

Longing for another You Yangs, Bonhams Secures a Yin and Yang Result

By Jane Raffan, on 13-May-2014

It is rare these days for an auction's saving grace to be attributed to the performance of Aboriginal art. And yet for Bonham's back-to-back autumn sales of the *The Roxanas Collection of Aboriginal Art* (Sunday 11 May) and *Important Australian Art* (Monday 12 May), this proved to be the case. With fewer audience members than the 67 lots on offer, the mixed vendor sale of *Important Australian Art* only managed to sell 40% for a hammer total of \$1.282 million, representing a rather scary clearance of 33% by value and hardly living up to its grandiose title, which, like the current 'budget emergency', is a purposely overstated marketing ploy, and one frequently used by all major players.

The Roxanas Collection, amassed over more than 30 years by Sydney psychiatrist Dr Milton Roxanas and his wife Alma, chiefly comprised bark paintings from the 1960s through 1980s and around 60 lots of work from desert artists. With all lots apparently for sale without regard to the typical practice of low-end reserves, results showed a market appetite well below estimation at times (often half to a third), but for the majority of the works the opposite applied, and against a strategically modest pre-sale expectation of \$462,800, 89% of the Collection sold for a hammer total of \$503,034, representing a clearance of 109% by value.

The cover lot – a beautifully composed and wonderfully expressive *Lumaluma* by 'the Picasso of Australian art', Yirrawala (Lot 5 ) – soared to a hammer price of \$21,000 against its pitched \$8-12K. Tripled and quadrupled estimate results were common throughout the sale's 226 lots, which were gobbled up by bidders active across all platforms (in room, on phones and online), and amongst whom were eighty-eight buyers new to Bonhams.

Many lots were rather savagely underestimated: (Lot 20 ) a handsome and highly detailed example by John Bulun Bulun was estimated at a paltry \$1,000-1,500 and made \$4,000; (Lot 16 ) a rare 1960s *Wagilag Sisters* by Dawidi Djulwarak sold for \$9,500 against its estimate of \$2-3K (and probably went to an institution); and a painting by another 'old master', Djunmal (Lot 70 ) – identical in composition to a work in the collection of the National Museum of Australia – sold for \$2,600 against a throwaway estimate of \$200-400.

Aside from Yirrawala – whose works always bump up sale totals, as was the case here with nine works providing a solid \$95K – Ivan Namirrki made a welcome contribution with five works totalling just over \$28K, including the very stylish and superbly sinuous *Ngalyod and Waterlily* (Lot 85 ) which made \$13,000 against \$5-7K.

Other highlights included: Wandjuk and Mawalan Marika's *Djankawu and his Sisters* (Lot 36 ) which, unlike many contemporary works, didn't suffer from its collaborative nature and sold for near double estimate at \$19,000; (Lot 106 ) *Rainbow Serpent Beneath Waterlilies*, by Lofty Bardayal Nadjamerrek, which made \$12,000 (against \$7-10K); Deaf Tommy Mungatopi's *Coral Designs* (Lot 60 ) a striking expression of Tiwi ancestral presence that reached its top end of \$20,000; and a group of works by another renowned Tiwi, Kitty Kantilla, which tallied \$22,300 and featured a gutsy, albeit modestly sized *Pumpuni Jilimara* canvas (Lot 167 ) that sold at low end for \$12,000.

The Tiwi works were tactically placed in transition from the barks to the colourful desert paintings, which saw fewer star results: recent RAKA Award nominee, the late Tommy Mitchell, sparked with the sale of *Tjunka's Country* (Lot 182 ) for \$8,500 against an absurdly low estimate of \$3-5K; and a cache from Papunya Tula proved the enduring allure of the genesis story, adding \$64K to the total with Anatjari Tjakamarra's *Pintupi Four Part Dreaming* (Lot 189 ) the best performing at \$23,000 (against \$12-18K).

The Roxanas Collection of Aboriginal Art wasn't expected to turn heads, but it did turn out to be an unexpected and most welcome follow-up to Bonhams' successful sale of the *Clive Evatt Collection* late last year.

Sale Referenced: [The Roxanas Collection of Aboriginal Art, Bonhams, Sydney, 11/05/2014](#)

About The Author

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Bonham's Important Australian Art, Sydney – Monday 12 May

By Jane Raffan, on 13-May-2014

Things started well with the opening teasers – two early works by Roy de Maistre that were priced to soar at \$25-35,000. Not seen in public since 1937 and fresh to the market nearly a century after their execution, *Berrima* (Lot 1) and *Colour Sketch – Dangar Island*, (Lot 2), both dated 1918, were competitively chased to \$75,000 and \$70,000 by a resilient phone bidder underbid by art consultant Annette Larkin.

