

ÖMIE





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The presentation of The Art of Ömie is a collaborative effort of the
Ömie Nemiss Incorporated group, David Baker, Drusilla Modjeska and Annandale Galleries.

The curators have, to their best ability, established the authenticity
and as accurately as possible described the works of art.

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Front cover: **Dapeni Jonevari** *asimano'e & soru'e* – design of a man and Ömie custom creations #2 2009 182 x 94 cm

Back cover: **Pauline Rose Hago** *soru'e* – Ömie custom creations 2009 140 x 83 cm

Page 1 (detail): **Mala Nari** *tubōru une* – cassowary egg #2 2009 222x120 cm

ÖMIE

THE ART OF ÖMIE

Aspesa Gadai • Lila Gama • Nerry Keme • Jean Magreat Hoijo • Dapeni Jonevari
Pauline Rose Hago • Brenda Kesi • Mala Nari • Flora Oviro • Stella Upia

Wednesday 1 July 6.30 for 7.00pm

Dapeni Jonevari and Pauline Rose Hago will be in attendance

Exhibition dates 1 July - 8 August 2009

ANNANDALE GALLERIES

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Tuesday - Saturday 11 - 5 pm

Directors Bill & Anne Gregory **ACGA**



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ÖMIE
bark cloths from New Guinea

To Be Opened by ALBAN SARE – Manager of Ömie Nemiss Inc

Discourse by JUDITH RYAN – Senior Curator Indigenous Art National Gallery Victoria

*In the Presence of Ömie Artists
DAPENI JONEVARI & PAULINE ROSE HAGO*

The Art of the ÖMIE female chiefs, who live in the shadow of Mount Lamington by the Kokoda trail in New Guinea, has been an enormous success for the Ömie people and for Annandale Galleries. Our first exhibition in July 2006 was followed by a show at Holmes à Court Gallery in Perth May 2007. Response by the public and museums was extraordinary. Over 20 pieces were sold into museum collections in Australia.

The works are made on bark cloth and incorporate traditional and ceremonial designs to do with the nature and culture which surrounds them. The artists go through a long period of apprenticeship but once they have achieved the status to make the work have complete freedom to express the stories in a personal manner so similar themes take on very different form depending on the artist. Like the Aboriginal women also on show at Annandale, the work therefore is always changing and evolving and should be viewed as a vibrant contemporary art using traditional materials.

Opening November 27th 2009, the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) will be mounting a full- scale exhibition 'The Art of ÖMIE' at St. Kilda Road with full one hundred plus page catalogue and over 50 works.

In July, Annandale Galleries will be hosting two of the ÖMIE artists, Dapeni Jonevari & Pauline Rose Hago, in Sydney who will be making some works 2-3 July 'in situ' at Annandale for a video to be used in the landmark NGV exhibition.

Ömie Contemporary Art

Bill Gregory Director Annandale Galleries Sydney May 2009

The villages of the Ömie are extremely remote. One has to go there to appreciate fully just how remote. Once made, the trek is not easily forgotten - as Drusilla Modjeska and David Baker will testify.

If you are reasonably fit, the journey is roughly nine hours of often gruelling walking. The famous Kokoda trail is not far off and the terrain quite similar. Very little of it is flat and the walk consists of seemingly endless ups and downs navigating narrow, slippery paths, fording fast flowing rivers and rock hopping along others. The way up requires holding-on to jungle trees and vines and the way down is often so steep it needs to be negotiated on backsides.

Relief from the heat and humidity is sought by dunking oneself in the rivers or creeks that wind through the valley floors although the Ömie guides rarely broke a sweat and left this indulgence for their visitors. There is an airstrip near one of the villages but this has been out of service for many years. It is small wonder that when David Baker made the trip in 2002 he was one of the only white men to have visited in more than a decade.

