

Barracking for Bonhams Important Australian and Aboriginal Art Sale

By Jane Raffan, on 09-Jun-2016

A rare and fresh-to-the-market work by acclaimed 19th century artist and Wurundjeri elder William Barak more than doubled its pre-sale estimate at Bonham's Sydney 7 June sale of *Important Australian and Aboriginal Art*, and set a new auction record for the artist at \$512,400 (incl. BP). The highly contested work, *Ceremony*, 1897 (Lot 58), eclipsed its conservative price pitch of \$180,000-250,000, and punted away the previous half-million-dollar record, held by Sotheby's since 2009.



A rare and fresh-to-the-market work by acclaimed 19th century artist and Wurundjeri elder William Barak more than doubled its pre-sale estimate at Bonham's Sydney 7 June sale of Important Australian and Aboriginal Art, and set a new auction record for the artist at \$512,400 (incl. BP). The sale achieved \$2.128 million, representing 110% by value and 86% percent sold by lot.

Cared for by a Sydney family for more than 100 years, the Barak drawing was previously unknown. Regarding the work's appearance, Bonhams' chairman and auctioneer Mark Fraser commented: "Family lore is that Barak exchanged the painting with their forebear Frank Piggott Webb, who was a master glass maker, and it had been treasured by the family ever since."

Bonham's remains tight-lipped about the buyer, however, so we'll have to wait and see whether it will be stashed away again or has joined other works by the artist in salubrious public collections.

Art consultant David Hulme claimed five from six tries for private clients, and was happy and excited to have snared two record-breaking artworks, including the "dark" cover lot, Arthur Boyd's diminutive (25 x 30 cm), albeit very powerful *Persecuted Lovers – Study*, 1957/58 (Lot 63 🍷), which made \$244,000 (incl. BP).

Of course Boyd's record price at auction stands in the millions, but Bonham's put their calculators to work for the

press release and declared the painting to be “the most expensive Boyd per square centimetre ever sold.”

The other record lot needed no spin – a remarkable Weaver Hawkins *Self Portrait*, 1923 (Lot 35 🎯), which realised \$122,000 (incl. BP) after a bidding battle, more than double its high-estimate and almost \$40,000 above the previous auction record for the artist.

The portrait, unique amongst the artist’s works on the open market, focussed on Hawkins’s war-affected hands, while his expression captured the resilience and resolve of the artist who fought to renew his art-making skills after more than twenty operations to save his arms. The Art Gallery of New South Wales has a fabulous etching of this subject – executed three years earlier than the record-breaking painting, and only a year after the end of the war – in which the artist portrays himself with huge black haunted eyes and crippled hands.

Acquired on behalf of a private client, Hulme said of the work: “The Hawkins self-portrait was one of the stand out paintings in the sale. The artist is not as celebrated as he deserves to be and this excellently provenanced painting gives us an extraordinary insight into the man himself.”

The auction’s kick-off by John Coburn, *Section*, 1968 (Lot 1 🎯), scored well, leaping over its \$25,000-45,000 estimate, landing at \$67,100 (incl. BP), and stirring a tenor of expectation for the audience of around 50 people who had to tussle over the sale’s first 83 lots for the next two hours.

Aside from the Coburn, most of the Belgiorno-Nettis Collection core (lots 1-30) sold within estimate, with a few exceptions for more unusual works, including Robert Junipers’ gold leaf *Mountain Devil*, c. 1962 (Lot 5 🎯), which made \$20,740 against an estimate range normally ascribed to brown pigment landscapes at \$6,000-8,000.

Peter Powditch’s *Sun Torso 2*, 1973 (Lot 18 🎯), made \$10,3070 against a come-and-get-it estimate of \$4,000-6,000.

William Dobell’s, *The Tired Lady*, 1966 (Lot 30 🎯), an interesting oil character study on yellowed newspaper from the day, made \$10,370 against a paltry \$2,000-3,000 estimate.

And earlier on, a rare colonial print of Sydney from 1802 by William Standen Blake (Lot 12 🎯), sold for \$20,740 (incl. BP) against \$8,000-12,000, setting a new record for the artist (previous of \$14,500 dating to 1984).

