

Bonham's Laverty Sale: Farewell without Fanfare and a Haul of New Records

By Jane Raffan, on 25-Mar-2013

The Foundation Hall at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, was packed by a crowd of around 300 who came to pay homage and participate in the sale of 266 lots from the Elizabeth and Colin Laverty Collection *Contemporary Australian Art*. The ambience was expectant, but reserved, and was marked throughout by bustle from the back bar, where the espresso machine was in constant employ throughout the 5 hour long event. After a delayed start, and apart from exuberant applause for a few stand-out record breaking sales early on, James Hendy steered the sale with good cheer and rather little fanfare to a highly successful clearance of more than 100% by value and 87% by lot, reaping just under \$5.1M.



The packed 5 hour Bonham's sale of the Elizabeth and Colin Laverty Collection of Contemporary Australian Art was steered by auctioneer James Hendy with good cheer and rather little fanfare to a highly successful clearance of more than 100% by value and 87% by lot, reaping just under \$5.1M.

At 50 lots an hour, the pace of the sale was slow, and the flurry of absentee bids being passed to the auctioneer in the last hour evidenced a lack of staying power, but most buyers stayed for the duration and 62% of purchases were accounted for amongst the crowd, which was diverse and, judging from the staggered exodus as the afternoon wore on, comprised many private buyers hoping to snare a favourite work. The sale's catalogue was well attuned to this demographic, with the strongest clearances in works under \$20,000 (96% under \$5K; 87.5% \$5-10K; 84.5% \$10-20K).

The spirited bidding that came from the floor was a refreshing change from the usual tug-of-war between the auctioneer and phone bidding table, which Bonham's had staffed with nine. Hendy made it clear at the outset that he would favour the room, and many of the staff on phones never had an opportunity to relay a bid. In the end, phone bidders accounted for a solid 30% of sales, but their impact on the tenor of the sale was far less obvious.

Although the visual drama of the phone staffers competing for the auctioneer's attention throughout the escalation of bidding in the room was lost, Hendy's sensible approach of engaging two bidders at a time before bringing others into the fray encouraged some in the

audience to make spectacles of themselves. Paddles were often raised in the air for great lengths of time, and some members of the audience stood up out of their seats to ensure attention, most notable for Ildico Kovacs' *Boot*, 2004 (Lot 145 ) , which a determined woman finally secured for \$72,000 after a bidding stoush ensued between others at its low start of \$11,000.

The works by Kovacs were clear highlights throughout. Earlier, battles were fought for *Travelling Pink Line*, 1995 (Lot 44), which almost doubled its estimate to achieve \$42,000, and Meeting Point, 2000 (Lot 119 ) , which doubled its high-end to make \$40,000. These three works are all new records for the artist.

In general, the non Indigenous component was more keenly fought over than the Aboriginal art, and around 46% of the 109 lots exceeded their high end estimates. Ken Whisson's flag painting (Lot 21) made \$65,000 against \$30-50K; Richard Larter's *Stripperama*, 1964 (Lot 30), was chased to \$55,000 against a high end of \$35K; Rosemary Laing's *Groundspeed (Rose Petal) #17*, 2001 (Lot 87) shot to \$11,000 against \$3-6K; McPherson's 1970s *Scale from the Tool* (Lot 160 ) more than doubled its high end to sell at \$17,000; Robert Hunter's *Untitled, No.9*, 1985, (Lot 162 ) , chalked up \$23,000 against \$10-15K. And Peter Booth, Noel McKenna and Louise Hearman were consistently popular.

In comparison, around 34.5% of the Aboriginal art component's 157 lots exceeded theirs. Of these, Sally Gabori was the hottest, with three works being broadly chased, the best performing of which was *Dibirdibi Country*, 2009 (Lot 6), which doubled its estimate to reach \$20,000. Rover Thomas was also represented with two works estimated to start a war, which duly occurred with competition between privates and dealers for *Islands*, 1996 (Lot 136 ) , which made \$24,000 against \$10-15, and *Lake Kadu*, 1996 (Lot 225), which tripled its cheap high end of \$6,000. Rammey Ramsey outperformed Freddie Timms, with his *Warlawoon Country*, 2007 (Lot 232) making \$15,000 compared with its high end of \$7K.

Bonham's has embraced the digital world and the sale also invited participation from internet bidders, one of which landed a \$40,000 bid on Kovacs' *Travelling Pink Line*, much to the surprise of the auctioneer, who paid much closer attention to his computer screen thereafter.

