

HOLDING THE COUNTRY – ART FROM UTOPIA AND THE SANDOVER¹

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'Utopia' was the unlikely name bestowed upon an area of land several hundred kilometres to the north-east of Alice Springs by the first white pastoralists who settled there in the 1920s. In fact Utopia is but part of a larger region known as the Sandover. In this region there are about 20 small communities or out-stations, located on two main Aboriginal-controlled freehold areas or land trusts which flank the Sandover River, and on a number of smaller excisions of land from neighbouring pastoral leases and stockroutes. The freehold area alone covers some 3,500 square kilometres of country and forms a small part of the traditional country of Eastern Anmatyerr, Alyawarr and Kaytetye speaking peoples.² These lands are home for a group of artists who have gained an international reputation for their exquisite batiks and for their acrylic paintings.

The early contact history of the Sandover region was characterised neither by the establishment of missions nor by the formation of government settlements. In fact, traditional lifestyles in the region remained relatively uninterrupted until the development of the pastoral industry. Even then, the majority of Aboriginal people lived in 'the bush', occasionally making forays into station homesteads for rations and for sporadic work. These facts make the journey that some of the older artists have undertaken in their lifetimes all the more remarkable.

Perhaps none epitomises this cultural and historical journey more than the late Emily Kam Ngwarray, who arguably remains the most well-known artist from the area³. She grew up in the bush, and she ran away in fear when she first sighted Europeans, whom she believed to be *arrenty* or 'devils'.⁴ In her teens she did domestic work for rations at the station homesteads. She spoke little English. It wasn't until her senior years that she enthusiastically took up batik as an artistic medium. The rest is history. She started painting in acrylic in 1988, and in 1990 had her first solo exhibitions in the state capitals of Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. These were followed by her inclusion in many group exhibitions, both in Australia and overseas, and by her posthumous representation of Australia, with Judy Watson and Yvonne Koolmatrie, in the XLVII Venice Biennale in 1997.

Early Beginnings – Wax and Woodblocks

There are several key differences in the genesis of contemporary Aboriginal art from the Sandover in comparison with other centres such as Papunya. Whereas art from the so-called 'Western Desert' began with the experiments of a group of men in acrylic on hardboard, in the Sandover contemporary art practices grew out of women's exploration of textile art – most famously batik. It remains the case that the majority of the practicing artists from the region are women, and the influences of the batik style can still be seen in acrylic painting from the area some 25 years later.

The batik program had humble beginnings. In 1976 a short literacy and numeracy course for adults was held at Ankerrapw (Utopia Station homestead). The following year the women requested on-going tuition in literacy, sewing and driving, and in the context of these classes they began to try out various methods of dying cloth, using tie-dying and woodblock printing techniques. Money to purchase fabric and dyes was raised by selling second-hand clothes and hot dogs at school picture nights. In late 1977 batik techniques were introduced to the women

and they took to it with characteristic energy and enthusiasm. It was immediately popular for its recreational as well as its economic potential.⁵ For these artists, batik was the first major innovation which provided a creative link between traditional and contemporary artforms. For many it was their first experience of using brushes and painting materials other than ground ochres used for ceremonial body painting and brushes made from sticks bound with thread, and used to apply the ochres to the body.

Successful land claims by Aboriginal people to their traditional country in the Sandover region, and the emerging outstation movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s provided the context in which 'art business' continued to develop. The production of batik fitted well into the outstation lifestyle. The wax was heated over open fires in old saucepans, metal pots, frying pans and even old hub caps and the cloth was supported on cardboard cartons, frames of branches, or simply stretched across the women's laps. The hot wax was painted onto the cloth using brushes and Indonesian *cantings*, small metal pipes which direct fine lines of wax onto the cloth. After several applications of wax and dippings in coloured dye baths, the wax was removed from the cloth by boiling it in flour drums of water over open fires.

In 1987 the operation of the Utopia Batik Group was taken over by CAAMA (Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association), an Aboriginal-controlled organisation based in Alice Springs. What followed were a series of 'group' projects, commissioned by CAAMA and involving artists living in communities ranging from Mulga Bore in the south to Amperlatwatya (Ampilatwatja) in the north.⁶

The first of these resulted in a collection of silk batiks by eighty-eight artists – all women except for one. These were acquired by the Holmes à Court collection in 1988, and featured in a publication titled *Utopia – A Picture Story*. In the best of these works are seen all the elements of the earlier batiks – a lyrical profusion of bush plants and animals, the striped designs signifying women's ceremonial body paint, traditional implements, and domestic scenes from traditional life. One innovation is the introduction, in many of the batiks, of striped borders, said to represent women's ceremonial designs, the leaves of particular plants, or features of the landscape such as sandhills.⁷

Further diversification of media followed. Some artists extended their traditional skills at making wooden artefacts and implements and began making painted sculptures of animals and people from bean-tree and mulga wood. Amongst the most accomplished sculptors are Billy Morton Apetyarr, Queenie Akemarr, Katie Akemarr, Wally Pwerl and Janice Kngwarrey. In 1990 a large number of artists were involved in a workshop on woodblock printing which resulted in a collection of 72 woodcuts called *The Utopia Suite*.⁸ Others painted landscapes on the metal remnants of wrecked cars.

