

Where ancient waterways and dreams intertwine

Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Yvonne Koolmatrie and Judy Watson
fluent Australia's representation at the XLVII Esposizione Internazionale D'Arte
La Biennale di Venezia 15 June to 15 November 1997

*Like the many canals that weave through Venice, fluent explores the subtle connections between the works of Kngwarreye, Yvonne Koolmatrie and Judy Watson. In the same sense that one might be fluent in a spoken language, these artists share a fluency of visual expression. In fluent this fluidity is expressed by the motif of the stripe, as it appears in Kngwarreye's work.....It is a mark that is globally occurring, like a word in a language we can all understand.*¹

Hetti Perkins, independent curator and writer, held the basic concept of *fluent* for some years prior to the Australia Council announcing in late 1995 that it was seeking proposals for representation at the XLVII Venice Biennale. Indigenous curators throughout Australia received invitations to submit proposals for consideration. Hetti devised the curatorial rationale for the project and the inclusion of the three artists - Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Yvonne Koolmatrie and Judy Watson - in collaboration with myself and Victoria Lynn, as the curatorial team². We envisaged the exhibition as an opportunity to present a select number of Australia's leading contemporary indigenous artists to an audience within an international contemporary art context.

The Australia Council's selection of *fluent* as Australia's representation at the Venice Biennale - one of the most prestigious and important visual arts events, also the oldest Biennale in the international arts calendar - provided the setting for this vision.

fluent effectively became a memorial and tribute to Emily Kame Kngwarreye, when this inspirational artist passed away in late 1996 at nearly ninety years of age, and the exhibition served to present her incredible vision and innovation to an overwhelmingly appreciative international audience.

*fluent not only suggests the visual fluidity of the artists' works and the intuitive nature of their creation, it also connotes the oral traditions of Aboriginal culture and the many languages that make up Aboriginal Australia.*³

June in Venice is the first month of the European summer, and it can be exceptionally humid, right through to late August, and is the peak tourist season with apparently infinite numbers descending in groups upon the city. Any attempt to walk along the main promenade fronting the Lagoon requires considerable patience, a good sunblock, and an ability to tune out irritatingly banal comments and loud accents.

Venice is often described as being a city with two faces - one by land, the other by water. Venice, the city, and the Venice Biennale are totally different animals, with the majority of tourist visitors being ignorant of its existence. However, that said, the Biennale Giardini, with its lovely old tree-lined paths, flowering gardens and water frontage offers a cool respite from the wilting heat of the packed city. Many visitors to the Biennale came a number of times, perhaps as much to rest in the shade as to view the works in each pavilion.

fluent suggests a continuous ebb and flow between modernity and tradition, art and craft, painting and sculpture, abstraction and narrative. It is the weaving together of different

¹Perkins, Hetti *fluent* exhibition catalogue, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997, p

²The title of 'Curatorium' considered most appropriate to include all our specific roles, with Hetti and myself as co-Curators, and Victoria Lynn, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, as Exhibition Manager, on behalf of the AGNSW. Victoria's inclusion was considered integral, due to previous exhibitions curated by herself and Hetti for the ACNSW, and her extensive knowledge of the international contemporary art world, invaluable for the Venice Biennale.

³Ibid, as in 1

*stories and journeys - from the past to the present - that creates the fabric of contemporary Indigenous Australia.*⁴

Prior to the official opening of the Biennale on 15 June, there are four days - the Vernissage - with 3000 to 4000 visitors to each pavilion daily, comprising critics, curators, artists, arts administrators and press who swoop upon the press desk, locust-like, to partake of the information on offer, before swarming off to the next pavilion. This occurs for eight hours each day, non-stop, until the closing of the Biennale Giardini each night at 6:00 pm. The press desk at the Australian pavilion was staffed by eight workers, and other volunteers, who were all kept busy, particularly the five translators.

