CONTENTS

Refereed papers marked *

VOLUME 32 NO. 1

An introduction to the women painters of Utopia, Northern Territory
Christine Nicholls *

Rockholes as cultural markers on the West Coast of South Australia
Sue Anderson *

An examination of the station at Moorundie after Eyre and an assessment of the work of E. B. Scott, 1847-1856
Katerina Bickford

The establishment of the South Australian Native Police 1834-1860
Mark Williams
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE WOMEN PAINTERS OF UTOPIA, NORTHERN TERRITORY
by Christine Nicholls

Introduction

In the late 1970s a group of Anmatyerre and Alywarr Aboriginal women from the Utopia region in the Northern Territory of Australia, whose land is situated about 275 kilometres north east of Alice Springs, began learning the techniques of batik print-making at a government-sponsored adult education course. Many of these women were later to take up acrylic painting on canvas and to become high profile artists, highly significant ‘players’, and even, in some cases, ‘big names’ in the Australian and international art world: notably Emily Kame Kngwarreye, and also sisters Kathleen Petyarre, Violet Petyarre, Gloria Petyarre, Nancy Petyarre, Myrtle Petyarre and Ada Petyarre, to name but a few.

Not long after they began learning about batik printing, the same group of women, who have consistently emphasized the connection between art and land, became key claimants in an eventually successful claim for Anmatyerre freehold title over the Utopia Pastoral Lease. In 1979 the land around Utopia was formally returned to its traditional owners. Of course, this nexus between art and land is by no means arbitrary or coincidental: Indigenous land claims are frequently founded on such an explicitly-made connection. The ‘Bark Petition’ so famously although unsuccessfully presented to Parliament by the Yolgnu people of Yirrkala in 1963, as part of a land claim, immediately comes to mind.

This distinguished group of older women, who in many respects were pioneers in terms of gaining recognition for Indigenous women artists, both nationally and internationally, have also been active and extremely generous in transmitting their knowledge and skills to the younger generation. The daughters, nieces, grandnieces and granddaughters of the same group of women who embarked upon batik-making and painting in the late 1970s are now painting and in some cases are also becoming very well known. For example, Kathleen Petyarre’s granddaughter Abie, who is only in her early twenties, is already winning an international reputation for herself. The members of this younger group have learned their Dreamings as well as their artistic techniques from this pioneering group of older Anmatyerre and Alywarr women artists, and are both diligent and acutely aware of their social responsibility in terms of carrying on the traditions of their foremothers and forefathers. In this article I will argue that a good deal of the success of these younger women artists is premised not only on the efforts and role models presented by the older generation of Utopia women artists, who are not only fine artists in their own right, but are also mindful of their secular and religious responsibilities in terms of passing on both their traditions and artistic skills to the younger generation of women artists.

The Utopia Women Artists

The work of the Utopia women artists has been relatively well-documented. As well as the astonishing collective success of the Utopia women artists in batik making and acrylic art, Australia’s (arguably) most famous woman artist thus far, the late Emily Kame Kngwarreye emerged from their ranks when she had already entered her late seventies. Kngwarreye literally took the Australian and international art world by storm, an amazing feat for a woman who was not only positioned at the extreme margins of the dominant Australian culture, could speak only rudimentary English, and was also so advanced in years.

The Utopia women artists have also had an important impact on the Australian Indigenous art scene insofar as they have to a certain extent upset the dominant paradigm and entrenched white beliefs about how gender relations are organized in traditionally-oriented Aboriginal society. To give but one example, a prominent white Australian male anthropologist and doctor spoke for many others of his ilk when, as late as the 1970s, he famously and disparagingly commented that he considered Aboriginal women to be little more than ‘feeders, breeders and follow-the-leaders’. Since then feminist scholars have demonstrated that Indigenous Australian women are frequently leaders in their own right, and that their social power extends into the realm of the sacred, as well as in secular matters. It is becoming increasingly accepted nowadays that Aboriginal women are not the passive, powerless, oppressed group of social onlookers that some white male anthropologists would have us, or like us, to believe.

