

Barbara Weir

Barbara Weir was born about 1945 at Bunday River Station, a cattle station in the Utopia region (called Urupunta in the local Aboriginal language) of the Northern Territory. Her parents were Minnie Pwerle, an Aboriginal woman, and Jack Weir, a married Irish man. Under the anti-miscegenation racial laws of the time, their relationship was illegal, and the two were jailed. Jack Weir died not long after his release. Minnie Pwerle named their daughter Barbara Weir.

Barbara was partly raised by Pwerle's sister-in-law Emily Kngwarreye. (After age 80, Kngwarreye took up art and became one of Australia's most prominent artists.) Barbara grew up in the area of Utopia until about age nine.

One of the Stolen Generations, she was forcibly removed from her Aboriginal family by officials; the family believed she was later killed. This was done under the Aborigines Protection Amending Act 1915, government or assigned officers were authorized in the territories to take half-caste children to be raised in British institutions to assimilate them to European culture. Some, like Barbara, were "fostered out", and she grew up in a series of foster homes in Alice Springs, Victoria, and Darwin. Boys were usually prepared for manual jobs and girls for domestic service.

In Darwin, at age 18 and working as a maid, Barbara Weir married Mervyn Torres. It was Torres who in 1963 or 1968, when passing through Alice Springs, asked someone about Weir's mother; he discovered that Minnie Pwerle was alive and living at Utopia. Mother and daughter were reunited but, although Weir regularly visited her family at Utopia, she did not form a close bond with her mother at first. Weir and Torres had six children before the marriage ended in 1977. She moved permanently to Utopia with her mother and family. As of 2000 she had thirteen grandchildren.

Barbara was active in the local land rights movement of the 1970s, working to recover Aboriginal territory. She was elected as the first woman president of the Indigenous Urapunta Council in 1985. As of 2008 she was living in Alice Springs. In midlife, Barbara began to explore Aboriginal artistic traditions. She first painted in 1989 at the age of about forty-five. Five years later in 1994, she was one of a group of ten Utopia women who travelled to study batik in Indonesia. Her paintings include representations of particular plants and "dreamings", inspired by deep Aboriginal traditions.

Barbara Weir is one of Australia's most loved, sought after and collectable artists has been exhibited and acquired by private collectors and major institutions alike. Named on multiple occasions as one of Australia's top 50 artists, her work features in collections all over the world. After Barbara's mother Minnie Pwerle took up painting in 2000, she quickly became a successful artist. Barbara played a significant role in managing the artistic careers of her mother and that of her aunt Emily.