An integral component of *fluent* was The Look: the brochures, catalogue (awarded the 1997 best design award by Museums Australia), posters, promotional banners flying from the pavilion, and particularly the red 'show bags' containing the press kits, comprising catalogue, kit and slides. These bags acted as signposts not only in the Biennale grounds, but throughout Venice, and many were also sighted at Documenta X in Kassel, and Munster Sculpture Project 1997, both in Germany. Quite a number continued to catch one's eye, months after the last one had been handed out. Three of the banners, with a detail of Kngwarreye's untitled/*alweye* triptych, proved so popular that they were stolen off the pavilion one Saturday night - no mean feat, as removing the lone remaining Kngwarreye banner took quite some effort from three people.

The official Australian launch was held in the stunning Palazzo Papadopoli, one of the few to have a garden fronting the water, located on the Grand Canal near the Rialto Bridge. *Metamorphosis*, the satellite exhibition from Melbourne commercial gallery, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, supported by the Australia Council, was held here from 15 June to 15 July.

Intuition

*Kngwarreye, Koolmatrie and Watson draw on a continuous cultural heritage while expressing their individuality within this tradition. Their works articulate the fluent relationship between country, kin and the individual - the relationship between seen and unseen worlds.*⁵

Everywhere one encounters the sight of water, the sounds of it lapping up against brick and stone - in the lagoon, the Grand and Guidecca Canals, the smaller canals one crosses in the back alleys, the lagoon to the islands of Murano, Burano, Isola del Deserto and Torcello - like a lover kissing a paramour, the only problem being that centuries of adour are eroding the recipient of their affections. As if in competition, the summer skies above often open, in an incredible lightshow of electrical storms, raining down in great deluges that carve channels in the paths, keeping visitors sheltering inside pavilions, filling up the waterways, leaking through roofs, accompanied by howling winds that knock down aged trees effortlessly.

The extremes in weather affected the way in which one viewed the work in *fluent*. Although the lighting inside the pavilion was controlled by the installation of security screens - as had been the situation in the 1995 Biennale during Bill Henson's exhibition - changes in outside light, temperature, seasons played an important part in the presentation of the works.

A personal favourite time was standing in the lower section of the split-level pavilion, surrounded by Judy's ethereal paintings - spotlit to create an effect of seeming to almost glow from within, similar to a duratran - listening to the rain trickle down the metal roof and outside walls behind her paintings.

*The mesmerising effect of tidal motion, described by Watson, is echoed in the repetition of Kngwarreye's strokes, a rhythm found in the song cycles of alweye - women's ceremonies.*⁶

⁴Ibid, as in 1.

⁵Ibid, as in 1.

⁶ Ibid as in 1, p 14. '*Alweye* is an Anmatyerre word for women's ceremonies. from essay footnotes.

Changes in outside light impacted most on Kngwarreye's works, which were hung in the upper level, near the uncovered glass front doors. Her powerful striped, webbed and gridded works on canvas and paper appeared almost to hum, their optical illusory effect serving to imbue the works with movement, as if the viewer were passing over the top of them, looking downwards, or as if wind was rippling through them.

Wet weather seemed to heighten the scent of Yvonne's eel traps, woven from sedge grasses, which gave off a uniquely Australian fragrance. Children were particularly intrigued by her works, and the manner in which they were suspended from the roof enabled one to walk between the works and view them from all angles. They proved a favourite for photographic opportunities with visitors.

Personally, it was a great pleasure to work on this project, to have the unique opportunity of being in Venice at the Biennale for five months, surrounded by the work of three of the leading contemporary female indigenous visual artists from this country. As Judy and Yvonne stated in the early weeks of the exhibition, the artworks constantly 'speak' to the viewer, and I felt that I could experience them anew, dependent on the season, the light, the heat, the cold, or the rain. They resonated and hummed with vitality and knowledge.

Visitors were intrigued by Judy's bronze stones - to the extent that a number were stolen during the five months, despite our diligence. One architect who was caught red-handed after an hilarious chase through the Giardini, burst into tears, proffering the excuse, 'I just wanted a souvenir', before being swiftly ejected from the Biennale. Frustrating thought this was at the time, in the end we chose to consider the thefts as a form of 'flattery', in that people liked the exhibition so much they just had to take something with them.

