



**Emily Kam Ngwarray**

(Indigenous Australian (Anmatyerr), 1910 - 1996)

## Biography

Emily Kam Ngwarray is without a doubt the most famous female Aboriginal artist to date. 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 stockhand 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 art history. Her work attracted immediate attention. The experimental, yet 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; of special significance are her more minimalist abstract works of two colors, 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.

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 receives 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.



#### Selected Collections

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australia  
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, 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  
Transfield Collection, Sydney, Australia  
The Collection of Colin & Elizabeth Laverty, Sydney, Australia  
Fred Torres Collection, Australia  
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  
Auckland City Art Gallery, New Zealand  
The Kasumi Co. Collection, Japan  
KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
Thomas Vroom Collection, The Netherlands  
Fondation Burkhardt-Felder, Motiers, Switzerland  
Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, USA  
The Luczo Family Collection, USA  
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  
The Robert Holmes à Court Collection, USA  
Donald Kahn Collection, USA

#### Selected Literature

Neale M, Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Alhalkere,  
Paintings from Utopia (Macmillan Publishers,  
Melbourne, 1998)  
Neale M (ed), Utopia; The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye  
(National Museum of Australia and The National Museum of Art,  
Osaka, 2007)

## Selected Exhibitions

2025

Solo Exhibition, Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom

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

2021-23

*A Year in Art: Australia 1992*, Tate Modern, London, UK

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

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

2008

Solo: *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Australia;  
Museum of Modern Art, Osaka; National Art Center, Tokyo, Japan

1997

La Biennale di Venezia, Australian Pavillion, Italy

1994

National Gallery of Victoria, Australia

1993/4

*Aratjara: Art of the First Australians*, Kunstmuseum Nordrhein Westfalen, Düsseldorf, Germany; Hayward Gallery, London, UK; Louisiana Museum, Humlebaek, Denmark

1992

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

1991

Solo: Gallery Savah, Sydney, Australia

1990

Contemporary Aboriginal Art, Carpenter Centre for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, USA

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.