The Development of Acrylic Painting

Although some of the Sandover men experimented with acrylic painting on small boards in the early 1980s, full scale acrylic painting did not begin until 1988 and 1989 when CAAMA distributed 100 small canvases to artists in the outstation communities. This was the second group project to be initiated by CAAMA and it resulted in an exhibition called *A Summer Project: The First Works on canvas* (1988-89) which was shown at the S.H. Ervin Gallery in Sydney in 1989.⁹ The women's paintings reflected their previous decade's experience in batik making, but changed to adapt to the new graphic possibilities of paint.

The increasing popularity of acrylic painting heralded a gradual shift away from the batik medium, although the production of batik continued sporadically. For some artists painting was

an attractive alternative, being more immediate and involving less technical processing. There is also no doubt that the economic returns for works on canvas soon outstripped those from batik work. Emily Kam Ngwarray was one who gave up batik and changed over to painting:

Batik-ek-amparr tha mpwarek, kel batik-arl mpwarek-penh an ayeng akalty anem akalty anem irrek, akwet anem ayeng painting-warl irrenhek ... Arntapant anem. Not angwenhakwey, ipmentyarl angwenh, clothes-an tha ipmekarl. Boilem-ilerlan-kerr. Ipmenty lazy bugger- too much hard work-kety. Hard work mpwarerlan-kerr. Sick of it anem ayeng irrek ... Awetharl hard warrk mpwarerlan-kerr awetharl boil-em-ileynepeynerl awetharl arrtyeparrtyerl awetharl thwep akenh irriny-ilep-ilerl. Alanh-kety ayeng ipmelhek ipmenty, an ayeng arntap-warl anem easy-warl irrenhek. Alknga ayeng apat-irrek ampwa anemarl irrekarl, too much ikwereng tha ipmek. Paint yanhey tha ipmek. Nhwelker silk one — paint-ant mwerrarl atyeng.

I did batik at first, and then after doing that I learnt more and more and then I changed over to painting for good ... Then it was canvas. I gave up whatsitsname – fabric – to avoid all the boiling to get the wax out. I got a bit lazy – I gave it up because it was too much hard work. I finally got sick of it... I didn't want to continue with the hard work batik required – boiling the fabric over and over, lighting fires, and using up all the soap powder, over and over. That's why I gave up batik and changed over to canvas – it was easier. My eyesight deteriorated as I got older, and because of that I gave up batik on silk – it was better for me to just paint.¹⁰

In the late 1980s there was a general recontextualization of Aboriginal art, and this shift towards appreciating Aboriginal art as contemporary art rather than as artefact or ethnographia gathered momentum across the world.¹¹ At this time the impact of these trends in the Aboriginal art market were also felt in the Sandover, although some had long argued that the batiks rightly belonged in the context of fine art rather than 'craft'. There was also a change of emphasis from the group to the individual, and the first solo exhibitions of artists from the region were held in 1989-1990. Although CAAMA initially dealt with women artists, during 1988 and 1989 men increasingly became involved in acrylic painting.

Lines and Dots – Sandover Style

In their batiks the women developed a style distinctive for its looseness and spontaneity – 'the art of free gesture and wandering line'.¹² For inspiration they drew on a rich store of visual and symbolic imagery associated with their traditional country – bush plants and animals and the iconography of *awely*, or women's ceremonies, in which the women celebrate their particular responsibilities towards country. This ancient tradition found new expression in batik, and later in acrylic painting.

