



RONIN FILMS PRESENTS

Emily

IN JAPAN

THE MAKING OF AN EXHIBITION

A FILM BY ANDREW PIKE



SCREEN
AUSTRALIA



NATIONAL
MUSEUM OF
AUSTRALIA
CANBERRA

A **STUDY GUIDE** BY MARGUERITE O'HARA



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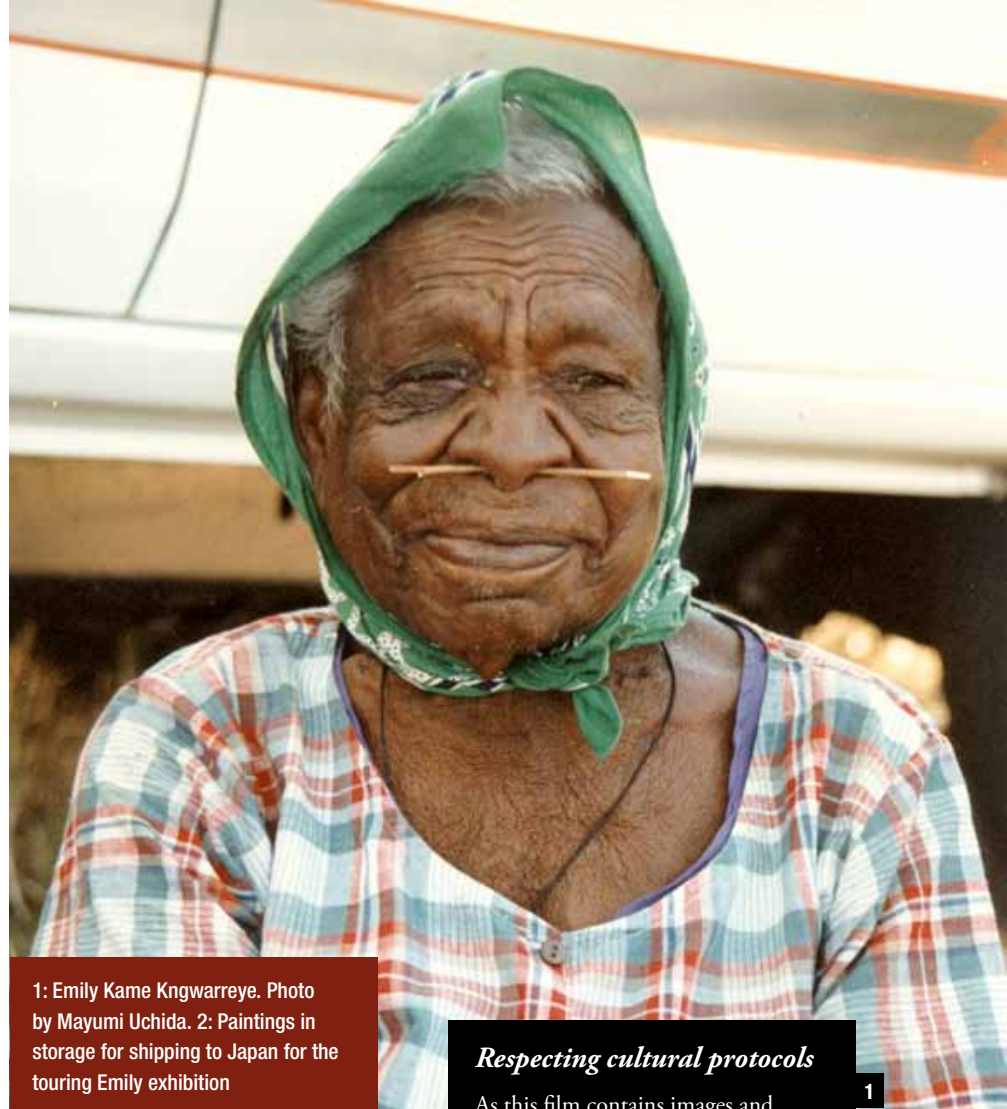
Note: this study guide relates to the full-length version of *Emily In Japan* (81 min) as well as the extras on the DVD available from Ronin Films.

Emily in Japan takes us behind the scenes of the blockbuster exhibition of paintings by the Indigenous artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye which toured Japan in 2008, attracting record crowds. As we follow the preparations for this exhibition we learn about Emily and how she expressed her connection to Country through her paintings. At the same time we follow Indigenous art curator Margo Neale as she negotiates complex sets of relationships to bring the Japanese project to fruition.