How and why did this tribe of people find themselves in such a remote spot in the shadow of Mount Lamington, a volcano that blew its northern side away in 1951 causing more than 3,000 deaths? Fortunately for the Ömie, whose villages are on the ridges to the south east of the summit, the volcano disgorged itself in the opposite direction and they were largely untouched by the steam, smoke, and lava. There are fewer than 2,000 Ömie and from their language and art it appears that the tribe originally came from the south, across the Owen Stanley Mountains and descended as far as they could before being stopped by the Orokaivans. After negotiations punctuated by wars and violence they settled on the ridges where the several villages are now located. The villages are not unlike European hilltop towns, and command views that allow them to monitor any movement below.

There is a siege mentality. Some of the villages are gated. Upon approach to a village one waits outside until the guides announce arrival and the village prepares a welcome. Once the gates are opened fierce looking warriors brandishing spears may greet the party. Once inside however the tone changes markedly and there are dancers in ceremonial dress, men beating kundos (ceremonial drums) and children running around to join in the excitement – visitors are rare and their presence a major event. There is a greeting line as well as a farewell line during these visits that sometimes extends up to 100 metres in length.

The very existence of these people seems precarious. Their physical surroundings are a constant reminder of the vigilance they maintain. There are spectacular views from the villages with both the threat and majesty of Mount Lamington (1,680meters) looming tall over them. Simple tasks such as fetching water require a significant trek down to the valley floors where the creeks and streams run. The vegetables that they grow are also situated further down the hillsides. It is hot and humid during the day, punctuated by downpours, and foggy and chilly at night. Perched as they are on the top of ridges, there is a vertiginous feeling of danger. It is as if they have not so much chosen a site as taken a last stand.

Their language and customs are quite different from their neighbours below. The threat from

these neighbours has, for centuries been very real. Raiding parties and armed confrontation has interrupted periods of peace. There are still serious border disputes and a man died at the border just a couple of years ago. The Ömie were contained and confined to the hilltop villages where they remain and they learned how to organize their lives and culture within those parameters. Today, although the vigilance remains and venturing beyond a certain point remains dangerous, their isolation is more economic than social. The Orokaivans are the dominant force in Oro province and government funds and support stop in their area. The Ömie have to be largely self-sufficient, receiving almost nothing from the provincial or government authorities. Cooking utensils, and staples such as salt or sugar are all luxuries – as becomes apparent to any visitor who shares their meals. The seeming inconsequential loss of a pinch of salt or some soy sauce on the trek in takes on great significance during a lunch or dinner with the Ömie!

Theirs is a life therefore immersed in the present. Survival is a daily routine of procuring and maintaining the sources of things we take for granted such as food and water.

The beating heart of nature is ever present and embraced out of necessity. Like the Australian Aboriginals, there is a Christian element that is woven into their animist beliefs and traditions. The subject matter of their art is the natural world around them and their all-important relationship with it.

They are a very social people and love to make music. At night the dancing and singing often go on into the small hours of the morning. Isolation makes music and art crucial to their social fabric.

But what is extraordinary about the Ömie, and what sets them apart is their art. Why does it exist in such contrast to other peoples and tribes who live nearby? Many of the valley tribes also make art but nothing like what we see from the Ömie. The work is stunningly beautiful and entirely unique – there is nothing like it in the outside world, nor is there anything similar in any other area of Papua New Guinea.

The Ömie work on barkcloth made by female chiefs although the society is not strictly speaking matriarchal. It is a utilitarian art in that the barkcloth is also used in everyday life. Both men and women use them as wraps for clothing and visitors are offered them as blankets for sleeping. While used in ceremony the cloths are also used as decoration in their homes as room dividers laid over sitting or sleeping areas and hung on the walls for ambience. The art surrounds them just as the nature and stories they depict are all around them. The women who make the art go through a rigorous apprenticeship that lasts for years before they are allowed to depict the stories and motifs that are the subject matter of the work. Once they achieve the right to make the work, different artists express themselves according to their own style. Therefore, many for example share a mythical tree frog or spider story. Unlike the Australian Aboriginals who often depict a specific dreaming (i.e. 'source of fire' by Djambawa Marawili that tells the story of how 'Baru' a mythical being from the dreamtime turns into a crocodile) which a certain artist has exclusive rights to according to his or her personal dreaming (origins) and clan lines, all the artists who have achieved the appropriate level are able to depict the stories or subject matter as they see fit. Therefore, there is plenty of room for personal expression, emotion and interpretation through the colour and composition.

