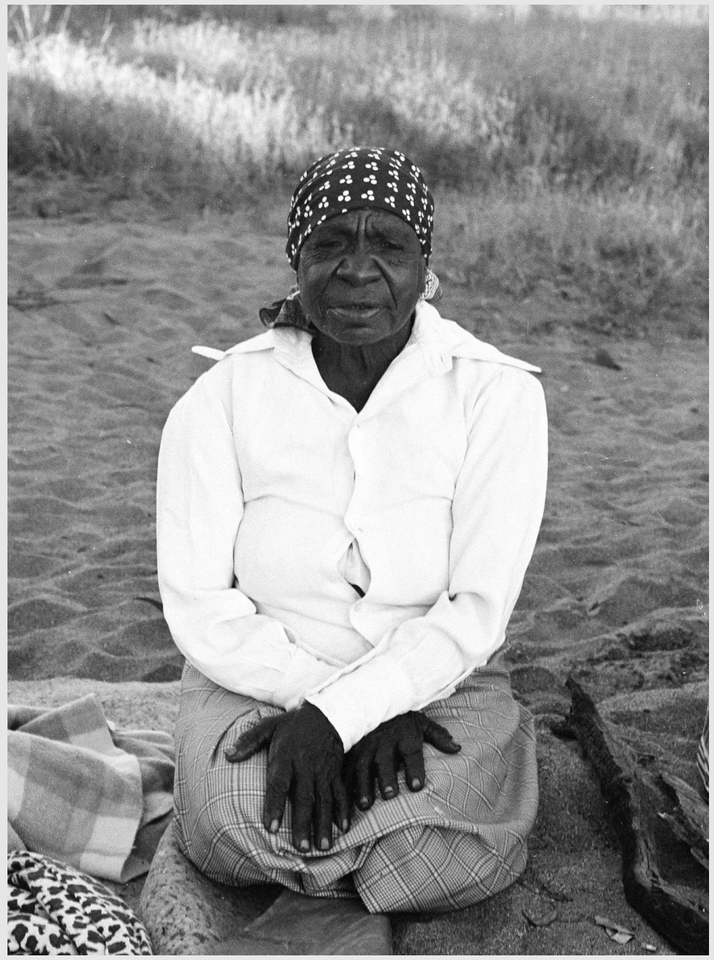

Emily Kame Kngwarreye
(Indigenous Australian (Anmatyerr), 1910 - 1996)

Biography

Emily Kame Kngwarreye is without a doubt one of the most acclaimed First Nations Artists. She may be considered one of the greatest contemporary Australian artists and her influence on the world of both indigenous and non-indigenous Australian art is indisputably great.

Emily was born in Alhalkere, 230 km north-east of Alice Springs on the edge of the Simpson Desert, Northern Territory. Unusual for a woman, she became a camel driver and stock-hand at Bushy Part Station and Mt Riddock Station. This hard work contributed to her physical strength later in life. Encouraged by the return of traditional lands to indigenous Australians under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act in 1976, Emily returned to Alhalkere and was one of the founders of the Utopia Women's Batik Group in 1978.

Following its first exhibition in Alice Springs in 1980, this movement had limited commercial success. This led, however, to an initiative in 1988 of the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA), called *A Summer Project*, which distributed 100 blank canvases and acrylic paint among the Aboriginals in Utopia.

The resultant 81 works, including Emily's first painting, *Emu Woman*, made history in the art world. Her work attracted immediate attention. The experimental and determined work spoke of a rare talent. At the same time, she became one of the founders of Indigenous Women's art in the Eastern and Central Deserts of Australia.

Having started at nearly eighty years old, her painting career lasted a mere seven years. One of her most remarkable attributes was her capacity to develop new styles, even adopting a new style a fortnight before her death. Yet, her vast output was a result of her enormous physical and mental energy, as well as her forceful personality and deep love for her ancestral country. Most of her work can be distinguished by an exceptionally wide palette of bright colors. Her more minimalist abstract works of two colors are especially significant, inspired by traditional body painting.

