logistical exercise, it was shown in a 2000 square metre area with nearly half a kilometre of wall space. The Tokyo venue has co-billed Kngwarreye with – and it followed their Monet blockbuster – clearly placing her on an international stage shoulder to shoulder with the American and European masters.

The works in the exhibition were drawn from public collections including the National Gallery of Australia, Art Gallery of New South Wales, National Gallery of Victoria, Powerhouse Museum, Melbourne Museum and private collections such as the Holmes à Court collection and Sir Elton John's.

An educational component called the *Utopia Room* was also installed to provide the appropriate cultural context, and explains Emily's other role as senior Anmatyerre custodian, a member of a wider community and her Country as the source of her inspiration.

'It not only tells the story of Emily Kame Kngwarreye as one of Australia's greatest contemporary artists, but also tells the story of her life as a custodian of the desert country that inspired her work,' said Craddock Morton, director of the National Museum of Australia.

The exhibition features some of Kngwarreye's most acclaimed works, monumental works such as *Big Yam Dreaming*, 1995, *The Alhalkere Suite*, 1993, which comprises 22 canvases, and *Earth's Creation*, 1994. It also includes a selection of batiks produced by Emily before she turned to painting on canvas and some intimate works done in the last two weeks of her life.

EMILY'S LIFE AND WORK

Emily Kame Kngwarreye (c. 1910–1996) was a senior Anmatyerre custodian and artist who lived and worked 250 kilometres north of Alice Springs, in relative isolation from the art world that sought her work.

'She was an artist of few words, in English at least,' said principal exhibition curator Margo Neale, 'but her paintings speak volumes. She did more than 3000 paintings on canvas over a period of eight years, which is roughly one painting per day. This is a testimony to how much she had to say about her reason for being and her cultural experience.'

According to an essay by Neale, written to accompany the exhibition, Kngwarreye rarely left the camps of Utopia,



Principal Curator, Margo Neale (left) with her National Museum of Australia team, Benita Tunks and Sonja Balaga, at the National Museum of Art, Osaka. Photo Aya Kato

and never went to school or was exposed to art books, newspapers or art journals. She did not work at an easel or table, but rather on the ground, with tools ranging from commercial brushes to anything at hand, such as old rubber thongs, chewed sticks or shaving brushes.

'And yet, despite her apparently unconventional approach, Emily Kame Kngwarreye has been "acclaimed by many as one of the major abstract painters of the 20th century",' Neale wrote.

Having produced batik works like other women of Utopia, Emily turned to painting on canvas in 1989, when she was already nearly 80 years old. Neale said her paintings were received with great excitement, from her very first canvas, *Emu Woman* – because of both their sheer aesthetic quality, and because they were at the cutting edge of Aboriginal art.

Neale said Kngwarreye's work bridges the dichotomy between 'tribal' art and Western modernism, and although this major international solo exhibition positions her as an artist alongside major European and American modernists, its Aboriginal origins should not be forgotten, as her style and methodology derive from very local practices and the Indigenous knowledge systems intrinsic to her Country, Alhalkere.

Her deep engagement with Alhalkere provided the material and inspiration for her work. However Neale commented that attempts to explain the nature and quality of her experience of Country are limited by our capacity to understand the fullness of this relationship.

'Whenever Emily was asked to explain her paintings, regardless of whether the images were a shimmering veil of dots, a field of 'dump dump' dots, raw stripes seared across the surface, or elegant black lines, her answer was always the same:

Whole lot, that's whole lot, Awelye (my Dreaming), Arlatyeye (pencil yam), Arkerrthe (mountain devil lizard), Ntange (grass seed), Tingu (Dreamtime pup), Ankerre (emu), Intekwe (favourite food of emus, a small plant), Atnwerle (green bean), and Kame (yam seed). That's what I paint, whole lot.

This is reportedly the only definitive statement she ever made about her work. By extension, an exhibition of her work no matter how large or small, is always the same story in which the whole is about the totality of her existence



VIP and press preview on 25 Feb in the entry gallery. *Yam Awelye* 1995, 150.0 x 491.0 cm, National Gallery of Australia and *Big Yam Dreaming* 1995, 291.1 x 801.8 cm, National Gallery of Victoria.



The Utopia Room is the education component of the exhibition. It contains rocks from Emily's country (Alhalkere), a grinding stone that Emily used, various sculptures that show body painting designs, animal sculptures to show examples of bush tucker, photographs of Emily being painted up for a women's ceremony, a map of the Utopia region and other objects which give the visitor some insight into Emily's life and the cultural source of her artwork.

expressed as her Dreamings in all their manifestations,' Neale wrote.

Although produced over a relatively short period, Kngwarreye's style evolved continually, resulting in an incredibly diverse body of work, which exhibits a close connection to the changes apparent in nature's seasonal changes which occurred around her.

'This is particularly evident in a series of works completed in 1992, which I refer to as her 'high colourist' phase. These works pulsate with strident hot pinks abutting citric oranges, deep blues and maroons, all contained in colliding triangular shapes that appear to gyrate on a compressed surface. In other works, vibrant colours are sandwiched into squares and oblongs which step the eye up, down and across the surface in a staccato movement. Different again are paintings where colours swirl loosely in a kind of frenzied abandon with flashes of white and yellow breaking loose – for some Australian viewers these evoke the experience of a flock of screeching cockatoos startled into flight,' Neale wrote.

