

## GAGOSIAN

### Los Angeles Times

#### Review: Spectacular aboriginal paintings from Australia burst with deep, sacred beauty

Christopher Knight



*Naata Nungurrayi, "Untitled," 2010, synthetic polymer paint on linen (Robert McKeever / Gagosian)*

As with Navajo blankets, Japanese Zen *ensō* paintings, Gee's Bend quilts and much more, the similarity between Australian aboriginal painting and modern Western abstract art is mostly superficial. All have their own codes and contexts, which are keys to unlocking the deeper beauty of what the artists have made. Think of them as outliers at your peril.

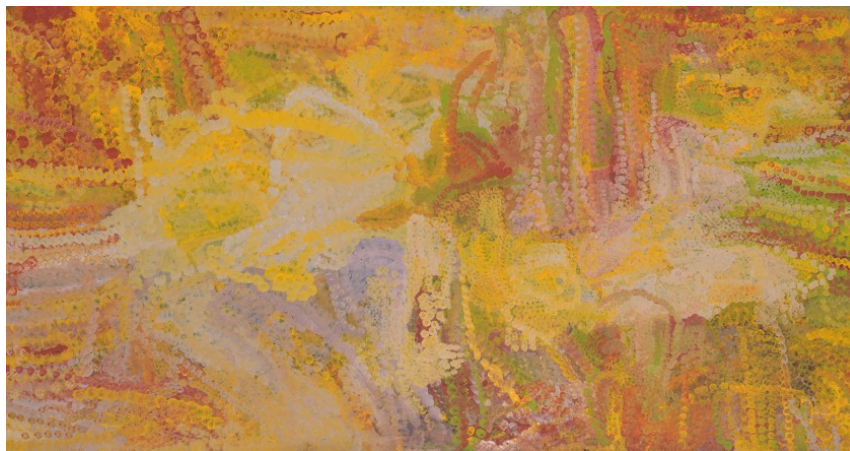
At Gagosian, "Desert Painters of Australia Part II" assembles 21 paintings by 11 artists made during the last 30 years, with most dating from this century. (The title's "Part II" nods to an earlier exhibition at the gallery's New York flagship last spring.) Many works are borrowed from the collection of writer Anne Stringfield and her husband, entertainer Steve Martin. The exhibition is an exciting conclusion to an unusually lively summer gallery season, which has departed from the more typical vacation-time quietude.

Most of these desert painters live and work in Australia's Northern Territory, first settled by indigenous people 40,000 years ago, principally in the sparsely populated, semi-arid southern region. Perhaps that helps explain the prominence of searing, red-orange hues in more than half

the show's paintings: You feel the presence and power of sprawling desert landscape, with its similarly colored earth and light, even if you don't see its forms depicted.

If there is a mark that characterizes these widely varied paintings, it is the dot. Atomized specks and spots proliferate, often coalescing to form lines, pathways and larger circles that create dense, canvas-covering patterns reaching edge to edge. Compositions have no center — or perhaps multiple centers, which constantly shift attention across the surface.

Naata Nungurrayi paints a densely stippled, horizontal field of flame-colored spots against earthen brown and black, a stark contrast that establishes its glowing vibrancy. George Tjungurrayi (Nungurrayi's brother) weaves sinuous lines that seem to be an impossible fusion of a tiny fingerprint and a limitless landscape. Like dried brush on a hillside, dense thickets of horizontal rows of vertical dot-lines mark an exquisite painting by Yukultji Napangati.



*Emily Kame Kngwarreye, "Merne Akngerre," 1992, synthetic polymer paint on linen (Robert McKeever, Gagosian)*

Many of the show's most captivating works are by women, including Nungurrayi and Napangati, ages 87 and 49, respectively. The standout is the justly celebrated Emily Kame Kngwarreye (1910-1996), a Utopia clan elder regarded by the National Museum of Australia as among the country's greatest artists.

Her career was brief but prolific, with some 3,000 paintings made over eight years — about one per day. The three Kngwarreye works in the show demonstrate her formidable breadth.

"Wild Yam and Emu Food" is a network of cellular shapes filled to overflowing with stabbed dots of color, like a roiling, barely contained energy field. "Yam Story III" is a vertical web of spidery white tracery over flat black, a ghostly trail of light standing 7½ feet tall. "Merne Akngerre," arguably the most viscerally beautiful painting in a show with tough competition for the title, is an ecstatic, 10-foot horizontal expanse of teeming spots of rainbow hues, which marks the eddying flow of time through the ritual tapping of the brush.

The paintings were specifically made for outsiders. The sacred and narrative cosmology contained within them is, according to a gallery handout, veiled and fragmentary, transformed and intentionally withheld in their fullness from those outside the clans. Given the expressive richness of the articulation of experience contained in what we do see, these are masterful contemporary paintings, plain and simple.