

THE



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EMILY KNGWARREYE



Emily Kngwarreye, Aboriginal artist, died in hospital in Alice Springs on September 2. She is thought to have been born in about 1910.

EMILY KNGWARREYE was one of Australia's leading artists. Although she only started painting in 1988, when she was well into her seventies, her achievement was immense. The spontaneity of her colour-filled work projected Aboriginal art to a new and international audience. Her paintings were eagerly acquired by public galleries and private collectors alike.

Emily Kame Kngwarreye — who became known simply by her Christian name, Emily — was born in Alalgura (Soakage Bore) at Utopia, northeast of Alice Springs. An Eastern Anmatyerre speaker, she did not see any white people until she was about nine years old.

As a young woman she worked as a stockhand on various properties in the area. She also learnt the sacred traditions of her people, having been adopted by Jacob Jones, a senior lawman in the Alyawarre community, and instructed by him. She became a leader in the women's ceremonial business at Utopia.

Aboriginal ceremonial business has a strong visual element, with bold body decoration and the mapping out of dreamtime stories in the sand with coloured earths, grasses and feathers, but it was only in the 1970s that these traditional motifs began to be used as "art".

At Utopia in 1977 Jenny Green, a visiting linguist, established an arts-and-crafts

programme for the women. They began with batik-making, adapting their traditional body-markings and forms to this medium. Emily's work, even then, stood out for its freedom and vigour.

In 1988-89 the women's group, under a new art adviser, Rodney Gooch, began working with acrylics on canvas, and Emily responded eagerly to this new challenge. It was, she found, a medium more suited to the bold immediacy of her style. From then, up to a few days before her death, she continued to paint with extraordinary power and invention.

Although to European eyes her pictures might appear almost abstract, they in fact depict her country — its animal and vegetable life, its terrain, its mythical origins, its changing patterns, the interweaving life-cycles and mythical meanings.

Emily's painting technique, from the start, was individual and distinctive, marked by boldness of colour and strength of design. Her extraordinary talent was recognised almost at once. In 1990 Emily's work was shown at two very successful one-woman shows in Sydney, and in 1992 she received an Australian Artist's Creative Fellowship from the Government.

Much alarm was occasioned at this time, when Emily (who spoke no English) appeared to think that the A\$110,000 award was a sort of retirement present and was contingent upon her *stopping* painting. Happily, however, this confusion was soon cleared up. It was fortunate not only for the art world, but



Emily with London gallery owner Rebecca Hossack

also for Emily herself: she loved to paint and even during her period of doubt had continued to work, telling her friends not to tell Paul Keating, then Australian Prime Minister.

By 1993 she had been represented in more than 50 exhibitions around the world. She had her first solo show in Britain in 1994 at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery, London.

In the seven years since Emily began painting, her style grew simpler and more expressive. She shifted from

using great light-filled splotches of colour to a more stark, linear style. Her masterpiece in this manner — *Big Yam Dreaming* — painted in white on a black ground, was recently presented to the National Gallery of Victoria, where it was hailed as Australia's equivalent to Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles*.

A tiny figure — barely five feet high — Emily painted sitting on the ground, holding the brush in either hand and pushing the paint onto the canvas in bold dabs as she

worked with steady concentration from the outside edge of the canvas towards the centre.

Her great success did inevitably bring some problems. There was constant pressure on her to produce, not only from art dealers but also from her own extended family, who after the Aboriginal fashion shared in her financial rewards (and it is estimated that she earned as much as \$A500.00 a year by her painting). Inevitably, with such demands upon her, she produced some work of lesser quality. And there are even those who see the simplification of her late style as a means of producing work more quickly.

For the most part, however, she loved her success, enjoying the opportunities it gave her to give presents to friends and relatives. She had no children of her own. She continued, until the end, to live the traditional Aboriginal life, gathering food in the bush and sleeping out in her bough shelter at Soakage Bore.