

FAR LEFT, TOP:
Untitled (near Cranbrook) 1958
watercolour on paper, 26 x 35.3
Collection of Iris Maude Bonshore OAM.
Purchased from the artist in Cranbrook.

FAR LEFT, MIDDLE:
Untitled (west of Cranbrook) c. late 1960s
watercolour and gouache, 48 x 61
Private Collection, Purchased from Simpson Kelly in Tambellup.

FAR LEFT, BOTTOM:
Landscape (with mountains) c. 1960
watercolour and gouache on paper, 27.3 x 37.5
City of Albany Collection.

LEFT:
Untitled (Sunrise) [detail] c. 1970s
acrylic on board, 48.3 x 62.5
Collection of Trevor Gartland.

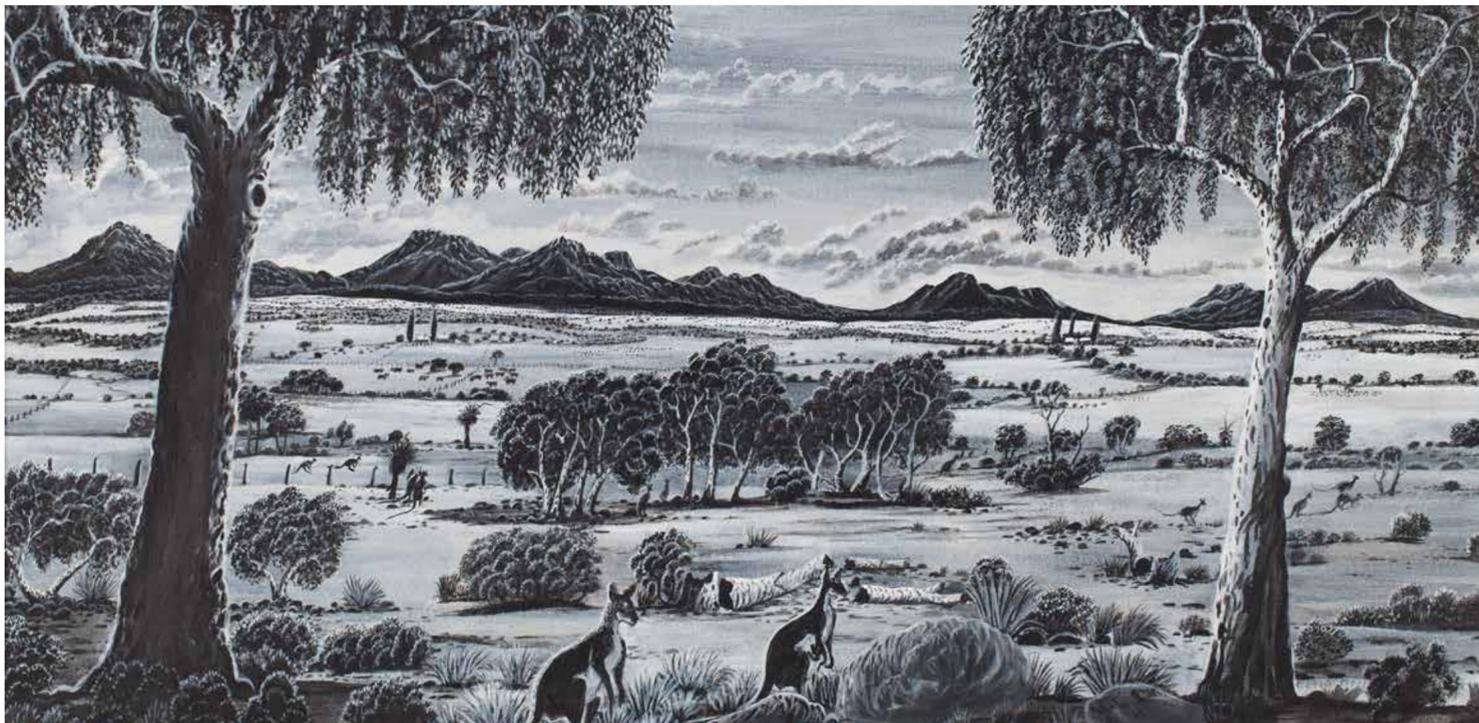
ABOVE:
Untitled 1989
acrylic on canvas, 121.5 x 182.5
Private Collection. Commissioned by the owner.

RIGHT:
Landscape (Untitled) 1988
acrylic on canvas board, 36.5 x 75
Private Collection. Purchased from the Southern Aboriginal Corporation art gallery, Coach House, York Street, Albany.

FAR RIGHT:
Untitled (Christmas Trees) c. mid 1960s
watercolour and gouache on paper, 33.5 x 44
Collection of Jean Burges. Purchased from the artist in Cranbrook.