Characteristic in Emily's paintings is a style referred to as her 'dump-dump' style. This originally involved coarse wide brushstrokes and build up layers of colored dots on a grid pattern surface to represent elements of landscapes and vegetation. This was followed by an even more diffuse pattern of layered dots with magnificent colors dominating.

"We didn't have any tents — we lived in shelters made of grass. When it was raining the grass was roughly thrown together for shelter. That was in the olden time, a long time ago."

During the last two years of her life, she broke with her bright color schemes by making minimalist "line" paintings in black, brown or blue on a white background with horizontal or vertical stripes inspired by women's ceremonial body painting. This led to her *Wild Yam Dreamings:* layers of intricately crossing lines that represent the roots of the Yam plant, an edible and spiritually significant indigenous vegetable. From this period, comes her most important masterpiece, *Big Yam Dreaming* (1995), which was donated to the National Gallery of Victoria.

Outside of Australia, her work increasingly received the recognition it deserves. In 2008, the National Art Center in Tokyo opened the exhibition *Utopia: the Genius of Emily Kam Kngwarray*, the largest collection of works by a single Australian artist ever exhibited outside Australia, with an estimated value of no less than $30,000,000.

Her masterpiece *Earth's Creation* (4 panels, each 275 x 160 cm) has been exhibited at the Central Pavilion of the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015. In the same year, her work was part of the *Signs & Traces* exhibition in Poznan, Poland.

The Tate Modern in London recently held a major solo exhibition dedicated to Emily Kame Kngwarreye. Organized in close collaboration with the National Gallery of Australia (NGA), the 2025 exhibition marked the first large-scale presentation of Kngwarreye's work ever held in Europe, offering international audiences a rare opportunity to engage with the art of this celebrated painter. The Tate exhibition followed the NGA's Kngwarreye exhibition, which ran from 2 December 2023 to 28 April 2024.

Provenance

Delmore Downs Station - Delmore Gallery

Established by the Holt family in 1989, Delmore Gallery was originally situated 250 kilometres northeast of Alice Springs in the Northern Territory of Australia.
The Holt's property, Delmore Downs Station, bordered Utopia, a former cattle station that has been under the management of its traditional owners since 1976, located very close to the exact centre of Australia. Don Holt began to collect Indigenous Australian art from Hermannsburg in 1966, then from the artists of Papunya in 1971. The Holts (Janet and Donald Holt) initially purchased and commissioned silk batiks from Utopia from 1978 to 1988. In 1988, they began commissioning and buying contemporary Aboriginal art from the nearby Utopia region, nurturing the talent of Utopia artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye from 1989 until her passing in 1996.
In this time, it is estimated that Emily produced approximately between 3,000 and 3,500 paintings, almost half of which were commissioned by the Delmore Gallery. Emily usually painted at Delmore three to four days a week and the gallery began curating exhibitions from 1989, held in Sydney at Coventry Gallery, in Melbourne with Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, in Canberra with Chapman Gallery, and then later with Hogarth Galleries, William Mora Galleries, Barry Stern and Coo-ee Aboriginal Art Gallery.

Janet Holt & Emily Kame Kngwarreye at Delmore Downs. image: Steve Strike

DACOU (Dreaming Art Centre of Utopia)

DACOU is the acronym for Dreaming Art Centre Of Utopia, and was founded by Fred Torres in 1993. Since its inception DACOU has become firmly entrenched in the art world and is recognized as one of the leading supplier of quality Utopian art. Torres started to work with Emily Kngwarreye through his mother, Emily's niece, Barbara Weir and her mother, Emily's sister-in-law, Minnie Pwerle, who both worked and travelled closely together with Emily throughout her painting career. Starting in 1990 he went on to assist a number of female relatives to market their art successfully and took 'auntie' Emily and other family members to Adelaide in the same year, selling their work to galleries in a number of capital cities. In the final two weeks of her life, Kngwarreye asked her nephew Fred Torres for materials to produce a series known today as *My Country - Final Series, 1996*. A gallerist of Indigenous art in Sydney once described the period as an energetic push to create: "With no other materials, she dipped her one-inch gesso brush into a pot of paint. Over the next few days Emily painted 24 canvases like nothing she had ever done before. This series of painting was shared between AGOD and Dacou, both receiving 12 paintings each. It is estimated Fred Torres and Dacou gallery commissioned between 1000-1500 paintings by Emily over her career.

