

EMILY IN JAPAN

Short synopsis

Behind the scenes of the blockbuster exhibition of paintings by the Indigenous artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye which toured Japan attracting record crowds.

(22 words)

EMILY IN JAPAN

Synopsis/Outline

Emily Kame Kngwarreye was an Aboriginal woman from Utopia in central Australia who began to paint on canvas when she was about 78 years old. In the 8 years before her death in 1996, she produced a staggering output of some 3,000 canvasses, some of which are now valued more highly (in monetary terms) than the work of any other female Indigenous Australian artist.

The exhibition of Emily Kame Kngwarreye's paintings which toured to Osaka and Tokyo in 2008 is arguably the biggest, most comprehensive single artist exhibition to travel internationally from Australia.

It may also be the last comprehensive exhibition of Emily's work anywhere in the world, due to the large scale of key works, their increasing fragility, and the high cost of moving them.

EMILY IN JAPAN is the story of the making of the exhibition: the work behind the scenes that put it all together and took it on the road. It's a story of cross-cultural transactions – from the red desert of central Australia where Emily lived, to Canberra where the exhibition was curated, and to Japan.

The driving force behind the exhibition is Margo Neale, an art curator and historian, who mounted an earlier, smaller exhibition of Emily's work for the Queensland Art Gallery in 1986. This earlier exhibition attracted the attention of a visiting Japanese scholar and art critic, Professor Akira Tatehata, and it became his personal mission to bring such an exhibition in Japan. The working relationship and friendship between Margo Neale and Professor Tatehata, both sharing a deep

passion for Emily's work, is at the core of the film: Margo an Indigenous woman from a background of poverty and hardship, and Tatehata, a "Bohemian" aesthete from a privileged arts background.

The film follows Margo as she visits Emily's community in the Utopia region, some 200kms north-east of Alice Springs, to consult with Emily's family members about the exhibition. It also follows her in equally complex negotiations with the Japanese sponsors of the exhibition (the media giant Yomiuri) and with the two galleries which will host the exhibition in Japan – the space-age National Museum of Art in Osaka, and the magnificent National Arts Center in Tokyo, one of the world's major galleries.

Margo, with her small team of consultants and staff from the National Museum of Australia, selects the 200 works for the exhibition from the 3,000 or more that Emily painted, and gathers them from sources around the world, from a myriad of private collections, corporations and galleries. Given the value of the paintings, crating and freighting them is a complex process of checking and security – a process to which the film crew is given privileged access.

The exhibition in Osaka and Tokyo turns into a major media event and attracts huge crowds, more so than the sponsors and organisers hoped for. It was visited by Prime Minister Rudd and federal ministers from Australia, as well as the Empress of Japan and other Japanese royalty and celebrities. It breaks the record held for the previous 10 years by Andy Warhol as the most popular contemporary art exhibition to show in Japan.

The success of the exhibition in Japan signifies the achievement of one of Emily's dreams that Margo undertook to realise: that her work, her stories, be seen by people around the world. It gives to this elderly woman from Utopia her rightful place as one of the world's leading modernist artists.

(574 words)

Background to EMILY IN JAPAN

We have seen "privileged access" films about staging operas and rock concerts, but rarely, if ever, have we had a film that looks behind the scenes of the art world at its extreme high end.

EMILY IN JAPAN was made possible by the unprecedented access that the filmmakers were given by the curators (both Australian and Japanese) of this epic exhibition.

Given the high profile and cultural importance of the exhibition, the curators were under great pressure – a perfect opportunity for us to explore the drama and complexity of staging a major “block-buster” art exhibition.

For a period of nearly three years, we were able to come and go at will to film the Principal Curator at work and to observe both her public and private experiences and thoughts, with minimal limitations on our freedom.

The Emily exhibition presents the art world at its most expensive, and at its most expansive, when huge amounts of money are at stake. It is also a time when the art world is at its most dramatic and glamorous.

Given the frenzy, the money and the gigantic scale, it is a constant irony that the subject of the exhibition is an artist who came from a desert community outside Alice Springs, and who painted in the open air, with her canvas spread on the red desert sand, under a canopy of corrugated iron or tree branches, with dogs and children all around. Paw prints are readily found embedded in even her most highly-prized works.

Everywhere we turned, something serious was at stake:

(a) Political:

1. The directive for the exhibition came from ministerial level, positioning the exhibition as a major boost to Australia-Japan cultural relations. Accordingly, the event has a keen political component which requires that the complexities of diplomatic protocols must be navigated by both the Australian curator and the Japanese venue curators at every stage.

2. For the National Museum of Australia it was an extraordinary opportunity to present itself as one of the world’s leading cultural institutions. The potential to achieve a high international profile put great pressure on the attendant media publicity campaign as well as on the curator and her support staff.

