

ART INTERNATIONAL MARKET



Emily conquers Paris with a solo show

A small but powerful exhibition in France of work by the late Emily Kame Kngwarreye is a harbinger of resurgent interest in Aboriginal art, writes **Dan F. Stapleton**.

A selling exhibition of just 14 paintings by one of Australia's most highly acclaimed Indigenous artists has opened at a world-leading contemporary gallery in Paris. Small it may be, but *Emily: Desert Painter of Australia*, feels like a big moment for the late Emily Kame Kngwarreye.

The sheer diversity of the work showing at Gagosian's Rue de Ponthieu gallery creates the impression that Kngwarreye (1910-1996) spent a lifetime exploring different styles on canvas. In fact, the revolutionary Australian Aboriginal artist painted all 14 high-energy pictures during the final seven years of her life - along with more than 3000 others.

The last major attempt to summarise her relentless pursuit of new forms and colours was the 2008 retrospective *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kngwarreye* at the National Museum of Australia. That show comprised 120 paintings. By comparison, Kngwarreye's first solo exhibition in France is petite. But it hits just as hard. What's more, many of the works are top tier.

In collaboration with Melbourne gallery D'LAN Contemporary, Gagosian has sourced examples of Kngwarreye's best-known styles, including *Awelye*, a luminous painting from 1990 in which scatterings of dots cover a curvy web, and 1994's *Untitled - Alhalkere*, a monumental line-based composition from the "Body Paint" series.

Also represented are styles that were largely absent from the *Utopia* retrospective but have lately become sought-after, including *Winter Awelye I*, an astonishing piece from 1994 in which metre-long trails of large dots create the impression of rippling tendrils.

It's a powerful assemblage of paintings and an indication that Gagosian is taking Kngwarreye very seriously indeed.

Over the past three years, Larry Gagosian's mega-gallery has mounted two other exhibitions of Australian Indigenous art with D'LAN Contemporary, in Los Angeles and Hong Kong.

But those were group shows. Being granted a solo exhibition puts Kngwarreye in the company of Cy Twombly, Helen Frankenthaler and Jeff Koons and brings her into the global contemporary art conversation like never before.

"I don't think we could achieve greater visibility with any other gallery in the world," says D'LAN Contemporary founder D'LAN Davidson. He credits Louise Neri, the Melbourne-raised Gagosian director, with putting Australian Indigenous art firmly on the agenda at her Manhattan HQ.

Davidson's gallery has lately mounted its own shows of Australian Indigenous art



overseas. But he says D'LAN Contemporary and Gagosian are working co-operatively, not in competition. "Louise and I have worked together for three years now, and we respect each other and what we each bring to the table," he says.

Speaking for his gallery, he adds: "We want the relationship with Gagosian to



continue to grow and flourish, for the benefit of First Nations artists. And we see it doing so."

Kngwarreye is already trending overseas, with works currently on view at Tate Modern in London and big sales at the recent Sotheby's Aboriginal Art auctions in New York.

Above: Detail of *Untitled - Alhalkere* (1994). Far left: Being granted a solo exhibition in Paris brings Emily Kngwarreye into the global contemporary art conversation like never before. Left: Kame Yam Awelye, 1996. PHOTOS: ADAGP, D'LAN CONTEMPORARY AND GAGOSIAN, CHRISTOPHER HODGES



Need to know

Emily: Desert Painter of Australia is on view at Gagosian's Rue de Ponthieu gallery in Paris until March 12.

Banner March for Aboriginal artists

Indigenous art takes centre stage in the coming weeks in Australia, both at institutions and on the secondary market.

■ **Cooee Art** opens the season on March 8 with the latest instalment of its annual Indigenous Fine Art auction. There are four paintings by Kngwarreye among the 103 lots, all with different lines of provenance. Founding director Adrian Newstead has long argued against blanket rules for provenance, preferring a case-by-case approach, and his auctions are often quite eclectic as a result.

