

Curator-as-point-of-difference pays off for Bonham's

By Jane Raffan, on 17-Jun-2015

Bonham's major fine art sale held in Sydney, 16 June 2015 – *Important Australian and International Art including Private Collections Curated by John Cruthers* – elevated the notion of curator-as-point-of-difference to the catalogue cover. With a hammer total of \$3,185,900, the sale achieved impressive clearances of 110% by value and 85% by lot. Whether this strategy will become enshrined in the market remains to be seen, but the success of last night's sale in broad terms is a win for Bonham's and especially Cruthers, who bore all the risk in the gambit.



Bonham's major fine art sale held in Sydney, 16 June 2015 – Important Australian and International Art including Private Collections Curated by John Cruthers – achieved a hammer total of \$3,185,900, with clearances of 110% by value and 85% by lot. The sale's notable find, John Joseph Wardell Power's *Basket of Fruit*, last exhibited publicly in Paris in a wartime charity auction to assist returned POW's, was offered at \$40,000-60,000 and sold for \$140,000, a

significant new record for the artist.

The phrase “carefully curated sale” has been in use since the GFC, when the cash cow speculator-as-buyer all but disappeared from the art market and major auction houses looked to cut production costs dramatically by trimming overblown catalogues, and banking on blue chip and saleable populist works rather than bulk offerings. While curators and advisors have long been a factor in major private collections, the spin of curatorial input has mostly remained the PR preserve of senior auction house specialists, while references to notable private consultants were relegated to catalogue provenance.

Cruthers’ core of 60 works from five vendors (lot 12 was withdrawn) included several Grosvenor School linocuts, complemented by others sourced by Bonham’s, along with a collection of works from the Nolan family, and an array of blue chip multi-vendor stock. The Grosvenor School linocuts all did well, as has been the trend for some time now, so there was no surprise as to their inclusion en masse, representing more than 10% of the lots on offer. Close on the heels of a \$70,000 sale in London last year for another print in the edition, Dorrit Black’s powerful linocut, *The Eruption, c.1929-30* (Lot 64 🎯) was the highlight of this group, selling for its low-end of \$50,000.

The sale’s notable find (arguably the highlight, no surprise, given its rarity) stemmed from the Netherlands. John Joseph Wardell Power’s *Basket of Fruit, c.1936* (Lot 67 🎯) – last exhibited publicly in Paris in a wartime charity auction to assist returned former prisoners – will no doubt keep the flea-market-find dream alive. Bought for presumably very few euro (or perhaps even pre-EEC guilder?), it was offered at \$40,000-60,000. The lot generated the only real expectant buzz of the night, and was steadily bid with suspenseful pauses to \$140,000, a significant new record for the artist, and one that will likely remain, given the majority of known works formed a bequest to Sydney University.

Three of the sale’s top five results came from the Cruthers core. Fred Williams’ relatively early and richly coloured *Gum Trees in Landscape II* (Lot 39 🎯) was opened by auctioneer/specialist Mark Fraser “at a modest \$220,000” and determinedly chased by consultant David Hulme to sell at the estimate’s low end for \$300,000, a handsome increase on its last sale price (\$85,000 in 1998). The most expensive failure on the night was another Williams, *Purple Landscape, 1958*, (Lot 13 🎯), at \$180,000-250,000. Catalogued as the most significant early work to have appeared in recent years, it was nevertheless a hard sell in contrast, being rather lumpy and dour.

Pre-sale editorial touted Cruthers’ interest in women artists on show. This was certainly exceptional as a curatorial enterprise in the formative days of his family’s collection of women’s art – *over forty years ago* – but at auction today it is an annoyingly outdated sexist categorisation, especially when Grace Cossington Smith provided two of the top three sale results for paintings and is a blue chip prospect for any firm.

Blue Glass, c. 1927 (Lot 4 🎯) really surprised. Estimated at \$90,000-120,000, it had steady support well beyond the upper end. Catalogued as early and experimental (reported by the Australian as ‘classic’), it was considered clunky by some in the room, to the point where one dealer was overheard exclaiming “ridiculous” at \$195,000. The hammer fell at \$210,000 (third top sale price), a generous dividend upon its last outing in 2003 when it sold for \$90,000. This work now sits at number four in the artist’s records. Coming in fourth in sale’s top five and fifth in the artist’s records was the more exceptional *Lili Kraus in the Town Hall, 1946* (Lot 42 🎯), which was also strongly contested, making \$175,000 against expectations of \$50,000-70,000.

The other two in the sale’s top five outside the Cruthers core were solid and unsurprising: Spencer and Gillen’s collection of early photographs of Indigenous people (Lot 71 🎯) made its low estimate of \$220,000 (last sold 1998 for \$128,000); and Jeffrey Smart’s *Second Study for Containers with Storm Clouds, 1990* (Lot 68 🎯) reached its top end of \$150,000.

Other lovely works from the Cruthers core surpassed expectations, including Godfrey Miller’s *Objects at Night, c.1948* (Lot 38 🎯), which was secured by art dealer Annette Larkin for \$125,000 against the estimate of \$80,000-100,000. It took out a place in the sale’s top ten and now places fourth in the artist’s records. Larkin also picked up one of the two interesting Weitzel linocuts on offer, lot 61, both of which easily sailed above their \$5,000-7,000 estimates, with *Abstract Design 2, c. 1930* (Lot 60 🎯) topping out at \$16,000.