In this exhibition of Ömie artwork there is a marked difference to some of the work that we have not seen before. The use of collage overlays which are stitched on the surface separate



Aspesa Gadai *dahoru'e – Ömie mountains #2* 2009 168 x 82 cm



to the original support, some minimal pieces using only support for form and colour and added elements mostly in dark, muted colours are some examples of the changes. The important thing to note is that the art is a living and breathing art, constantly evolving. The cooperative that was set up in 2002 with the help of David Baker and Drusilla Modjeska and the subsequent exhibition at Annandale Galleries has clearly been a catalyst for change. While pieces may have found their way out in the past - sold in Port Moresby and beyond as far back as the 1950's - there has never been an organized attempt to get the work out to the world or exhibitions in any regular manner.

How does this affect the work – this interaction between the source of the art and the western aesthetic taste and market influence?

Obviously the artists are now aware that the work is going to be seen by us and purists may argue that this changes the dynamic. Simply by the curatorial choices we make we are perhaps affecting the art. Obviously, we encourage work that the market is embracing. Does this 'water down' the effect of the art? I think not. Whether we are talking about artists from 16th century Italy, contemporary video artists or Australian Aboriginals, market forces and patrons have always played their part in artistic output. In the case of the Ömie, who have very few options from an economic standpoint, the exhibitions we have mounted here are a positive thing that has provided them with a crucial income stream. As a result they are concentrating and allotting more time and effort to their art than before. The prospect of a wider audience encourages the artists to create more work, but also to maintain their artistic standards. The knowledge that the work will be seen in Australia, and even in London and New York, is more inspiration than cultural interference. They share their work and their beliefs with us with an ever-increasing pride. They want us to understand some of what they understand, to believe in what they believe and know to be true about nature.

The response to our first exhibition in 2006 was extraordinary. Over twenty works have gone into the collections of the National Gallery of Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria and the Queensland Art Gallery. A full exhibition of over fifty pieces will open in November at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) at the St. Kilda Road building. To help facilitate this exhibition, two of the artists, Dapeni Jonevari and Pauline Rose Hago, will be in Sydney for our opening and also to do some work 'in situ' for the video cameras with the results to be screened during the NGV show.

I would like to thank David Baker, the curator of the exhibition for his tireless work on behalf of the Ömie people. His work has made this exhibition possible, and it is satisfying and exciting to see this extraordinary art be embraced by the outside world. We are very lucky to have the two visiting artists mentioned above; my thanks go out to them for making the effort to attend. I also want to thank author Drusilla Modjeska, currently finishing a novel set in New Guinea, who wrote the essay in our catalogue in 2006, visited the Ömie villages with David Baker in 2004, and who helped him to set up the artists cooperative. I am grateful to Judith Ryan of the NGV for her essay in this catalogue, her enthusiasm for the Ömie projects and crucial insight into the work. All these efforts, on behalf of the Ömie people and their spectacular art, will culminate in the forthcoming landmark exhibition, curated by Judith Ryan, at the National Gallery of Victoria opening November 27th 2009.

Bill Gregory, Sydney, May 2009



Ömie *nioge* (bark cloth): Skin of now

The making of *nioge* (bark cloth) is an Ömie practice intrinsic to women, which originated before time. Suja, the first woman to tread on Ömie territory, cut the first *nioge* to reward her husband, Mina for endowing her with the capacity to give birth. That *nioge* was cut in two and worn by the first couple, the procreative ancestors of today's mountain Ömie from Oro Province in Papua New Guinea.

