

Deutscher and Hackett hit the boards for their end-of-year Revue

By Jane Raffan, on 03-Dec-2015

Held in Sydney's inner-east at the atmosphere-laden National Art School's *Cell Block Theatre*, Deutscher and Hackett's end-of-year sale – a 200+ lot offering of *Important Fine Art and Aboriginal Art* – achieved a hammer total of \$4,355,402 against expectations of \$4,521,000 (total with buyer premium \$5,393,591). This represents a very good result for the company, which will see them stay in the top three.

Staged in four parts, the top-billed non Indigenous material in the first act broke records and produced applause, and while there were a couple of stellar performances in the second – the first of two *Important Aboriginal Art* acts – the 100+ audience was decidedly less enthusiastic. Indeed, with most of the bidding occurring between missing-in-action buyers on phones, the expected auction drama seemed more akin to a contemporary rendition of *Waiting for Godot*: drawn out silences, some slightly absurd performances and utterances from auctioneer Roger McIlroy, a bemused and yet committed audience, and inevitable walk-outs over the course of the 4 hour-long production.

In keeping with the theatrics, the sale included a cache of 18 works that had been stolen from nearby Darling Point in 2010 and recovered in Wiley Park, Western Sydney in 2013[i], and listed in the catalogue as Company Collection, Melbourne. The insurers reportedly paid out between \$1.5 and \$2 million dollars. The calculation of the value of the haul to the insurer – many individual works of which had significant condition issues – will have to wait until the prices realised list is published.

Throughout the interminably slow pace under his gavel (the first 76 lots in 1.5 hrs), auctioneer Roger McIlroy managed to confuse (but not lose) bids with good humour, swatted rather dramatically mid-bid at a mosquito, attempted to titillate the audience with sexual inuendo and completed his direction of act one with several new artist records:

Margaret Preston's colour stencil, *A Mile Out of Alice Springs, 1949* (Lot 2 🎯) was chased by those with academic interests, including art consultant John Cruthers, to finally settle at \$55,000 (*Prints & Graphics*; previous record \$46,000).

A typically detailed pencil drawing executed with a light touch by Lloyd Rees, *Waverton, Sydney, 1931* (Lot 12 🎯) was determinately bid by dealer Michael Nagy and phones to \$135,000, making a mockery of its \$8,000-12,000 estimate (*Works on Paper*; previous record \$47,000).

Hilda Rix Nicholas' celebrated *The Shepherd of Knockalong, 1933* (Lot 21 🎯) was bid without fervour to its expected low end of \$180,000 (*Paintings*; previous record \$80,000).

And here's where cataloguing gets tricky for statisticians: Brett Whiteley's sinuous painting *2pm Light Early January 1984* (Lot 50 🎯) reached \$320,000. Based on the primary substrate (the painting was executed with mixed media on card on board), this work's impressive result could be classed as a record price in the sales database category 'Works on Paper', being an improvement of \$40,000 on the artist's previous record. As it stands, the painting's result is a solid data point in the artist's records of 'Paintings' category sales this year: the work itself is, assuredly, a sale highlight regardless.

Other performance highlights from act one were by understudies, such as *Study for: Homage to the Square: Allegro, 1961* (Lot 44 🎯) by German-born American Josef Albers. This work was chased well above its high end to \$280,000 (*Paintings*; previous Antipodean record NZ\$45,510).

And Jeffrey Smart's, *Study for Waiting Woman, Naples Turnoff, 1969-1970* (Lot 25 🎯), made a whopping \$120,000 against its estimate of \$75,000-95,000. The authoritative finished work, which was twice as large, last traded in 1996 through Sotheby's for a hammer price of \$75,000.

Towards the finale of act one, and adding to the sale's afterglow, Brett Whiteley's *Sunshower, 1983* (Lot 51 🎯) made its low-end of \$160,000 (est. \$160,000-200,000), while Fred Williams' *Flooded Creek, 1977* (Lot 53 🎯) was a bit off its mark at \$200,000 against a low-end of \$250,000.