(b) Financial:

1. the National Museum of Australia has invested over \$1m in the show, plus significant sponsorship funds; on the other side, Yomiuri Shimbun, the major Japanese sponsor (who “owns” most blockbuster exhibitions that go to Japan, whether Monet or Cezanne or ... Emily Kngwarreye), has \$2 or \$3m at risk. Will an exhibition of paintings by an elderly Indigenous woman from the central Australian desert who is unknown in Japan attract enough people to allow Yomiuri to recover its huge financial outlay? Will the way be open for future exhibitions from Australia?

2. Emily’s paintings are already among the most highly priced of any female Australian artist, let alone an Indigenous artist, and the art world is very aware that a major exhibition of this nature will significantly enhance the value and reputation of Emily’s work. (Even the catalogue of an earlier exhibition which Margo Neale also curated – in 1996 at the Queensland Art Gallery – sells at over \$3000 on eBay). Collectors, both private and governmental, are very keen to have their paintings included: inclusion will greatly escalate value.

3. Because the paintings are being lent to the exhibition and are extremely valuable, security is critical: the complexities of crating and freighting the paintings are an important part of our story, as are the maze of demands and restrictions that bedevil the selection of paintings and the way they are hung. Security teams for many paintings will travel to Japan to over-see the hanging of specific works.

(c) Personal:

1. When Margo mounted the first exhibition of Emily’s work in 1996 for the Queensland Art Gallery, the press and her colleagues in the art world said that this was “the exhibition that couldn’t be done,” because of the politics and protocols of the Indigenous art world at that time. Nevertheless, Margo did it, and did it so well that she was inundated with requests to repeat the show overseas. This time, however, the stakes are much higher: the scale of this exhibition is vastly greater and ten times the cost, and it is playing in an international arena to an untested audience.

2. The exhibition is the result of passionate enthusiasm for Emily’s paintings from the two senior curators – Professor Tatehata in Osaka,

and Margo Neale in Canberra. Will their personal commitment and faith in Emily's work be appreciated by the Japanese public?

3. Margo Neale, herself an Indigenous Australian from south-eastern Australia, has a responsibility to ensure the co-operation and goodwill of the elders of Emily's community and her family in central Australia. The pressure on her to honour the family's interests and to keep faith with their wishes is constant.

(810 words)

EMILY IN JAPAN – episode breakdown

Episode one:

In Episode 1 of EMILY IN JAPAN, we meet two very strong Indigenous women: the artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye, and the art curator, Margo Neale.

Through archival footage and photographs of Emily we learn that she came from the remote area of Utopia in the central Australian desert and had lived a largely traditional life until she started painting on canvas at the age of about 78. She was immediately recognised by art dealers and experts as a significant talent and her work was immediately taken up by the art world. Over the next 8 years, she produced some 3,000 paintings, working right up to a few days before she died in 1996.

Margo Neale is very different. She grew up in a small country town near the sea, and had progressed to being one of Australia's leading curators of Indigenous art with a distinguished academic background as an historian and teacher.

In 1996, Margo had curated an exhibition of Emily's work for the Queensland Art Gallery which attracted the attention of a Japanese art critic, Professor Akira Tatehata. Tatehata became obsessed with the idea of presenting Emily's work in Japan and succeeded after ten years in finding the support needed to make the touring exhibition possible, with Margo as Principal Curator.

The film follows Margo as she travels into the Utopia region, some 200km north-east of Alice Springs, to consult with Emily's family

members and community, and to pay her respects to Emily's Country, an area known as Alhalkere, which Emily always stated was the subject of her paintings.

Progressively, the preparations for the exhibition gather momentum, with over 200 works being gathered from around the world. Given the high value of the paintings and the fragility of many of them, the crating and freighting of the exhibition is a complex process involving high levels of security and conservation concerns.

As the paintings are finally loaded onto the freighter planes for Japan, it is the end of a three year process for Margo and her small team. She now faces new challenges in Japan where the works will be revealed to the Japanese media and public.

(357 words)

Episode two:

Because of the close involvement of Japanese partners in the exhibition of Emily's work, Margo Neale and the National Museum of Australia invite the Japanese curatorial team to visit Utopia where Emily lived and worked. The team is led by Professor Tatehata who was the driving force in Japan to make the exhibition an event of the highest significance, a "blockbuster" on a par with Monet and Cezanne. Although very brief, their visit to the desert brings them an enhanced understanding of Emily's background and the meaning of her art.

Matching the Japanese visit to Utopia, Margo and a logistics consultant visit Japan to negotiate details of the movement of works, to plan the lay-out in each of the galleries and to devise the media campaign. Despite uncertainties that an "unknown" like Emily can draw the level of public support that everyone needs to cover their costs, the roller-coaster of the exhibition gathers momentum.