The 'coming of the light', the war on the Kokoda Trail, and the eruption of Mount Lamington in 1951, profoundly affected and marginalised the 1812 Ömie people now living precariously on the steep, south-eastern slopes of that volcano. In deference to Christianity, the mountain Ömie gave up overt manifestations of their customary ritual practices, notably the tattooing of clan insignia onto the body for initiation. But the 'double skin' designs survive through their transfer onto *nioge* that is worn or explicitly displayed in ceremony, where they continue to signify Ömie knowledge and wisdom. Through this strategic transformation of tradition, bark cloth 'suffered a sea change into something rich and strange', a sophisticated contemporary art form that is fairly priced, documented and marketed by Ömie Nemiss Incorporated rather than being subject to random trading, a first for Papua New Guinea.

The National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) has a particular interest in collecting and displaying the work of contemporary Pacifica artists and in developing special exhibitions featuring current work that is founded in customary culture. In light of this mission, the NGV is organising a major exhibition of around fifty of the finest examples of Ömie *nioge* in celebration of contemporary Ömie art and culture: *Wisdom of the Mountain: Art of the Ömie*, which will be held in Special ExhibitionsI at NGV International, 27 November 2009 – 21 March 2010. This exhibition of work by sixteen artists from Budo, Godibehi, Gora, Jiapa and Savodibehi villages who range from inspirational *duvahe* (chiefs), Lila Gama and Dapeni Jonevari to spirited younger women, Nerry Keme and Flora Oviro will reveal the beauty and spiritual resonance of designs for Spider Web, Bark of the Trees, Jungle Vine and Mountains: custom creations dyed onto the cloth with fluid complexity. The designs, echoing body tattoos — bearers of sanctity — affirm the artists' identity and intimate affinity with place and assert the power of different clans. When engaging with works in the exhibition, the viewer can look into the beauty of another world in which image and essence reverberate.

The exhibition will celebrate the dynamism of a great art form expressive of a vital living culture and will enable the viewer to study the work of sixteen strongly individual Ömie women artists, defying commonly held misconceptions that the artist in Oceanic society is anonymous and male. Ömie women have been producing bark cloth for sale for around five years and have developed an assurance and facility of technique by working consistently in an exacting medium, whose singular aesthetic of raw inwardness derives from its matt materiality of surface texture, irregularity of shape and design, and its vitality of line. Each *nioge* is formed of materials from the mountainous forest homeland of the Ömie, being an organic veil beaten from paper mulberry tree bark in which an exquisite form of visual music is articulated with bush dyes.

Judith Ryan
Senior Curator, Indigenous Art
National Gallery of Victoria





Flora Oviro *subudejõ'e* – the markings of a caterpillar 2005 123 x 68 cm





Jean Margreat Hoijo *visuija'ahe & dahoru'e* – the backbone of mountain fish & Ömie mountains 2009 119 x 62 cm





Lila Gama *odunaige + wisdom – jungle vines + wisdom* 2003 69 x 59 cm





Mara Nari *tubōru une* – cassowary egg #3 2009 112x88 cm



Wisdom of the Mountain

free
entry

ART OF
THE ÖMIE
27 NOV 09 –
21 MAR 10

NGV International
180 St Kilda Road
10am–5pm
Closed Tuesdays
03 8620 2222
ngv.vic.gov.au

ngv
National
Gallery of
Victoria

Aspesa Gadai
Ömie people born 1961
Oro Province, Papua New Guinea
Dahorué (Ömie mountains) 2006
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
© Ömie Nemiss Incorporated