As with many artists from Central Australia, the cultural foundation of contemporary artforms comes from the *Altyerr* or 'Dreaming' – the creative principle which saturates the world with meaning. Aspects of the *Altyerr* are manifest in the topography of the land, the diversity of its life forms and in the language and social codes of its human inhabitants. This complex knowledge of place legitimizes the symbolic content of artwork both at a local level and in the context of the art market, where 'authenticity' is closely associated with the notion that the artists are painting themes over which they have traditional authority. Some of the artists articulate their responsibility as land-owners, and by extension as painters, in terms of 'holding onto' and 'looking after' their country.¹³

Contemporary artwork from the Sandover region tends towards either of two broad stylistic extremes. Of the 'gestural abstractionists' Emily Kam Ngwarray perhaps went further than other artists. She was never one to be careful, either with a wax-loaded canting or with a brush full of paint, and she incorporated the accidental with humour and certainty. Throughout her painting career she constantly experimented with the elements of line, dot, colour and tone. She was a pioneer in her field, partly because of her unique vision but also because of the force and eccentricity of her personality. At the time her work challenged pre-existing notions of the 'traditional' in Aboriginal art because she did not use the more familiar imagery of the Western Desert painters — motifs such as concentric circles, animal tracks and stylised implements. As her painting life evolved, her style changed to obscure the residual iconicity in her work. Some of her later works consisted 'simply' of lines – broad brushstrokes, generally of black paint on white.

Artists such as Minnie Pwerl and Ada Bird Petyarr continue in this broad brushstroke tradition, rendering the essential elements of their *awely* designs in strong and confident colour. Others, such as Minnie's daughter Barbara Weir, have moved even further away from the figurative, and in some of her paintings residual traces of women's ceremonial designs are almost entirely obscured by the heavy textural application of natural ochres.

Perhaps no other group of artists from Central Australia have explored the myriad possibilities of the 'dot' as widely as have those from the Sandover, and almost all have used this technique at some time or another. For some the progression of their style has been a move towards using ever larger and bolder dots. In dramatic contrast is the fine stippling technique favoured by others, such as Kathleen Petyarr, Kathleen Ngal, Polly Ngal and the late Lily Sandover Kngwarrey.¹⁴ Kathleen Petyarr, winner in 1996 of the 13th Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award, works almost entirely with a muted palette of finely executed dots, overlaid upon a grid representing the travels of the *arnkerrth* – the mountain devil lizard. In 2001 she had a solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.¹⁵

The artists from Amperlatwaty (Ampilatwatja), an Alyawarr community in the northern part of the Sandover region, incorporate bush plants and features of figurative landscapes within finely dotted fields of vibrant colours, placed in 'pointillist' juxtaposition. Some artists use more delicate colours, and their paintings have the chimeric quality of mirages, which play above the horizon during the hot months in the Sandover. The Amperlatwaty artists have close traditional and historical associations with those from the outstations to the south, and some were involved in the community art projects of the 1980s and 1990s. The batiks of Michelle Holmes Pwerl and Edie Holmes Akemarr in *Utopia: A Picture Story* prefigure the landscape paintings being produced by these artists today.

Other Sandover artists oscillate from one form of representation to another. Gloria Petyarr, another well-known artist from the region, incorporates the broad brushstrokes of the *awely*, various dotting techniques, and the innovative use of fine brushstrokes such as in her recent paintings where she creates spiralling whorls of colour to represent leaves and grasses.

Characteristically there has been a great deal of ingenuity when it comes to tools used for applying paint – brushes of all shapes and sizes, sticks, and even fragments of old thongs. To achieve the finest dotting effect, some artists apply the paint with clusters of satay sticks, and the batik artists who travelled to Yogyakarta in 1994 were delighted to find this implement is such abundance (and some brought bundles home in their handbags).

Travelling beyond the Sandover

One of the notable outcomes of the development of marketable art in the Sandover has been the opportunity it has given for artists to travel far beyond their homelands to destinations both interstate and overseas. In 1997-1998 Gloria Petyarr and Ada Bird Petyarr travelled to Paris to attend an exhibition of batiks at the Parc De La Villette, and another group of women demonstrated batik techniques at the Seventh Pacific Festival of the Arts in Samoa in 1996.

Perhaps one of the most ambitious forays into the outside world was the 1994 trip to Yogyakarta, when a group of 10 artists travelled to further their batik skills at the Brahma Tirta Sari workshop, run by Agus Ismoyo and Nia Fliam, two of Indonesia's leading contemporary textile artists. Here they learnt to use the *cap* – a hand-held copper or wood stamp which was introduced in Indonesia to speed up production of batik, and facilitate the duplication of identical images. Prior to the journey to Indonesia the women made drawings of animals and plants, and these were sent to Indonesia to be made into *caps*.

The women combined their distinctive brushwork and *canting* style with the *cap* to produce visually complex batiks incorporating images of the Central Australian desert. Although taught the meticulous Indonesian method of applying sequences of *cap* motifs, the women soon adapted the *cap* technique to their own requirements. The women also experimented with Indonesian *caps*, and in some batiks the fusion of Central Australian and Indonesian symbolism is seen – *wayung* puppets alongside goannas. The fabrics produced were acquired by the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory to form a travelling exhibition entitled 'Hot Wax', which opened at the museum in Darwin early in 1995.