The Cruthers core was not without financial risk to Bonham’s – five of the sale’s major lots from this consignment remained unsold – but in today’s market where multivendor sales cost more to produce and pose significant administrative burdens, the tactic of engaging with a third party bringing intellectual and academic credentials in tandem with commercially viable property clearly paid off.

Cruthers also sees personal benefits in the experiment: “Working with Bonhams to develop this auction was important for me because it allowed me to continue my relationship with several of my collectors, from the initial stage of buying to rationalising their collections and selling.”

“I was very confident about the quality of the artists and works, as my collectors have always focused on museum quality examples by significant artists. But many of the more contemporary artists are not seen often at auction, which made the process of selling quite tricky.”

Some of the more commercially risky offerings included art from the 1980s/1990s. Mark Fraser sought to frame this “Post-Modern” core as an opportunity for buyers rather than a risk for the auction house, albeit acknowledging their position outside what is understood to be currently “fashionable”.^[i]

Of the unsold works, most fell into this category, including tricky brown works by Susan Norrie, Karl Wiebke and Peter Booth, an atypical Howard Arkley, and a profound academic work by Imants Tillers with a strong NZ connection. On this tack, two works by contemporary New Zealand artist Shane Cotton also failed to sell.

Cruthers has stated that the collaborative approach with Bonham’s enabled them “to create a good context to present these contemporary works to auction audiences. We consciously curated a fairly tight group, choosing 61 from the 87 submitted. We often included more than one work by artists so viewers had a chance of seeing how an artist’s work developed. We also commissioned catalogue essays by leading curators, scholars, academics, artists and art writers, who knew these artists very well and could provide a way into them and their work for auction audiences.”

Despite a number of works failing to sell, Cruthers feels that the approach worked very well, with “some important but challenging works finding new homes”. These included:

Robert MacPherson’s very elegant *Sarah’s Merle #5*, 1976-77 (Lot 23 🎨), which made \$14,500; Tim Johnson’s documentary painting from his years at Papunya Tula, (Lot 27 🎨), whose modest result at \$4,800 nonetheless brought appreciative clapping from the room; Adam Cullen’s *I wish I was Benny Hill (Trouble and Squalor)*, 2004 (Lot 31 🎨), which was used as the cover illustration on his monograph and realised \$21,000; Robert Rooney’s *The Art of Illustration, 1983* (Lot 25 🎨), which made \$16,000 against \$7,000-9,000 and was acquired by Annette Larkin; and three works by Trevor Nickolls (lots 29, 30 and 33).

Cruthers has high hopes for this type of work going forward and a message for auction houses:

“I hope this sale will be a platform for further auctions featuring quality contemporary art. Since the demise of Christies dedicated contemporary art department in 2005, the secondary market for contemporary art has been poorly served by local auction companies, especially when compared to markets in the US and UK. This can have a negative impact on an artist’s market. In the longer term it is vital that artist’s representative galleries and secondary market sellers, whether dealers or auctions, work together to get the best results for artists and collectors. This is the true sign of a sophisticated art market, but it is sorely lacking in Australia.”

This may offend Deutscher and Hackett, who have lead the way in support for this field since their breakaway from Menzies, but Cruthers’ comments about an artist’s market ring true, with some contemporary dealers, most notably Martin Browne, enforcing pre-sale estimates in a trade-off for catalogue reproduction permission as a way of protecting their stable.

Other works making up the sale’s top ten included Ian Fairweather’s rarities from a short-lived 1960 series: *Painting 1*, lot 14, which made \$125,000 and *Painting VIII (Landscape)* (Lot 15 🎨), which was more strongly contested, realising \$140,000. And taking out tenth spot was an ubiquitous Boyd *Wimmera Landscape* (Lot 69 🎨), which sold for \$105,000.

While Cruthers’ academic content provided the British firm with curatorial *yin*, auction stalwarts offered up dollars with plenty of colonial *yang*.

One of the better performing works in the non Cruthers core was Donald Friend’s rather embarrassing idyll, descriptively titled *Arrival of the First Fleet*, c.1962 (Lot 76 🎨). Fiercely contested, this lot spurred the Antipodean rabble seated at the rear to yell at British accented Fraser when he rejected a \$1,000 bid increase with an explosively loud “Aw, C’mon!!” ... Liquor supplies dwindling, and in fear of a popular uprising (no doubt encouraged in part by an agonising half hour delay at the start), Fraser conceded. The work eventually reached \$46,000 against a conservative estimate of \$20,000-25,000.

Other new artist records:

Sam Byrne – *Broken Hill Line of Lode*, c. 1970 (Lot 56 🗨) – \$17,000

Charles Terry – *Sydney Harbour*, c. 1853 (Lot 98 🗨) – \$28,000

[i] Jane Sullivan, 'JW Power's long-lost work set to energise Bonham's sale', *Australian Financial Review*, 27 May 2015

Sale Referenced: Important Australian and International Art including Private Collections Curated By John Cruthers, Bonhams, Sydney, 16/06/2015

About The Author

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