Victoria
The Place To Be

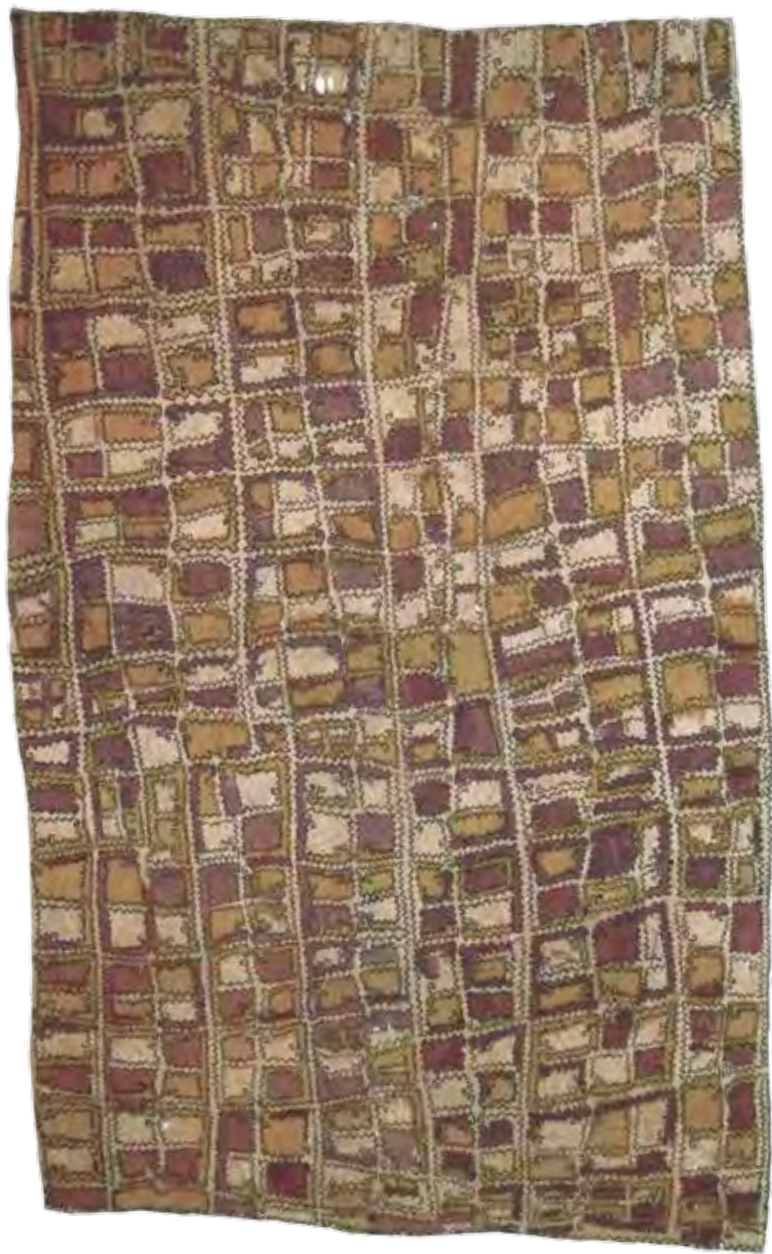


Mala Nari *tubōru une* – cassowary egg #1 2009 174x120





Nerry Keme *obohutaigu'e* – bark of the trees 2006 138 x 79 cm





Pauline Rose Hago *soru'e* – Ömie custom creations 2006 152 x 82 cm





Pauline Rose Hago *odunaige – jungle vines* 2004 85 x 52 cm





Dapeni Jonevari *savan dëgerane* - mountain frog 2005 113 x 120 cm OM34



Aspesa Gadai *kukuhone* - Ömie smoking pipe 2009 123 x 120 cm ÖMIII



Brenda Kesi *siechoutie* - muddy bark 2009 123 x 120 cm OMI14



Dapeni Jonevari *asimano'e* & *soru'e* – design of the head of a man & Ömie custom creations #1 2009 116 x 79 cm OM116



Flora Oviro *nuni'e* - design of the eye 2006 156 x 69 cm OM121



Jean Margreat Hoijo *visuija'ahe* - the backbone of mountain fish #1 2006 116 x 79 cm OM123



Stella Upia *siha'e* – fruit from the trees 2006 158 x 73 cm OM138



Flora Oviro *vahu sine & nuni'e - the body of a snake and the design of the eye* 2009 134 x 114 cm OM139



Lila Gama 'other elements – historic custom creations' 2009 143 x 68 cm OMI40



Pauline Rose Hago 'Ömie custom creations' 2009 150 x 106 cm OM141

DAPENI JONEVARI

Chief of the Emate Women

'I paint from my observations of mountains and forests and creatures. Dreams give me inspirations... I have learned from traditional practices and I teach the custom ways of remembering to educate the younger generation... I paint to record the traditional Ömie ways for dancing performance in traditional feasting.'

