

Australian arts in focus Indigenous art

Art world split over NGA name change for one of Australia's greatest female painters

Curators of new exhibition say decision was made in consultation with artist's family and dismiss claims move is 'paternalistic'



📷 National Museum of Australia's senior Indigenous curator and head of the Centre for Indigenous Knowledges, Margo Ngawa Neale, says the name change goes against the artist's express wishes. Photograph: Greg Weight/NPGA collection

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Two art world figures pivotal in the career of Australia's most internationally lauded female painter have spoken out against the

decision by the National Gallery of Australia to adopt a new spelling of her name.

The Emily Kam Kngwarray retrospective which opened at the NGA in Canberra earlier this month is the first major exhibition of the artist, who died in 1996, to use the new spelling.

During her lifetime the artist was known as Emily Kame Kngwarreye, but the NGA has adopted the new version after what it says was extensive consultation with the community of Utopia and linguistic expert Dr Jennifer Green, who in 2010 published the Central & Eastern Anmatyerr to English Dictionary.

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Green is not Indigenous, but had known the artist since the 1970s and learned the Anmatyerr language from her. She said the change reflected “the most up-to-date conventions” and was made in close consultation with NGA curators.

“They took a principled and consistent approach to words in the Anmatyerr language,” she said in a statement.

But the National Museum of Australia's senior Indigenous curator and head of the Centre for Indigenous Knowledges, Margo Ngawa Neale, who curated the artist's previous two retrospectives, said the name change went against the artist's express wishes.

“She was always adamant that her name must stay the same, because that was her artist's name,” Neale said. “She was very clear on this. She was aware that the linguists might try to change her name as they did for other artists who passed away. She said ‘my name stays the same because I am famous for that name’ and she was in a very clear mind about this.”

Neale said when mounting the retrospectives in 1998 and 2008, the artist's wishes to retain the name the world had come to recognise - Emily Kame Kngwarreye - were of paramount importance.

“We had no choice but to retain the name because it would have been supremely disrespectful if we hadn't,” she said.

“For us who worked with her directly, we would not now be able to change her name posthumously, as others have. That would be supremely disrespectful.”

Christopher Hodges, the director of Utopia Art Sydney, the first gallery to mount a solo Kngwarreye exhibition in 1990, which launched her international career, said his relationship with the artist dated back to 1988.

“Kngwarreye wrote no language, spelling was of little interest to her, but the same spelling was used throughout her career and she recognised it visually. As no other spelling was used, it was never an issue,” Hodges said.

“The speaking of the words and the use of her image that were agreed upon were to continue posthumously. We had no idea that over a decade later a linguist would rewrite the spelling ... and then seek to apply it posthumously.”

Don Holt is the owner of the Delmore Gallery, 250km north-east of Alice Springs, which also played a substantial role in establishing the artist. He was also critical of the spelling change.

“It’s just bloody ridiculous,” Holt said. “It’s a pretty unfair thing to do, and very paternalistic, I think.”

Green said claims that the artist held strong opinions about the spelling of her names were “not credible” as she could not read English or written forms of her own language.

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“I am not aware of explicit instructions from the artist about the spelling of her name after her death,” she said. “I do not think a question to Kngwarray about whether she preferred one spelling or another would have made any sense to her.

“This is not the first time that Kngwarray’s skin name [Kngwarray] has been spelled correctly.”



📷 Emily Kame Kngwarreye's paintings are displayed at an exhibition at the National Art Center in Tokyo in 2008. The controversy over her name divides some of Australia's most significant galleries. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

The co-curator of the NGA exhibition Hetti Perkins said both she and her fellow curator Kelli Cole rejected claims that the name change was disrespectful or patronising.

“We emphasise that the spelling is in accordance with a community-endorsed dictionary and that the entire exhibition was developed in close, documented collaboration with the artist’s direct and extended family,” Perkins said in a statement.

Perkins, the former head of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art at the Art Gallery of NSW (AGNSW), curated Australia’s 1997 exhibition at the Venice Biennale which showcased Kngwarreye’s work (spelled that way) alongside fellow Indigenous artists Judy Watson and Yvonne Koolmatrie.

Guardian Australia has [used the new spelling in reviewing the NGA retrospective](#), since that was the title of the exhibition.

The controversy means that two of Australia’s largest art museums with significant collections of the artist, the NGA and the National Gallery of Victoria, are using one spelling, while the AGNSW and the Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA) use the other.

The AGNSW declined to comment on Friday and the AGSA could not be reached for comment.

Since her death the artist's works have fetched hundreds of thousands of dollars on the international art market - the Hollywood actor Steve Martin is [among the most high-profile collectors](#). In 2007 the massive work *Earth's Creation*, widely thought to be her masterpiece, sold at auction for \$1.064m, the highest price at the time ever paid for a work of Australian Aboriginal art and the highest price ever paid for a female artist in Australia. A decade later the same work smashed its own record [when Andrew Forrest paid \\$2.1m to acquire it](#).

In 2025 London's Tate Modern will stage its own Emily Kam Kngwararray retrospective. In [publicity material already released](#), the museum is using the new NGA-approved spelling of the artist's name. Elsewhere on the Tate's website [it continues to refer to her as Emily Kame Kngwarreye](#).

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