

# Out of HOURS

## ART

### DIFFERENT AGES OF A PAINTER'S STYLE

**N**O one is sure of Emily Kngwarreye's age, not even the artist herself. Indeterminate age is one of the legacies of the official treatment of Aborigines early this century, and her birth date has been given as 1910 and 1916. But whatever it may be, her age is catching up with her; she has put aside the big canvases that have been a feature of her work in recent years and has started working on a smaller scale, often putting together panels to form a larger work.

A show of her latest work, at Sydney's Utopia Art, demonstrates that the change of format has led to a productive change of direction in Kngwarreye's art. Perhaps it is the more intimate scale of this new format, but in place of the radiant landscape-inspired abstractions that have been the focus of her work for the past five years, she has drawn her themes from the body painting that is part of the ceremonial practice of her At-neltyeye community, north-east of Alice Springs. All the paintings are entitled *Awelye*, which refers both to the practice of body painting and the canon of knowledge and lore shared by the women of the community.

Transposed to canvas, the body-painting motifs take the form of minimalist abstractions — a series of lines or cross-hatchings done in one or

two colors. The simple, direct treatment of the imagery conveys the strong sense of physicality that lies at its source. The grouping of smaller panels to form a completed work may have been devised as an expedient, but it enhances the work in a couple of ways. The groupings evoke an image of the women coming together for their talk, their work and their ceremonies, and the repetitious nature of the panels echoes the repetitive quality of Aboriginal song and dance.

The US artist Agnes Martin



made a career of painting severe geometric grids and horizontal bands. She often surprised observers with the spirituality that underpinned her work. She was once asked by a viewer why she had called a painting of horizontal blue and grey stripes *Grey Geese Descending*, when it looked nothing like that. Her answer was that the painting

conveyed the feeling of watching birds in flight. In much the same way Kngwarreye has, with absolute economy, given us a sense of the mood and atmosphere of a meeting of the women of her community.

Kngwarreye's shift from body painter to contemporary artist began in 1977 when Jenny Green went to Utopia — a region 270 kilometres north-east of Alice Springs — to become the area's first art coordinator under a Northern Territory Education Department adult education scheme. Green arranged for the teaching of wood-block fabric printing and batik. Painting in acrylics on canvas did not become popular until the 1980s.

Green worked with the women of the Utopia community and the art that emerged from the region in the 1980s was dominated by women. By contrast, male-dominated groups were emerging at the same time in communities such as Papunya and Napperby. This

difference has given Utopia art a distinctive character, which is most notable in the body-painting style used in this show.

Kngwarreye exhibited in group shows in the late 1970s and the 1980s, but she did not have her first solo exhibition until 1990. She is recognised as a leading Aboriginal artist and as a leading contemporary artist. In 1992, she received an Australian Artists Creative Fellowship.

The paintings for which Kngwarreye is best recognised are landscape-inspired abstractions that explode from the canvas in a mass of dots. Her palette is different from most Aboriginal painters; it is brighter and broader in range.

Her new work may appear sombre and austere in comparison, but it lacks none of the force that lies at the heart of her painting. It will challenge the people who still see the work of Aboriginal artists as a static process. Kngwarreye continues to explore the themes in her art, and the artistic process, in the same way that any contemporary artist would.

— JOHN KAVANAGH

Two works by Emily Kngwarreye: An expedient on canvas that enhanced a traditional art form