Dapeni Jonevari was born in 1949, two years before the eruption of Ömie's Mount Lamington. She is *duvabe* of the Emate women. She is married to Imanuwell, also a *duvabe*, and they have four adult children.



PAULINE ROSE HAGO

'My paintings come from our Ömie history. We live in the mountains and make gardens... I have seen the design from the trees. I am inspired by the diamond shapes from the fruit of the trees but I include other designs that our ancestors used to paint... I want to maintain my grandparents' teaching in culture and educate the young people in Ömie customs.'

Pauline Rose Hago, a member of the Emate clan, was born in 1964. She and her husband Simon have four children, the youngest born in early 2006. Pauline's older children sit with her and listen to her stories as she paints and are beginning to learn to paint.



LILA GAMA

*Paramount woman
Chief of Ömie women*

'I was taught by my grandparents, my parents and my traditional grandmothers... I apply their teaching of our traditional culture. I paint for important feasting ceremonies. It is my obligation to teach and train all Ömie people about the origin and history of Ömie art and symbols.'

Lila Gama was born in 1946. She has eight children, two of whom are developing their practice and knowledge as artists. She is now married to Nathan, a *duvabe* of the Emate clan.



BRENDA KESI

'While I paint, I sit with my friends and we talk about our lives and our families. I paint our history and what I see and think. I have learned everything from the old people and their wisdom is now being passed to the younger ones. I am pleased you like my paintings.'

Brenda Kesi, born in 1939, is a member of the Emate clan and recalls the turmoil of the war and the eruption of Mt Lamington. Brenda is married to Robinson, both respected Ömie elders.



ASPESA GADAI

'My parents were painters so I learned. I am following Ömie tradition when I paint. I learned from my mother and grandmother, and I get inspiration from the branches of trees... I paint traditional stories and designs from my clan... Sometimes I paint about initiations when we lived underground.'

Aspesa Gadai, a member of the Emate clan, was born in 1961. She and her husband are the parents of a teenager.



MALA NARI

'Since when I can remember I have been learning our Ömie history. We often sit around talking of the times of our grandparents and the land they nurtured. I was taught by my grandparents and my mother to paint our history and the important things in Ömie territory.'

Mala, born in 1972, is an Emate clan member. Mala and her husband Elo have three children.



JEAN MAGREAT HOIJO

'I am a traditional Ömie person so I paint to maintain the memory of Ömie culture... My mother was an artist, so were my grandmothers. My grandmother taught me about Ömie customs and how to paint... I like painting Ömie designs.'

Jean Magreat Hoijo, a member of the Sahuote clan, was born in 1956. She rarely ventures outside Ömie territory. She is married to John Michael and they have six children.



NERRY KEME

'I paint the stories of our Ömie customs and our place. I have listened to the teachings of our grandparents... I love the old Ömie tattoo designs. I paint on barkcloth the designs that were on my grandparents' bodies. Then we all remember and our customs will not be forgotten.'

Nerry Keme, a member of the Emate clan, was born in 1975. She and her husband Sebastine have one child.



STELLA UPIA

'My parents and grandparents were traditional Ömie people. They were my teachers. I now have the experience to take the challenge of teaching the younger people... I paint all things from my Ömie culture.'

Stella Upia, a member of the Ina'e clan, was born in 1950. She is married to Randolp.



FLORA OVIRO

'My inspiration has always been the stories and teachings of my grandparents. As a child I listened to them speak about our clan and the designs and decorations we create. Today I paint our history and I encourage our younger people to paint, too.'

Flora is married to Tonny and they have four children. Flora, born in 1973, is a member of the Dahoruraje clan and she rarely ventures outside Ömie territory.





K25.00