This is borne out in the case of the Utopia women artists, who are dominating the artistic scene in their geographical region. Comparatively few men have taken up painting in that particular ‘country’, and even fewer men have experienced the levels of success of the leading women artists of Utopia. The art which the Utopia women produce and create, like other Indigenous Australian art, needs to be understood within the category of the sacred and religious, widely known in English as The Dreaming. The Utopia women are empowered to paint specific Dreamings as a matter of heredity. But increasingly, the works created by these women also have to be seen within the framework of the international art market, globalisation and commodity capitalism, a point to which I shall return later.

‘The Dreaming’

It is important to understand works of art in terms of the particular logic which produces them, and essential to any real understanding of Indigenous Australian art, which first and foremost needs to be understood as religious art. An analogy could be drawn to the art of the Renaissance, which is impossible to understand without reference to Christianity. In the same way, the Indigenous religious concept of The Dreaming needs to be evoked in order to understand the art of the Utopia women artists.
‘The Dreaming’ is in fact a poor and trivializing translation for this complex and all-embracing concept, which encapsulates Aboriginal Law, and the Creation time of the Ancestral heroes, a time which, unlike the Biblical Genesis, is not believed to have occurred exclusively in the past, but to be an ongoing process, covering the past, present and future. ‘The Dreaming’ also refers to the rituals, ceremonies and the other associated artistic practices which are utilized to evoke that time of Creation. At the same time ‘The Dreaming’ provides the template for all social interaction, including marriage and other relationships.

Anmatyerre and Alywarr people ‘own’ (in the copyright sense of ‘own’) or ‘manage’ particular Dreamings, as a matter of inherent rights deriving from their fathers, grandfathers and mothers — for example Carol Kunoth Kngwarreye owns the Bush Banana Dreaming under Anmatyerre law. In effect, this means that she and a limited number of other people are the only ones permitted under Anmatyerre law to reproduce the images associated with the Bush Banana Dreaming. It is considered a capital offence under Anmatyerre law to reproduce the Dreamings of others without permission.

What is impressive about the younger Utopia women artists like Carol Kunoth Kngwarreye is how knowledgeable they are in their artistic realisations of their Dreamings, which is in turn a function of how well-schooled they have been by the older women artists living at Utopia. The older women spend a good deal of time with the younger generation, and are generous in passing on their knowledge and painterly skills. This is encouraging, auguring well for the future of Indigenous art in that region.

‘Awelye’ and the Art of the Utopian Women

Awelye is a key concept in terms of understanding the art of the women of Utopia. Awelye refers to women’s ceremonies, women’s ceremonial business and the rituals and body painting associated with it. Awelye ceremonies are held for the purpose of looking after country, and looking after health, particularly the health of women. Every Utopian woman artist I have spoken to has consistently underlined the continuing, pivotal importance of Awelye to their artistic expression. Kathleen Petyarre, who has since Emily Kame Kngwarreye’s death become the leading exponent of this ‘school’, puts it thus:

I love to do my paintings - I feel all right in my body when I paint the stories of my country, Attraction, near Mosquito Bore. My Mountain Devil story, my Green Pea, Bush Tucker, Atnangere (little wild orange bush tucker), and my Bush Seed story. I feel really good in my body when I’m doing these paintings. What do I think about when I’m painting my country? I’m thinking about my family, my daughter, my brothers, my sisters and all my nieces, nephews and my grandchildren.

I started a new way of doing my paintings - a new way of thinking about them, painting them, and doing them. It’s like when you go up in little ‘plane and you can look down while it’s moving. It’s like you are wind, moving and looking down on a big sandhill, a big high one, like when you see it when you walk around all the time. That’s my Dreaming from the Mountain Devil, a big high one from above. The red one is sand, and the white one is apertew (hailstone, synonym aperrkwr). When you go in a ‘plane you can look down and when you see it, it’s like a different one, it changes colour all the time as you move along. I’m doing that kind of painting now, new style, change-over, I’m changing that story. I’m looking down on it (during) the hot time, at the time when it changes colour. You know how we went up that big sandhill at Atnangere and we looked down. It’s just like that. I like to make it like it’s moving, travelling, all the girls and women from the awelye and all the men, moving, travelling, like the Mountain Devil. It’s still body painting, ceremony, looking from the sky, still dancing, still ceremony, my new style is still dancing ceremony, still awelye. Some people still do painting ceremony — that story is still going, even with the new style. Maybe that’s all. 4

