

Byron Ellis, University of Western Australia

Entrant Profile (47 words):

Byron Ellis is a final year undergraduate student in History of Art and History at the University of Western Australia. His interests include post-Impressionism, printmaking, and Australian art as well as histories of social movements and their relationships to the forces that have shaped the modern world.



Summary Paper (401 words):

“Divisionism and Dreaming: Paintings of Landscape and Country by Georges Seurat and Emily Kame Kngwarreye.”

In 2018, Damien Hirst was accused of plagiarism in his series of acrylic works entitled The Veil Paintings. Advocates for the late Australian Aboriginal artist, Emily Kame Kngwarreye (1910-1996), claimed there were deliberate similarities between her paintings, made thirty years prior, and Hirst’s. In his defence, Hirst pleaded ignorance of Kngwarreye’s work claiming his paintings were original yet inspired by the French “Impressionist and post- Impressionist painters such as Bonnard and Seurat.

Inadvertently, Hirst had described a stylistic convergence of little dots or petit points between Kngwarreye and Georges Seurat (1859-1891). The artists’ works, though disparate in time and space, do indeed have an affinity. With technical and story-telling ability, they demonstrate the relationships between the landscape and the people that inhabit it.

Seurat’s dotted abstraction in Sunday on the Island of La Grande Jatte (1884-1886) interposes a sophisticated layer of technique between the artist/viewer and the subject of the painting, the bourgeois picnickers. Seurat’s system, a rippling layer of dots, dislocates the viewer from the subject of the painting as well as the painted figures from each other and their environment as they are fixed in division into suspended dots of colour.

Kngwarreye, removed from Seurat’s alienated vision of Paris, presented her view and connection to Country as an Anmatyerre elder and law woman. Her breakthrough paintings tell the stories of the yam Dreaming, for which she had a special responsibility as a knowledge-holder. Kam (1991) is one of these. It is titled the Anmatyerre word for seed of the pencil yam.

Beneath the yam’s bright yellow flower, its roots grow horizontally under the surface of the dry creek beds. This produces thin ridges that are sung as part of the forming of the song lines, in Anmatyerre Dreaming, running through Kngwarreye’s Country guiding people in the law and practice of their ancestors.

Some critics dislocate Kngwarreye’s painterly Dreaming from Country through a formalist narrative where paintings such as Kam are read analogously to Abstract Expressionism. She, however, was clear of purpose stating, “That’s what I paint: whole lot,” referencing an understanding of Country alive and transcendent in Dreaming.

Seurat's alienated and dislocated figures converse with Kngwarreye's blooming Country, the new civilisation of bourgeoisie Paris in relation with the oldest civilisation on earth. Overcoming differences, the dots are essential for the Seurat's Divisionism and Kngwarreye's Dreaming constituting a vision of lives disrupted by urbanisation and colonisation conversing across time and space.