■ **Leonard Joel's Fine Art auction** on March 22 will include a section for Indigenous works and marks the launch of the house's new sourcing guidelines. "We have

committed to a revised policy regarding the sale of Australian Indigenous art, specifying direct lineage to the artist and ethical provenance," notes head of art Olivia Fuller.

■ Then it's **Deutscher & Hackett's** turn on March 30. Its "Important Australian Aboriginal Art" auction is considered a bellwether for the local market and usually features notable works by Kngwarreye. According to Crispin Gutteridge, D&H's head of Indigenous art, this year is no exception. "We have several Emilys," he says. Also included are barks dating to the 1930s and 1940s and several contemporary photography lots. "It's a really broad sweep of the best works we can bring together," says Gutteridge.



In the Gagosian gallery: Emily Kame Kngwarreye, *Awelye*, 1990.

■ Meanwhile, after several pandemic-related delays, the fourth instalment of the **National Indigenous Art Triennial** opens on March 26 at the National Gallery in Canberra. The eclectic showcase, titled *Ceremony*, features 35 practising artists and has been curated by Hetti Perkins.

■ Already running at the **Art Gallery of WA** is *Ever Present: First Peoples Art of Australia*,

an 80-artist survey featuring significant work by Kngwarreye and other heavy hitters. And the **National Gallery of Victoria's** visitor favourite *Bark Ladies: Eleven Artists From Yirrkala* is on view until April 25.

■ Looking ahead, art-world chatter suggests a landmark single-artist retrospective is taking shape at the National Gallery. Who could it be? Watch this space. **L&L**
DAN F. STAPLETON

Davidson believes all that's holding her back from greater success internationally is the variable quality of some of the many works attributed to her.

Rumours of Kngwarreye forgeries have long circulated in the Australian media. In 1997, the *NT News* even reported on an organised "school" of painters creating "fake Emilys". "That's why our two galleries are presently working on a comprehensive document that will provide assurance on provenance for the international market," Davidson says.

So, which of Kngwarreye's works are considered bullet-proof?

Davidson says the only two lines of provenance that his gallery and Australia's major museums currently accept are Delmore Gallery, which operated on a homestead adjacent to Kngwarreye's homeland of Utopia (north-east of Alice Springs), and Rodney Gooch, an Alice Springs-based arts worker who facilitated Kngwarreye's first works on canvas.

"Presently - aside from a handful of additional works that were verified for the retrospective - we're not prepared to go any further than that," he says.

The Gagosian show contains paintings from both lines of provenance. Together, they show how Kngwarreye moved between aesthetics with ease.

The eight-panel *Untitled - Alhalkere* work (Gooch) and the vastly different *Winter Awelye* picture (Delmore) were both painted in mid-1994.

Christopher Hodges, whose Utopia Art Sydney gallery handled the sale of Gooch works throughout Kngwarreye's career in the 1990s, says the artist's stylistic transformations never ceased to shock the Australian scene.

"The 'Body Paint' series almost broke the market," he says.

But that particular shift, he explains, was born of necessity. "She was seriously ill at the time and she realised that her heart condition was not going away. Nonetheless, she demanded to keep working."

The lines were inspired by the body painting that Kngwarreye had practised all her life while living on Country. "She was going back to the basics of her belief system," notes Hodges.

Over at Delmore Downs, Kngwarreye was producing various smaller works in bright

palettes, often changing styles from day to day. *Winter Awelye I*, a larger piece at 1.5x1.2 metres, is a remarkable physical achievement for an 80-something artist whose health was failing. "That period of work is a bit of a mishmash," says Davidson. "But when the paintings hit the mark, they are truly melodic and spectacular."

Of the two 1994 works, only *Winter Awelye I* is for sale (*Untitled - Alhalkere* is a loan). Neri won't specify exactly how many other pieces remain available. "But Gagosian tells me there have been several significant sales already," says Davidson.

"I firmly believe that the market for Emily's work is now in the beginning stages of a whole new trajectory," he adds. **L&L**