Curriculum Guidelines

Emily in Japan would be of great interest to students at middle and secondary school levels working in Visual Arts areas, as well as tertiary students studying Art History and Indigenous Studies. Students undertaking post-graduate diplomas in Museum and Curatorial Studies will also find much to interest and inspire them in this documentary. It may also have value in Japanese language and culture studies. At the same time, this is a documentary that incorporates many elements of the filmmakers' art. It would be an excellent film to show to students of Media and Film Studies, particularly those studying documentary-making.

The film is a rare behind-the-scenes exploration of the staging of a major internationally touring 'Blockbuster' art exhibition, and provides a fascinating insight into the curator's role in mounting such an exhibition. The film also serves as an introduction to the life and work



1: Emily Kame Kngwarreye. Photo by Mayumi Uchida. 2: Paintings in storage for shipping to Japan for the touring Emily exhibition

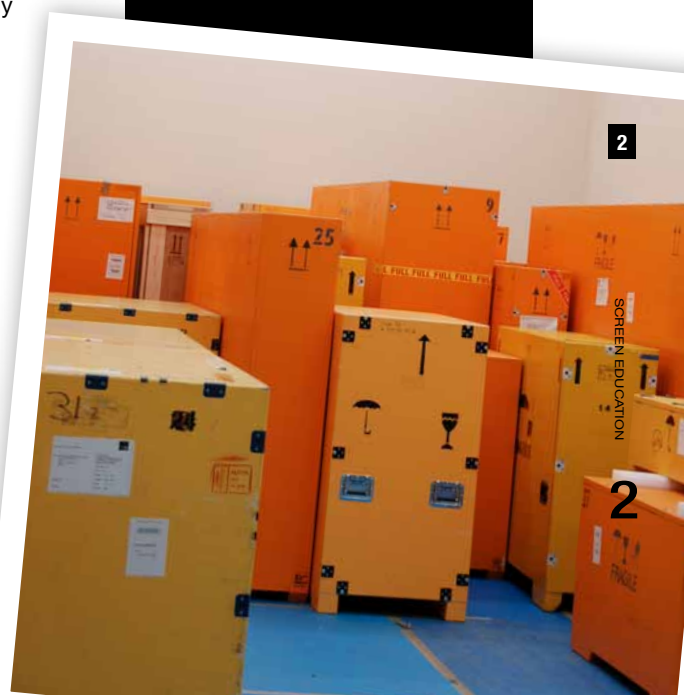
of an extraordinary Australian Aboriginal artist. Margo Neale, who co-curated this exhibition with Akira Tatehata, and the filmmakers who filmed this complex project, bring this story of Emily Kame Kngwarreye to life. Their enthusiasm and passion for the painter and this project is infectious.

Phase 2 of the new Australian National Curriculum guidelines will outline an Arts curriculum which is likely to include a strong emphasis on the value and importance of understanding the range and history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. In developing an appreciation of the complexity, strength and beauty of Indigenous artwork such as that of Emily Kngwarreye, students may well be inspired to look at how their own artistic practices can be enriched and developed. Part of this study should include developing an

Respecting cultural protocols

As this film contains images and voices of people who have passed away, including Emily Kame Kngwarreye, a warning text appears at the start of the program to ensure that people are aware of what and who they may see and hear. You may already be familiar with these warnings which precede programs where the images and voices of deceased people appear:

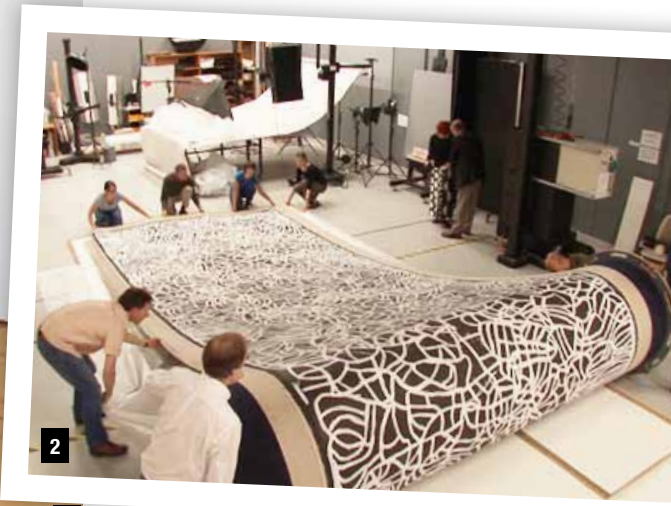
This film includes images and names of deceased people that may cause sadness and distress to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.