Dimensions of artworks in cm, height x width.

www.bellakelly.com.au



BELLA KELLY

RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION 2016
Vancouver Arts Centre, Albany | 24 March to 4 June
John Curtin Gallery, Bentley | 20 June to 21 August
NEXIS Narrogin Exhibition Space | 9 September to 16 October

We remember our mother as a great inspiration. She was a role model for us and for other Noongars. CHERYL AND CAROLINE NARKLE

Bella Kelly (1915-1994) was a prolific Noongar artist whose landscape paintings are found in many public and private collections in Western Australia. Her art has previously been described as being influenced by the "Carrolup School" named after the Carrolup Native Settlement near Katanning in south west Western Australia where, between 1946 and 1950, Indigenous children created hundreds of drawings, many depicting the country around them. However, there is compelling anecdotal evidence that rather than being influenced by the *Carrolup School*, Bella Kelly was the starting point for this distinctive style. This exhibition brings together, for the first time, paintings by Bella Kelly that span five decades. It explores Bella Kelly's significance as the genesis for the Noongar style of art known as the *Carrolup School*.

Bella Kelly witnessed and experienced immense change and upheaval during her life. The first five decades of her life were subject to the harsh policies of the Aborigines Act 1905, which progressively became more restrictive during the 1930s - 50s. The lifestyle into which she was born, in which her family were farm workers and could move to follow seasonal work and camp at places of significance, changed to a life of living on Aboriginal reserves, on the outskirts of towns. Her two sets of four children, born in the 1930s and 1950s, were both taken away from her. In the late 1960s and 1970s, as policies turned to integration rather than exclusion, Bella was able to re-establish relationships with her children and lived with them in Narrogin, Tambellup, Mt Barker and Albany.





BELLA KELLY

Throughout these decades, Bella Kelly painted her Country. The scene she continually depicted was a view across paddocks and bush to the Stirling Ranges in the distance, framed by tall trees in the foreground. This is the view from her birthplace. Wherever she lived in the Great Southern and South West, the Stirling Ranges were an anchor to her identity. Painting views of 'the hills' provided emotional solace during years of turbulence and heartache².

Early Years

Bella grew up around Mt Barker, where her parents Billy Colbung and Nina Bayla Brockman worked for the Edgerton-Warburton family. Bella formed a close bond with the unmarried daughter Kitty Edgerton-Warburton, who fostered Bella's interest in drawing. Referring to Kitty's influence, Bella said "Kitty showed me"³. This friendship continued to be important throughout Bella's life.

By her mid-teens, Bella was working as a housemaid in Narrogin. Here she met Henry Kelly, who became her husband and father of Bella's first four sons. Bella remembers being given her first set of paints by her employer Mrs Edwards⁴. Memoirs provide an account of how, in the early 1940s, Bella was given a sketchbook and returned a week later with it full of paintings⁵. This suggests not only that Bella was enthusiastic about art, but also that she was already well practised in creating pictures. She was encouraged by the Narrogin Native Welfare Committee, of which Mrs Edwards was a member, and her talent received publicity when her paintings featured in the local newspaper⁶.

Even before she had paints and paper, Bella drew with whatever materials were at hand. Sitting around the

campfire, Bella would draw in the sand and with charcoal on paper⁷. "When we were sitting around the campfire, Bella would use a stick to draw into the blackened base of the long handled frying pan, then next time the pan was put on the fire, the drawing would disappear" said Maude Bonshore (nee Eades) remembering when she, Bella and Bella's four sons, and other family, were camped at Frankland in the 1940s⁸. "She also used to strip the paperbark tree to get a surface for charcoal drawings."⁹ Working as a housemaid gave Bella access to different images as well as pencils and crayons. Bella remembered "I used to look at coloured books and papers before I started with different colours"¹⁰. Her artistic talent and skill were no doubt observed by her four sons and other families with whom they camped.

Connection to Carrolup

In the 1940s Bella experienced the trauma of her sons Simpson, Gregory, Goldie and Fleming, being taken away from her, and sent to live at Carrolup Native Settlement. Along with other families who had had their children removed, Bella camped across the creek from the Settlement. At the school, from 1946 to 1950 the teacher Mr Noel White and his wife Lily, gave the students drawing materials and encouraged them to draw what they had seen on their walks through the bush.

Without any instruction from the Whites, many of the students showed an innate artistic talent. Bella's sons and other youngsters from the extended family, were familiar with her approach to depicting the landscape. Having observed how their mother drew, Simpson and Gregory, the elder of the four boys, were able to effectively create a naïve representational view of the country around them. Others in Noel White's class would also have observed their Aunt Bella drawing with charcoal and possibly paints around the shared campfire. These were the 'child artists of the Australian bush'¹¹, whose drawings were exhibited overseas and received much acclaim, creating the distinctive style which became known as the *Carrolup School*.

