

Artists create nothing, they are merely mediums for the 'Genius' of their culture. Discuss in relation to Australian Aboriginal Art.

Introduction

If artists create nothing and are merely mediums for the 'Genius' of their culture, then how is it that two or more artists from vastly different cultural backgrounds can produce visual imagery so similar that it could almost be made by the same artist? Furthermore what is 'genius'? Is 'genius' a gift or talent, recognised universally or is it purely a Western concept designed by critics who attempt to remould history by elevating selected individuals?

The notion of artistic 'genius' became most popular during the Romantic period of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, with the idea that the artist was somehow a link between nature and humanity - a sensitive 'child of nature'. (Duro & Greenhalgh, p.136) Later, in the 20th century Carl Jung's theory of the 'collective unconscious' inspired the work of American Abstract Expressionists, like Jackson Pollock, whose 'genius' status became elevated to 'hero'. (Moszynska, p.149). But during the 1960s and 70s, a time of upheaval and re-evaluation, these ideas were debated and disputed by exponents of the Auteur Theory¹, amongst them Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. They argued that mythologising artist's lives distorted the viewer's evaluation of art. Barthes, in his essay 'The Death of the Author' in 1977, demoted 'authorship' claiming that ultimately the response of the viewer took precedence over the artists' intentions. Foucault with his essay, 'What is an Author?' in 1978, reclaimed the worth of authorship but insisted that cultural context was the significant determinant. (Duro & Greenhalgh, pp.50-51).

There are numerous paintings of visual and conceptual originality amongst the artworks of Aboriginal Australia, with striking characteristics particular and unique to various regions. Many could be considered works of genius. Artists like **Emily Kame Kngwarreye** (Anmatyerre² c.1910 -1996) comfortably fit the Romanticist notion of artistic 'genius'. This inspiring Aboriginal elder took up painting in her seventies and in just the eight years remaining of her life produced an amazing outpouring of creativity, becoming one of Australia's most internationally acclaimed artists. Critics worldwide have recognised connections between Emily's work and various Western styles of art including Minimalism, Impressionism, and even the paintings of the great American Abstract Expressionists, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Barnett Newman. (Butler, pp.42-43). This is despite having had no contact or access to artistic instruction or institutions of any kind. These claims alone would substantiate the distinction of 'genius'.

The origins of the Western artistic styles of Impressionism, Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, formed decades earlier in modern populated cities of New York and Paris, are as culturally diverse to those of Australian Aboriginal art, as the desert is to the rainforest. But, if the paintings of Emily Kame Kngwarreye reflect the 'genius' of *her* culture, how then can such comparisons with Western art be made?

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For Emily Kame Kngwarreye recognition was unintentional. Australian Aboriginal Art as it exists today is a modern phenomena, derived from ageless rituals, but usually made specifically for the art market both as a means of

¹ French for 'author'. (Duro & Greenhalgh, p.50)

² One of the language groups of the desert region 250 kms. north-east of Alice Springs, Northern Territory.

preserving culture and providing financial independence³. The hundreds of works Emily produced are pure expressions of her life experience concerning custodianship of ancestral land in the desert country of remote Central Australia and of sustaining that land's spirit.



Illus.1: **Emily Kame Ngwarreye**, *My Country*, 1994, Synthetic polymer on canvas, 203x176cm.

(Hollow, p.9)

The paintings, are subtly varied and harmonious arrangements of colour, either horizontal bands, merging dots or a network of labyrinthine curving lines.

³ The chauvinism that came to Australia with white settlement served to deny Aboriginal women of respect they had formerly maintained, as major contributors to food collection and overseeing 'Law' in their communities. Like white women they were paid less and given fewer rights than Aboriginal men. Coupled with lowered self-esteem of Aboriginal men due to white repression, the social balance was upset, leading to increased domestic violence and other social problems. Painting was especially embraced by women in this region, incorporated into ritual performance, helping strengthen sacred women's business and offering financial independence. It is also recognised by women as a record of the 'Dreaming' for future generations. (Bell, pp.45-46 & 103-106).

Most of these coloured arrangements are painted on a ground of dark brown or black, symbolic of her own body presence interacting with the colours of the desert. Her canvases are a direct transference from the ritual body paint used in traditional ceremony – the connecting force between her people and the land⁴.

Australian art has predominantly been influenced by Western artistic styles due to the country's colonial heritage, but Aboriginal Art has also been an important influence for artists like Margaret Preston, Ian Fairweather, Tony Tuckson, Tim Johnson and many others. Former Melbourne artist⁵, **David Rankin** (b.1946), of Irish heritage, is motivated by an eclectic mix of cultures, both East and West. He explores a range of visual possibilities - landscape, abstraction and figuration, with influences that include Aboriginal Art, Western Abstraction, elements of calligraphy, Zen Buddhism and Japanese haiku poetry. (Art and Australia, Summer 1996). Rankin's series of abstracted landscape paintings show remarkable similarities with Emily Kame Kngwarreye's horizontal banded panels such as *Lines I & II*, 1994. Both artists utilise painterly horizontal stripes forming columns of fragmented colour. Rankin began this series in the early 1980s, before Emily had discovered painting.