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SCREEN EDUCATION

2



1: Unpacking *Big Yam Dreaming* during the installation of the Emily exhibition in Japan (L) John Payne, National Gallery of Victoria.
2: *BYD*, unrolling 3: Paintings in storage for shipping to Japan



appreciation and understanding of the ways in which Indigenous artists' work is in its heart and soul an expression of country and spirituality, of memory and the honouring of tradition and continuity. As curator Margo Neale wrote in her 1998 catalogue essay that accompanied an earlier exhibition of Emily's work – 'her own visual theory is firmly rooted in total "connectedness", to her land, her spirituality and her being'.

Every State and Territory Gallery has a dedicated Indigenous art collection, often representing the work of local artists. Indigenous artworks can also be found in museums and in regional and commercial galleries. Seeing an artist's work in a gallery or other collection is a convenient way to appreciate the artwork, but it is through a documentary like this that one is able to get an understanding of an artist's work. *Emily in Japan* offers an extraordinary glimpse into the artist's work, guided by the people who curate the exhibition.

For art students, exploring the work of other artists is an integral part of developing understandings of their own practices. At senior secondary levels where students are studying visual arts subjects such as Art, Studio Arts and Art History, this documentary offers opportunities for them to develop their analytical, interpretive and creative skills. Some of the key tasks in undertaking any study and appreciation of art include:

- Understanding the relationship between the artist, the artwork, their world and that of the audi-

ence, whether this is local, national or international

- Developing an awareness of the cultural, social and historical context in which the work was created
- Developing an ability to recognise and evaluate the particular characteristics of an artist's work
- Being able to describe the aesthetic and technical qualities of an artwork, i.e. the melding of content and stylistic elements
- Making informed judgements about the qualities of the work, i.e. do I like it and why? What are the work's intrinsic qualities that I respond to?
- Developing a sense of how other artists' work and practices relate to their own creative processes, i.e. ways of seeing, conceptualising and representing.

Synopsis

Emily Kame Kngwarreye was an Aboriginal woman from a community named Utopia in central Australia who began to paint on canvas when she

was about 78 years old. In the eight 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, Japan, 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 Indigenous art curator and historian, who mounted an earlier, smaller retrospective exhibition of Emily's work for the Queensland Art Gallery in 1998 and which toured nationally.

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 to Japan. The working relationship and friendship between Margo Neale and Professor

Tatehata who share a deep passion for Emily's work, is at the core of the film. Margo is 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 270kms 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 (including 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 Centre 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 some 60 collections 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 is visited by then prime minister Kevin 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 ten 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.



1: Principal curator of the touring Emily exhibition, Margo Neale, from the National Museum of Australia
2: Emily Kame Kngwarreye. Photo by Mayumi Uchida. 3: Professor Akira Tatehata, eminent art critic and curator in Japan, who initiated the idea for the touring Emily exhibition

Key people in the documentary

Emily Kame Kngwarreye c.1910–1996 – the artist

Emily is an Aboriginal woman from Utopia in central Australia, a region 270 kms north-east of Alice Springs. She was born at Alhalkere and raised on the land in traditional ways. She spoke Anmatyerre.

Emily started painting on canvas when she was around 78 years old while working with the Utopia Women's Batik Group. In the following 8 years she painted some 3000 canvasses in an astonishing diversity of styles. Her work was immensely popular and sought after and in 1992 she was awarded a Federal Creative Fellowship. She died in 1996, leaving an enormous body of work, held in public and private collections in Australia and in many other countries.

Margo Neale – principal curator of the touring Emily exhibition

Margo Neale is an Indigenous woman of Aboriginal and Irish descent who was born and raised in

Gippsland, Victoria. Her professional positions at the time of the Emily exhibition included:

- 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.

Margo Neale curated the first major national touring retrospective for an Indigenous artist on the art of Emily Kame Kngwarreye in 1998, the show so admired by Japanese scholar and critic, Professor Akira Tatehata.

Professor Akira Tatehata – Japanese scholar, art critic and curator

He initiated the idea to stage the Emily exhibition in Japan and co-curated it with Margo Neale. Tatehata was born in Kyoto in 1947. He now lives in Tokyo but works in Osaka where he is the Director of the National Museum of Art, Osaka. He specialises in modern and contemporary art and was the Japanese commissioner for the Venice Biennale in 1990 to 1993, and artistic director of the Yokohama Triennale in 2001. He is also a nationally awarded poet.



ABOVE: The opening of the Emily exhibition in Osaka, Japan

THE FILMMAKERS

Director	Andrew Pike
Producer	Harriet Pike
Photography and Editing	Scott Wombey

Emily in Japan is a Ronin film. It was produced independently, with assistance from the National Museum of Australia and the Australia–Japan Foundation. The film runs for 81 minutes.

