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Exhibition honours work of respected Noongar artist Bella Kelly

Bella Kelly Retrospective

- *Vancouver Arts Centre, 85 Vancouver Street, Albany, WA*
- *Opening event: 5.30pm Wednesday, 23 March 2016.*
- *Exhibition dates: 24 March to 4 June 2016.*

A ground breaking exhibition which celebrates the art and legacy of Noongar artist Bella Kelly (1915-1994) opens at Vancouver Arts Centre this month.

The Bella Kelly Retrospective makes a new and important statement about her place in history. It aims to establish Bella Kelly's significance as the genesis for the Noongar style of art known as the Carrolup School.

Born in Mt Barker, Bella Kelly lived in many towns throughout the Great Southern. During her life she experienced immense change. Her two sets of four children, born in the 1930s and 1950s, were both taken away from her.

Throughout all this, Bella painted her country, the Great Southern, with the Stirling Ranges in the background. She sold her paintings to earn money and her paintings are found in many public and private collections.

This exhibition celebrates Bella Kelly's creative passion, resourcefulness and resilience through an era of immense hardship and change.

Bella Kelly's art has previously been described as being influenced by the Carrolup School, named after the Carrolup Native Settlement near Katanning in south west WA, where between 1946 and 1951 indigenous children created hundreds of pastel drawings, many depicting the country around them.

However, based on a range of evidence, this exhibition proposes that, rather than being influenced by the Carrolup School, Bella Kelly was in fact the starting point for this distinctive Noongar art style.

This Retrospective is a unique opportunity to view 52 artworks by this significant Noongar artist. The paintings span five decades, and show the development of her style as new materials became available to her.



Most of the paintings have been borrowed from private collections, and have never been seen publicly before.

Exhibition curator Annette Davis there was a huge response to last year's call-out for paintings by Bella Kelly.

"I have seen about 250 paintings, mostly owned by people who lived in the Great Southern and bought their painting directly from Bella," Ms Davis said.

"With so many lovely paintings to choose from, it was a difficult task to select the 52 for the exhibition."

The City of Albany Art Collection's four paintings by Bella Kelly will be part of the exhibition.

Bella Kelly's two surviving daughters, Cheryl and Caroline Narkle, are artists themselves and paint at Mungart Boodja Art Centre, Albany. They were inspired by their mother and who they describe as a role model to them and other Noongar artists.

To coincide with the exhibition's focus on their mother, a selection of paintings from Cheryl and Caroline Narkle and other descendants of Bella Kelly will be on show in adjacent galleries at Vancouver Arts Centre.

To allow broad community access and extend the life of this important exhibition, developing an online publication (www.bellakelly.com.au) has been an integral part of the project. The website will feature images of all the works from the exhibition, video and audio information, educational information and worksheets, and background information on the project and its development.

The importance of the Bella Kelly Retrospective has been recognised by other WA galleries.



After its presentation in Albany, the exhibition will be shown at the John Curtin Gallery, Curtin University, Bentley from June 20 to August 21, and then at NEXIS Exhibition Space in Narrogin from September 9 to October 16.

This project is supported by the Departments of Culture and the Arts and Regional Development, Royalties for Regions and Country Arts WA.

For more information please contact arts@albany.wa.gov.au or by phone on 9841 9260. To arrange interviews please contact Curator Annette Davis direct on 0428 922968.

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