



Money for myth

AUSTRALIAN CHARACTER ON THE MARKET. BY **JANE RAFFAN**.

Amid the cacophony of celebration, national anniversaries give rise to reflections on nationhood and national character. In 1988, two hundred years after the First Fleet’s arrival, and again in 2001, the centenary of Federation, large scale and ambitious exhibitions of Australian art framed and toured a picture of Australian life, culture and character across the nation.

Creating Australia, 200 Years of Art 1788-1988 (curated by then Snr Curator Australian Art at the NGA, Daniel Thomas) and *Federation – Australian*

Art and Society 1901–2001 (curated by former NGA Head of Australian Art and long-time art critic, John MacDonald) were filled with hero pictures and more modest works championing overlooked or underrepresented aspects of our society and culture. Both exhibitions cast wide nets, in particular the latter; each had inevitable gaps and the odd minnow in the mix.

More recently, the Gallipoli centenary offered sombre contemplation on an episode indelibly inked into our history books. Despite the terrible defeat, the campaign is enshrined in our collective consciousness – with significant mythologising by early war historians,

First-Class Marksman
1946
Sidney Nolan
Art Gallery of
New South Wales
Image courtesy
Menzies Art Brands
© The Trustees of the
Sidney Nolan Trust

the media and film/television industries – as marking the birth of the ‘digger’, who possesses a ‘bush born’ Australian identity and character distinct from British antecedents.

Academia offers a contradiction: in a new exhibit about colonial artist ST Gill, Professor Sasha Grishin claims Gill invented the character of the digger with illustrations of gold prospectors in the 1860s exhibiting ‘resilience, anti-authority attitude and dry humour.’ Meanwhile, contemporary mythologising continues, with the media repeatedly describing all injured/killed soldiers as diggers; one wonders how they’ll reference the first female soldier to fall.

Bushranger and murderer Ned Kelly espouses the digger’s characteristics and is venerated as a cultural symbol. Sanctioned with a postage stamp in 1980 commemorating his death, his status was proclaimed to the world in the 2000 Sydney Olympics opening ceremony,



Rocky McCormack
1962-63
Russell Drysdale
Private collection
Image courtesy
Sotheby’s Australia
© Russell Drysdale
Estate

Settler’s Camp 1888
Arthur Streeton
Private collection
Image courtesy
Deutscher and
Hackett

In contemporary times, where the term ‘battler’ is regularly paraded by politicians in aspirational outer-urban marginal seats to court votes, the impact of the foundational image of the bush battler has somewhat faded from collective memory – but not on the secondary market, where portrayals of ‘The Old Boss Drover’, ‘Warrego Jim’ and the like, regularly achieve sums well over \$1 million.

Australia’s foundational narratives are inextricably tied to the landscape. There are no great history paintings of convict life. Instead, our public art institutions are filled with pictorial visions of sun-bleached pastorals and wooded idylls, where pioneers toil or itinerant workers pause to contemplate life ‘on the wallaby track’ (collection AGNSW), a euphemism that offered the prospect of independence from master/overlord, tied to the promise of bounty from the land.

Coincidentally, or perhaps not, Australia’s first recorded million dollar sale on the secondary market occurred in 1988, the bicentenary of the first convict arrivals. What better way of saying ‘we’ve made it’ The aspirational buyer was Alan Bond.

The secondary market has long supported an idealised view of our early history, with several works by Frederick McCubbin amongst the top twenty recorded sales.

McCubbin’s paintings carry intensely poetic titles that serve to disguise their subjects’ toil, such as *Bush Idyll*, 1893 (sold 1998 for just over \$2.3 million), and *Whispering in the Wattle Boughs*, 1896 (sold 2012 for \$1.2 million). Like the French artist Millet’s depictions of peasants gleaning under a glorious sunset, this genre served to keep the privileged classes comfortable in the

one artist straddles the divide, with Drysdale’s images of outback types or ‘European bush battlers’ – which were present in both the 1988 and 2001 exhibitions along with versions of Nolan’s Kelly – having blue-chip status.

Drawn from real life encounters, these works – such as *Rocky McCormack*, 1962-63, which sold for \$1.89 million (2008) – were acclaimed by Sotheby’s at the time to be ‘distillations of deep personal and social truths’, and a ‘compassionate record of a people and an epoch in a limbo that is partly reality, part legend’.