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

Watching the film

The structure of the film

Like the exhibition, the documentary *Emily in Japan* traverses several worlds. The first part of the film deals mostly with preparations in Australia for the exhibition in Osaka and Tokyo, while the second part of the film follows the journey to Japan: the logistics of staging the exhibition, seeing the work as it is hung and hearing and observing responses to the show. As the film develops we learn more about:

- Emily and her paintings
- Margo Neale, the curator, and her work in bringing it all together and
- The Japanese response to the work, represented by Akira Tatehata, gallery curators and visitors to the exhibition.

Watching art documentaries can be demanding as our immediate impulse is to focus on the visuals, but this documentary is much more than a slide show of paintings. Images are accompanied by descriptions as individuals talk about their work and that of Emily. We see people at work, in the country and in cities and we learn about the complexities of curating a major international art exhibition. This is a story of diplomacy and co-operation as much as it is about an astonishing painter.

In mounting this international exhi-

bition there are many areas to be worked through. Three of these inter-related areas include:

(a) Political:

- 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 had to be navigated by both the Australian curator and the Japanese venue curators at every stage.
- 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:

- The National Museum of Australia invested over \$1m in the show, plus significant sponsorship funds; on the other side, Yomiuri Shim-bun, the major Japanese sponsor (who 'owns' most blockbuster exhibitions that go to Japan, whether Monet or Cezanne or ... Emily Kngwarreye) had over \$2m at risk. Would an exhibition of paintings by an elderly Aboriginal woman from the central Australian desert who is

unknown in Japan attract enough people to allow Yomiuri to recover its huge financial outlay? Would the way be open for future exhibitions from Australia?

- 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 book of an earlier exhibition which Margo Neale also curated – in 1998 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.
- 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 the 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 travelled to Japan to oversee the hanging of specific works.

(c) Personal:

- When Margo mounted the first exhibition of Emily's work in 1998 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 were much higher: the scale of this exhibition was vastly greater and ten times the cost, and it was 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. Would 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, had 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 was constant.

All these areas had to be carefully negotiated with various organisations, communities and individuals for the exhibition to be successful. As you watch the planning activities for the shows in Japan, choose one of these three areas on which to focus your attention – the political, the financial or the personal.

●●● STUDENT ACTIVITY 1 ●●●

From conception to show

1. Preparing to go to Japan

The exhibition included works from sixty collections gathered across four continents and valued at over 50 million dollars.

1: Media scrum around the hanging of Emily's biggest painting, *Big Yam Dreaming* 2: Japanese curator, Hanako Nishino (L), from the National Art Center, Tokyo, with a model of the Emily exhibition. 3: Principal Curator of the touring Emily exhibition, Margo Neale (L) from the National Museum of Australia, with Japanese curator, Hanako Nishino (R), from the National Art Center, Tokyo



1

- Who proposed the Emily exhibition project?
- What are Akira Tatehata and Margo Neale's credentials and previous experience that make them the best people to undertake the curating of this exhibition?
- Whose job is it to gather all this work together?
- What would be some of the most important tasks to be worked through during the initial planning stages for an international exhibition?
- In trying to gather a representative



2

collection of an artist's work, how would curatorial staff be able to track down work that was not held in a public gallery?

- What is the role of the Japanese corporation Yomiuri Shimbun as a partner in the Japanese exhibition and how does this differ from Australia?
- Why is it important that both the Tokyo and Osaka galleries each have over half a kilometre of wall space to work with in mounting this exhibition?
- How is the use of the scale model of the available gallery wall space a clear way to demonstrate to co-workers the scale and context of the paintings within the exhibition spaces? Or what are the advantages in using a scale model of the galleries financially, curatorially and politically?



3



- Margo Neale curated the major Emily retrospective exhibition through the Queensland Art Gallery in 1998. What were some of the difficulties she had to work through at that time which were valuable experiences for curating this exhibition ten years later?
- How can paintings deteriorate if they are not handled, stored and displayed with great care and respect?

2. Consulting with Emily's family and community

All of those people are custodians of the story ... and of what it means to be Aboriginal ... and have roles and relationships and responsibilities to what Emily is painting. – Margo Neale

- What are some of the main reasons that Margo Neale travels to the Utopia region, north-east of Alice Springs, where Emily lived and worked?
- What is it about Barbara Weir's background and connection to the land that makes her an ideal guide and companion for Margo in Utopia?
- What are some of the objects found in the landscape that Margo is able to take to Japan to convey some tangible sense of the importance of Country? Why is

getting the permission of the senior members of the community to move these things a crucial aspect of this trip?

- What is Christopher Hodges able to tell us about the genesis of Emily's work as an artist?
- Why is Emily's grave some distance from the place where she lived and worked?
- Who are Emily's closest blood relatives?
- What does Stephen Pitijara show Margo at Alhalkere, Emily's country?
- What important artefact does Lindsay Bird Mpetyane, Emily's nephew, allow Margo to take to Japan as something that will give the Japanese people some

sense of Emily's Country?