The Iconography of Indigenous Australian Art and the Art/Land Nexus

It will be apparent from the most cursory glance that these artists are not working within a western artistic paradigm: their art is not figurative, but iconographic, and the icons in a number of instances are multivalent. In addition, it will be clear to even the unschooled eye that Western perspective is not utilized in any of these paintings. Rather, each painting is to be understood as an aerial, or bird’s-eye view, of specific tracts of land situated in Anmatyerre country. Some tracts of land favour the growth of bush plums; others, bush bananas. Bush turkeys are known to proliferate in other areas. In most cases, these are not discrete areas, but overlapping — in other words, Dreamings intersect one another, although people tend to have proprietary rights over particular, discrete Dreamings. What follows is a close analysis of the work of a number of women artists whose homelands are in the Utopia region. It has no pretensions to being a comprehensive survey but flags the continuing presence of a highly significant art movement which is dominated by a number of extraordinary women artists.

The Work of Emily Kame Kngwarreye

Such is the late Emily Kame Kngwarreye’s pre-eminence that some commentators have described the favourable critical attention she has received as ‘Emily-mania’ and speak of the ‘Emily phenomenon’ or even of the ‘Emily industry’. Not only did Emily Kame Kngwarreye receive unparalleled critical attention and popular acclaim but she also achieved considerable commercial success, no mean feat for a woman artist who only began painting when she was
exceedingly old and resided in what is arguably one of the most remote parts of the world. Moreover, Kngwarreye’s work was and is equally well received and appreciated in both ‘high art’ and popular art circles, unusual in Australia where these usually exist as distinct and virtually polarized spheres.

Born in 1910 at Alakahkere (Utopia Station), Emily Kame Kngwarreye first saw a white person when she was about nine years old. As a young woman she worked as a stock hand on the station which was situated on her country. Kngwarreye began painting using acrylics late in life (around 1988) although she had been a central figure in the vigorous Utopia women’s batik-making movement which had begun roughly ten years before that. Sadly, Kngwarreye passed away in the latter part of 1996. However, in the years between 1988 and 1996 her artistic output was phenomenal, her stylistic range prodigious, and she established herself as a legitimate part of the international artistic canon.

In the late 1970s under the tutelage of adult educators Julia Murray and Jenny Green, Emily Kame Kngwarreye and a number of her countrywomen began making batik and screen printing cloth for sale. Because of her position in the kinship structure, Emily Kame Kngwarreye was the ‘rightful’ or ‘legal’ owner of a number of Dreamings including the Sand Goanna, Wild Orange, Emu, Bush Potato, as well as the Yam and Yam Seeds. As a senior custodian of these Dreamings Kngwarreye was entitled to sing the songs and perform the ceremonies (awelye) associated with them, as well as to commit those designs to canvas or other media of her choosing. The designs and patterns which Emily Kame Kngwarreye painted on batik, boards or canvas are visible manifestations of that primary force of the Dreaming and need to be understood within that framework.

Emily Kame Kngwarreye’s greatest achievement was to open up what is recognized as the category of ‘Indigenous Australian art’ to a broader set of possible meanings. Kngwarreye has been described variously as ‘one of the major abstract painters of the twentieth century’ 5; as ‘bridging the gap between the primitive and the contemporary’ 6; as an impressionist in whose paintings there is ‘a kind of magical reappearance of Matisse’ 7 and by the New Age set as a kind of ancient sage or guru, with direct and elemental links to Dreaming on account of the fact that she was born in the bush, and did not see white people until she was a young girl.