AGOD (Aboriginal Gallery of Dreamings)

Hank Ebes can safely be said to have had a colourful history, way outside the prescribed boundaries of the community art centre system. He was Dutch pilot, who recognized the nascent market for Aboriginal art in early 1990, but saw that the dealerships for both Utopia art and Papunya Tula had already been snapped up in Melbourne. So he flew himself to Alice Springs and bought 120 Kngwarreyes on the spot from Donald Holt, the man who owned Utopia's neighbouring pastoral property and was able to offer Emily painting space on his verandahs. Ebes soon fell out with Holt, but employed three agents working for him, who facilitated Emily with painting materials and, starting in late 1990, so commissioned many artworks from her for Ebes Aboriginal Gallery of Dreaming in Melbourne until her death in 1996.
Ebes also early in 1991 fell in with the influential trio of artist Barbara Weir, her son Fred Torres and her mother Minnie Pwerle, sister-in-law to Emily, who travelled and worked with Emily on a daily basis. Over the approximate six years that Ebes worked with Emily he was able to procure approximately 800 - 1000 paintings by Emily. This included the Emily Wall, consisting of 53 individual paintings, and the famous Last Series.

Selected Collections

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australia
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin, Australia
Parliament House Art Collection, Canberra, Australia
Campbelltown City Art Gallery, Sydney, Australia
Benalla Art Gallery, Victoria, Australia
Allen, Allen & Hemsley, Sydney, Australia
BP Australia, Australia
Transfield Collection, Sydney, Australia
The Collection of Colin & Elizabeth Laverty, Sydney, Australia
The Kasumi Co. Collection, Japan
Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, USA
Collection of Steve Martin & Anne Stringfield, New York, USA
Kelton Foundation, California, USA
KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Hank Ebes Collection, Melbourne, Australia
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Australia
Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia
Artbank, Sydney, Australia
Donald Kahn Collection, Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, USA
Fred Torres Collection, Australia
The Luczo Family Collection, USA
Auckland City Art Gallery, New Zealand
The Robert Holmes à Court Collection, Perth, Australia
Fondation Burkhardt-Felder Arts et Culture, La Grange, Motiers, Switzerland
Thomas Vroom Collection, The Netherlands
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia
Museum of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia
ATSIC Collection, Canberra, Australia
Kaplan and Levi Collection, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, USA
The Araluen Centre of Arts and Entertainment, Alice Springs, Australia
Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, Australia
University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
University of Sydney Union, Sydney, Australia
University of Wollongong Art Museum, Wollongong, , Australia
University of New England, Maine, Australia
Victoria University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia
Flinders University Art Museum, Adelaide, Australia
Dr Peter Elliot Collection, Sydney, Australia
Delmore Collection, Alice Springs, Australia
Chartwell Collection, Waikato Museum of Art and History, Te Whare Taonga, Waikato, New Zealand
The Vatican Collection, Vatican City
TarraWarra Museum of Art, Healesville, Australia
Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia
Jacqui McPhee Collection, Perth, Australia
Stefano Spaccapietra Collection, Switzerland
Sol LeWitt Collection, New York, USA
Art Gallery of Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia
Bendigo Art Gallery, Bendigo, Australia
Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, Perth, Australia
The Oval Paintings Collection, Bishop Museum, Honolulu, Hawaï
The Menil Collection, Houston, USA
SmithDavidson Collection, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Australia
The British Museum, London, United Kingdom
Musee du Quai Branly, Paris, France
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA
The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, USA
Papunya Tula Artists, Alice Springs, Australia
Gabrielle Pizzi Collection, Melbourne, Australia

