

MINNIE PWERLE · EMILY PWERLE · MOLLY PWERLE · GALYA PWERLE

September 13–October 25, 2025

Château Shatto is pleased to announce an exhibition of works from the early 2000s by Minnie Pwerle (born c. 1920–2006), Emily Pwerle (born c. 1922), Molly Pwerle (born c. 1919–2024) and Galya Pwerle (born c. 1930). These four sisters—belonging to the Alyawarre and Anmatyerre language groups in central Northern Territory, Australia—were prolific Western Desert artists who applied themselves to the medium of paint towards the latter parts of their lives.

Minnie Pwerle was the first of the sisters to begin painting with synthetic polymer in 1999 and would receive the most institutional recognition, both during her lifetime and posthumously. Minnie was first invited to approach the medium by her daughter, the acclaimed artist Barbara Weir, who initially supplied her mother with materials. The understanding and appreciation of her work was propelled in the slipstream of her sister-in-law Emily Kam Ngwarray's incalculable contributions and immediately-canonized career. Five years later, Barbara extended this encouragement to her aunts—Emily, Molly, and Galya—and together their first workshop was initiated at the Ulotja Outstation in 2004. There, the sisters gathered regularly—every six weeks—for workshops where they developed both collaborative canvases and individual works.

At the center of this exhibition is one of these collaborative paintings, Awelye Atnwengerrp, dated shortly after their workshops began. In 2005, Minnie, Emily, Molly and Galya completed this painting in one continuous sitting, a pace of working that characterized their individually authored works as well.

In this collaborative painting, each artist's mark occupies a quadrant of the rectangular canvas, which measures no more than a meter on its longest side. Relatively modest in size for a painting movement that embraced expansive scales, this work embodies the oppugnant existential forces within the transcultural practice of Western Desert painting.

The Pwerle sisters' gestural repertoires are formally distinct, yet each is concentrated on the repetitive conjuring of bush melons and their seeds—a life-sustaining plant in Atnwengerrp, their home country—and awelye, a ceremonial tradition that includes body painting, practiced only by women. Derived from performance but deployed into static materials, the marks rendered with synthetic agents still retain the sense of both structured and spontaneous choreography.

Whereas Minnie's painterly marks embody momentum—the emphatic and continuous conduction of awelye—Emily's paintings produce a layering and cross-hatching that speaks to a handling of time and phenomenology that is indefinite, layered and illuminated. Molly's practice favors pendulous lines and Galya's canvases are typically formed with a diaphanous, repetitive impact of a blotting brush.

Western Desert painting is a distinctly modernist phenomenon, in that it resulted from an irreversible break with cultural practices that were extant among Indigenous language groups dating back tens of thousands of years. This fracture was produced by forced contact with technologies, economies and societal relations—a colonial matrix that both upheaved and attached itself to the notion of past in dialectical arrangement.

At the time of invasion, an indescribably complex ontology and protean epistemological system had developed within hundreds of Indigenous language groups across territory. In this universe of meaning and knowledge existed an expansive repertoire of visual expression with manifold application: marks deployed in fat and natural pigment atop the body for ceremony; renderings directly in the earth to accompany oral history traditions; and other expressions of visual relation to country, flora and fauna.

As the colonial project relentlessly displaced and alienated Indigenous practitioners—while introducing industrially-produced materials such as sheetrock, acrylic paint and canvas—one of the most consequential aesthetic and conceptual developments of the 20th century came to be.

The mark making itself is not a simple semiotic equation of fixed signifiers. While certain well-practiced gestural and compositional traditions might appear in the canvas works, these paintings are developed to both obscure and suggest the complex ancestral knowledge that informs them. This extends the spirit of pre-contact aesthetic traditions, which themselves were mutable and unfixed—often evolving in step with changing realities, myths and environmental conditions. This reveal and refusal embodies the tension that characterizes so much accomplished art: one is lured and then also left with a vast expanse of phenomenological curiosity.

The intersubjective nature of the Indigenous worldview and hermeneutics is in opposition to the singular subjectivity valorized by the economy of art. In this sense, Minnie, Emily, Molly and Galya's collaborative painting *Awelye Atnwengerrp* itself represents an ontological junction within Western Desert painting—a medium whose existence is conditioned both by Indigenous cosmology and the global trade of art.

Minnie Pwerle (born c. 1920-2006) was an Alyawarre artist born in Atnwengerrp, in the Central Desert of Australia. Her languages were Alyawarre and Anmatyerre. Pwerle's work has been exhibited at the National Art Centre, Tokyo; Portland Art Museum, Oregon; Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane; San Antonio Museum of Art, San Antonio; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Crossbay Gallery, Seoul; Kate Owen Gallery, Rozelle, NSW; Space Gallery, Pittsburgh; Tandanya Cultural Institute, Adelaide; Flinders Lane Gallery, Melbourne; Gallery Gondwana, Alice Springs; Dacou Gallery, Adelaide; Foundation Burkhardt-Felder Arts et Culture, Motiers; National Museum of Australia, Canberra. In 2002 she was awarded the 18th Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award. Her work is held in the permanent collections of National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; Queensland National Gallery, Queensland; Kelton Foundation, California; La Trobe University Collection; AMP Collection, Sydney; Kreglinger Collection, Antwerp; Bendigo Art Gallery, Bendigo; and Foundation Burkhardt-Felder Arts et Culture, Motiers.

Emily Pwerle (born c. 1922) is an Alyawarre artist born in Atnwengerrp, in the Central Desert of Australia. Her languages are Alyawarre and Anmatyerre. She currently lives in Irrultja. Emily has exhibited at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra; University of NSW, Sydney; DACOU Gallery, Melbourne; Kate Owen Gallery, Sydney; Fireworks Gallery, Brisbane; Gongpyeong Art Space, Seoul; Flinders Lane Gallery, Melbourne; Robert Steele Gallery, New York; Tandanya Cultural Institute, Adelaide; Space Gallery, Pittsburgh; Australian Embassy, Washington DC.

Molly Pwerle (born c. 1919–2024) was an Alyawarre artist born in Atnwengerrp, in the Central Desert of Australia. Her languages are Alyawarre and Anmatyerre. Molly has exhibited at Crossbay Gallery, Seoul; Tandanya Cultural Institute, Adelaide; Robert Steele Gallery, New York.

Gayla Pwerle (born c. 1930) is an Alyawarre artist born in Atnwengerrp, in the Central Desert of Australia. Her languages are Alyawarre and Anmatyerre. She currently lives in Irrultja. Gayla has exhibited at Mbantua Gallery; Flinders Lane Gallery, Melbourne; Fireworks Gallery, Brisbane; Tandanya Cultural Institute, Adelaide; Robert Steele Gallery, New York; University of NSW, Kensington; Australian Embassy, Washington DC; Japingka Gallery, Fremantle; Space Gallery, Pittsburgh.