

Menzies' winter auction aims to ward off lingering art market blues

By Jane Raffan, on 05-Jun-2011

Acknowledging that Australian modern and contemporary works continue to dominate market attention and results, Menzies mid season fine art Sydney auction, scheduled for June 23, serves up a dose of highlights to amass a pre-sale low end of \$11 million, the biggest auction to be held since the crash of 2007. And, as if to ward off any lingering art market blues—no doubt coincidental rather than curated—the top four lots are all aglow with warm hues.



Will Brett Whiteley's rich orange work, *The Paddock – Late Afternoon, 1979* prove as desirable as his Lavender Bay blue and snare a top-ten spot for the artist?

Tim Abdallah is confident that Brett Whiteley's rich orange work, *The Paddock – Late Afternoon, 1979* (Lot 46 [📄](#)) will prove as popular as his Lavender Bay blue and snare a top-ten spot for the artist with a result against estimate of \$1.4–1.8 million. In private hands since original acquisition, other than extensive tours on loan to major public exhibitions, the painting offers an array of signature stylistic elements in a very appealing landscape composition in brilliant orange and mauves; colours seen earlier in a softer application by Fred Williams with *Werribee Gorge II, 1978* (Lot 43 [📄](#)), estimated at \$400,000–500,000.

Drysdale was an early influence on Whiteley and in the accompanying text to lot 48, *The Orange Table*, it is suggested he was possibly also a source of inspiration for Whiteley's adoption of orange. Drysdale's gutsy *Red Landscape, 1958* (Lot 47 [📄](#)), makes up the sale's top lot triumvirate. Traded last winter to an investment syndicate, it is, ironically, offered for less this time around, with an estimate of \$800,000-1,000,000. With a tough subject and intense colour that could be overbearing placed elsewhere in the sale, it is strategically positioned between the two Whiteley highlights, the second being the sparser *The Orange Table, 1978* (Lot 48 [📄](#)), which also carries an estimate of \$800,000-1,000,000.

Later works by older moderns are peppered throughout the sale, examples by the long lived Nolan chief among them. There are nine works by Nolan in the catalogue, including an unprovenanced Kelly under a moonlit landscape (Lot 35 [📄](#)), an Antarctic icescape (Lot 75 [📄](#)) and two pictures with desert settings. The desert is an important element of our national psyche and when combined with historical stories of the frontier is a popular subject for painters and collectors alike. Sidney Nolan's *"Action" Bourke and Wills* (Lot 53 [📄](#)) estimate \$150,000-180,000, records a cinematic mythologising of the Bourke and Wills story.

Mythology also figures in Fairweather's *Penelope* (Lot 37 [📄](#)) estimate \$220,000–280,000, which is a lovely picture referencing the stoic Greek heroine from the Illiad, and a warm and softly painted example from his later period.




Naturally, there are moderns amongst the top echelon with harder edged subjects and more rigid lines. Blackman wouldn't be obvious in this group, but the sale's major work from the sought-after Schoolgirl series fits both characterisations. Using a playground swing-set as a formal device, the children in *Children Playing* (Lot 38 [📄](#)), estimate \$250,000–350,000, are caught mid-air and held in suspense. The stiffness of the composition reinforces the frozen moment: the imminent loss of childhood innocence. The work is more chilling than is suggested in the accompanying catalogue entry. It is, in fact, a rendering of childhood naiveté and the proverbial principle "see no evil, speak no evil and hear no evil".




Children and acrobatic paraphernalia also feature as subjects and formal devices in John Brack's work, but the sale's major listing by the artist is an altogether cheerier and more fluid depiction of both: *On Two Hands and One Foot* (Lot 41 [📄](#)), estimate \$300,000–400,000.


One of the catalogue's two international sculptural highlights is also fluid; the formal contradiction a significant element of its appeal. Jean Arp's beautiful *Torse Fruit* (Lot 44 [📄](#)), estimate \$450,000–550,000 makes a refreshing entry in the top five. In contrast, Jacques Lipchitz's *Arlequin à la Clarinette* (Lot 45 [📄](#)) estimate \$700,000–900,000, is a suitably stiff and unique retro cubist rendition of Picasso's more famous 2D clown.


The Menzies pre-sale total is big at \$11 million but big ticket items and the spread of works pitched over \$100K only represent 13% of the sale's offering by volume. Representing 75% of the sale's 140 lots, the bulk comes in with estimates under \$50,000. Tim Abdallah tactfully refers to this component as representing "meaningful opportunities for collectors with smaller purses", and nominates Brack's *Study for Elastic Stockings* (Lot 32 [📄](#)) estimates \$40,000-50,000, as an example.

In a clear nod to the success of Deutscher & Hackett's contemporary push, this component also features a solid group of works from the current cream of the crop.

Paint is mercifully back in vogue in contemporary painting. And there are some very good examples of this phenomenon amongst this group, including two palette knife beach paintings: Euan MacLeod's *Figure Lying in Seascape* (Lot 15 ) , estimate \$12,000-16,000, and Nicholas Harding's *Beach Life* (Lot 70 ) estimate \$28,000-32,000. In an altogether different, liquid application, Stephen Bush's luscious hallucinogenic paint disturbs the tranquillity of mountain dwelling in *One of These Things First* (Lot 71 ) estimate \$14,000–18,000.

Adam Cullen's brash version of *The Expulsion* (Lot 72 ) carries Blake Prize provenance and an estimate of \$18,000-24,000. And presumably consigned to capitalise on Quilty's Archibald win, the sale includes two examples by the artist: a skull (Lot 78 ) at \$10K and a larger skull-like budgie (Lot 16 ) estimate \$16,000–20,000.

New Zealand artist Shane Cotton has been described as a postmodern Maori 'merchant of ideas',^[1] and his works are usually filled with symbolism. *Self Portrait* (Lot 79 ) estimate \$50,000–60,000, offers a genealogy with an Australian story signified by the word 'Parramatta'. The work's iconography links Cotton, through his ancestor warrior Hongi Hika, to the Reverend Samuel Marsden, based at Parramatta in the early years of the colony, and who arranged for a carved head of Hika to be sent to London as a specimen of the native peoples he was converting to Christianity. Marsden was infamous in Australia and became known as the 'flogging parson'. In New Zealand he is more fondly remembered for introducing sheep, if not Christianity.

McLean Edwards also features with a self portrait *à la* Douglas Fairbanks, with bunny and pussy, in an attractively priced, if distastefully titled, fantasy scene called *Women Drivers* (Lot 74 ) estimate \$15,000–18,000.

Therein lies the appeal of auctions; something on offer for buyers of all bents.

[1] Exhibition text, Shane Cotton, *Pararaiha*, Sherman Galleries, Sydney, 28 July - 20 August 2005

Sale Referenced: [Australian & International Fine Art, Menzies, Sydney, 23/06/2011](#)

About The Author

Jane Raffan runs ArtiFacts, an Art Services Consultancy based in Sydney. Jane is an accredited valuer for the Australian Government's highly vetted Cultural Gifts Program with over 20 years experience in the arts sector, working initially for the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and then over twelve years in the fine art auction industry. Her consultancy focuses on collection management, market advice and valuations. Apart from published fine art market commentary, Jane also writes and blogs on Aboriginal art, and has a weekly radio spot reviewing the Sydney art scene. www.artifacts.net.au.