- How will the recording and playing of a song about Alhalkere be an important part of the Emily exhibition? How is chanting and singing the songlines related to the ceremonial aspects of Emily's paintings?
- Akira Tatehata, one of the driving forces behind the exhibition in Japan says, *We were visitors from the outside; it is too much to think one could understand the culture of these people who were born there and live there, who belong to that land.* However, he clearly believes it is important for the Japanese partners in the exhibition to experience Emily's Country first-hand. Why do you think he feels this to be important?
- In what ways is Janet Holmes à Court an important figure in the success of Emily's work as an artist?

1: L-R: Artist Barbara Weir, Margo Neale and director Andrew Pike, on the way to Utopia 2: Barbara Weir, an artist from the Utopia region who grew up with Emily Kame Kngwarreye 3: Margo Neale and Barbara Weir in Utopia





1: The Emily exhibition being installed in the National Museum of Osaka
 2: Margo Neale plans with the Japanese co-curators, Yasuyuki Nakai (centre), and Professor Akira Tatehata.

3. Japan

Margo Neale and the Project Manager, Benita Tunks, along with the crew filming the documentary, travel to Japan four months before the Osaka opening to negotiate details of the exhibition tour.

- Why are face-to-face meetings in Japan between all the key members of the curatorial group, the financial partners and government representatives seen as being important to the smooth running of the organisational aspects of mounting the exhibition?
- Apart from the language differences, what are some of the other differences shown in how people from different cultures conduct themselves during business and cultural transactions?
- What is the role of the Yomiuri corporation in contributing to the success of the exhibition?
- How vital is good advance publicity to generate interest in the work of an artist who, unlike Monet or Warhol, would not have been known in Japan?
- What are some of the differences in approaches to hanging the work that need to be negotiated between the two groups of curatorial staff?
- In what ways has the curator incorporated her understanding of Japanese culture in the way the works are presented?
- Why does *Big Yam Dreaming*, Emily's 1995 painting, present particular challenges for the curators and installers?

- What are some of the 'extras', apart from the paintings, that are incorporated into the exhibition and why does Margo think that their inclusion is critical to this exhibition?
- What do the close inspection of the surface of the paintings reveal about how Emily worked? Describe some of the incidental 'inclusions' in the paintings.

4. 'Showing them off to great advantage'

- What does Margo Neale see as the significance of the February, 2008 Australian Government Apology to the Stolen Generations of Indigenous Australians, especially in relation to how white Australians might begin to 'read' and understand artworks of Indigenous Australians?
- Margo Neale wants people to have an emotional engagement with Emily's work. How does she see her role as curator of the work in relation to the artist's intentions?
- How do collector Janet Holmes à Court, Akira Tatehata and Margo Neale each respond to the paintings once they are hung on the Osaka Gallery walls?
- When the exhibition moves to Tokyo, why does Margo feel it is important for her to take charge of how the exhibition is hung?
- What is the major difference between the exhibition layout in Osaka and the layout in Tokyo?
- What are some of the slightly unusual decisions she makes in relation to how the paintings will occupy the

spaces in the Tokyo gallery?

- What is the irony Margo Neale sees in the promotional posters for the Emily exhibition alongside the posters for the exhibition of Modigliani's work?
- What does this suggest about the accuracy and usefulness of labels such as 'abstract expressionism', 'primitivism' and 'modernism'?
- Were the Japanese exhibitions successful? How can we measure the success of art exhibitions? Are they about more than attendance figures and money? What may be the ongoing value for cross-cultural relations? How might this exhibition affect the value of the artist's work?

STUDENT ACTIVITY 2

Responding to Aboriginal art

Emily's work has been, and continues to be, greatly admired and sought after by collectors. Her work is popular in many places throughout the world. But what is it we are responding to when we stand before a canvas such as *Big Yam Dreaming*? What is it that is beautiful, alive and visually arresting in her paintings?

The Utopia Art Sydney gallery, which has represented Emily's work from the outset, describes her as 'a landscape painter'.

The place she painted, Alhalkere, is an area of land that she referred to as



1

1: The hole in the rock at Alhalkere – the place that Emily celebrated in her paintings. 2: *Alhalkere*, 1996. 3: Emily Kame Kngwarreye. Photo Mayumi Uchida.

'her Country'. She explained that her pictures incorporate all of the stories and subjects that made her land.