After a brief interval to accommodate a change-over in auctioneers, act two was directed by Scott Livesey with a firmer hand and faster pace, due, in part, to a larger proportion of lots going unsold (12 from 35).

A mammoth near-five metre canvas by Emily Kngwarreye, *Alhalkere (My Country), 1994* (Lot 99 🎯) from her most popular and productive period took out the people's choice award – it was acquired for an important Sydney collection by art consultant David Hulme at its low-end of \$300,000.

The critics circle award, however, was rightly accorded to master class performer Uta Uta Tjangala, whose *Women's Dreaming, 1972* (Lot 81 🎯) ticked all the right boxes for early Papunya Tula painting. Fiercely contested, this truly important work eclipsed its estimate of \$80,000-120,000 to achieve \$170,000, a new record for the artist (previous \$150,000), and one that was set by this very same work in 2003 (second top price at \$91,500).

Elsewhere in act two, PTA works failed to live up to expectation, apart from Walangkura Napanaangka's *Tjintjintjin, 2007* (Lot 104 🎯), which sold at its low-end of \$40,000.

Outperforming Uta Uta Tjangala against price anticipation was Robert Campbell Junior, whose *Cinema, 1986* (Lot 108 🎯), was the act's most competitively sought after work, achieving \$35,000 against a rather tame estimate of \$8,000-12,000, and breaking the previous record for the artist (\$32,000). Campbell's market cachet has been bubbling up for some time – albeit a slow percolation – and *Cinema*, with its strong composition and loaded commentary about Australia's racist history (not to mention irony given the Western's Cowboy and Indians theme), is an important example from the artist's oeuvre and one of the strongest works to come to the market.

Other notable character appearances included a broad shield from the Darling River region, NSW (Lot 77 🎯) with intricate and interesting incised patterns, which sold to Livesey's book above its high-end for \$55,000; Bill Whiskey Tjapaltjarri's *Rockholes and country Near the Olgas, 2007* (Lot 111 🎯), which made \$44,000, and Paddy Bedford's *Untitled (Emu Dreaming), 2003* (Lot 110 🎯), which also sold just above its low-end, for \$35,000. Other Kimberley works, including Paddy Bedford, and Freddie Timms, were no shows, and Rover Thomas' *Crossroads, 1990* (Lot 96 🎯) was secured below low-end at \$32,000.

Deutscher and Hackett's sale had some important works from important collections – most notably art publisher Sydney Ure Smith – as well as notable private individuals, some of which achieved important new benchmarks. And it had a lot of non important (but not uninteresting) works from same.

If there was only one plea I could ask of auction houses with regard to sales going forward, it would be to truly discriminate in the use of the word important – not all expensively estimated works fit this bill. True, they are often (but not always) more important than others with smaller price tags, but the ubiquity of its application increasingly renders its marketing potency null and void.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating, as they say ... Important works sell, and will usually sell well, appropriately positioned in a sale that has been developed mindful of market conditions, of course. The stats for this one speak for themselves, which in this case, is a loud 'encore!'.

SALE STATS:

COMBINED

Lots sold: 158

Lots offered: 208

Sold by Value: 96%

Sold by Volume: 76%

FINE ART

Lots sold: 107

Lots offered: 123

Sold by Value: 105%

Sold by Volume: 87%

ABORIGINAL ART

Lots sold: 51

Lots offered: 85

Sold by Value: 73%

Sold by Volume: 60%

[i] Lots 58, 64-69, 121, 129-131, 134, 153-158 – <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2010-08-13/paintings-snatched-in-million-dollar-art-heist/942758> and <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/who-would-buy-them-2m-theft-baffles-art-world-20100813-123eo.html>

Sale Referenced: Important Fine Art + Aboriginal Art, Deutscher and Hackett , Sydney, 02/12/2015

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.