The crates are shipped to the first venue, the National Museum of Art in Osaka, a space-age gallery that offers Margo great opportunities to be creative in the way she will hang Emily's work for maximum impact. Over an intensive two week period, the 200 works are hung and the exhibition opens with very promising results. Responses from the Japanese public are generally enthusiastic.

The exhibition then moves to Tokyo, to one of the world's leading galleries, the magnificent National Arts Center, where Emily's paintings

are installed in a cathedral-like gallery with 8 metre high walls. The exhibition is opened by a member of the Japanese royal family and the media responds to the show with maximum coverage, drawing huge crowds. The exhibition goes on during its Tokyo run to break the pre-existing record held for 10 years by Andy Warhol as the most successful major contemporary art exhibition ever in Japan – a great vindication of the personal dedication of both Professor Tatehata and Margo Neale, and a culmination of one of Emily’s wishes, that her work be taken to a wider world.

(339 words)

The Making of EMILY IN JAPAN

To make EMILY IN JAPAN, the small film crew led by director Andrew Pike, cameraman Scott Wombey and producer Harriet Pike travelled to Japan four times to film the preparations for the exhibition and the installation and openings in Osaka and Tokyo. The crew also followed the exhibition’s curator, Margo Neale, to central Australia to film her consultation with Emily’s family members and community.

This intimate view of the interior workings of a huge public event was only possible because of the small and unobtrusive “fly on the wall” crew and the degree of trust displayed by Margo Neale in allowing the filmmakers to observe her work at any time, in any way. Privileged access of this nature was partly prompted by Margo’s awareness of the significance of the exhibition, and partly by her awareness of the need to give Emily the historical position she warranted as one of the world’s leading modernist painters.

Because of the nature of the curatorial process, the filmmakers could rarely anticipate what would happen next, when and how, and accordingly many long days were spent in hand-held camerawork, ready to move in any direction at any time. The resultant 170 hours of footage represents an extraordinary record of the process that will be invaluable for students of museum and gallery procedures, but will also be an invaluable record of how Emily’s work reached a wider world. The finished documentaries that are edited from this footage will form only part of the value of the filming exercise.

One of the most exciting episodes in the film involved the largest of Emily's paintings, a huge 8m x 3m work known as "Big Yam Dreaming". Because of its size, it had to be rolled onto a huge bobbin for shipment, and had to be "stretched" on its frame each time it was hung. For the installation of the work in Japan, curatorial staff from the National Gallery of Victoria flew to Japan to unroll the painting and mount it on the complex jigsaw puzzle of timber pieces that was its frame. Some 12 people were then needed to lift the painting on to the gallery wall, a process which we covered with 3 cameras plus a time-lapse camera. The painting itself stood as the centre-piece of the whole exhibition, a magnificent statement, bold and striking, in strong contrast to the small intimate works that Emily painted in her last days and which also formed part of the exhibition.

(411 words)

Director's statement

It all began with a casual suggestion by Margo Neale that we might like to make a film record of her work in preparing the Emily exhibition. Three years later the exhibition was a major landmark event, and we had 170 hours of film to edit into digestible form.

During this time, I was also working with my cameraman/editor, Scott Wombey, and my daughter and producer, Harriet Pike, on our documentary about Ben Chifley, THE CHIFLEYS OF BUSBY STREET. In many ways, both projects came to carry a similar meaning to us. Our film about Chifley, made in collaboration with the historian, Robin McLachlan, came to be less about Chifley's achievements as Prime Minister than about the way he was remembered. The real centre of the film was not Chifley but the community of people who are still today moved by their memory of the man.

In a similar way, our film about the Emily exhibition could never even attempt to represent honestly and fairly Emily Kame Ngwarreye, the meaning of her art, nor the complexities of her world: we could only ever suggest the concepts and experiences that lay behind her paintings. Instead, the real subject of our film became the legacy of her work, the community of people linked by her paintings, by their memory of the artist and by their love of her work. This community was very diverse – from Emily's family and community in central Australia, to Margo Neale and her staff, to private collectors and

gallery owners who were dedicated to Emily's work, and to the Japanese art-lovers who were equally dedicated to her memory.

In this way, I see EMILY IN JAPAN as being a film about the making of an historical record (the exhibition), about memory and the making of memory. Inevitably, the film itself is part of the process of creating this historical memory.

At the same time, EMILY IN JAPAN is an observational film that records a fascinating maze of cross-cultural transactions, most particularly the cultural differences in management style between Australia and Japan. Margo Neale is the quintessential Western individual dealing with Japanese consensus. The misapprehensions and frustrations may have their deep-seated cultural roots, which our cameras documented on many occasions, but the film also shows that where there is a common goal, the end result can be a magnificent triumph, despite all of these differences. The most touching moments for me, and in a way, the deep essence of the film, are the quiet scenes between Margo and Professor Tatehata where they walk and talk in the rain or where they share their mutual love of Emily's paintings.