In the end, internet and absentee bidders together only accounted for around 8% of sales, mostly on low-end works, but they were active on many others throughout. The most expensive work to sell to this demographic was Paddy Honeychild Yankarr's superb *Jila Japirnka*, 2002 (Lot 126 ) , which sold at \$38,000 to an internet bidder who had entered the fray at \$32K, much to the chagrin of Indigenous art consultant Wally Caruana who was the underbidder. This price also set a new record for the artist.

In all, the Laverty sale set 9 new benchmarks peppered throughout three quarters of the sale. Peter Upward, whose powerful work *October Still*, 1962 (Lot 17 ) brought dealers and consultants out in droves early, including Charles Nodrum, who had originally sold it to the Lavertys and who chased it to near double its high-end and a new high of \$110,000. Nodrum was active

throughout the sale but only managed to acquire one other work, Peter Tyndall's inexpensive rumination on looking at art (Lot 265) for \$3,500.

An untitled work by Doreen Reid Nakamarra (Lot 24), who was represented among the Australian contingent at last year's international contemporary gathering *Documenta 13*, was the first from the Aboriginal component to significantly exceed expectation, making \$25,000 against its estimate of \$12-18K. Shortly after, Aida Tomescu's *Albastra III*, 2002 (Lot 33), trebled its high-end to achieve \$60,000 amid excited applause and an announcement of its record status. The last record to fall in the first 50 lots was for John Mawurndjul's very beautiful *Mardayin Ceremonies, 1999* (Lot 50), which soared \$20K above its high end to make \$90,000.

Like many of the highlight artists, Mawurndjul was represented in the sale with multiple works. In his case, all but one of the seven offered sold, a strategy that paid-off across the board[i], but which also saw a handful of top lots fail, including William Robinson's *Morning Tallanbanna, 1998* (Lot 36), which was the most dour of the three major paintings by the artist and set the sale total back by \$190K. The auction's top lot was also by Robinson. *Blue Pools Springbook, 2000* (Lot 201) sold to a phone bidder without competition for the low-end of \$420,000, while an earlier, more whimsical work, *Landscape with Night and Day, 1989* (Lot 92), also sold at its low-end of \$220,000.

Others among the top lots with expectations \$50K plus and which failed to attract a referred bid was Paddy Bedford's *Brumby Spring, 2003* (Lot 155 [ii]) at \$120-150K, which suffered in competition with one of the sale's top lots, the artist's *Cockatoo at Police Hole, 2003* (Lot 88). This work sold at its low-end of \$165,000, including GST payable on the hammer[ii].

The earliest Aboriginal piece in the sale, Uta Uta Tjangala's *Special Pintupi Travelling Ceremony*, a board from 1972 (Lot 175 [iii]), did not attract a bid and was passed in at \$32K, 20% below estimate. This work, which carries exceptional Stuart Centre provenance, also currently features in the French version of the National Gallery of Victoria's Papunya Tula 40 year anniversary retrospective at the Musee du Quai Branly. The Lavertys acquired this work from auction in 1998. The time has clearly passed when collectors clamoured for such a prize. Market taste is one thing, but government impediments and the strong dollar have aggravated matters. The federal government's *Protection of Moveable Cultural Heritage Act (PMCHA)*, in particular, which requires all works of Indigenous art older than 20 years to have an export permit, has dampened the interests of many international collectors[iii].

Bonham's Aboriginal Art specialist, Greer Adams, confirmed that export permits were sought for all works in the sale with a date that fell within the PMCHA's purview, but she also indicated that she did not believe this had bearing in their results[iv]. Of the sale's 32 works that remained unsold, all but 4 (lots 36, 82, 166, 193) were from the Aboriginal component. Of these, 8 works hailed from Balgo and 10 works came with Papunya Tula provenance. The Balgo works included two by Eubena Nampitjin that carried overly optimistic estimates (Lots 95, 185) and a couple of collaborative works, to which the market is traditionally slow to warm.

Late in the sale, Emily Kame Kngwarreye's re-titled *Untitled, 1990* (Lot 221), which by its date of execution would also fall under the PMCHA's purview, didn't inspire any action and was vendor bid to \$45K or 10% below estimate. The only other lot from the 50 Plus category to fall short was Tommy Watson's *Wangkamarl, 2003* (Lot 26), which carried an optimistic estimate of \$70-90K.

