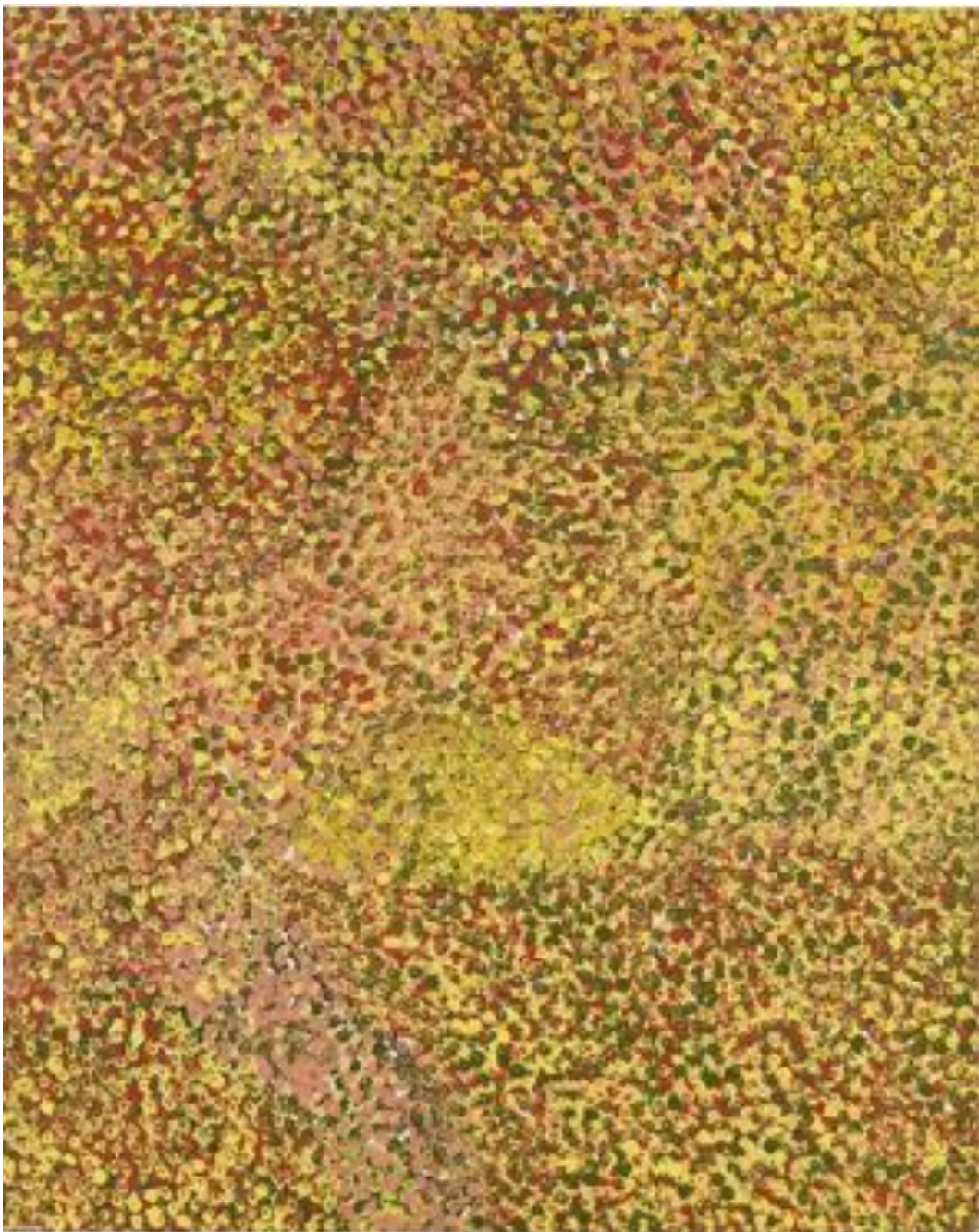


## Bonham's Vroom Collection marathon sees 90% of starters get over the line

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By Jane Raffan, on 08-Sep-2015

Unlike the sporting kind, this marathon (*Aboriginal Art: The Thomas Vroom Collection*, Sydney, 6 September) took 5 hours for the field of 246 to finish. Conservative estimates drew a standing-room-only crowd for the first half, including many first-time bidders. The crowd steadily dissipated as it became clear that the promise of a bargain was becoming more unlikely with every hammer fall. In the end, the sale hauled in \$1.6 million, including buyer's premium, representing 136% by value.



Unlike the sporting kind, this marathon (Aboriginal Art: The Thomas Vroom Collection, Sydney, 6 September) took 5 hours for the field of 246 to finish. The sale included twenty-nine works by Emily Kngwarreye and the artist's early work *Abundant Country*, 1991 was the top lot, doubling its low end to make \$40,000. The sale total was \$1,606,606 million, including buyers premium, with 90.23% sold by lot and 136% sold by value.

The top ten results were dominated by the works of Emily Kngwarreye. Six of the artist's twenty-nine works in the sale made the grade. This was not surprising, given Kngwarreye's works were the star attraction, both in terms of broad appeal and quantity. Nor was it surprising that many/more/most more than doubled their asking price, as estimates were strategically undervalued.

The best performing lot amongst the top ten was the rare circular form and early canvas *My Alalgura*, 1991 (Lot 52 🎯), which made \$31,000 hammer against its estimate of \$10-15,000. Unlike the sale coverage in *The Australian*, I doubt anyone amongst the eighty to one hundred-plus crowd, except perhaps newby punters, really believed the printed pre-sale estimate was the work's "expected price". Another lovely work from the same period, *Of Rare Winter Rain II*, 1991 (Lot 54 🎯) made \$33,000 hammer against its estimate of \$12-18,000.