While it is beyond question that Kngwarreye has a profoundly erudite, comprehensive and clear knowledge of her Dreamings, it would also appear that Kame Kngwarreye often deliberately obscures those Dreamings. Many of her early paintings are covered or overlaid with dots, creating brilliant constellations of intersecting, whirling colour, so that although the viewer is subliminally aware of Dreaming, it is glimpsed as a shadow or suggestion beneath the surface. This tantalizing subterranean presence is sensed by the viewer rather than actually seen. Because the Dreaming is only ever visible as a shimmering, underlying presence it is rendered the more powerful. In other words, Emily Kngwarreye’s work references the Dreaming, or to use the post-modern term, she quotes from the Dreaming without actually revealing or giving us her Dreaming. In her evocation of Dreaming as existing beneath a ground cover of swirling dots in bold, sensational colours (rather than giving it to us ‘straight’ as it were), Kngwarreye pulls off the greatest coup of contemporary Australian art: she opens up the possible set of meanings or interpretations which can be brought to bear upon her work, virtually to the point of infinity. At the same time from her own Indigenous perspective, somewhat paradoxically, the possible interpretations remain bounded by the unchanging truth of the Dreaming.

By executing her paintings in ways which camouflage her Dreamings, Kngwarreye has succeeded brilliantly in the resolution of a problem which has beset Aboriginal people since the white people first set foot on this continent: that is, the problem of protecting restricted cultural information from the predatory Western gaze. The colourful screens of dots which characterize Kngwarreye’s earlier work serve another crucial purpose. Aboriginal cultures may be glossed as ‘cultures of concealment’ and as such they have always been subject to invasive Western proclivities towards disclosure and revelation in the arts and in other spheres. Kngwarreye’s sheer technical accomplishment in terms of composition, formal organization of space, and daring use of colour also acts to artfully conceal, protect and ultimately reclaim the underlying secret-sacred elements in her works.

In the course of her artistic career, Emily Kngwarreye traversed many themes and styles, at times focusing on one or more particular Dreaming, sometimes merely making a passing reference to Dreaming, like the great post-modern painter that she is. In the final years of her life Kngwarreye’s preference was for huge canvases on which she splashed large dots in an apparent unleashing of tremendous energy, Jackson Pollock style.

Kngwarreye’s famous Stripes 8 are a case in point. On the surface these are works of great simplicity and humility. Aesthetically, they appear to disclose themselves immediately. Yet the longer one gazes upon them, the more apparent their dynamic qualities become. In some of the paintings this dynamic quality emanates from the white space between the lines, which creates tension and raises the inevitable question of where the viewer stands in relation to the work. It is a similar process to seeking meaning from dreams. Kngwarreye’s Stripes are enigmatic, they resist definition, at times acting like bars, blocking the gaze, which is why the gaze is compelled to return to them, struggling to look through or past them, seeking that elusive underlying meaning which one feels surely is there but which remains permanently just Out of reach. It is because these works defy the spectator’s need for closure that we keep coming back to them again and again. The controlled dynamism of these paintings, with their long uneven, never uniform, sometimes leathery, quivering lines is reminiscent of the breathtakingly beautiful designs Centralian women paint on their breasts with ochres during awelye ceremonies or ‘women’s business’, as it is known. The source of the power is one and the same.

In the final analysis these paintings speak powerfully to Emily Kame Kngwarreye’s vision, a vision which, despite everything, remains firmly anchored, indeed grounded, in her Dreaming. Kngwarreye was a senior custodian of the Yam Dreaming, the bush potato or sweet potato yam (the botanical name for which is Ipomoea costata) sometimes
known as Rock Morning Glory. After the rains these large edible tubers proliferate in the harsh semi-desert terrain of Central Australia. The dry, hard earth is pushed upwards by the yams, which can sometimes extend for very long distances underground, and this prized ‘bush tucker’ first manifests itself as elongated cracks in the ground. The yams literally begin to burst the barrier of the earth’s surface. Using wooden digging sticks, women dig laboriously to free the sweet and juicy yams from the red earth. The stories associated with this Dreaming describe the long and complex journeys undertaken by the Yam Ancestors, and as with other Dreaming narratives, there are many different levels of ‘knowing’ this Dreaming history. As a senior custodian, Kngwarreye’s knowledge of this ‘business’ was profound.