Earlier in the night, another early piece by Emily did meet expectation, but only after tough work by the auctioneer who successfully cajoled bidders through a stall at \$185K to secure the \$200,000 sale at the low end to a buyer in the room. This work carried a full page provenance with considerable exhibition history and literature. Perhaps propelled by prestigious museum provenance, the same bidder also contributed to the records for night, capturing Dick Watkins' *The Mooche, 1968* (Lot 122 [v]). This work was included in the important 1968 exhibition *The Field*, and this, no doubt, contributed to its hammer price of \$93,000 against expectations of \$40-60K.

The other two records for the night were for Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri's *Untitled, 1994* (Lot 101 [vi]), which also carried interesting MCA provenance (*Spirit and Place, 1997*), and which was bought at its low-end of \$180,000 by a phone bidder, again with enticement from the auctioneer of it being "very well priced".

Consultant and dealer Annette Larkin nabbed two fabulous works for private clients, including Jan Billycan's star work *Kirriwirri, 2007* (Lot 189), where she beat off John Cruthers after a chase that saw the work achieve \$30K over estimate with a price of \$80,000 – a new record for the artist. Larkin also snared *Untitled, 1996* (Lot 165 [vii]) mid estimate for \$80,000. This powerful and dynamic work by Emily Kame Kngwarreye carried the cachet of international retrospective provenance.

Two other buyers snapped up 21 lots between them. One of these came from amongst the rows thought to be occupied by extended family and friends. This person acquired 11 lots totalling \$310,000, including the sale's top lot by Paddy Bedford.

The sale was notable for the number of industry players in attendance, including auction house staff, past and present: Roger McIlroy, Justin Miller, Geoffrey Smith and Gary Singer, D'Ian Davidson, Wally Caruana, Sue Hewitt, and former Director of the Hogarth Galleries, Sydney, Helen Hansen, as well as Karen Coote, Adam Knight, Suzanne O'Connell, Gabriella Roy, Bill Nuttall, and the Lowensteins, to name a few.

Natalia Bradshaw, Dick Quan and Patrick Corrigan were among the notable collectors. Federal minister Peter Garrett was successful on Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula's *Untitled, 1989* (Lot 149 [viii]) for \$14,000, while collector cum dealer, Simon Chan, was outbid on the sale's two works by Dorothy Napangardi after setting himself sensible caps at the high end of \$20,000 (Lots 110, 150). One of these works was acquired by a collector wearing a T-shirt that read "stereotypes are a real time saver". The same man also snared a work by Ildicao Kovacs from the grasp of Justin Miller.

A lot of people left empty handed, but fewer were left really disappointed, like Adelaide dealer Neriba Gallasch, who came expressly to honour Colin Laverty and to bid on three small works for her personal collection in the hope of obtaining a memento of the man who has given so much to the cause of contemporary Australian art.

[i] Other artists represented by 5 or more works: Paddy Bedford (9) sold 8; Peter Booth (12) all sold; Robert Klippel (10) all sold; Emily Kame Kngwarreye (5) sold 3; Ildico Kovacs (7) sold 5; Richard Larter (7) all sold; Noel McKenna (6) all sold; William Robinson (6) sold 5; Billy Thomas (5) all sold; Aida Tomescu (6) all sold; Dick Watkins (7) sold 6.

[ii] In total, 4 lots by the artist (and the only ones in the sale) attracted GST on the hammer: 88, 155, 190 and 191.

[iii] For example, see Jane Raffan, 'An American Love Affair: Interview with John Wilkerson', *Art Market Report*, Issue 41, 1st quarter 2012, pp. 36-41, where Wilkerson is quoted as saying "there is no reason for a sane and rational US collector to collect Australian Aboriginal art that falls within the purview of the cultural heritage regulations" and where other auction industry players comment on the effects of this legislation.

[iv] Unsold lots that fell under the PMCHA's purview were lot 42, 71, 113, 175, 221, 186.

Sale Referenced: [The Laverty Collection: Contemporary Australian Art, Bonhams, Sydney, 24/03/2013](#)

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 with over 20 years experience in the arts sector, working initially for the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and then over twelve years in the fine art auction industry. Her consultancy focuses on collection management, market advice and valuations. Apart from published fine art market commentary, Jane also writes and blogs on Aboriginal art, and produces/presents a fortnightly radio program on the arts. www.artifacts.net.au.

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