



Collector Cachet: What Price Provenance?

The James Gleeson Collection at Bonhams & Goodman's turned over nearly \$1 million dollars (hammer) compared with its low-end total of \$870,000 and cleared virtually 100%.

The announcement by Goodman before the sale that all but a select few works would be sold without reserve momentarily stunned the room into silence, which was followed by an apprehensive murmur rather than excitement, suggesting the audience interpreted this to mean there were enough bids on the books to

take sales well beyond published estimates. And this was true for nearly all works, the opening bids for which were most often at, or above, the low-end estimate.

Comprising 106 lots from the artist's estate, 67 works were by Gleeson himself, achieving \$630,000 of the gross sales. Works by long time friend and fellow early surrealist Robert Klippel formed the majority of the balance numbering 22, which totalled \$165,000, while the remaining 17 works by various artists offered glimpses into the artist's work and personal life. This small group had some very strong results to contribute a total of \$135,000.

The sale was ordered chronologically for both Gleeson and Klippel, and collectors were thus treated to mini surveys of both artists, which in Gleeson's case in particular, strongly illustrated the development of themes and stylistic concerns. On the auction's eve, ABC TV ran a preview story that pitched the artist's homosexuality as an important element in his work. While this is widely understood, it is not often directly embraced in critical appraisals of his work, which have tended to subjugate Gleeson's love of the male nude in his fixation on Classical mythology.



Nearly 50% of the works on offer by Gleeson depicted the nude male figure, the bulk of which dated to the 1960s and 1970s; many of which were modelled on his partner, Frank O'Keefe. This particular element of his oeuvre captivated a large portion of the 120 strong audience, and generated the only real buzz of the night when lot 25, a particularly dynamic and well drawn example from his intimate 'Psychoscape' series (depicted), made \$24,000 against a low pre-sale estimate of \$3-4,000, doubling the existing record for works in this series. This was followed by lot 35, a paint and collage work that purportedly also featured a piece of veil belonging to Gleeson's mother, which sold for \$20,500 against expectations of \$6-9,000.

Of the abstract works in his later and best known style, a large proportion also featured the phallus amongst the visceral psychoscapes, both distinctly and prominently. The large works from this period were the failure of the evening, with only 2 from 4 selling, and both well below the low end estimates. Lot 51 made \$65,000 and lot 65, the artist's self portrait from 1998 entitled 'The Artist Descending', made \$72,000 (depicted, top); both against estimates of \$80-100,000. This work depicts Gleeson, with an unnerving and unfixed gaze, sinking slowly beneath the still waters of an otherwise turbulent landscape lit with an eerie Turner-esque glow. Although descending, one gets the distinct impression that the artist will rise, and that

the work is a presentiment of metamorphosis. And while portraits are often valued less than other works in an artist's oeuvre, I would expect the buyer, who also captured most of Gleeson's collages, will feel pleased with the price paid for this interesting work.



Lot 3 augured well for the sale. A tiny but wonderful early example with strong exhibition provenance, 'The Gondolier with Siren' (depicted) was quickly chased to \$30,000 against expectations of \$15-25,000. The sale was otherwise painfully slow throughout at 2hrs 20 minutes. Tim Goodman excused the pace, citing 'many first time auction participants'. The drawn-out battles on the phone between, on average, 2-5 of the 11 bidders spread around the room, added to this pall, which was not helped by Goodman accepting \$100 and \$200 bids on some works.

The Kilpkel collection brought fresh momentum to the sale, despite the crowd thinning to 66%. Works were keenly sought after, but predominantly by one buyer, who secured 10 from 22 offerings. In most cases sale prices far exceeded estimates, especially for the sculptures. Lot 80 (depicted), a delicately balanced work with fine exhibition provenance, soared to \$41K after stalling at \$10K, at which point an emboldened and possibly weary bidder made a \$5,000 jump in the bidding, which propelled the others to recognize the piece's true value and chase it with renewed momentum to its hammer.



Lot 81, a stainless steel work last offered in this edition in 1995, sold at the upper end of its pre-sale \$15-25K range; and the intimate works standing around 15cm high also predominantly sold at the high end, or just above, from \$6-8,000. The buy of the night, however, was lot 87 (depicted): number 1 from a 1982 edition of 6 large bronzes, which sold for \$18,000 to the buyer of Gleeson's self portrait; obviously still looking for bargains. Numbers 4 and 3 from the same edition were sold in 2002 and 2008 respectively for hammers of \$38,000 and \$46,000. Lots 89 and 90 had a different tale to tell: identical artist proofs from the same edition, both gifts from Klippel to Gleeson (lot 90) and O'Keefe (lot 89). The work carrying Gleeson provenance sold for \$6,000, while the O'Keefe sculpture made \$4,000.

Of the works by other artists in the collection, it is easy to surmise that the abstracts by Elwyn Lynn (lot 99) and Asher Bilu (lot 100) would have appealed to Gleeson because of the treatment of paint; the moody nocturne by Jack Carrington Smith (lot 95) for its interesting exercise in light; the Cedric Flower (lot 71) for its charm and Classical narrative; while Lawrence Daws' symbolist burning train (lot 101) no doubt lit an intellectual spark. Of these, only the Flower (depicted) set a new record for the artist at \$3,800.



Coburn (depicted) and Olsen offered a distinctly contemporary aesthetic compared with most of the other works, which were figurative, and like Gleeson's own works focused on the male form in various poses, including a sublime portrait study by Justin O'Brien from The Stations of the Cross (lot 72), which brought \$7,000; and a lovely early work by Donald Friend (lot 70) that had 5 phone bidders see it reach \$18,000 against an estimated \$8-12,000. The fine works by John Coburn (lot 96) and John Olsen were ridiculously estimated at \$4-6,000, making \$23,000

and \$16,000 respectively. George Baldessin's enigmatic works also rose above expectation, with lot 103, a triptych etching/acquatint on silver foil breaking the record for this series with the hammer falling at \$19,500 against a more realistic \$9-12,000; and Polish artist Ewa Pachucka's monumental 3D mesh man from 1977 lifted the tail-end of the sale, selling for \$18,000 against the ubiquitous pre-sale estimate of \$4-6,000.

While the event was clearly successful overall, compared with sales of Gleeson's work in recent auctions by Bonhams & Goodman and Sotheby's, this collection did not break new broad ground for the artist. It did, however, reaffirm the special attraction of single owner collections for the broader public. In this case, the artist as collector added to the mystique, which translated at times into prices paid significantly above market averages.

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