These include *Awelye* (women's dreaming); *Arlatyeye* (pencil yam); *Arnkerrthe* (mountain devil lizard); *Ntange* (grass seed); *Tingu* (a dream time dingo pup); *Ankerre* (emu); *Intekwe* (a favourite food of emus, a small plant); *Atnwerle* (green bean) and *Kame* (yam seed) from which Kngwarreye gets her name.

This is somewhat different from a western view of the landscape but for Kngwarreye this vision included not only the visual but that which gave her Country meaning. This landscape was the subject for nearly all of Kngwarreye's paintings.¹

Read the three observations below (1, 2 and 3) each of which suggests that the way people understand, appreciate and talk about Aboriginal art varies greatly depending on different backgrounds and different understanding of the term 'art'. How useful are terms such as 'symbolic', 'non-representational' and 'abstract' when we are describing paintings such as those of Emily Kame Kngwarreye? Why do people paint pictures? What purpose do they have beyond being decorative and able to delight us? Such questions are fundamental to how we respond to this work.

1. *Prior to contact, there was no word for art in Indigenous languages. For Emily she's not painting abstract art; she's not even doing art. She is simply performing ceremony on canvas. So she is doing what*



2

she would be doing in ceremony, painting up, doing the body stripes, singing the songs, and she often sings and chants and so on when she is working, and in her head she is affirming her relationship with Alhalkere, therefore of her Country, therefore of her custodial role with nurturing for the increase of the yam, and other totemic animals, plants and animals that she has responsibility for.

... the prime motivation and impetus of her work is to tell the stories of her and her relationship to Country and ... in doing that, she is also telling the history of her Country, the history of her people's relationship to that Country.

– Margo Neale

2. *The essence that she [Emily] may have drawn inspiration from may have been a particular seed or a rock and there's definitely the influence of a rock, and important places and landscape ... however the pictures aren't literal interpretations of any of these things, they're abstractions of those things and people looking at this work will be looking at it as non-representational painting surfaces ... you've got to treat it as an exhibition of abstract painting.*

– Christopher Hodges,



3

Director of Utopia Art Sydney
3. *Of course, when Aboriginal people see Emily's work, and when the Australians in the white culture see Emily's work, the cultural bias is different each time ... We see the work differently yet we can share our joy.*

– Akira Tatehata

- How is your response to artworks mediated through your background, culture, history and education?
 - *In my view it is better to push this as the work of a great Australian artist, because the reflection back into the community is a much stronger reflection than if we pushed the idea that she is an Aboriginal artist. It should be great art ... like nobody cares if Picasso was Spanish or French ... and Emily's got to be treated in exactly the same way.*
- Margo Neale



1



1: Margo Neale at work while in Utopia 2: Margo Neale at Alhalkere

2

In what sense does the reception of Emily's work in Japan (as well as in other countries) suggest that art is 'an international language'?

- How important is it to know about an artist, their background, their culture and their intentions as well as why they work the way they do, in developing an appreciation of artworks?
- What influence does the curator's notes (often written on a label placed beside the artwork) have on your understanding and appreciation of the artist and the artwork or/and the use of an audio guide which provides information? Discuss your approach to viewing an exhibition of paintings with others in your class.
- How important is the role of art in the transmission and maintenance of cultural knowledge and values in any society, but especially in Aboriginal societies?
- Do the works of great artists 'stand alone' and have their own distinctive pictorial language, regardless of our knowledge of the circumstances, place, time and culture in which they were created, e.g. what sense might people in 100 years time make of Andy Warhol's Campbell's soup cans or Bill Viola's video installations; is our liking for the work of painters such as Van Gogh, Vermeer and Brett Whiteley affected by our interest in, and knowledge of, their life and times?
- Read the following excerpts from some of the 'vox pop' interviews of

Japanese visitors to Emily exhibitions.

- *She has amazing ways of using colour ... lines and dots. I felt very strong power coming from them.*
- *They looked very Japanese ... classical Japanese art ... the same feel ... I found them inspiring.*
- *That physical process, particularly with the brushstrokes, may have something in common with Eastern calligraphy that is letters drawn with a brush ... the way she drew lines without hesitation and with determination, is perhaps not unlike calligraphy.*
– Akira Tatehata
- *it's art that we don't understand at all ... I thought they're only for those who can understand ... we didn't.*
- *The value of the paintings for Aboriginal people and for others is fundamentally different when they are exhibited in the West or Japan. When their works are shown by Westerners as interesting novelties it means they are seen within the Western modernist framework, within the Eurocentric context of multiculturalism ... The issues are not a problem for Emily, but for us, the audience.*
- *To see those patterns that are imbued with the soul of the people, I found it very moving. Because I went there thirty-seven years ago, memories like that of the red earth are still vivid.*

- *I feel very inspired by her work. As a woman, she was doing such wonderful work up to her death.*

So, is it enough to enjoy the colours, the patterns, the boldness of the brushstrokes and that indefinable sense of harmony and even spirituality? Is there any other way in which non-Indigenous viewers can appreciate these canvasses and the sense of Country expressed in the work? How are we able to understand the complex visual language that is embodied in these works, what Margo Neale calls 'the ceremonial'?