While Rankin admits his earlier mark-making paid homage to Aboriginal art his earthy tones are derived foremost from personal influences - the tan, red, black and white leathers of his father's boot-making shop in suburban Sydney. (The Weekend Australian, pp.16-17). Despite their similarities of imagery these works by both artists fit comfortably within the context of their other work.

⁴ Emily Kame Kngwarreye was born at Alhalkere at the edge of Utopia cattle station in Anmatyerre country. (Isaacs, p.12). This was in some ways fortunate as it allowed her to grow up with knowledge of her ancestral land including the practice of ceremonial ritual and tribal responsibilities, interspersed with station duties. In contrast those Aboriginal people forced onto missions away from their land were forbidden from practicing their traditional language and religion, which resulted in loss of much of their culture. (Bell, pp.60-66 & 101-103)

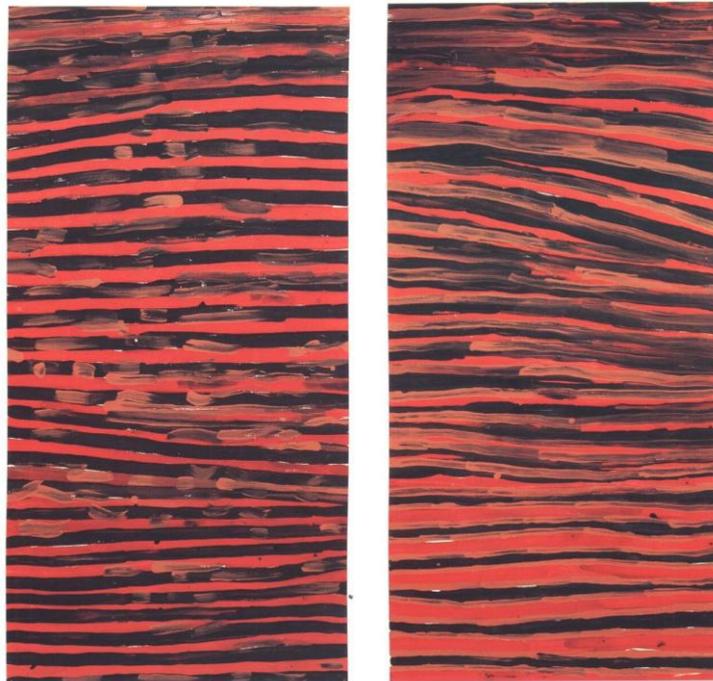
⁵ Now living in Soho, New York.

In a recent interview when asked about the similarities Rankin said,

“I simply don’t know what to make of this. Coincidence? Maybe it shows the interconnectedness of artists no matter what their experiences or cultures.” (The Weekend Australian, Sept.15-16, 2001, p.17)

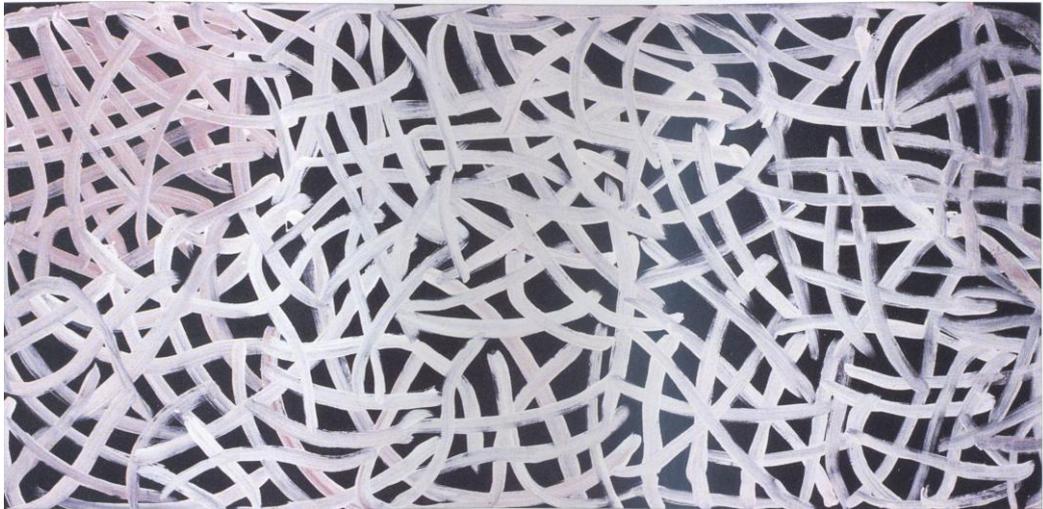


Illus.2: **David Rankin** in his Soho studio, New York. Details of works unavailable, but usual medium is Acrylic and charcoal on canvas. (Image obtained from website www.davidrankin.net.)