In commentary published in *Art and Australia* to accompany a Drysdale exhibition in 1967, however, the idea of bush battlers as ‘sentimental-nationalist fictions’ was dismissed, and the works were lauded for depicting images of people who, as ‘inhabitants of the Lucky Country’, showed it had ‘been built upon their very bones.’

where Kelly figures based on Sydney Nolan’s iconic depiction ran around the stadium ground with guns blazing fireworks.

Kelly’s cultural status is also enshrined in the Australian secondary market. Nolan’s *First-class Marksman*, 1946 (collection AGNSW), is the most expensive painting on record, realising \$5.4 million (2010). This eclipses the best price paid for an image of a soldier: Russell Drysdale’s *Soldier, ’42* (collection AWM), a portrayal of isolation and angst en route to a new posting (sold 2004 for \$519,000).

National institutions celebrate and collect depictions of esteemed real-life people as well as types. Portrait galleries have been called ‘institutions of collective memory’, and in this context art galleries can be considered repositories of myth and imagination. The secondary market shows clear preferences for the latter, but at least



knowledge that the working poor were (and are) content, and won McCubbin significant praise and patronage.

The approach of McCubbin's Heidelberg group compatriot, Arthur Streeton, was somewhat more direct and robust, if not factual. *Settler's Camp*, executed in the centenary of British colonisation, set a record price for the artist and is currently the seventh highest price for an Australian work at auction (sold 2012 for just over \$2.5 million). The real-life subjects of most of Streeton's settler pictures depicting heroic masculine labour were, in fact, tenant farmers.

In 1938, the sesquicentenary of colonial settlement, Australia hosted the Empire Games (now Commonwealth)

for the first time, and Charles Meere, who designed the posters, commenced *Australian Beach Pattern*, 1940 (collection AGNSW). Painted a year after Max Dupain's *Sunbaker*, this work has become an iconic representation of nationhood for its depiction of ordinary Australians as 'heroic symbols' exhibiting health and vitality – an extension of the ideals credited to Tom Roberts' young woman in *Australian Native*, 1888 (collection NGA), painted in the centenary of colonial settlement.

Meere's classical idealism has led one commentator, Linda Slutzkin, to describe his painting as 'Spartans in Speedos'. It privileges the Australian white male (albeit heavily tanned), who is depicted at the centre of this national story, as

Australian Beach Scene
1938–40
Freda Robertshaw
oil on canvas
Private collection
© Estate of
Freda Robertshaw

in most others. There have been three near-identical versions of this work sold at auction, with the best price being \$427,000 (2013).

In 1989, photographer Anne Zahalka produced *The Bathers* (collection AGNSW), a work that replaced the bronzed Aussie mono-racial figures in Meere's work with a representation of multi-cultural Australia. In 2013, she updated the work with *The New Bathers*, which depicts an even greater racial mix and centres on a Muslim woman wearing a hijab.

Painted by Meere's student/assistant, Freda Robertshaw, *Australian Beach Scene*, 1940, is a markedly different version of Meere's narrative. Its compositional devices place the focus on

women; men are all but absent. It sold for \$475,500 (1998), more than five times the top price for the artist, and was acquired by a private collection by curator John Cruthers who has long championed women painters. Robertshaw's work – where carefree play is disrupted by a central warning sign – can be read as a comment on loss. In the artist's case, it is maternal loss, fore-grounded with a mother and baby evoking *The Pietà* and, in a broader cultural context, as an observation on the absence/loss of men due to war.

One of the most popular narratives on the secondary market is exploration, or more accurately, the explorer. Modernists Sidney Nolan and Albert Tucker, in particular, repeatedly turned to this theme in their oeuvres. Stoicism, resilience, blind ignorance and masculine heroism fill canvases. And the landscapes are *terra nullius*.

Nolan did tackle a couple of stories of women and the landscape, both with Indigenous connections – Daisy Bates and Eliza Fraser – but these 'imaginary portraits' were exceptional, utilised chiefly for expressing alienation rather than pioneering spirit or resilience.

