

No Surprises and No Superstars at the Menzies Sale and Prayers in Thanks for Savill

By Jane Raffan, on 25-Mar-2012

You know it is a slow night when the auctioneer proudly announces new auction records for obscure artists, even more so when they come in under estimate. There were two set at last night's *Important Australian & International Fine Paintings & Sculpture* sale: Albert John Hansen's ode to Millet, *In the Golden Gleam of a Summer Sun* (Lot 60), which made \$56,000 against its low end of \$60K and Henry Hanke's *La Gitana* (Lot 170), which realised \$16,000 (\$18–26K).



Most of the key top lots sold, and in the \$100K plus bracket only one, Lin Onus' beautiful *Barmah Forest* (Lot 37), climbed beyond its upper estimate, selling for \$215,000 (hammer) against a conservative estimate of \$150–200K.

stalled on a work known to be in the dealer's stable. He was busy on the Boyds and Nolans, except for Boyd's *An Hallucinated Cow*, which raised chuckles amongst the audience, but didn't get a look in from the dealer, or anyone else, and passed in; and Nolan's *Face* (Lot 134), which was similarly dismissed by Savill, but was bought by someone else for \$30K.

Savill also snapped up, somewhat surprisingly, a work by AH Fullwood (Lot 105) and was an active under-bidder on a host of other items, including the group of four works by Sam Byrne (lots 117–120), which saw one of the most energetic exchanges of the evening. He even threw his hand up for international works, including the Rodin (Lot 71) and the Antonio Blanco (Lot 137), which was sold to someone in the room on a mobile to an international caller.

Other dealers and agents were in the fray. Michael Nagy offered strong competition, securing Whiteley's *Westerly with Daisies* (Lot 42) for \$600,000. Collector Steven Nasteski, who recently spoke up in the press about returning a questionable work by Whiteley for refund, was seen to be closely inspecting this work prior to the sale, but wasn't active on it, or any other work during the auction. Nagy also bought Boyd's *Little Train* (Lot 44) for \$340,000.

After the big guns were done, Farrah's job was made harder by an unresponsive room and a succession of passed-in lots that cycled throughout the evening. He did a good job of keeping the tone up amidst the faltering tail end and was heard to cry "surely more?!" across a number of lots throughout the evening. And when he wasn't feigning surprise at low bids, he demanded of the crowd that "there should be hands everywhere!" on works that generated little or no interest. The tone dipped occasionally with suggestive utterances and sad jokes with crowd members about nudes on lots 75, 100 and 170.

There were 12 phones in operation but rarely more than three on any one lot. Auctioneer Martin Farrah enjoyed the bold and dramatic bidding by one of his younger team, asking him to bring his phone bidders back next day for the sale at Annandale. In contrast, he was seen to repeatedly check for bids from the team at the opposite table, at one point drolly referring to Tim Abdullah, Andrew Crawford and Chris Cullity as "the pensioners".

The first sign of Farrah's dwindling stamina came with a shout to the crowd of "a quick sale is good sale" at lot 74 (and without a drop of irony either—he sold the top lots at a rate of 50 lots in the first hour). The work, by Charles Blackman, was knocked down to a phone bidder at its low end without obvious competition for \$20K. More bidding instructions along the lines of "quickly" followed throughout the evening and with no show of hands on the last lot, an exasperated Farrah admonished the room with "well what are you all still doing here?"

Jokes aside, the sale pulled off a reasonably hefty total of \$6,921,550 hammer, with good stats of 76.67% by volume and 80.81% by value. A solid workman-like effort from a team more used to glowing headlines.

Top Lots – \$100K and above – works with asterisks best performing

42	\$600K	(\$600–800K)	Whiteley
43	\$600K	(\$600–800K)	Brack
40	\$480K	(\$550–750K)	Smart

In all, six new high prices were achieved^[1], but none for blue chip artists: Martine Emdur's *Coast* (Lot 142) recorded a new high at \$38,000 (\$22–28K), Robert Clinch's *Memory* (Lot 63) made \$80,000, and the Manly picture by Gerald Fitzgerald achieved \$34,000. The vaunted self portrait by Mary Edwards, *Heritage* (Lot 57), also secured a new record for the artist at \$72,000.

Estimated at \$80-100,000, this result was typical of the performance across the top tier.

Most of the key top lots sold—without fanfare and with a fair amount of cajoling—but apart for a handful of key works, often 10-20% under estimate. In the \$100K plus bracket there were only six works that surpassed their low end estimate, and of these, only one climbed beyond its upper estimate. As predicted, Lin Onus' beautiful *Barmah Forest* (Lot 37), made \$215,000 against a conservative estimate range of \$150–200K.

Dealer Denis Savill acquired a number of key works, including Sidney Nolan's Bourke and Wills triptych *Dig* (Lot 50) for \$220,000 (\$180–240K), Charles Blackman's *Veiled Light* (Lot 52) for \$115,000 (\$140–180K), and Arthur Boyd's *Shoalhaven with Flying Bird* (Lot 56) for \$120K (\$140–180K). He also acquired works by Ray Croke (Lot 16), David Boyd (lots 113 and 127), John Perceval (Lot 148) and Sidney Nolan's *Rescue Bather* (Lot 88)—one of the better performing works at \$32,000 against \$18–24K.

Savill was active throughout the evening, much to the relief of the auctioneer, whose gaze wandered to Savill's seat whenever bidding

41	\$450K	(\$450–650K)	Nolan
44	\$340K	(\$350–450K)	Boyd
51	\$320K	(\$300–400K)	Smart **
39	\$220K	(\$240–300K)	Oliver
37	\$215K	(\$150–250K)	Onus **
50	\$220K	(\$180–240K)	Nolan **
33	\$150K	(\$120–160K)	Nolan **
47	\$130K	(\$140–180K)	Whiteley
56	\$120K	(\$140–180K)	Boyd
52	\$115K	(\$140–180K)	Blackman
36	\$110K	(\$100–140K)	Whiteley **
46	\$110K	(\$100–140K)	Tucker **
59	\$110K	(\$140–180K)	McCubbin
35	\$100K	(\$100–140K)	Storrier

Best Performing works (against estimate) \$10–50,000

7	\$28K	(\$12–16K)	Streeton
9	\$16K	(\$7–10K)	Baldessin
8	\$25K	(\$14–18K)	Quilty
88	\$32K	(\$18–24K)	Nolan
108	\$34K	(\$22–28K)	Fitzgerald
4	\$14.5K	(\$8–12K)	Amor
10	\$14K	(\$10–14K)	Thake
156	\$20K	(\$16–20K)	Edwards
11	\$18K	(\$15–20K)	Friend
22	\$30K	(\$22–32K)	Blackman
78	\$28K	(\$22–28K)	Lindsay
15	\$26K	(\$22–28K)	Preston
83	\$22K	(\$20–25K)	Boyd

[1] Works under \$20,000 do not appear in the AASD's tally of artists' new highs.

Sale Referenced: [Fine Australian and International Paintings and Sculpture, Menzies, Sydney, 22/03/2012](#)

About The Author

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