Recent Years (1995-2003)

There have been several attempts to provide community support and infrastructure for the artists in the Sandover region. ATSIC funded the Utopia Cultural Centre and the Utopia Awely Batik Aboriginal Corporation from around 1995 until 1998. Subsequently Urapuntja Artists Utopia was established as a community artists' organisation, and it was funded by ATSIC through Desart until 2002. The organisation had about 150 contributing artists (50 of these men) and during that time-span exhibited widely and continued to experiment with new media, including etching and silk screen print making.¹⁶

Several of these projects highlighted men's artwork. An exhibition inspired by men's body painting, titled 'Earning Your Stripes', was held at the Desart Gallery in Rosebay, Sydney in 2000. It featured younger artists such as Roly Long Kemarr, Stevie Loy Kemarr, Graham Long Ngwarray, and senior men such as Dave Ross Pwerl, Joe Ross Pwerl, and Greenie Purvis Petyarr. Younger men from the communities were also involved in a project close to their hearts – 'Footy stories from the Sandover' – which was held at Alcaston House Gallery in Melbourne in 2000.

In 1999 a separate community arts centre, supported by Desart, was established for the artists of Amperlatwaty (Ampilatwatja) and they began to further develop their distinctive finely dotted landscapes. The art centre, now incorporated as the Artists of Ampilatwatja Aboriginal Corporation, is independent of government funding and supports around 150 artists from Amperlatwaty and nearby outstations, and from some Alyawarr communities to the north.¹⁷ Significant artists include Lily Morton Akemarr, Eileen Bonney Akemarr, Michelle Holmes Pwerl, Chloe Morton Kngwarrey, Edie Holmes Akemarr and Daisy Akemarr.

Selling Sandover Art

The Sandover artists are 'represented' by a plethora of individuals and agencies – both from Alice Springs and from interstate – as well as by community art centres. This contrasts with some other regions where community cooperatives, such as Papunya Tula, have had a more central role in the marketing of regional art. The relative merits of these stake-holders in the art-trade has been the subject of sometimes acrimonious debate, and this has been stressful for those artists caught up in the cross-fire. However, this diversity of buyers has undoubtedly given the artists choice – some have formed on-going allegiances with individual dealers and many paint simultaneously for several patrons.¹⁸

In this context it has sometimes been a hard road for community art advisers who have had to perform in a field rife with competition. In their attempts to represent the community fairly they have also had to negotiate the tension that exists between the pragmatics of supporting individual high-status and economically successful artists, versus community demands for support for groups of artists with parallel status in local terms.

Emily Kam Ngwarray's trajectory to fame in the later years of her life embodied some of these contradictions. She was put under enormous pressure to paint, both from art dealers who competed for the right to market her paintings, and from family who were keen to share in her earnings. As her success escalated other painters from the region were puzzled by the disparity between the financial return they received for painting, and the high prices Ngwarray commanded — after all they all belonged to the same country and they shared many of the same 'stories'. Yet she was explicit, both about the profound effect that her paintings had on viewing public, the enthusiasm of buyers, and about the economic returns the paintings brought:

Whitefella ingkerrek ra angkem, 'Atyeng yanh, atyeng mwerr akngerr yanh atyeng mwerr akngerr yanh. Ngka ngka ngka atyeng atyeng atyeng atyeng!'...Iterrem proper anper – mer ikwer. Lakenharl iterrem – 'Mer nyent kwenh ikwerenh antey arernepernem, ampwel old lady-el kwenh. Long time-arl anekarl, mer Alhalkerel'...Manarl imernt atnyemel – manarl imernt anthemel... Too much man imernt akngety-alpemel painting-iperrarl.

All the whitefellas would say, 'That one over there is for me, that beautiful one there is for me. Give it to me, that one's for me – give me that one!'... They think that the paintings are really wonderful – the country itself. 'The old lady keeps on painting her country, that one place, Alhalker – the place where she lived for a long time.' That's why they think the paintings are so good...Then the money floods in – they pay the money... [The boss] brings back lots and lots of money from [exhibitions] of paintings.¹⁹

A lot has changed since the innocent days of doing batik for pin-money under the whitewood trees at Ankerrapw. Commercial painting has irrevocably altered life in the Sandover. In almost every household there is evidence of this activity – rolls of completed canvases awaiting their buyers, tins of paint, brushes soaking in water, and the ubiquitous satay sticks. In the context of disgracefully low levels of Aboriginal employment in remote areas, painting has provided some independent income for hundreds of people. It has given the artists the opportunity to engage with non-indigenous Australians and with overseas audiences on an unprecedented scale, and in terms that are firmly rooted in their own cultural heritage. Yet the artists have remained true to their own idiosyncratic vision, continuing to innovate and explore the possibilities of paint and other mediums. They have negotiated the tough politics of the art world with characteristic resilience and they continue to produce some of the finest art to come out of Central Australia.