Paintings of Still Lifes by Margaret Olley, John Brack, Arthur Streeton and Margaret Preston kept the privates engaged throughout the short sale. The works by Brack and Preston lived up to the sale's 'important' tag. The chirpy result for Brack's rare-in-oeuvre and very elegant Still Life *Gerberas* (Lot 4 ) was tweeted and uploaded to Instagram within nanoseconds of Michael Reid's departure from the saleroom, having paid the low end of \$150,000 on behalf of a client. The buyer of Preston's *Window*, c. 1916 (Lot 23 ) however, remained anonymous on the end of a phone, having secured the precious precursor to her more formal/rigid Still Lifes mid estimate for \$135,000. Margaret Olley's examples sold mid estimate with (Lot 3 ) making \$45K, and (Lot 22 ) \$75K. The rather dull *Proteas and Pears*, lot 52, did not make it past its opening bid of \$40K, while Arthur Streeton's *Still life with Lillies* (Lot 6 ) attracted enough bidders to chase it to the upper estimate of \$80,000.

The best performing work on the night – and one of two works to generate real energy and activity in the room apart from the opening duo by de Maistre – was Colin McCahon's *Black, White and Orange Landscape* (Lot 17 ) which catapulted to \$70,000 over its estimate of \$30-40K. The other was Arthur Streeton's *At Queenscliffe*, c. 1907 (Lot 40 ) which was underbid by Andrew Crawford, but sold to a private buyer for \$47,000, close to double low end.

And the Aboriginal art fared reasonably well here, too, selling at a greater rate by volume than the non Indigenous works. Emily Kame Kngwarreye's *Alagura VI*, 1992 (Lot 8 ) made its low end of \$25K. The safe bet *Ghost Gums* (Lot 16 ) by Albert Namatjira hit a high note above estimate at \$30K, and Paddy Bedford's *Winperrji – Police Rock Hole*, 2001 (Lot 46 ) scraped over the line, selling just under estimate for \$44,000. The works that faltered included Makinti Napanangka's pushily priced *Peewee*, lot 9, and Ningura Napurrula's *Women at Wirrulinga*, 2005, lot 27, which may have suffered from poor catalogue reproduction that promoted the work as high keyed (black, red and white) when in fact the 'white' was quite pink in the flesh. Later in the sale, Julie Dowling's rather sombre *Cousin Ray* (Lot 44 ) was the best performing of the lower-valued works, being cheerily bid to double its low end at \$4,000 and Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri's untitled work (Lot 49 ) cruised quickly over its high end to sell at \$7,500.

Auction houses hate not selling their cover lots, and this came to pass. The failure of the key work by Fred Williams left a \$1.5 million dollar hole in the total and a pall over the balance of the sale with 40 or so lots remaining. The well provenanced large-scale and cool toned *Ferns Diptych* (Lot 25 ) had hopes in line with Bonhams' Grundy Collection's burnished *You Yangs landscape 1*, which set the auction record for the artist in 2013 with a hammer price of \$1,875,000.

Other unsold major works included lot 11, John Olsen's early and earthy *Landscape*, c. 1958 (est. \$90-120K); lot 14, Roger Kemp's gloomy and somewhat staid *Transfiguration* (est. \$65-85K); lot 21, Olsen's bright and cacophonous *Circus Day*, 1961 (est. \$400-500K); and lot 47, William Robinson's striking dark-tinged and vertiginous *Rainforest with Botan Creek*, 1989 (est. \$100-150K), for which the podium efforts of James Hendy drew Denis Savill's bored ire and a drawling call to "pass it in".

Obviously deserving and well priced lots also failed to sell, such as lot 18, John Coburn's *Maralinga II, 1999* (est. \$25-35K) and lot 20, Robert Klippel's, *Opus 97, 1960* (est. \$25-35,000). Nolans were on the nose throughout, as was John Perceval's *Adam and Eve with the Garlic Plant*, lot 33, which has been reoffered every 2/3 years since 2007. Also uninspiring were impasto works by John Firth-Smith, Peter Booth and Nicholas Harding, and scraggly offerings by the brothers Boyd. These and other middling works by Blackman, Albert Tucker and others left the room silent, except for the almost imperceptible tinkling of the chandelier.

The sale was peppered with the usual Smarts and Boyds, bringing welcome and safe additions to the tally. Smart's *Second Study for The Picnic II* (Lot 5 ) made mid estimate at \$65,000. Later, another second study, this time for *Conversation Piece* (Lot 30 ) sold to the book for \$65,000. Boyd's big blonde *Wimmera* (Lot 10 ) climbed ever so slowly to its low-end of \$100,000. Another *Wimmera* (Lot 24 ) made mid estimate at \$80,000, selling to a phone bidder who was active throughout the sale, and who secured a whopping \$405,000 worth of stock priced well below retail expectations ... long distance call to a cashed-up dealer up north perhaps?

Bringing up the last of the top lots, Thomas Griffiths Wainewright's portrait of his cousin Edward Foss (Lot 53 ) sold 15% under estimate at \$85K to the phone. In this case the story had more appeal than the portrait of the under-sheriff and lawyer, which was rather dour. Wainewright, who Oscar Wilde described as a "subtle and secret poisoner", lived the high-life well beyond his means before his downfall and conviction for forgery. He was sentenced to an altogether different life in Van Diemen's Land, arriving in Hobart in November 1837 and dying a decade later.

Sale Referenced: [Important Australian Art, Bonhams, Sydney, 12/05/2014](#)

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