There are striking similarities between Bella Kelly's style and that of the *Carrolup School*. These relate not only to the similar subject matter of the Great Southern landscape, but to conventions in tone and perspective which underpin traditional Western landscape painting. Perhaps Bella had learnt from looking at pictures in the farmhouses in which she had worked? Is this what her friend Kitty Edgerton-Warburton had shown her? In the majority of pictures, tree trunks dominate the foreground and frame the view. The decreasing size of elements such as trees, fenceposts, kangaroos, and hills, along with the softening of colour, creates a sense of distance and atmospheric perspective, while a receding fenceline or track often leads the viewer's eye through the picture.

Bella Kelly's close observation of her Country enabled her to draw and paint her scenes from memory. The Country she depicted was often farmland, with

fencelines bordering the cleared ground of paddocks. Fallen branches and a hole in the trunk of a tree, for birds to nest in, are hallmarks of her images. Travelling between Gnowangerup, Tambellup and Cranbrook, places she regularly stayed at, Bella had the ongoing inspiration of the Stirling Ranges, and in particular the view of the "the Sleeping Lady" profile within the hills.

Bella partnered Largie Narkle in the mid 1940s, and she had four more children – Geoffrey, Cheryl, Lorraine and Caroline. Living in Narrogin, Bella gave birth to her three younger children at the Valmai Maternity Hospital. A midwife working there in 1954 remembers that while Bella was in the hospital, she painted landscapes on paper, and was taught how to put her name on the bottom of each painting¹². Sadly, Bella again experienced the sadness of having her four children taken from her, when they were taken away and sent to the Wandering Mission.

Developing her style

The small paintings from the 1950s and 1960s, painted with watercolour on student sketchbook paper, are simple landscape compositions, with sometimes only a single tree in the foreground, often a fenceline, and the blue hills of the Stirling Ranges in the distance. These early paintings attracted attention and, in 1960, two were included in an exhibition in Perth, along with paintings by seven other Aboriginal artists including three from the *Carrolup School*¹³. In the same year, Bella won an award for "the best painting by a coloured person" at the Narrogin Arts Festival¹⁴.

From the early 1970s, more art materials became available to Bella, often through the support of local doctors Dr Bourke and his wife Dr Owens¹⁵. Bella's technique expanded by painting with gouache on larger sheets of paper, and with acrylic paint on canvas boards and on masonite. She learnt to paint with acrylic paint from her son Goldie Kelly who had been taught painting while in Fremantle Prison¹⁶. Working in a larger format, Bella was able to bring more elements into her compositions, and paint with more detail. Kangaroos became a regular presence, standing in the foreground or



bounding across the paddocks. While Bella's palette became more vivid with the availability of opaque paints, she also painted many grey-scale tonal paintings which are interesting for their limited palette and eerie mood. These beautifully detailed paintings very clearly show the artist's skill in mastering tonal variation.

Selling her art

Bella's ability to create opportunities to sell her paintings is testament to her own resilience, courage and talents, as well as providing a fascinating glimpse of rural life during the 1960s to 1980s. The money she received not only supplemented her rations but was an important source of income for her extended family. Many residents of the small towns through the Great Southern and Wheatbelt remember Bella knocking on their door, seeking to sell one or more of the paintings under her arm. She bartered with her paintings at stores and hotels and, in the early 1970s, sold many paintings through the butcher shop in Tambellup.

In 1972 Bella and her son Goldie Kelly had an exhibition together at the Gallery of Aboriginal Art, run by Mary Macha, in Wellington Street Perth, and Macha continued to promote Bella's paintings in her gallery. To build on this opportunity, Bella moved her family to Fremantle in 1973. Her nephew Ken Colbung, the well known activist, introduced her to many people, but her stay in the city was short lived. Back in Mt Barker, and later in Albany, Bella continued to sell her work wherever she could and she is remembered as always having a small painting in her bag, ready to sell¹⁷. She joined the Baptist Church, in which her son Geoffrey Narkle was very involved.

Although formal exhibition opportunities were rare, Bella found ways of exhibiting and selling her art. During the 1970s and 1980s, Bella sold her paintings through general stores and art and craft outlets in the Great Southern. In the 1980s, the Southern Aboriginal Corporation set up a gallery in central Albany, where Bella and other Noongar artists sold artworks. Bella often entered art prizes and received strong acclaim. In 1988 Bella was named NAIDOC Aboriginal Artist of the Year and, in 1991, she exhibited at the Fremantle Arts Centre.

We remember our mother as a great inspiration.

She was a role model for us and for other Noongars.

She was always painting – she'd sit down, with her family around her and paint her pictures. She loved painting the Stirling Ranges and she'd talk to us as she painted - there was always a story to tell. She travelled around a lot and wherever she went she sold her paintings. She got a lot of respect from people. In those days Noongars used to be shamed, but our mum used to talk to them all. She was always kind to people.

