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***Art Aborigène en Paris:
Contemporary Art, bien sûr!,
mais avec un peu Primitive Appeal.***

Over the next month Paris will witness two auctions of Aboriginal art.

While Australian indigenous art has been engaging the imagination and attention of the European public through gallery and museum exhibitions for decades, a steep rise in its attraction and appreciation by collectors can be traced to the celebrated 1993 exhibition *Aratjara Art of the First Australians*, and further renewed growth was evident following the 2006 opening of the Musée de Quai Branly in Paris.

And although this phenomenon is not restricted to Europe, with the US being the next major centre, Paris maintains a notable dominant focus with four commercial galleries in operation for many years, as well as a flurry of openings and closures over the last five. Some follow the ethnographic model prevalent in Belgium, where colonial paradigms contextualize Aboriginal art alongside African art and works from other tribal peoples¹, while others focus exclusively on Australian indigenous art and present works in a contemporary gallery setting²; some by appointment only³.

This duality in approach and appeal in Paris is culturally endemic and made apparent at the city's showcase venue for the arts and civilisations from Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas, the Musée de Quai Branly, where works by eight of Australia's pre-eminent indigenous artists were commissioned to grace the fabric of the building⁴, while the internal displays of older material conform to ethnographic museum display models.

Paris has long been a centre for the trade in tribal art, and since 2007 dedicated sales of Aboriginal art have also featured on Parisian auction calendars. Artcurial, which is a group of auctioneers including Briest, Poulain and Tajan, and is France's 3rd largest auction house, entered the market with the *Peter Los Collection of Desert Paintings* in July 2008, which was managed through its contemporary department with an external specialist, Marc Jallon.

The collection sold 29 of the 62 works on offer, for a total of 238,338 EUR (including Buyer Premium), and Artcurial's upcoming 4 November sale is their first since. The smaller operation GAIA inaugurated modest sales of Aboriginal art in December 2007 and has held two per year since. GAIA's next sale is scheduled for 24 October and

comprises 79 paintings, all from desert communities, with a low end expectation around \$370,000.

GAIA promotes its expertise in the usual tribal arts of Africa, Oceania and Indonesia, alongside Pre-Columbian, Australian Aboriginal art and Inuit art; photography; and modern and contemporary art from Africa, Japan, Australia and South America. GAIA's specialist Marc Yvonnou ran 'Le Temps du Rêve', a gallery in Pont Aven that specialized in the popular French combination of 'primitive and contemporary art'.

Yvonnou is clearly well versed in Aboriginal art and has written text for each work that focuses on the biographies of the artists, as well as the subject or style of each work. The cataloguing is also notably different to Australian entries in two important areas: no listed dates of execution, and no stated provenance, with only three exceptions.

It would seem that, for the French at least, aesthetic considerations outweigh politics; no concerns here about works of art appearing on the secondary market after what has been described locally as "tastelessly short periods" following execution. There is a small and oblique reference at the start of the catalogue that certificates for works of art will be made available to buyers, but the catalogue entries themselves make no mention of a work's source other than the artist's ethnicity, that is, tribal language group and desert domicile. This is in stark contrast to Australian catalogues, where market dictates have determined the pre-eminence of provenance in catalogue entries as well as the consignment policies of the leading auction houses.

This is also a possible reason for the Los Collection's offering through Artcurial in Paris rather than Australia. Although Peter Los has been active in remote communities since the 1980s and many works carried community art centre provenances, a number of notable major works did not, and a sale on the Australian market would not likely have attracted the same response from the local press or collectors.



The 2008 Artcurial Los sale also capitalized on the different aesthetic tastes apparent between local and European markets for certain styles of desert painting. Many of the works for sale were of a period and style currently not favoured by the Australian market.

The top result was a *Bush Banana Dreaming* by Eunice Napangardi (lot 7), a monumental work nearing 5 meters in length that was purchased from Joel's in 2005 for \$12,409 (incl. BP). It sold to a French collector for a massive mark up close to \$70,000 (incl. BP). The GAIA sale on 25 October features another large example of the artist's classic subject. Lot 41 (depicted previous page) is denser and more finely executed than the Los example and carries a pre-sale estimate of 35-40,000 EUR.

The upcoming GAIA sale also features work by artists who have had limited commercial success despite a wealth of academic interest, such as Linda Syddick Napaltjarri who is represented by three paintings. Lot 50 (untitled) carries an estimate of 9-11,000 EUR; Syddick's top price on the Australian market to date is \$3,481.



As expected, the auction also features big names that can pull in big money: lot 25 (untitled) is a large, richly coloured and sumptuously textured work by Naata Nungurrayi, which carries a pre-sale estimate of 16-24,000 EUR; somewhat bullish by Australian market standards.

Elizabeth Nyumi's *Parwalla* (lot 52), depicted, is another fine example of her later work; and at 10-12,000 EUR is also expensive compared with larger works on offer at Deutscher-Hackett on 14 October, but it is a more delicate example and could easily find broad appeal.

The other major works include lot 38, an impressive *Perente Goanna Dreaming* by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri; and lot 40, a *Snake Tjukurrpa* by Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula, both at 18-22,000 EUR.

In another striking example of divergent trends between the European and Australian markets, many works offering a more restrained contemporary aesthetic in past GAIA sales have not sold, most noticeably those by Dorothy Napangardi. Napangardi features again in the 25 October sale with three fine examples of her well known styles (lots 15, 41, 62) and an unusual highly coloured variant (lot 69) reminiscent of her early *bush flower* paintings, which were painted in a style similar to that of Eunice Napangardi.

Other works on offer from many of the market's most popular contemporary artists include: Abie Loy Kemarre (lots 34, 70), Lily Kelly Napangardi (lots 34, 35), George Tjungurrayi (lot 7), George Ward Tjungurrayi (lots 19, 54, 61), Kathleen Petyarre (lots 10, 16), Ronnie Tjampitjinpa (lots 8, 56, 66), Minnie Pwerle (lot 17), Judy Napangardi Watson (lots 22, 23), and Ningura Napurrula (lots 46, 59, 64).

It will be interesting to examine the results of both GAIA and Artcurial, following close on the heels of the Deutscher-Hackett Aboriginal Art sale, and test whether the divergent aesthetics and market trends between Australia and Europe are sustained.

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*Note: At time writing the Euro was approximately 1.6 Australian dollars.
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Notes

¹ African Muse Gallery – Luc Berthier.

² Arts d’Australia – Stephane Jacob; Galerie Yapa – Morteza Esmaili; Contemporary Aboriginal Art Paris – Mary Durack (now closed); Galerie Dad (now closed).

³ Woo Mang et Partners Galerie d’Art Aborigène – Arnaud Serval

⁴ Lena Nyadbi, Paddy Nyunkuny Bedford, Judy Watson, Gulumbu Yunupingu, John Mawurndjul, Tommy Watson, Ningura Napurrula and Michael Riley.