

Still a Boys Club, but Women Artists Don't Need to Join for Cred

By Jane Raffan, on 28-Nov-2014

Despite their work being relegated to the back of the catalogue in Sotheby's Australia's November 2014 sale of *Important Australian & International Art* (71% versus 29% in the first half), the small proportion of art by women (24% of 72 lots) helped raise a hefty \$900,000 and provided a star performer, when a painting by Grace Cossington Smith double vaulted over its estimate, selling to art dealer Annette Larkin for \$671,000 (including BP).



Sotheby's Australia's November 2014 sale of Important Australian & International Art, realised a total of \$5.36 million including buyer's premium, and recorded 102% sold by value and 62% by lot. The small proportion of art by women (24% of 72 lots) helped raise a hefty \$900,000 and provided a star performer, when a painting by Grace Cossington Smith almost doubled its low estimate of \$250,000, selling for \$550,000, (\$671,000 IBP).

Earlier this year, Terry Ingram reported for the Australian Art Sales Digest that "the Women's liberation movement of the 1960s is finally having a knock-on effect in the Saleroom, where gender equality has increased substantially since 1973". (*Flowers still bloom in it, but Emily is queen of the closing gender gap*, 13 July 2014). "Figures show that the value of art by women artists as a percentage of the total value of art sold at auction has grown from 2 per cent in 1973 to 14 per cent in 2013."

In the Sotheby's sale, work by women artists provided around 17% of the sale's total, and cleared with figures similar to their male counterparts at 59% sold versus 64%. The average price for the ten sold works was around \$90,000 (including BP), whereas art by men averaged \$127,000 (including BP).

Cossington Smith appeared as number 5 in Ingram's list of star women artist performers in his review of the saleroom over a forty year period. In the Sotheby's sale, her impressively credentialed and bold work, *The Window*,

1956 (Lot 14 🎯) was the star performer (based on results versus estimate), eclipsing its pre-sale estimate of \$250-350,000 for the hammer price of \$550,000. With a final price at \$671,000 (including BP), the painting came in at number 4 out of the sale's top 5.

Jeffrey Smart's *The Four Closed Shops, 1982* (Lot 7 🎯), was another impressively credentialed star performer, realising a hammer price of \$570,000 against its estimate of \$350-450,000, and coming in at the sale's number 3 spot with a total of \$695,400 (including BP).

The top two lots had nowhere near as much cred (exhibition history, provenance, literature), but were the sale's expected star pieces: Brett Whiteley's *Washing the Salt Off II, 1984* (Lot 16 🎯), realised its low end of \$800K on hammer, chalking up \$976,000 (including BP); and Whiteley's *Seagull Over Lavender Bay, 1979* (Lot 30 🎯) picked up the number two spot with a result on hammer providing a total of \$732,000 (incl. BP).

The next best figures fell in the \$200K+ bracket with two tying for sixth place in the top ten with sales on estimate at \$244,000 (including BP): Rupert Bunny's *Au Soleil (Girl in Sunlight), 1913* (Lot 20 🎯) and Hans Heysen's *Bushfire, Hahndorf, South Australia, 1912* (Lot 26 🎯). Coming in at number 5, Fred Williams also sold on estimate to tally \$292,800 (including BP).

Most of the sale's 72 lots sold to a single phone bidder, where Martin Gallon made it obvious to seasoned attendees with his opening bids that they were the lot's sole prospect on the books.

The main exception was Tom Roberts' *With Wistful Eyes, 1889* (Lot 22 🎯), which had 6 or 7 phone bidders on the go to realise its hammer of \$130,000 against an estimate of \$60-80K for a total of \$158,600, and achieving eighth place in the top ten. Previously known as "Head Study of a Young Girl", this work epitomises the saleroom value of a name change, provenanced or not. And Arthur Streeton's oil on canvas on board, *Cairo* (Lot 21 🎯), whose previous title included Islamic "minarets", also attracted real action, selling \$18K above estimate for a final total of \$58,560 (including BP).

The only other work to sell in the \$100-200K bracket was also estimated well below its final price of \$195,200 (including BP). Bernard Buffet's *Lys (Lilies), 1962* (Lot 15 🎯), was hammered down for double its estimate of \$80-120,000 and took out seventh place in the top ten.

The last two spots were taken up by Arthur Streeton's *Blue Depth's, 1914* (Lot 19 🎯) and another Jeffrey Smart, *Study for Satellite Receiver, 1974* (Lot 46, both selling on estimate and making \$91,500 and \$61,000 (including BP) respectively.

And of the other star women performers in Ingram's review of sales 1973-2013 only three made an appearance: Emily Kame Kngwarreye—recorded by Ingram at number 1— with a very average awelye *Desert Flowers, 1992* (Lot 38 🎯) that sold on estimate for a total of \$24,400 (including BP); Clarice Beckett—7th in Ingram's list—with a characteristically soft grey *Collins Street, 1931* (Lot 2 🎯), which almost doubled estimate to total \$26,840 (including BP); and a circa 1925 woodcut, *Banksias*, by Margaret Preston (Lot 55 🎯)—fourth in Ingram's list—which was bought by journalist, author and commentator David Marr on estimate after some strong competition for a final total of \$7,320 (including BP).

Other back-of-the-catalogue works by women that met expectation included coloured linocuts by Ethel Spowers, Sybil Andrews and Dorrit Black, a modest painting by Jacqueline Hick of Dorrit Black with eyes closed, and a Still Life by Kathleen O'Connor. The best performing of this group was Janet Cumbrae Stewart's pastel of a nude ruby-lipped pubescent girl, *Admiring the Lace, 1925* (Lot 64 🎯), which, had it been more brooding and labelled Henson, might have seen it attract attention of a different kind. Estimated at \$8-12,000, the work sold for a total of \$17,080 (including BP).

In future gender-based saleroom reviews don't be surprised to see Cressida Campbell's name in the mix. Her meticulous prints are highly desirable and a sure-fire sale starter. Her woodblock *Eucalypts, 1999* (Lot 1 🎯) almost doubled estimated for a total of \$46,360 (including BP). And with the trend of offering British modern and contemporary works in Australian salerooms in recent times, Bridget Riley has been a major drawcard. Her gouache and pencil drawing, *Study 1970 Orange, Violet and Green Twists in Different Proportions, 1970* (Lot 6 🎯), made 1.5 times its estimate for a total of \$51,240 (including BP).

Top lots that failed to sell included lot 11, Fred Williams' *Botanist's Garden, 1975*, estimated \$280-380K; Lot 12, Jeffrey Smart's difficult *T.S. Eugenides, Piraeus (1970-1971)*, estimated at \$400-600K, and two other works by

Smart: lot 17, a self-portrait at \$250-350K and lot 28, *First Study for On the Wharf, Livorno, 2001*, estimated at \$100-120K.

Sotheby's Australia's November 2014 sale of *Important Australian & International Art* realised a total of \$5.36 million including buyer's premium, and represented the highest November result for Sotheby's Australia in the past four years. The sale recorded 102% sold by value and 62% by lot.

Sale Referenced: Important Australian & International Art , Sotheby's , Sydney, 25/11/2014

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.

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