Three small works by the artist (90 x 60 cm; 1993) drew strong competition from the domestic buyers and were heavily bid; the best of these, *Untitled*, 1993 (Lot 59 🎯) making \$11,000 hammer against its estimate of \$3-5,000. A luscious pink work from the same 'middle period' *Awelye*, 1994 (Lot 60 🎯) kept the momentum alive, rocketing to \$27,000 (against \$10-15,000).

All but two of the Western Arnhem Land barks and Tiwi figures in the lead-up to the first group of Kngwarreyes sold, and all around estimate; most within. The tranche of colourful canvases from Balgo that followed also all sold. None was particularly exciting and results were generally in line with estimates.

Kngwarreye shared the top ten limelights with Kathleen Petyarre, Dorothy Napangardi and two works from Papunya Tula.

Usually an Aboriginal art auction staple, works from Papunya Tula were few in the Vroom sale; the best of the early examples, by Anatjari No.III Tjakamarra, *Rilynga*, 1974 (Lot 72 🎯) bore a provenance with decent exhibition and literary references and tripled its rather silly estimate of \$8,000-12,000 to make \$25,000.

Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri's large and elegant contemporary rendition of 'designs associated with the Lake site of Wilkinkarra' (Lot 73 🎯) soared to \$26,000 against \$12,000-18,000. Later, Kaapa Mbitjana Tjampitjinpa's *Man and Women's Snake and Bush Tucker Dreaming*, c. 1971 (Lot 219 🎯) more than tripled its low-end to achieve \$16,000.

It was really refreshing to see a quality generic work by acclaimed artist Kathleen Petyarre attract proper interest, with *Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming*, 1998 (Lot 77 🎯) reaching \$34,000 (against \$12,000-18,000). Two works by another avant-garde star, Dorothy Napangardi, each carrying MCA retrospective provenance, performed very well, as they should have, if not as estimated. *Salt on Mina Mina*, 2001 (Lot 76 🎯) made \$20,000 (against \$12,000-18,000), while the larger/more stylistically rare *Salt on Mina Mina – Karntakurlangu Jukurpa*, 2001 (Lot 78 🎯) reached \$26,000 (against \$15,000-20,000).

Rover Thomas is another premier artist who has failed the 'sure fire' test in recent times. Here, three of four sold, with *Warburton Ranges*, 1995 (Lot 98 🎯) best performing at \$14,000 (against \$8,000-12,000). Two stunning works by Jimmy Nerrimah, *Kurrjalpartu*, 2000 (Lot 105 🎯) and *Untitled*, 2000 (Lot 106 🎯) lifted the tone of the otherwise brown Kimberley section; both sold mid estimate, which was a marked pattern across the sale.

The sale's middle was anchored by another group of nine Kngwarreye works, which offered the same pattern in results as the first: all performing over-estimate, small works heavily contested and achieving comparatively very strong results, and the early work *Abundant Country*, 1991 (Lot 121 🎯) the top lot, doubling its low end to make \$40,000. Pink pulled here too, with *Untitled*, 1994 (Lot 124 🎯) realising \$28,000 (against \$10,000-15,000).

Most of the sale's unsolds stemmed from the ensuing Port Keats (Wadeye) and Central and the Eastern Arnhem Land works (56 lots). Special images stood out and performed best: Djinu Tjimari's *Ceremonial Figure* (Lot 132 🎯) doubled its high-end to realise \$6,000; the very elegant *Ceremonial Ground Designs* (Lot 134 🎯) made \$9,000 (against \$4,000-6,000); Munggurawuy Yunupingu's *Mortuary Theme*, c. 1960 (Lot 159 🎯) tipped over its high-end to realise \$6,000, and Yirawala's cheeky and well-priced *Mimihs* (Lot 180 🎯) made \$10,500 (against \$7,000-10,000.)

Big names planted near the sale's end did well, with Ningura Napurrala's rather stiff *Wirrulgna* (Lot 194 🎯) making \$20,000 (against \$12,000-18,000); and a pretty pink work (another one!) by Naata Nungurrayi (Lot 200 🎯) doubling its low end to make \$6,000. Polly Nelson Ngale's large *Flowers of My Country* (206) kept the 'pretty' results going, realising \$7,500 against its decorative estimate of \$3,000-5,000.

Kngwarreye's tail end group (9 works) all performed well and produced another couple of top ten results, with (Lot 210 🎯) and (Lot 23 🎯) the best performing, each achieving \$25,000 against \$12,000-18,000 and \$8,000-12,000 respectively.

Sixty or so highlights from the Vroom collection were auctioned by Sotheby's London in June, raising £1.14m. The Australian second tier of 246 lots totalled \$1,606,606 million, including buyers premium, with statistics of 90.23% sold by lot and 136% sold by value. Bonham's has kept their vendor happy, with Thomas Vroom reportedly "thrilled with the results".

Bonham's wouldn't divulge the demographic of the successful buyers, other than to say that there were "lots of international bidders and generally strong interest from overseas buyers." Happily for them, and for the market at large, they are "delighted to see some very healthy bidding and market depth for Aboriginal art at auction". Near 30 not dissimilar works by Kngwarreye up for grabs was certainly a good test of buyer interest, regardless of the temptingly low estimates.

Bonham's has confirmed they are looking at another Vroom sale "in the future" but as yet this is unconfirmed.

Sale Referenced: The Thomas Vroom Collection, Bonhams, Sydney, 06/09/2015

#### **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](http://www.artifacts.net.au).