¹ Thanks to Simon Turner and Narayan Kozeluh for their insights into recent developments in the Sandover. Thanks also to Alison French, Judith Ryan, Robert Hoogenraad and Felicity Green for comments on this essay.

² See Toohey, J. (1979a) Land claim by the Alyawarra and Kaititja. Report by the Aboriginal Land Commissioner, Australian Government Printer, and Toohey, J (1980) Anmatjirra and Alyawarra Land Claim to Utopia pastoral lease. Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra. Report to the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs.

³ The spelling of skin names is an issue that provokes considerable aggravation. There has been a lot of variation in the ways these names have been spelt in the past, even though these different spellings do not alter the local pronunciation of the words. In this essay I am following the orthographic conventions agreed upon, after extensive consultations with language speakers, in the most recent publications on the languages in the Sandover region – *The Alyawarr to English Dictionary (1992)*, and the draft *Central and Eastern Anmatyerr to English Dictionary (2003)*. Thus the eight Anmatyerr skin names are spelt as follows: Ngwarray, Petyarr (or Peltharr), Ngal, Mpetyan, Kemarr, Pwerrerrl (or Pwerl), Penangk and Pengart. The four Alyawarr skin names are spelt as Kngwarrey/ Ngwarrey, Apetyarr, Akemarr and Pwerl. Individual artists may have different ways of spelling their own skin names. There are also varying local pronunciations of skin names (and of other words in the languages). One of the most frequent of these is the optional inclusion of an initial ‘a’ on many words. So, for example, the skin names Kemarr and Petyarr may be spelt and pronounced alternatively as Akemarr and as Apetyarr.

⁴ Emily Kam Ngwarray, personal communication to J. Green 1983. Recorded at Three Bores, Utopia.

⁵ For more discussion on the early development of the batik programme see Jenny Green, *Singing the Silk: Utopia Batik* and Julia Murray *Utopia Batik: The halycon days 1978-82* in Ryan, J. & Healy, R. (eds), *Raiki Wara. Long cloth from Aboriginal Australia and the Torres Strait*, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1998 pp 38-55.

⁶ See A. M. Brody *Utopia: A Picture Story*. Heytsbury Holdings, Perth. 1990, p.7.

⁷ *ibid*, p.19.

⁸ Initially commissioned by Utopia Art, Sydney, the blocks are now held by the Australian National Gallery

⁹ *ibid*, p 31.

¹⁰ Emily Kam Ngwarray, personal communication to J. Green, 13 September 1992. Recorded at Atneltyey outstation, Utopia.

¹¹ See Fred Myers, *Painting Culture, The Making of an Aboriginal High Art*. Duke University Press 2002.

¹² Judith Ryan in *Emily Kngwarreye. Paintings*. Craftsman House 1998, p79

¹³ Kathleen Petyarr personal communication to J. Green, recorded at Atneltyey, Utopia 1988 and Gloria Petyarr personal communication to J. Green, recorded at Iylenty, Utopia 1998.

¹⁴ Lily Sandover and Emily Kam Ngwarray, classificatory sisters with close shared personal histories, worked side by side until Emily passed away in 1996. The fact that their painting styles remained so divergent shows the persistence of individual styles of painting in the Sandover.

¹⁵ See Christine Nicholls and Ian North. *Kathleen Petyarre: Genius of Place* 2001. Wakefield Press South Australia.

¹⁶ Simon Turner personal communication September 2003. The establishment of Urapuntja Artist’s Utopia followed the liquidation of Utopia Awely Batik Aboriginal Corporation.

¹⁷ Narayan Kozeluh, personal communication, November 2003. Narayan has been involved in supporting the Amperlatwaty artists since 1998. See also Narayan Kozeluh, *Custodians of the land*. In *Craft Arts International* Issue No. 58, 2003.

¹⁸¹⁸ A rough count of non-community controlled dealers and other ‘interested parties’ in 2003 yielded a count of seven.

¹⁹ Emily Kam Ngwarray, personal communication to J. Green, September 1990. Recorded at Camel Camp outstation, Utopia.

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