For students interested in further investigating this issue of how we understand and talk about Aboriginal art, there is an interesting essay by Rex Butler – *The Impossible Painter* – about the 1998 exhibition of Emily Kame Kngwarreye's work, published in *Australian Art Collector* magazine. The essay can be accessed at <http://www.artcollector.net.au/Assets/427/1/2_kngwarreye.pdf>.

Butler suggests that the comparison of Emily's work with Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning reflect distinctly Eurocentric notions of artistic expression. He suggests that we are forced to use the only language we have to describe her work and that this is the language of Western art criticism and traditions. Such language and the critical categories into which her work

is sometimes placed are somehow inadequate, even beside the point.

As Margo Neale explains in the documentary, the notion of Aboriginal art is a Western invention. It was the white people who encouraged artists like Emily to paint on canvas. While some understanding of the origins and ideas behind the works may increase our appreciation, for many viewers it is the simplicity and beauty of both colour and line that attracts us to these paintings.

- How would you describe the work of Emily Kame Kngwarreye to someone who is not familiar with Aboriginal art?
- Where did Emily work? What was her studio, her materials and her method?
- How might the places in which she worked relate to colour and light in the paintings?
- Describe the range and diversity of her painting style.
- Her paintings have been described as embodying aspects of Country through colour, lines, patterns, the layering of paint and the sense of light and shadow on the surface of the canvas. Does the power of her work come from a combination of all these things or is it something less easy to identify? Which of her works that we see in this exhibition do you find to be most visually satisfying and beautiful? (or pleasing?)

Another essay by Ian McLean entitled *Aboriginal Modernism? Two histories, one painter* goes some way towards an understanding of Emily's work by contextualising it within a post-contact history and thus exposing its problematic relationship with western modernism.

In so doing he refutes a number of aspects of Rex Butler's interpretation. See his essay in Neale Margo (ed.), *Utopia: the Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, The National Museum of Australia Press, 2008, p.23.

See <<http://www.nma.gov.au/audio/>



ABOVE: Margo Neale (L) with Barbara Weir (R) and female relatives of Emily Kame Kngwarreye in Utopia, central Australia

series/emily-kame-kngwarreye-series/> and <http://www.iniva.org/library/archive/people/m/mclean_ian>.

●●● STUDENT ACTIVITY 3 ●●●

Documentaries about art and artists

Today we can see a range of great art from all over the world as never before. Not only are we able to see artworks when we travel, in galleries and museums, in cities and in the country, but through the power of film and television documentaries we can see not only the artworks, but how an art exhibition is staged. No longer are art lovers and students of visual arts and history only able to view artworks as photos in textbooks or projected onto a screen as slides. While nothing can compare with viewing art in the place where it was created, or in a gallery 'face to face', films can introduce us to a vast range of art that has previously only been accessible to people able to travel and visit art galleries, many of which are often found only in cities.

Today we can see paintings, sculpture and other artworks in colour, in the setting and sometimes, (particularly with contemporary art), as they were being made; we may be able to watch the artist at work and hear them talk

about their creative process; we are able to grasp the scale of a painting or sculpture; we can investigate details of the brushwork and surface texture through the lens of the camera. We can develop our own critical judgements through seeing art on film and often be stimulated to visit the places where the work is on show. Art documentaries such as *Emily in Japan* introduce us to the work of great artists and through their approach to the work and the artist, provide us with background and detail which in this case includes an account of the curatorial processes involved in staging an exhibition.

Here is some background information from the filmmakers about their experience in making this film. You can hear more from director Andrew Pike in the interview that is included in the DVD extras that follow the documentary.

Our film about the Emily exhibition could never even attempt to represent honestly and fairly Emily Kame Kngwarreye, 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 connection to 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.

– Andrew Pike, Director

- How does the archival footage incorporated into this documentary offer some insights into Emily’s practices as an artist and custodian of culture and Country?
- What did you learn about the work of art curators through what we see of the work of Margo Neale in the documentary?
- 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. Setting aside cost considerations, why do you think a small crew is more likely to gain more open and intimate access to this kind of project than might be possible with a larger film crew? Were there any occasions where you were aware of the presence of cameras and

film crew? Was this a problem?