Critical reaction

Although indigenous artists had represented Australia at a previous Biennale⁷, until recent times, indigenous artists from Australia have usually been exhibited, internationally, in ethnographic museums, which '...perpetuated the out-of-date idea that Aboriginal art is merely exotica, if not 'primitive' art, rather than living contemporary practice.'⁸ Djon Mundine, touched on this further, when referring to the European response to *Aratjara: Art of the First Australians*, a major survey exhibition to Europe and Britain in 1993:

*Responses in the European press followed several patterns. Most common were the exotic travelogues of the Australian landscape and its inhabitants, motivated by a romantic perception of Australia as clean and pure in comparisons with Europe's ravaged social and political environment. A few critics took an obliquely referenced look at primitive art and a few others attempted the difficult task of describing to European viewers this new and infinitely complex form of painting and sculpture.*⁹

Survey exhibitions of indigenous visual art for an international audience tend to be problematic, because much of the audience expects them to be a complete representation of contemporary indigenous art practice, which is unfair and impossible. Although problematic, survey exhibitions such as *Aratjara* and *Dreamings* (exhibited at the Asia Pacific Society, New York, in 1988) were instrumental in generating a greater awareness of the diversity of contemporary indigenous art practice. Aside from the obvious limitations imposed by the Pavilion¹⁰, *fluent* was not conceived as a survey exhibition¹¹.

⁷ Rover Thomas and Trevor Nickolls, 1990, in a non-curated exhibition.

⁸ Mundine, Djon, 'Aboriginal Art Abroad: Responses to Touring Exhibitions in Europe, The United States and Asia', *Art and Australia* The Festival of the Dreaming Olympic Arts Festival Special Issue Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Vol 35 No. 1 1997 p 70. *Aratjara: Art of the First Australians* was a decade in the planning.

⁹ *Ibid*, as in 8

¹⁰ Designed by Phillip Cox and officially opened in 1988, the pavilion is split level and tiny in comparison with other pavilions - eg Great Britain, Germany, France and of course, Italy. Except for Thomas and Nickolls in 1990, solo exhibitions have represented Australia

¹¹ Although certain areas could be argued as being represented eg, remote/traditional, rural/regional and urban-based; community and art-school trained, art and craft, this was not the impetus for *fluent*

*fluent demonstrates the ability of Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Yvonne Koolmatrie and Judy Watson to draw on and be sustained by a continuous cultural heritage while developing a means of expressing their individuality within this tradition.*¹²

From a critical point of view, the Curatorium anticipated some negative reception to *fluent*: John McDonald, Visual Arts Writer, for The Sydney Morning Herald, summed it up:

*From the beginning, the noises were not promising. The Australia Council. ..proposal... provoked howls about political correctness, and the suspicion that Australia was thinking about the Biennale in terms of its own conscience, rather than more objective criteria.*¹³

The Curatorium attempted to anticipate all these factors, including a possible dismissal of *fluent* as being 'folk' art, and therefore, not contemporary¹⁴. *fluent* was conceived with an emphasis on the contemporaneity of the art, as opposed to an historical, or geographical context. To our delight, the majority of feedback was very positive, surpassing all expectations.

Australian critics were overwhelmingly positive, and from unexpected sources such as McDonald, who, in the same review, echoed the thoughts of many when he wrote: *Last year I turned up at the pavilion in Venice expecting the worst, and was surprised by the presentation and atmosphere of the exhibition.*

And, in discussing the work, he stated:

*The spiritual or political messages could be extracted at will, but the all-important first impression was a vision of bold minimalist stripes, fields of shimmering colour, and two floating sculptural forms that could have been designed by Russian constructivists as agitprop loudspeakers. The work was exotic in origins, but suggested many comforting family ties with international modernism.*¹⁵

A review of the exhibition by British art critic, William Packer in The British Financial Times 24 June 1997 stated:

*The resolution of ethnic and cultural tradition with modernism is a contemporary problem faced by artists from Japan to Mexico. ..the Australian Pavilion shows three artists of Aboriginal origin achieving authentic personal solutions. ..the paintings of the late Emily Kame Kngwarreye, with her stripes of rich, lush paint, dancing together in a natural energy and intuitive accord, leaves us the most immediately engaging paintings in the entire Biennale.*¹⁶