In her Stripes paintings Kngwarreye bears witness (to use an old-fashioned term with rather evangelical connotations) to her own Yam Dreaming, but it is also possible to appreciate them at a multiplicity of other levels. Kngwarreye’s Stripes suggest a great deal more than what is seen on the surface, indeed, suggest entire other worlds or layers underneath. These paintings also inscribe an epistemological system which differs in significant ways from the dominant version, but which many non-Indigenous Australians and others in the world are now seriously attempting to negotiate.

The work of Emily Kngwarreye gave expression to a particular moment in cultural history. Kngwarreye succeeded in pushing the boundaries at the critical intersection between the international and the Indigenous and perhaps ironically, her work bears all the hallmarks of postmodernism. Kngwarreye not only forged a pathway forward for Australian and international art wherein she made use of the Indigenous and the sacred while at the same time protecting and concealing it (a delicate exchange involving the newly-created hybrid category the ‘Global Indigenous’) but she also produced artworks of astonishing range and vitality. These works were - and are - open to multiple readings and interpretations, and as such, they also articulate well with the increasing globalisation of culture and communication.

The Work of Kathleen Petyarre

Kathleen Petyarre deservedly has the highest profile of the Utopia artists painting today, and is the heir apparent to her late aunt, Emily Kame Kngwarreye, although there are a number of important differences in their work, both in terms of approach and content.
Born around 1940 in the Utopia region at Atnangkere, nearly 300 kilometres north east of Alice Springs, as a small child Kathleen moved around her vast ancestral homelands with her parents and extended family. During that time she accumulated an encyclopaedic knowledge of the flora and fauna, rainfall patterns, seasonal changes, significant rockholes and sacred sites of her ‘country’.

It was also during that time that Kathleen began acquiring a deep knowledge of her Dreaming Ancestor, the Mountain or Thorny Devil (called Arnkerth in Kathleen’s language, Anmatyerre). In appearance the Mountain Devil, a small lizard with rather alarming spikes on its back, is like a bonsai dinosaur. The same elements today figure prominently in Kathleen’s extraordinarily finely-wrought art works, in the non-figurative, abstract, aerial view style which characterizes Centralian art.

Kathleen estimates that she was about seven or eight years old when she first met a white person. The solitary white man, encountered by Kathleen’s family while he was wandering around Atnangkere country accompanied by a camel, was a former army officer who had been stationed there during World War II. After the war, the man decided to stay. Today Kathleen vividly recalls how this eccentric man, shocked by his meeting with the unclad family, insisted that they all put on clothes ‘out bush’, regardless of temperature. The lunacy of such prudery has to be measured against the fact that it can reach 55 degrees centigrade in the shade in the Atnangkere summer. The man, who Kathleen describes as a ‘funny one’ outfitted Kathleen’s entire extended family with itchy, ill-fitting army-supply clothing, and insisted that they wear them at all times out bush, despite the discomfort.

Since her initial involvement with the Utopia batik artistic movement in the late 1970s, Kathleen’s career has really gained momentum. Kathleen Petyarre has exhibited her work internationally, in the United States, France, Germany, Holland, Indonesia, India, England, Scotland and Ireland, as well as throughout Australia.

Kathleen, in keeping with the ‘tradition’ established by her late aunt, has always been an innovator within the framework of cultural continuity permitted by The Dreaming, the central Anmatyerre religious practice, and has recently begun working in a dynamic new style. Kathleen proudly says that the new, topographical style she has created captures the powerful feeling of:

...... looking down from a little ‘plane, looking down from sky    Like looking down on my country during the hot time, when the country changes colour - you know, like looking right down onto the top of big sandhills. I love to make the painting like it’s moving, travelling, but it’s still our body painting, still our ceremony.  