A few other lots in the mixed vendor half of the sale’s “Part I” also proved more popular than expected:

Robert Klippel’s assembled steel sculpture *Opus 95*, 1960 (Lot 42 🎯), won out over the two bronzes by the artist in the sale, soaring to \$45,140 (incl. BP) over its modest estimate of \$8,000-12,000.

And continuing the support for the work of Nora Heysen, her delicate *Still Life with Scabious*, 1934 (Lot 71 🎯), painted predominantly in hues of white, mauve and grey, sold for \$30,500 against \$10,000-15,000, breaking a rather long dry spell at auction for the artist’s floral still lifes (a result perhaps influenced by the Whistler exhibition at the NGV?).

The Bonhams sale’s “Part II” was reserved for works for *Aboriginal Art from The Thomas Vroom Collection*. The group of around 160 lots represented the third tranche of works from the Collection since 2015; a total of nearly 500 pieces having been offered to the market since 2015. Vroom was a voracious collector, and art consultant/dealer Adrian Newstead reckons there are still more than 1,000 works left awaiting disposal, although he suspects he will renege on his decision to disperse the collection in its entirety and will keep the very best of the best for himself.

There could have been no doubt that anyone interested in the sustained health of the Aboriginal art market would have been perturbed by the sheer quantity of multiple works by artists amongst the 160 or so lots in the Vroom sale. Unlike offerings by other houses, where the mantra of “carefully curated selection” is bandied about, in tandem with Emily Kngwarreye, the Petyarres represented more than 20% of total lots.

In keeping with the previous Vroom offering at Bonhams last year, estimates were at give-away levels – the highest being \$10,000-15,000 for works by Kngwarreye and Petyarre – and most lots sold over the top-end.

Kathleen Petyarre’s *Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming (After Sandstorm)* (Lot 120 🎯), sold for \$73,200 (incl. BP), making it the second-highest price ever achieved for this esteemed Utopia artist.

Despite being an acclaimed painter, and one of only three contemporary Aboriginal painters to have been given a retrospective at Sydney’s MCA, Petyarre’s oeuvre and market has been impacted by controversy.

Her 1998 Telstra Award winning work was claimed to have benefited from the assistance of her non Indigenous husband – and while the Award stood, her market suffered from the fall-out and a flood of subsequent poor bread-and-butter works, which have kept prices suppressed for many years. The price achieved represents another data point on an upward trend not seen since 2009, when Petyarre’s top record price of \$96,000 was established.

Newstead believes the sale was probably unreserved, and the combination, if true, proved to be a winning strategy for the group “with no standout works”, as only 3 of the 160 on offer failed to sell (lots 129, 142, 154). One can only imagine the collective sighs of relief extending from Bonhams though the industry at large ...

Two small 90 x 60 cm works by Emily, estimated for the domestic buyer at \$3,000-5,000 each, sold for \$10,370 (Lot 113 🍀) and \$9,150 (Lot 115 🍀), while the much larger *Alagura Country*, at 150 x 121 cm, and from the same period (Lot 116 🍀) made \$12,200 (all incl. BP).

Apart from the Kathleen Petyarre top lot, the only other work to break the \$15,000 barrier was by Angelina George, whose *My Imagined Country*, 2006 (Lot 112 🍀), made \$17,080 (incl. BP) against an estimate of \$8,000-12,000.

An early work by Gordon Bennet from the Vroom Collection, *Course of Empire* (Lot 74 🍀), featured in the sale’s “Part I”, presumably because it was felt it would appeal to contemporary buyers who might not stick around for Part II. It sold within estimate at \$12,200 (incl. BP).

With only two major lots (over \$50,000) remaining unsold (lots 7, 47), Bonhams chalked up another successful albeit patchy sale; this one totalling \$2.128 million, representing 110% by value and 86% percent sold by lot. A very strong result, but not good enough to move them up from bottom of the ladder in a highly competitive field.

Sale Referenced: Important Australian and Aboriginal Art incl. The Collections of Amina and Franco Belgiorno-Nettis and Thomas Vroom, Bonhams, Sydney, 07/06/2016

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, and Vice President of the Auctioneers & Valuers Association of Australia. Jane’s experience spans more 20 years working in public and commercial art sectors, initially with the AGNSW, and then over twelve years in the fine art auction industry. Her consultancy focuses on collection management, advisory services and valuations. She is the author of *Power + Colour: New Painting from the Corrigan Collection of Aboriginal Art*. www.artifacts.net.au.