EMILY IN JAPAN is above all about two strong women: Emily whom we can never really know, given our cultural background as filmmakers; and Margo who we can know a little better but who is still an enigmatic figure of contrasts – flamboyant and extroverted but also sensitive and reflective, driven by her sense of history. It's no wonder Professor Tatehata gets their names confused, and says "Margo" when he means "Emily" and vice versa.

So this is an observational film about process – about cross-cultural transactions and the curatorial process of mounting an exhibition. It's also a character study, and it's about memory and history. More than enough for any film and worth every minute of the many months that went into its making!

(566 words)

BIOGRAPHIES: MARGO NEALE

Margo Neale, of Aboriginal and Irish descent, is currently:

- the Principal Advisor (Indigenous) to the Director at the National Museum of Australia;
- a senior curator at the National Museum of Australia;
- senior research fellow at the NMA's new centre for Historical Research; and
- Adjunct Professor in the Australian Centre for Indigenous History at the Australian National University.

She was formerly the inaugural Director of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Program and First Australians Gallery at the National Museum of Australia from 2000 to 2005.

Having worked as a teacher in Arnhem Land and Christmas Island, she later moved to the National Gallery of Australia, the Queensland Art Gallery, and the Art Gallery of New South Wales where she co-established the Yiribana Gallery and authored the first definitive book on its Indigenous collection.

She curated the first major national touring retrospective for an Indigenous artist on the art of Emily Kame Kngwarreye in 1998 (with accompanying publication), and *Urban Dingo, the Art of Lin Onus* as a key cultural event for the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000.

Her academic appointments have included visiting fellowships at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research and the Humanities Research Centre at the A.N.U., Canberra, and in the Art History Department, Queensland University. She has been a co-recipient of a number of Australian Research Council grants.

Her publications range from a social history of Christmas Island to publications on Indigenous art and history. She was general editor (with Sylvia Kleinert) of the *Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture* (2000).

She was appointed to Prime Minister Howard's History Summit in 2006, Prime Minister Rudd's 2020 Summit of Ideas (Creative Stream) in 2008, and served as a judge for the Prime Minister's Prize for Australian History, 2009.

The Emily exhibition won the Manning Clark House National Cultural award for 2008. The catalogue of the exhibition is short-listed for the prestigious Australian Book Industry Awards, 2009.

Writer-director: ANDREW PIKE, OAM

Researched & co-authored (with Ross Cooper) a major book documenting Australia's film history, *Australian Film 1900–1977*, published by Oxford University Press, 1980.

1979-82: Research Fellow (part-time) in the Department of Pacific History at the A.N.U. There he made an award-winning documentary, **ANGELS OF WAR**, about the experiences of the people of Papua New Guinea in WW2.

In 1974, he formed Ronin Films with his former wife, Dr Merrilyn Fitzpatrick, a specialist in China studies. The company was involved in many innovative distribution and marketing activities for which Andrew won **the Australian Film Institute's Byron Kennedy Award in 1986**.

Among the many Australian feature films which the company has distributed are **STRICTLY BALLROOM, SHINE** and **ROAD TO NHILL**, all of which achieved outstanding national box-office figures.

As an exhibitor, Ronin ran the Academy Cinema in Sydney, for several years during the 1990s, and Electric Shadows Cinemas in Canberra, 1979-2006.

Member of the Board of the Australian Film Commission, 1989-1992.

In 1992, he was given a **special award by the Australian Film Critics' Circle** for contributions to the film industry.

2003, appointed by the French government to the rank of **Chevalier dans L'Ordre des Arts et Lettres** for the promotion of French cinema in Australia.

In 1999, Founding Member (and from 2004 to 2008, President) of the Friends of the National Film and Sound Archive, Inc., an association dedicated to support the Archive's work and to promote best practice

in archival work.

2000-3: Council member of the National Screen and Sound Archive (then known as ScreenSound Australia)

In 2006, produced the documentary, **BETELNUT BISNIS**, for filmmaker Chris Owen.

2007: Awarded a **Medal in the Order of Australia (OAM)** for services to the film industry and to the community.

2007: Awarded an **Honorary Doctorate** from the University of Canberra for services to the film industry and to the community.

2007: Produced the feature-length documentary, **ACROSS THE PLATEAU**, for Chinese director, Zhang Zeming.

2008: Writer-director of the feature-length documentary, **THE CHIFLEYS OF BUSBY STREET**.

2008: appointed to the Board of the National Film and Sound Archive, established as an independent Statutory Authority from 1 July 2008.

2009: Writer-director of **EMILY IN JAPAN**.

Andrew also plays the tuba and participates regularly in community music outreach activities.