We are really proud of her art. We are both artists, and we hope that our children and grandchildren will do the same thing and keep the painting going in our families.

Cheryl and Caroline Narkle, March 2016



The Legacy

Geoff described how Bella's stories and art continued to inspire her sons Gregory and Goldie who, as adults, created many paintings of their Country¹⁸. Their younger siblings, Geoffrey, Caroline and Cheryl Narkle also became artists. In their paintings, Cheryl and Caroline reflect their mother's influence in subject matter and style. Simpson Kelly's daughter Lynette is continuing the tradition, and other grandchildren show artistic talent. Other artists including Athol Farmer (Moordippa) remember watching and learning from Bella, while Lance Chadd (Tjillyungoo) remembers her influence.

Bella Kelly's legacy, having started before 'the child artists from the bush', continues through subsequent generations. This exhibition celebrates Bella Kelly's creative passion, resourcefulness and resilience through an era of immense hardship and change. In proposing Bella Kelly as the matriarch of Noongar art, this exhibition makes a new and important statement about her place in Aboriginal art and in Western Australian art history.

Annette Davis 2016

Curator: Annette Davis | Advisors: Cheryl Narkle, Caroline Narkle, Tony Davis, Chris Malcolm, John Curtin Gallery | Filmmaker: John Carberry
Graphic Designer: Donna Cameron | Photographer: Bo Wong | Vancouver Arts Centre: Amber Perryman, Indra Geidans, Rachel Wilson
John Curtin Gallery: Chris Malcolm, Amanda Alderson.

The curator thanks the many individuals who shared information about their paintings and their memories of Bella Kelly, and is particularly grateful to the lenders of the artworks for their generous assistance.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ *Carrolup Art and Carrolup School* are colloquial references to the body of artwork created at the Carrolup State School within the Carrolup Native Settlement 1946-1950. These artworks were created by indigenous children aged 7 – 14, detained at the Settlement against their will.
- ² Geoffrey Narkle, quoted in *South West Central, Indigenous Art from South Western Australia 1833 – 2002*, Brenda Croft with Janda Gooding, Art Gallery of Western Australia, 2003, p 43.
- ³ Conversation between Bella Kelly and Tony Davis, as stated by Tony Davis on 14 June 2014, "Ripples in the Pond" talks, Vancouver Arts Centre, Albany.
- ⁴ Albany Advertiser, 1992 interview with Bella Kelly by Pat Fraser.
- ⁵ Research undertaken by Tony Davis, 2015.
- ⁶ Narrogin Observer, 19 April 1947 and 23 April 1948.
- ⁷ Stated by Caroline Narkle on 14 June 2014, "Ripples in the Pond" talks, Vancouver Arts Centre, Albany.
- ⁸ Interview by curator with Maude Bonshore, 20 Nov 2015.
- ⁹ Interview by curator with Maude Bonshore, 28 Feb 2016.
- ¹⁰ Bella Kelly quoted in "Self-taught artist finds inspiration in a raw landscape" article by Pat Fraser, Albany Advertiser.
- ¹¹ Referring to the book *Child Artists of the Australian Bush* by Mary Durack Miller with Florence Rutter, published in London, 1952.
- ¹² Told to curator by Kathleen Catton, 17 Nov 2015.
- ¹³ Exhibition of Paintings by a Selection of Aboriginal Artists, 28 Nov – 9 Dec 1960, Dulux Colour Centre, Perth.
- ¹⁴ "Narrogin's 5 Day Art Festival" by Winifred Bisset, *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 30 Nov 1960, p 19.
- ¹⁵ Personal communication by curator with Maude Bonshore and with Tony Davis.
- ¹⁶ Interview by curator with Caroline Narkle, 13 Nov 2015.
- ¹⁷ Interview by curator with Antonio De Meis, 16 Oct 2015.
- ¹⁸ Geoffrey Narkle, *South West Central*, p 43.

FAR LEFT, TOP:

Bella Kelly c 1985.
Photo: Unknown.

FAR LEFT, BOTTOM:

Cheryl and Caroline Narkle, 18 Nov 2015, Mt Barker. Photo: Annette Davis.

LEFT, TOP:

Untitled [golden sunset] c 1970s
gouache, 36 x 48.7
Private Collection.
Purchased from the Chinese Restaurant in Mt Barker.

RIGHT, TOP:

Map showing Bella Kelly's Country, Western Australia.

RIGHT, MIDDLE:

Untitled [late summer landscape] c 1980s
gouache, 36 x 48.5
Collection of Helen Kitching.
Purchased from the artist in Albany.

RIGHT, BOTTOM:

Untitled [sunrise over the Stirlings] c 1970s
acrylic on board, 48.3 x 62.5
Collection of Trevor Gartland.

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