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Figure 2. Kathleen Petyarre, at home at Mosquito Bore, Northern Territory, July 1998. [Photograph: Eleonore Wildburger]
Kathleen Petyarre’s work permits a kind of ‘multiplex vision’: not only is it deeply meaningful to other Indigenous groups as religious art but it may also be read in many other ways too, most certainly as post-ethnographic. As has already been noted, similar observations have also been made about the work of Emily Kngwarreye. It is possible that the way the Utopia artists operate with layers which cover the Dreaming may reflect their early intense and very successful engagement with batik - a form that adds and removes layers. This is over determined by a possible affinity between this layering and Arrandaic (as opposed to other Aboriginal) worldviews.

Perhaps it is ironic, given that she didn’t actually meet a white person until she was about eight or nine years old, that Kathleen’s works seem equally at home in New York, Paris, or Sydney as they do at her own ‘place’, Mosquito Bore in the Northern Territory. Like her famous countrywoman and aunt, the late Emily Kngwarreye, Kathleen Petyarre draws upon the Indigenous to create the international. Kathleen’s artistic oeuvre seems at home in the international art world, defying simplistic categorisation.

That Kathleen Petyarre also has a profoundly erudite and comprehensive knowledge of both the grammar and the lexicon of her Dreaming is beyond question. Notwithstanding, she often provides the viewer with little more than a fleeting, subliminal awareness or suggestion of her Dreaming Ancestor’s travels or journeying. This is glimpsed as a tantalizing subterranean presence sensed or felt by the viewer rather than actually seen. This layering effect is at least in part a function of Kathleen’s sheer technical brilliance.

In fact, this is the work of an exceptionally gifted and highly disciplined artist. Many hours are spent in canvas preparation, in carefully applying the gesso in a way that allows layer upon layer of different-coloured paint to become absorbed by the linen. It is this absorption of colours and layers into the canvas that gives Petyarre’s work its very ‘fine’, or even ‘refined’ appearance - the art that conceals art. Because the colour of the paint becomes diluted as successive layers are applied and soak into the canvas, this heightens the illusion of three dimensionality. Petyarre’s dotting, which is much more careful and precise and ‘thought-out’ in terms of overall effect than that of her late aunt Kngwarreye, is part of each work’s texture - the dots don’t just ‘sit’ atop the canvas rather lumpily, as is the case in some contemporary Indigenous painting. That Kathleen is in fact a far more careful artist than Kngwarreye is in part a function of her own
personal disposition but also because she has been exposed to the work of many more fellow artists, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, simply because she has travelled a great deal more. Again, in her own words:

(I’m) getting known world wide - yes, famous!

I0 went to America last year, me and Violet (Violet Petyarre, Kathleen’s sister) went there, and met up with a very big man (Richard Kelton of the Kelton Foundation in Los Angeles). Richard Kelton’s got a lot of paintings there, he collects them - yes, my Mountain Devil painting is there at the Foundation in Los Angeles. Iye also been to Bali a while back with all my canvases — I had an exhibition there but I forget the name of the gallery (Museum Puri Lukasan, the King’s Palace Museum, Ubud). Good, nice people there in Bali, I like (the Balinese) better than Americans. Too much hugging and kissing in America! I’ve also been to England and Ireland and Scotland, India - that’s it I think, always for my exhibitions. 13

Underneath the screen of Kathleen’s very fine dotting the Dreaming exists as a barely tangible, shadowy palimpsest, overwritten, in effect, by the surface colours and movement. Yet ultimately control is exercised over the work in the same way it was by Kngwarreye - by that underlying Dreaming, and its connection with awelye. The power of Petyarre’s work emanates from these ‘eternal’ truths. Like Kngwarreye, Kathleen Petyarre manages to keep the substratum of sacred meaning intact, evoking the Dreaming rather than serving it up to outsiders on a platter, as it were. As Aboriginal cultures tend towards being ‘cultures of concealment’ rather than ‘cultures of revelation’ this is a move at once strategic and poetic.

In a sense Kathleen’s work acts as a powerful metaphor for the Indigenous/non-Indigenous encounter in Australia. It signals what many of us were already beginning to comprehend: that there are layers of meaning in Indigenous cultures, and a great deal more than is apparent via observable reality.