Selected Literature

Neale M, *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Alhalkere, Paintings from Utopia*, Macmillan Art Pub., Melbourne, 1998

Neale M (ed), *Utopia; The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra and The National Museum of Art, Osaka, 2007

Cole K., Green J., *Emily Kam Kngwarray*, National Gallery of Australia, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2024

Selected Exhibitions

2025
Solo: *Emily Kam Kngwarray*, Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom
Tjukurrpa: The Dreaming, SmithDavidson Gallery X UNIT London, London, United Kingdom
Echoes Unveiled: Art by First Nations Women from Australia, Artizon Museum, Tokyo, Japan
The Stars We Do Not See, Art Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia, Touring exhibition: Denver Art Museum, Colorado, Portland Art Museum, Oregon; Peabody Essex Museum, Massachusetts, USA; Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada

2024
The Art of Giving, Art Gallery of Macquarie University, Sydney

2023/24
Utopia in Colours, Musee de l'art aborigene australien, Fondation Burkhardt-Felder Arts et Culture, Motiers, Switzerland

2023
Solo: *Emily Kam Kngwarray*, National Gallery of Australian, Canberra, Australia
Sharjah Biennial 15, *Thinking historically in the Present*, Painting: Multi Color Yam acquired via SmithDavidson Gallery

2022
Solo: *Emily : Desert painter of Australia*, Gagosian, Paris, France
Origins, SmithDavidson Gallery, New York, USA
Indigenous Art from the NGV Collection, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia

2021/23
A Year in Art: Australia 1992, Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom

2021
Voyage across Aboriginal Australia – Founders, Favourites, Fondation Burkhardt-Felder Arts et Culture, Môtiers, Switzerland

2020
Origins: Australian Aboriginal Art from the SmithDavidson Collection, SmithDavidson Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Knowing my Name: Australian Women Artists 1900 to Now, Australian National Gallery, Canberra, Australia

2019
Desert Painters of Australia, Works from the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia and the Collection of Steve Martin and Anne Stringfield, Gagosian Gallery, New York & Beverley Hills, USA

2015
Signs and Traces: Contemporary Aboriginal Art, Cultural Institute Zamek, Poznan, Poland
La Biennale di Venezia, Central Pavilion, Venice, Italy

2010
Remembering Forward: Australian Aboriginal Painting since 1960, Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany

2009
Mythology & Reality: Contemporary Aboriginal Art from the Gabrielle Pizzi Collection, TarraWarra Museum of Art, Healesville, Australia

2008
Emily Kngwarray and her Legacy, Art Front Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
Solo: *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Australia; Museum of Modern Art, Osaka; National Art Center, Tokyo, Japan

1998/99
Solo: *Emily Kame Kngwarreye | Alhalkere Paintings from Utopia*, Queensland Art Gallery; Art Gallery of New South Wales; National Gallery of Victoria, Australia

1997
La Biennale di Venezia, Australian Pavillion, Italy

1995
Solo: *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Paintings from 1989-1995*, Parliament House, Canberra, Australia

1994
National Gallery of Victoria, Australia

1993/4
Aratjara: Art of the First Australians, Kunstammlung Nordrhein Westfalen, Düsseldorf, Germany; Hayward Gallery, London, United Kingdom; Louisiana Museum, Humlebaek, Denmark

1992
Crossroads, Towards a New Reality, Aboriginal Art from Australia, National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto and Tokyo, Japan

1990
Contemporary Aboriginal Art, Carpenter Centre for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, Cambridge, USA
First solo exhibition: Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Utopia Art Sydney

1989
Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Louie Pwerle are the first recipients of the CAAMA/ Utopia Artists-in-Residence Project funded by the Robert Holmes à Court Foundation