- How important is it to have engaging and articulate people able to act as guides and participants in this story? What makes Margo Neale such an interesting figure who commands our attention?
- The filmmakers amassed 170 hours of footage over the three years they worked on the *Emily in Japan* project. Selecting the best scenes to tell the story most vividly would have been demanding. Do you think the director and editors balanced the footage of the setting up of the exhibition with sufficient information about Emily’s world and art? Describe the main focus and content of the film in less than 200 words. What, for you, are the most interesting aspects of this film? Were there aspects of the exhibition process that you would like to have known more about? Does it inspire you to explore further the world of Indigenous art in Australia?

Extras

This 81-minute DVD version of *Emily in Japan* is followed by a number of extras which include additional footage of, amongst other things, the installation of *Big Yam Dreaming*, the enormous black and white painting from 1995 that measures eight by three metres.

There is also an extended interview with Margo Neale about the significance of Sorry Day and footage of Utopia Art Sydney gallery owner Christopher Hodges talking about the curating of the exhibition and some of Emily’s paintings.

Finally there is an extended interview with director Andrew Pike where he answers a number of questions about his approach to making *Emily in Japan*. This interview would be of particular interest to students of Media and Film Studies for the insights Pike offers into the challenges of making a film about such a complex process involving many different elements. Amongst other things, Pike explains

why he decided to use intertitles (on-screen text) rather than having a single voice narrator. He also explains the importance of the key interviews in the film, how they were shot and how they fit into other elements of the film which are more deliberately constructed in visual terms.

Resources and References

Jenny Green, ‘Holding the country: Art from Utopia and the Sandover’ in Hetti Perkins and Margie West, *One Sun One Moon: Aboriginal Art in Australia*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2007.

D. Hart, *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Paintings from 1989-1995*, Parliament House, Canberra, 1995.

J. Isaacs, *Emily Kngwarreye Paintings*, Craftsman House, North Ryde, Sydney, 1998.

M. Neale, *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Paintings from Utopia*, Macmillan, South Yarra, Victoria, 1998.

D. Thomas, *Earth’s Creation: The Paintings of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, Malakoff Fine Art Press, North Caulfield, Victoria, 1988.

M. Neale, *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, National Museum of Australia Press, Canberra, 2008.

Utopia Art Sydney website with a listing of Emily Kame Kngwarreye’s exhibitions and collections where her work is held.
http://www.utopiaartsydney.com.au/emilykk_bio.htm

Notes for students and teachers about Emily’s work from the National Gallery of Australia with suggested activities for students.

<http://nga.gov.au/exhibitions/Kngwarreye/teachers.htm>

Read about the story of *Big Yam Dreaming* and other information about Emily’s work
http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/utopia_the_genius_of_emily_kame_kngwarreye/behind_the_scenes/

Peter Coster, ‘Watching the Price of Spirituality’, *Herald Sun*, 18 September 2009, <<http://www.heraldsun.com.au/business/watching-the-price-of-spirituality/>

story-e6frfh4f-1225776645452>.
Article about the sale of a major
Emily painting

Rex Butler, 'The Impossible Painter',
Australian Art Collector magazine,
issue 2, Oct–Dec 1997, <[http://
www.artcollector.net.au/Assets/
427/1/2_kngwarreye.pdf](http://www.artcollector.net.au/Assets/427/1/2_kngwarreye.pdf)>.

Symposium and discussions held in
conjunction with the *Utopia: The
Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*
exhibition held at the National Mu-
seum of Australia and two Japa-
nese venues in 2008. Transcripts
of papers available at <[http://
www.nma.gov.au/audio/series/
emily-kame-kngwarreye-series](http://www.nma.gov.au/audio/series/emily-kame-kngwarreye-series)>.

Information about training and work
opportunities as a curator: <[http://
getaccess.wa.gov.au/careers/
profiles/data/OCC48.asp](http://getaccess.wa.gov.au/careers/profiles/data/OCC48.asp)>.

**For other documentaries on In-
digenous art, visit the Ronin Films
website at <[http://www.ronin films.
com.au](http://www.roninfilms.com.au)>.**

Emily in Japan (full-length version) with
extras is available on DVD from Ronin
Films.

Also available from Ronin is the bi-
lingual catalogue book of the touring
Japanese exhibition. The book was
edited by Margo Neale and published
by Yomiuri Shimbun, 1998. 256 pages
including 140 pages of full colour im-
ages.



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Emily in Japan was produced indepen-
dently by Ronin Films, with assistance
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and the Australia–Japan Foundation.
Marketing assistance from Screen
Australia.

Endnote

¹ [http://www.utopiaartsydney.com.au/
emilykk_bio.htm](http://www.utopiaartsydney.com.au/emilykk_bio.htm)

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