Finally, Kathleen Petyarre takes her role as mentor to the younger women artists who live and work in the Utopia region extremely seriously indeed, and she is a hard taskmistress. She has acted as a mentor for her granddaughter Abie Loy Kngwarre for almost a decade now, and her standards are extremely high.

Kathleen does not hesitate to communicate her opprobrium to younger artists if she believes their work to be substandard. When I visited her at Mosquito Bore in the Utopia region in July 1998, I witnessed her telling more than one young woman that their canvases were not up to scratch and that they should begin again. Such rigour I believe can only benefit Indigenous art production in this country, both in the short and long-term.

The Work of Violet Petyarre

Violet Petyarre’s career has really taken off recently - she has been exhibiting her work more extensively and has adopted a boldly innovative new style of painting. One of seven sisters, including Kathleen, Violet now paints her awelye Dreaming (women’s ceremonial body painting traditionally applied with ground ochres on the breasts, upper
body, and in the case of Anmatyerre women, on the thighs as well) in a way which captures the three dimensionality of the designs. Violet’s most recent awelye designs appear to really move, swirling, virtually dancing on the canvas, the elements seemingly colliding with one another as they bring to life the dance. This dynamic sense has been created by means of powerful optical illusion which is underpinned by Violet’s technical competence with the medium.

A Canvas of One’s Own: Snapshots of the Work of Some of Utopia’s Emerging Young Women Artists

Lucy Kngwarreye ‘s Kunoth ‘s Work - Alalkere (Bush Tomato) Dreaming

In Lucy Kngwarreye’s Dreaming, a group of women are preparing and paining themselves for awelye (women’s ceremonies) at Alalkere. The women, young and old alike, have gone out to collect bush tomatoes and have brought them back to the ceremonial grounds. The bush tomatoes they have collected are displayed inside the women’s coolamons (wooden bowls carved for the specific purpose of collecting ‘bush tucker’ or local food and which are also sometimes used for cribs, and to carry babies around). A windbreak, around which the women sit as they companionably sing and paint one another’s upper bodies and thighs in readiness for the ceremony, is prominent in this painting.

Lucy Kngwarreye is an outgoing young woman who several years ago, with her fathers blessing, refused to marry her ‘promised husband’, instead marrying a much younger man of her own choosing. For some years Lucy has worked as an assistant teacher in the Utopia school. She speaks excellent English and is very interested in non-Aboriginal customs and mores. Lucy’s ‘feisty’ nature is expressed par excellence through her work.

Helen Kunoth Kngwarreye ‘s Work - Bush Honey, Sugarbag Dreaming

Helen Kunoth Kngwarreye’s Dreaming depicts a group of women collecting sugarbag, a highly-prized delicacy which comes from honey ants, one of the very few naturally occurring very sweet foods of the Central Desert. Her works also utilize the body paint designs for both arms and legs, used by women for awelye ceremonies.

Helen Kunoth Kngwarreye is a shy and reserved young woman who was tragically widowed soon after she married her young husband several years ago. Not long after that she lost her first baby in equally tragic circumstances, almost losing her own life in the process. This young woman’s quiet resilience and strength of character is apparent when one meets her; her life has been a struggle yet she shows no self-pity.

Carol Kunoth Kngwarreye ‘s Work - Bush Banana Dreaming

The ‘bush banana’ which Carol Kunoth Kngwarreye paints is not in fact a banana, but a kind of small, edible green bush fruit (Leichhardtia (Marsdenia) Australis) which resembles a small banana in shape only, but tastes nothing like it, despite being sweet and delicious when young. This highly-prized and sought-after fruit grows as a symbiotic vine which winds and wraps itself around small shrubs and trees. It has large and rather long leaves, and produces a characteristically fluffy flower before the fruit develops. The fruit can be eaten raw when young, but also can be cooked. The first flower of this unique bush banana vine is sometimes referred to as ‘big sister’ and the second flower as ‘little sister’.
Cindy Kemarre's Work - Bush Plum Dreaming, Alcoota Area

This small painting is packed with meaning. A waterhole dominates the centre of the painting. Immediately around this central waterhole are the dried seeds of the edible bush plum (canthium latifolium), a fruit which proliferates in that area. The bush plum, which is in fact a native currant, grows on a tall, straight, thin, broad-leaved lightish-coloured tree, and is initially green, then gradually turns black as it ripens. These fruits grow in small black clusters. In the ‘old days, after the berries were picked or harvested they were traditionally placed in water in coolamons, kneaded, and then eaten.

