

Wet Paint and Wet Behind the Ears – Parisian Aboriginal Art Auctions Need Refining

Since 2007 dedicated sales of Aboriginal art have featured on Parisian auction calendars, and while appreciation of *Art Aborigène* is still evident from museum and gallery promotions, the appetite for works appearing on the secondary market is currently moderate and has little depth. Apart from a few strong results for key works, the recent round of Aboriginal art auctions in Paris generated disappointing clearances around 30% by value.

Artcurial, which entered the market with the *Peter Los Collection of Desert Paintings* in July 2008, managed 50% by lot at their 4 November auction. Aboriginal art was presented as a small component of their 450 lot *Modern and Contemporary Art* sale. Only 21 from 42 works sold, representing 31% by value for a total of 60,643 EUR (incl. BP); a significant fall from last year's one-owner sale, which generated 238,338 EUR (incl. BP) for a similar clearance by lot.

The smaller operation *GAIA* also struggled with its dedicated *Aboriginal Art* sale on 24 October, only selling 26 from 79 paintings for a value rate close to *Artcurial*. Despite the lower clearance rate, however, the *GAIA* sale offered superior work overall, which secured a couple of strong sales and lifted its overall result.



Close scrutiny of the content and character of both sales reveals novel developments and interesting trends. The *Artcurial* sale featured a number of works by artists untested on the Australian market that found appeal with buyers. Trevor Turbo Brown's *Sea Eagle* (Lot 739), depicted, made 2,295 EUR (incl. BP). The sale also featured seven works by recently deceased artist William King Jungala and his daughters Sarrita and Tarrise, who are both in their early twenties.

William King's *Fire* (Lot 707) made 2,168 EUR (incl. BP), and all but one by this family sold, including a work that was painted onsite, specifically for the sale. Along with youth, buyers were seemingly not deterred by the relatively recent date of execution of works. Seventeen works, representing 40% of the sale, were painted 2007-2009, including two of the three top lots; and thirteen sold.



The auction's top lot was Michael Nelson Jagamarra's *Yam and Kangaroo Dreaming* (Lot 702), depicted, which made 8,646 EUR (incl. BP). It stood out on three counts: its early date of 1987; its provenance to Papunya Tula artists; and its publication in dealer Patrick Courbally Stourton's (catalogue of his personal

collection as book) *Songlines and Dreamings*. This artist's work is notoriously difficult to sell in Australia, and this result is promising for collectors lumbered by the local market's indifference.



Second and third spots went to recent works. Freddie Timms' *Moonlight Springs Top Country* from 2007 (Lot 728), depicted, sold for 7,315 EUR, while Gabriella Possum Nungurrayi's *Seven Sisters Dreaming* from 2008 (Lot 722) sold for 6,630 EUR (both incl. BP); each sale representing a new top price for the artist at auction for comparable work within their oeuvres.

The *Artcurial* sale was most notable for being predominantly serviced by Melbourne dealer stock. Given their first foray into the market began with Los, it comes as no great surprise that he was a source for the second. Fifteen works bearing Los' art dealership provenance formed the core of the sale and comprised 90% of the works imported from Australia into the EU. The remaining 10% were resales from European clients originally acquired through two other Melbourne dealers. Interestingly, with 30% of these EU imports selling, it would seem that the impost of an additional 5.5% VAT did not present a significant impediment to general interest.

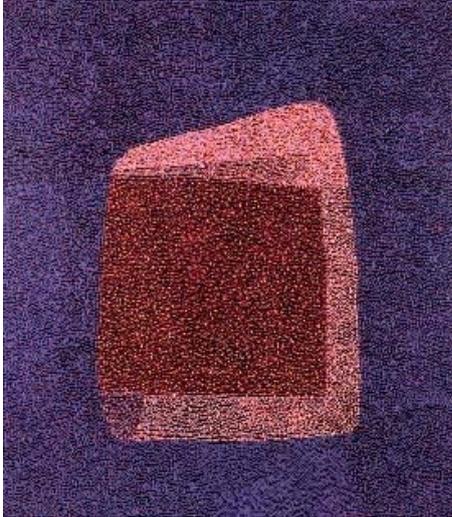
Peter Los was the source of the three major unsold works, including two which carried his undeclared provenance. Both Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's *Fire Dreaming at Warlukurlangu* (Lot 733), estimated at 25-35,000 EUR, and Mick Namerari Tjapaltjarti's *Marsupial Mouse Dreaming* (Lot 738), estimated at 15-25,000 EUR, identified the source as 'private collection Melbourne', with accompanying certificates that bore Los' personal initials rather than business acronym in the catalogue numbers.

In general, and despite sale statistics, the *GAIA* results were much better than *Artcurial*, including four top lots each above 10,000 Euro. This was due chiefly to the calibre and diversity of the work on offer at *GAIA*, which featured a solid proportion of works by top tier artists. Unlike *Artcurial*, date of execution and provenance were not declared, but the two sales did share a common pattern in the appreciation of certain works not readily supported on the Australian market.



GAIA's top lot was Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's *Perente Goanna Dreaming* (Lot 38) from 1992, which made 20,128 EUR (incl. BP); while a fabulous work by Judy Watson Napangardi, *Untitled* (Lot 22), depicted, claimed second spot with a sale at 16,470 EUR (incl. BP). Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula took out third with *Snake Tjukurpa* (Lot 39), which made 14,701 EUR (incl.

BP); while Ronnie Tjampitjnpa presented the fourth sale over the magic 10,000 level, bringing 14,640 EUR (incl. BP) for his grand *Untitled Tingari painting* (Lot 56).



There were also relatively strong sales close to, and over the AUD \$10,000 level by Kathleen Petyarre's *Bush Seeds* (Lot 16) at 6,100 EUR; Dorothy Napangardi Watson's *Untitled Mina Mina* (Lot 62) at 6,700 EUR; and Josie Petrick Kemarre's lovely *Untitled* work with strong modernist appeal (Lot 58), depicted, which made 5,612 EUR (all incl. BP).

Many of the works in both auctions carried estimates far above Australian equivalents, but unlike local trends, it would seem that the French firms managed to negotiate lower reserves, as most sales were knocked down well below pre-sale estimates.

GAIA has presented dedicated Aboriginal art sales since 2007. Given the nature and source of works in both auctions, and their respective presentation, it would seem that *GAIA* is, at present, more serious about the development of Aboriginal art auctions in Paris. They have a sale slated for May next year; and while *Artcurial* has indicated it intends to hold one, it hasn't committed a date to its calendar.

Despite the evident rough ride, there are promising signs for this market's expansion and development in areas not exploited or supported by local firms. And with increasing restrictions being placed on content in the Australian context, a more open reception by the European market will come as a relief to many local collectors, notwithstanding current volatile estimates and patchy results.

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Note: At time of both auctions the Euro was approximately 1.6 Australian dollars.

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