Images from *fluent* were portrayed in many Italian magazines, journals, and on national television, as the lead into articles or promotions of the Biennale. According to the Biennale press office, *fluent* received more favourable coverage than any other pavilion, other than the Italian Pavilion.¹⁷ For the most part, the international audience displayed a maturity and development in their appreciation and awareness of the work as such. The ability of the

¹²Ibid, as in 1

¹³McDonald, J The Dream Weavers' The Sydney Morning Herald, Spectrum Arts, Saturday 10 January 1998, p 14S

¹⁴Gabrielle Pizzi encountered opposition from the organisers of the 1995 Cologne Art Fair, who initially refused to approve her inclusion due to her exhibiting the work of contemporary indigenous artists from Australia on such grounds. Pizzi successfully challenged the decision and was readmitted - having exhibited contemporary indigenous artists at the previous Cologne Art Fair.

¹⁵Ibid, as in 7

¹⁶Packer, William, 'Pavilioned in Splendour', The Financial Times, Tuesday 24 June 1997, Britain

¹⁷Celant's *Future, Past, Present* was exhibited in the Italian Pavilion and the Corderie, at the Arsenale

international audience attending the Biennale to embrace this was reflected in the visitors book, maintained over five months.¹⁸

One leading British art critic commented that he was stunned by the power of Kngwarreye's works, and that in his opinion, they exceeded the work of internationally renowned abstract artist Agnes Martin (USA), who was awarded the Leone d'oro all'opera (Golden Lion). He, like many others, was even more intrigued by this visionary artist, upon learning that her life experience offered no contact with international contemporary visual art practice. The raw strength evident in her visual expression was easily recognised, and celebrated as comparable with, if not surpassing, her international contemporaries. Other parallels were drawn between Kngwarreye's work and that of Brice Marden (USA), and Elsworth Kelly (USA). The aforementioned Martin and Marden had been selected by Germano Celant, the Venice Biennale Director, for inclusion in his *Future, Past, Present*.

The exhibition was consistently referred to by visitors as being 'one of the best' exhibitions at the Biennale. In the final month of the Biennale, *fluent* was chosen by local teachers as one of three exhibitions from over 30 pavilions, in which to stage workshops for 1200 students, ranging in age from 6 to 14 years.

Similarly, its intrinsically sensual and feminine aspects were commented upon, especially pertinent in a sensual and feminine city such as Venice, where one's own sight, sound, touch, taste and scent are all heightened by the incredible surroundings.

These were moments experienced by thousands of people who visited the pavilion and will be experienced by many more people during its national tour. People overseas can comprehend indigenous Australians contemporaneity, our ability to operate on a world stage, our specifically Australian essence, and also respect that our ancient cultural traditions are intrinsic to our present and our future. They applaud us for it. They value it. They honour it.

Coming Home

It was difficult to leave that generosity of spirit and a sincere interest in indigenous Australia, and return to the current political climate where the situation between indigenous people and the Federal Government is the worst that I remember. Where reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians seems an ever-increasing improbability, whilst the powers governing this country cannot bring themselves to say such a simple, yet essential and mature statement as, 'We are sorry'. Where the 1992 High Court decision that *terra nullius* was void, and Native Title extant, is currently under attack from select quarters, couched in unbridled ferocity, ignorance and racial hatred, irrespective of the Government's deflection of the issue.

The willingness of an international audience, and many non-indigenous Australians, to learn more, to work with, and alongside us, and gain an insight through viewing the work of artists' such as Kngwarreye, seeing their interwoven stories, ancestral prescience, individual and cumulative vision will assist us in understanding each other's culture.

The accomplishment of *fluent*, acknowledged by peers and critics, both in Venice and Australia, was anticipated by Hetti in her catalogue essay:

*The possibilities of Aboriginal art practice are infinite and can have relevance and resonance outside their immediate cultural context while maintaining the integrity of speaking from within that context. We belong to this country, always have, always will.*¹⁹

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¹⁸ A few comments referred to the indigenous aspect of the work in a negative, and frankly uninformed manner eg, 'I'm over dots'(although none of the works depicted dot configurations), or 'Not representative of Australia'.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, as in 1