Another remarkable aspect of Kngwarreye's career is her prolific output, and the intensity with which she worked. An example of her amazing creative process was the production of her enormous work, *Big Yam Dreaming*, 1995. 'She tackled the 24 square metres of this work with unrelenting energy, constant concentration and consummate control, an effort made all the more remarkable by the fact it was achieved in the year before her death, when she was quite frail ... this monumental painting was completed in two days, which is the same time it took two assistants to prime the canvas. She sat cross-legged on the canvas and painted her way to the edges, "knitting" one section onto another without preliminary sketching, scaling or any subsequent re-working,' Neale wrote.



NMA Curator Margo Neale in front of *Big Yam Dreaming* 1995, 291.1 x 801.8 cm, National Gallery of Victoria. Photo: Sonja Balaga



(Left to right) Sonja Balaga, Margo Neale and Benita Tunks in front of the 'Seed Dreaming' series. Photo: Aya Kato

STAGING UTOPIA

The *Utopia* project was initiated by Professor Tatehata, Japan's foremost international art academic, critic and curator, and director of the National Museum of Osaka, who first saw Kngwarreye's work in the 1998 national touring retrospective mounted by the Queensland Art Gallery, also curated by Neale.

Tatehata later made a representation to the Minister for the Arts, Rod Kemp, through the Australian Ambassador in Japan.

Speaking about the exhibition in *The Japan Times*, Tatehata said, 'Emily's batik work (examples of which will be included in the exhibition) was nothing out of the ordinary. Her paintings, however, were magnificent. Part of it sprung from her natural affinity with colour – the colours of the paint allowed her to express her visions in their full glory. There is nothing to explain her taking to the medium other than genius.'

While Australians may have their perception of Kngwarreye's work coloured by its Aboriginal origins, Tatehata, coming from a different cultural context, interprets them as examples of modernism.

'Let's be clear on this,' he said. 'I am saying she is one of the best abstract modern painters. All of those concepts – abstract, modernism and maybe painting, too – would have been foreign to Emily. This is a totally alien context from which I view her work,' he says. 'That is all I can do. I can only interpret it with my own values – which happen to be very modern.'

However Neale highlights the difference between the context of Emily's work and that of other modernists.

'[Her works] were informed by a collective body of knowledge bestowed upon her over a lifetime of experiential learning and they functioned primarily as cultural



Utopia artist Barbara Weir, with the Director of the National Museum of Art, Osaka, Professor Akira Tatehata, in front of *Big Yam* 1996, synthetic, polymer paint on canvas, 401.0 x 245.0 cm, National Gallery of Victoria.

inscriptions rather than the intensely personal expression of western modernists,' Neale wrote.

Neale and her team, Benita Tunks and Sonja Balaga, faced some interesting cross-cultural challenges in the two years required to get the project off the ground. Building relationships across a cultural and language divide as they worked with staff from the Japanese venues was one such challenge. Communicating by teleconference was made difficult by their Japanese colleagues' self-consciousness surrounding their English language skills and preference for formality during business meetings. However the team freed up the lines of communication when Margo gave everyone a nickname – as an indicator of all being part of the same family.

There were also language difficulties when transporting the works to Japan. Tunks, who accompanied some of the works to Osaka, oversaw some repairs to the protective covering on the freight on the tarmac in Hong Kong – but ended up with a cherry picker instead of a ladder when trying to communicate by sign language with the Chinese-speaking ground crew.

And one of the stars of the show, secured through lengthy negotiations, nearly didn't make an appearance – the 8 x 3 metre canvas *Big Yam Dreaming* was a tight fit in the lift of the Osaka Museum, with barely a centimetre to spare.

Following the exhibition's tour of Japan, the National Museum of Australia will show a more tightly hung, slightly scaled-version in late August, featuring paintings drawn from private and corporate collections. Neale said it should resonate well with those who came in droves to the Museum's recent exhibition *Papunya Painting: Out of the Desert*.

Speaking to the *Canberra Times*, she said, 'We can do a museum version of it without taking away its aesthetic value. We will run a large screen of it being shown in Tokyo so you will get the story of its exhibition in a different site with different conditions, for a different audience.'

She said this was the first major Kngwarreye exhibition in ten years, and would include some works not seen in the previous retrospective.



Mayumi Uchida with Utopia artist and Emily's relatives, Barbara Weir and Gloria Petyarre, in front of *Big Yam Dreaming* 1995, synthetic, polymer paint on canvas, 291.1 x 801.8 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

The exhibition will be on display at the National Museum of Australia from 21 August – 12 October 2008.

***Utopia: the Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye* is supported by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Yomiuri Shimbun, the Australia–Japan Foundation and Woodside Energy Limited.**

Freya Purnell is a Sydney writer and editor.



Visitor dressed in traditional kimono viewing batik works in the 'Origins' room. *Length of Fabric* 1981, 174.0 x 110.0 cm, National Gallery of Australia. (The draped batik in the forefront is 10 metres long, from the Heytesbury Collection: *Untitled* 1988, batik on silk.) All artwork images are © Emily Kame Kngwarreye. Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney, 2007.