Nolan fixed on Burke and Wills (268 sales; top price \$552,000 in 2009), whose follies were exploited for poetic drama, while Tucker developed a type, or 'refracting prism for the human condition' – a huge skeletal male head that usually dominated the landscape. Various titles *Antipodean Head*, *Pioneer Head* and *Explorer*, the latter performs best, despite clearly utilising the same head. The depicted work, *Explorer*, which made nearly \$219,000 (2002), was originally sold in 1974 as *Antipodean Head*.

Brett Whiteley, too, ventured into this territory with his 1985 sinuous homage to Ernest Giles who 'discovered' and named *Kata Tjuta* 'The Olgas', currently the third top selling work at auction, at close to \$3.5 million (2007). Contemporary Indigenous artist, Gordon Bennett, has repeatedly addressed the explorer/colonist trope in his work, challenging this heroic masculine canon in Australia's narratives by reinstating Indigenous presence and adding political comment.

In *Zones of the Marvellous: In Search of the Antipodes* (2009), author Martin Edmund described Bennett's depiction of Burke in *Haptic Painting Explorer (The Inland Sea)*, 1993, as

Explorer 1968
Albert Tucker
Private collection
Image courtesy
Sotheby's Australia
© Barbara Tucker



'burning as he drowns in a sea of his own territorialising imagination.' Bennett has the heroic explorer sinking beneath a dotted sea, referencing central desert art, amongst the flotsam and jetsam of previous colonial naval explorers (sold 2012 for \$108,000).

In search of portrait depictions of national character on the secondary market – as opposed to our national institutions, where they abound – there are few compared with types. Where portraits have sold well, they tend to be unnamed sitters, a ploy to draw attention to the work's aesthetics. Named sitters are typically society people, or from the

artist's circle. Ex-pat Jeffrey Smart's portraits, rare in the oeuvre, focussed on Australian intellectual and artistic pioneers (David Malouf, Germaine Greer, Clive James, Margaret Olley). Despite this, in most cases they are still 'chess pieces' in his chief aim of highlighting the banal, sometimes sinister and alienating effects of our urban environment.

Smart's works are a far cry from masculine heroic narratives of pioneers and pastoralists, explorers and bush battlers, diggers and drovers. He and satirist John Brack, in particular, share the secondary market limelight

Haptic Painting Explorer (The Inland Sea) 1993
Gordon Bennett
Corporate collection,
Sydney
Image courtesy Bonham's
© Estate of
Gordon Bennett





The Bar 1954
John Brack
National Gallery
of Victoria
Image courtesy
Sotheby's Australia
© Helen Brack

Self Portrait at Papini's
1984-85
Jeffrey Smart
oil and synthetic
polymer paint on canvas
Private collection
Image courtesy
Deutscher and Hackett
© Estate of Jeffrey Smart

for insightful engagement with this particular counter-narrative.

Brack's famous depictions of rushing workers, ballroom dancers, jockeys, shopfronts, domesticity and the car, ground contemporary Australian experience in the suburban, where the charade of heroic character gives way to the mundane, in which his subjects nevertheless still express the 'resilience, anti-authority and dry humour' assigned to characterisations of Australianess.

Works by both artists factor in the top prices paid at auction each year, with Brack currently claiming three places in the historical top-ten, totalling nearly \$7.65 million. *The Bar 1954* (\$3.2 million, sold 2006; collection NGV) is a parody of Manet's famous *Un bar aux Folies Bergère* and a comment on the infamous 'six o'clock swill'. Curiously, the profiles of the patrons exhibit strong similarities to Tucker's Antipodean heads developed a decade later.

For Smart – who, along with Brack, Nolan and Drysdale are four of the market's most traded artists – it is a self portrait that currently ranks top in the artist's oeuvre: *Self Portrait at Papini's 1984-85* (sold 2014 for \$1.26 million). Smart depicts himself smiling ambiguously out at us. Here we have the mature artist confidently front and centre of his own story. This work comes closest to the examples of notable people lauded by our public institutions for their personal achievements as Australians, but they are few and far between on the secondary market, where espousals of national mythologies and masculine types still fill the front of catalogues and bring the biggest bucks. ▣

Auction results courtesy of the Australian Art Sales Digest (AASD)