Around Kemarre’s central image she always paints four smaller rockholes, one in each corner of the painting. Initiates, both men and women, are clustered in the top centre of the painting, between two of the rockholes. In the centre of the bottom half of the painting is a shield with extremely prominent handles. This shield has secret-sacred significance which may not be fully elaborated in this public context.

Mary Ngale Jones’ Work - Bush Plum Dreaming

Central to this painting is the representation of a large waterhole beside which there are markings representing awelye or women’s body designs, which are characteristically applied, in ceremonial contexts, to the breasts, upper back, shoulders and thighs, in parallel horizontal and vertical lines and streaks. The Bush Plum Dreaming site is one of the major Dreamings of the Utopia region. The proliferation of white dots in this painting represent the dry seeds of the indigenous bush plums (canthium latifolium) which grow seasonally - and abundantly in this area.

Grace Morton Ngale’s Work - Bush Plum Dreaming

This is a representation of the same Dreaming that Gracie Morton’s classificatory sister Mary Ngale Jones paints. In the top two halves of the painting there is a profusion of the dry seeds of the native bush plum. Intersecting the lower part of the painting are scalloping shapes representing the ritual activities of women who are singing, dancing and painting awelye on their limbs.
Rita Purle's Work - Bush Turkey/Bush Hen Dreaming

In her paintings Rita Purle represents the tracks of the female bush turkey, or bush hen (indigenous plains turkey or bustard, ardeotis australis) in its flight from the Arlparre area to the Ilyente (Mosquito Bore) area, the ‘country’ of, or land belonging to Rita Purle’s kinsman and classificatory late brother, old Louis Purle. From time to time the large bird descends from its flight to walk along the ground, eating seeds and grasses particular to its dietary requirements. An important component of its diet are desert raisins (solanum berries) which are depicted in this painting.

In the ‘old days’ this large bird was killed with a boomerang, and cooked with Red River Gum leaves, and even today when it is shot with a rifle, it is considered a great delicacy.

Conclusion

The Utopia women artists form a unique group whose work is as at least as important to this country’s identity formation as that of the Heidelberg school.

Historically this ‘social movement’ will probably prove to be of even greater significance to this country, for it has been achieved against a background of very great odds, not the least of which involves the breaking down of dominant anthropological perceptions about the place of Indigenous women both within their societies and in terms of the value of their artistic production. Furthermore, what these women artists have achieved has been informed by high levels of social and cultural capital, but with very little economic capital. The women’s desire to ‘carry on’ their conceptions of country and their Dreamings and awe! ye, in other words their culture, into future generations must be judged a resounding success. That this is actually happening is evident in the very fine work of the coming generation of young women artists of Utopia, who show every sign of reaching the level of artistic competence and ritual knowledge of their foremothers.
ENDNOTES

1. ‘See for example Brody, A. Utopia - A Picture Story, 88 silk batiks from the Robert Holmes ‘a Court Collection, Exhibition Catalogue (Adelaide 1989); Brody, A. Utopia Women’s Paintings: the first works on canvas, a summer project, Catalogue No. 7 (Perth 1989); Brody, A. Contemporary Aboriginal Art from the Robert Holmes ‘a Court Collection (Perth 1990); and Boulter, M. Art of Utopia (Roseville, NSW 1991).


5. Terry Smith quoted in Cadzow, J., Emily s Gift, the late flowering of a desert genius’ in Good Weekend, The Australian, August 5 1995, p.32.

6. ibid.

7. ibid.

8. 1996.

9. 1996.


11. ibid.

12. For example, Smith, op. cit.


15. See description of Cindy Kemarre’s painting.