Emily Kame Kngwarreye’s oeuvre is a collective expression of the interconnectedness of her physical self and Country – her home Anmatyerre (Anmatyerr), situated near Sandstone Bore, Utopia, north east of Alice Springs – as well as the metaphysical associations of awelye (women’s law ceremonies in the Anmatyerre language), and attendant custodial responsibilities for nurturing the land and its bounty. Her genius stems from the individualizations in her visual expressions of this nexus. In Kngwarreye’s visual language, paintings are glorious manifestations of Country, awelye, and self – ‘the whole lot’ – a concept that was ever present in her work, across all styles and periods.

Author and art academic Terry Smith pinpoints Kngwarreye’s use of colour in the period 1990-93 as key to her artistic motivation and innovation. Kngwarreye’s tireless exploration of colour’s potential to enunciate personal narratives is astounding, both in terms of her own art and artistic virtuosity. This ‘high colour’ period produced a body of marvellous works exhibiting powerful synergies of energy and colour, such as the present untitled work (Wildflower Dreaming), from 1992.

Janet Holt (Delmore Gallery) refers to 1992 as the artist’s ‘famous early period’, and has written that Kngwarreye was inspired by her painting’s ability to conjure the fertile energy of her country’s life cycles, in particular the seasonal maturation of the anocalyra (finger yam), an important element in awelye. In describing Kngwarreye’s painterly lexicon, yellow is linked to the yam’s ‘deady’ flower, while trailings of different coloured dot work may indicate seasonal rains, as well as various levels of plant maturity. The flush of new growth that appears across Country after rain, Kngwarreye joyfully referred to as ‘green time’.

Kngwarreye’s own energy and focus exploring these themes has resulted in an extraordinary body of sublime and celebrated work, within which the present work is a commanding example. (Wildflower Dreaming), 1992, is both celebratory and reverential: a joyous expression of the promise of bounty within Kngwarreye’s Country.

The resulting compositions are suggestive of a powerful centrifugal force, which has physical manifestations and metaphorical meaning. The language employed by critics talking about this period demonstrates the emotive power with which these paintings radiate. Margot Neale makes the connection between Kngwarreye’s lifetime of ceremonial dancing, singing and mark-making and the rhythm of her paintings, which often exhibit a circularity in their composition, akin to the way women’s body marking is performed from breast to breast, arm to arm.1

Terry Smith also sees these works reflecting body marks that have ‘cartwheelered into a plant form’ and postulates that these centrifugal compositions are performative, where the yam is ‘present as an absence’, and made apparent by the design’s suggestion of a ‘reaching in, in a digging motion, a scraping and a clearing of dirt’.2

The present work also prefigures the artist’s later transition from dot work to lines, and is a delightful example of Modernist synergies of energy and colour, such as in the untitled painting (Wildflower Dreaming), 1992. The resulting compositions are suggestive of a powerful centrifugal force, which has physical manifestations and metaphorical meaning. The language employed by critics talking about this period demonstrates the emotive power with which these paintings radiate. Margot Neale makes the connection between Kngwarreye’s lifetime of ceremonial dancing, singing and mark-making and the rhythm of her paintings, which often exhibit a circularity in their composition, akin to the way women’s body marking is performed from breast to breast, arm to arm.1

Kngwarreye’s significance was acknowledged and celebrated with the prestigious Australian Artists Creative Fellowship award bestowed in 1992. Her work has rightly held pride of place in several international exhibitions of Australian art, including the Venice Biennale in 1992, and her exceptional talent showcased in two solo retrospective exhibitions, most recently Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye, which toured Japan in 2008.

Footnotes
3 Smith, T., op.cit., p.33

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