Illus.3: **Emily Kame Ngwarreye**, *Lines I & II*, 94H027 & 94H028, 1994. Synthetic polymer on canvas 120x60cm. each. The Holt Collection, courtesy of Delmore Gallery, N.T. (Isaacs, pp.130-131)

Australian Aboriginal art contains a contemplative quality and because it has not evolved within the realm of the Western tradition of art it is not scrutinised and categorised but is evaluated purely from an intuitive response⁶. Works such as *My Country*, 1995 by Emily Kame Kngwarreye demonstrate freedom of expression and intuitive gesture, forming an intriguing web of meaning, fully known only to the artist. Yet the passion and emotion felt by the artist for the subject – her country – is translated through the telling gesture of her marks.



Illus.4: **Emily Kame Kngwarreye**, *My Country*, 1995. Synthetic polymer on canvas 181x88cm.

(Hollow, p.10)

“To the western viewer, the paintings of this extraordinary octogenarian artist with her exuberant colouration or minimalist stripes and absence of narration may appear as pure abstraction. Yet despite her differing styles, for Kngwarreye, her paintings were all inseparable from her subject – her country”. – Susan McCulloch, 1998. (Hollow, p.3)

There is no evidence to suggested that Kngwarreye was influenced in any way by Western artistic styles. In fact, like most Aboriginal people her experiences of Western culture were more likely uninspiring.

⁶ The increasing appreciation and popularity throughout the world of Australian indigenous art is evidence that there is a need for greater freedom of response to all art, and likewise freedom for artists of diverse cultural backgrounds to not be dictated by fashions or ‘isms’.

During the 1970s German artist Joseph Beuys explored connections between art and Shamanism, suggesting that 'the artist is Shaman of society'⁷. Emily's painting probably shares a closer affinity with this belief than to Abstract Expressionism, although for Emily it is more likely 'Shaman as artist'. But there is an undeniable relationship between the power of the gesture by this artist and that of Abstract Expressionism. Unlike Abstract Expressionism, however, where the painted surface became the subject of the work replacing narrative, Emily's paintings are entirely about subject – the whole essence of her country – both physically as source of food, water, shelter, and spiritually as the place where ancestral beings (all living things) were created. Lewis Biggs in his introduction to *Working With Nature – Contemporary art from Korea*, in 1992 gives an overview of the Shamanist tradition:

'The essence of Shamanism is a respect for the entire animate and inanimate world (including the proper place of humanity within it). . . Shamanism does not place humanity at the head of a symbolic hierarchy; its philosophy of harmony, of working with the situation rather than attempting to dominate it, of only allowing ourselves the things which can be taken with respect, is an ancient wisdom and has had an urgent rebirth in the West – in which Beuys played his part – under the name of 'Ecological Studies'.' (Biggs, p.8)

Whether linked by the 'collective unconscious' (or some other theory), artists who pursue genuine and purposeful visual communication despite changes in trends or cultural influences can attain a spiritual presence in their work, inspiring contemplation. These artists, I believe, *are* the Shamans of the modern world and their shared philosophy explains the occurrence of similar, apparently universal visual language despite cultural diversity.

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⁷ German artist Joseph Beuys and Korean artist Nam June Paik collaborated as part of Fluxus. 'They shared an interest in Shamanism, a belief that the artist is the Shaman of society' (Biggs, p.8)

Conclusion

Is Emily Kame Kngwarreye a medium for the 'genius' of her culture? She satisfies the Romanticist ideals of 'genius' and the Auteur Theorists' views of demythologising the artist in favour of cultural context. Unlike the slashing marks of Jackson Pollock and the distorted figures of Pablo Picasso as indicators of their personal anguish, Emily's paintings do not speak of her personal life. There are no signs in her work of colonial impact, such as the shocking massacres of Aboriginal people that took place in Central Australia in the 1920s⁸.

The story she paints goes back further than white settlement, yet she has developed a uniquely personal interpretation unlike any traditional styles of Aboriginal art. Her work is devoid of symbolism and diagrammatic qualities, finding instead that expressive line or layers of rich glowing colour, best describes her 'Dreaming'. Her Dreaming therefore contains a universal message with qualities that simultaneously seem to break down barriers of typified cultural attributes while transcending the boundaries of artistic categorisation. Like all true 'painters' of any culture, her discovery of paint overwhelmed her sense of tradition and consumed her passion for expression. She extended her palette to include blues, greens and shocking pinks using them in a truly harmonious way that creates shimmer, enhancing the precious quality of her desert land.

The idea of 'genius' is an entirely Western concept. In terms of her own culture she is not a genius. Her expressions of her 'Dreaming' would be expected of any tribal elder entrusted with the responsibility of overseeing ancestral land and continuing the cycle of knowledge that sustains the last threads of a struggling spiritual-based culture in a capitalistic world.

⁸ These events left an eternal wound in Aboriginal communities throughout Central Australia. Due to extended kinship people from every community throughout the region experienced loss as a result of the 'killing time'. (Bell, pp.66-69)

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Details of Works

- Illus.1 **Emily Kame Kngwarreye**, *My Country*, 1994 Synthetic polymer on canvas,
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- Illus.2 **David Rankin**, Studio in Soho, New York. Details of works unavailable, but usual
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