

The Eyes of March - Figurative Works Factor Strongly in Menzies' Fine Art Sale

By Jane Raffan, on 08-Mar-2012

Against recent trend, there are no big ticket dry landscapes in the Menzies catalogue for their *Important Australian & International Fine Paintings & Sculpture* sale, first cab off the rank this season in Sydney, 22 March 2012. Perhaps this is symptomatic of a summer season that witnessed the country under constant deluge, whereby collectors couldn't be parted from their fantasies about this supposedly wide brown land. Surmise aside, the sale is surprisingly full of figures and faces (including masks and skulls). Fortunately, figurative works are a popular drawcard and the sale offers a broad selection across a range of styles to suit varied budgets and tastes.



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Among figurative works portraits usually have less popular appeal, but collectors are still rightly drawn to works by blue chip masters, and here the sale offers a solid component amongst the top lots, the stand-out being Russell Drysdale's *Portrait of an Aboriginal Girl*, c.1965 (Lot 45), estimate \$120,000–160,000, and Sydney Long's *Isabella*, 1904 (Lot 55), estimate \$100,000–140,000, which also carries the promise of prominence in an upcoming exhibition on Symbolism at the Art Gallery of New South Wales[1].

For those with a taste for the patriotic, the auction includes a self portrait amid indigenous flora and fauna in Mary Edwards' *Heritage*, 1932 (Lot 57), at \$80,000–100,000. Its elaborate frame—more representative of 1930s iconography and style than the painting—was carved by the artist, itself an overlooked important tradition. Edwards' critical regard has had a patchy history, as her auction records attest, but this work deserves attention from both institutional and private collectors. Interestingly, it is the artist's deadpan and somewhat disquieting demeanour that is considered critically important in the book for which it graced the cover, Joan Kerr's revisionist tome, *Heritage, The national Women's Art Book*. Edwards, who ended life as the expatriate Edwell-Burke, curiously disavowed the work in a letter to art market critic Terry Ingram[2]. Intrigue – cachet of a different kind.

Following Menzies' newly adopted tradition of including significant international works amongst the highlights, the top tier features a portrait drawing by Henri Matisse, *Jeune Femme Assise (Young Woman Seated)* from 1942 (Lot 48), estimate \$140,000–180,000. And if the human visage doesn't appeal, there is always Whiteley's portrait as a bird in the beautiful *Untitled (Blue Wren)* (Lot 47), estimate \$140,000–180,000, or the ever-popular Margaret Olley, who is represented by a de facto portrait—a painting of her living room in the tradition of Van Gogh's bedroom in Arles—*The Yellow Room*, c.1990 (Lot 29), estimate \$60,000–80,000.

And of course no major Australian art sale would be without a mask or two, and when it comes to Kelly, the more the merrier. The Menzies sale offers three Kelly series paintings, including a top lot, fresh from a market respite of more than twenty years. *Ned Kelly and Mounted Trooper*, 1964 (Lot 41) should easily surpass its estimate of \$450,000–650,000. At the other end of the scale, Nolan's *Kelly Mask*, 1980 (Lot 19), estimate \$50,000–70,000, is priced to quell qualms about the hangman's noose. The third work is a narrative of Kate Kelly and Constable Fitzpatrick (Lot 33) and is one of only a few early works (pre-1948 series) left in the public domain. From the artist to Lady Nolan's estate, it first sold in 2010 for \$162,000 (incl. BP) and reappears here for \$120,000–180,000.

Fitzpatrick is described in the accompanying essay as wearing a lecherous mask. The array of masks peppered throughout the sale also includes a rather peculiar *Face* in the form of an artist's palette by Sidney Nolan (Lot 134), estimate \$30,000–40,000, and skeletal figures in David Larwill's *Untitled* (Lot 124), estimate \$12,000–16,000. Disembodied heads also loom large, the best of these being David Boyd's *Explorer Thrown*, 1957 (Lot 69), estimate \$50,000–60,000.

For collectors who appreciate the macabre, a striking *Faun* by Albert Tucker (Lot 46), estimate \$100,000–140,000 is the pick of the bunch; while Ben Quilty's *Six Skulls* (Lot 25), estimate \$30,000–40,000 pitches to the contemporary cool (and, at a stretch, could pass a Rorschach inkblot test as a sunny green landscape as seen from a cave—yes, it has been a bleak summer). Rick Amor's famed quiet menace is represented in a few works, including *Hanging Rock* with ominous sky (Lot 87), estimate \$20,000–26,000.

And while not macabre, quirky works abound, including one for the books: a not-to-be-missed large Pro Hart revenge whimsy depicting *Rabbits Cooking People*, from 1981 (Lot 122). Estimated at \$15,000–20,000, it should top the chart in his rabbit trapping oeuvre, currently at \$22,800 (incl. BP). The theme starts early, with Donald Friend's *Yulgilbar Butler's Day Off*, c.1963 (Lot 11), estimate \$15,000–20,000, one of a series of commissioned works on Yulgilbar Castle, the colonial property owned by Sidney Baillieu Myer, situated on the Clarence River near Grafton in New South Wales. Arthur Boyd's *An Hallucinated Cow*, 1983 (Lot 114), estimate 35,000–45,000, brings up the rear on this theme with a cow up a tree. On this note, there are six works by John Kelly in the sale...

It will be interesting to observe whether a collective itch to see the sun might propel prices on the few landscapes with blue skies by major artists: Arthur Boyd's *Shoalhaven with Flying Bird*, c.1980 (Lot 56), estimate \$140,000–180,000; Albert John Hanson's romantic *In the Golden Gleam of a Summer Sun* (Lot 60), estimate \$65,000–85,000; or Albert Namatjira's pretty pink *Finke Valley, MacDonnell Range*, c.1936 (Lot 131), estimate \$10,000–15,000. And the sunset through Lin Onus' *Barmah Forest*, c.1993 (Lot 37) adds magic to a magnificent work reappearing for the first time since 1993, which should see it easily surpass its estimate of \$150,000–200,000.

Or perhaps our newfound European sense of light will give added appreciation to more low keyed works, such as Frederick McCubbin's *The Sheltered Pool*, c.1911 (Lot 59), estimate \$140,000–180,000; Arthur Boyd's *Too Cold*, c.1971 (Lot 89), estimate \$60,000–80,000; or the highly rated *Still Life* by Yosl Bergner (Lot 78), estimate \$30–40,000, which comes with significant Australian modernism exhibition provenance. The sale also includes a crop of European Old Master wannabes (lots

96, 111, 112).

Elsewhere, more modest landscapes by big names are priced to appeal, including: Fred Williams' *Tibooburra*, 1967 (Lot 23 ) at \$40,000–60,000 and *The Rock* (Lot 84 ) at \$50,000–70,000; and William Robinson's *Sunlight After Rain, Tallanbanna*, 2001 (Lot 26 ) and *Late Summer Bushland*, 2001 (Lot 91 ) , both estimated at \$28,000–35,000.

Aside from the major Kelly, the other three top lots over \$500K had recent outings under the Menzies banner (Smart–lot 40, Whiteley–lot 42, and Brack–lot 43). Jeffrey Smart's *Approach to a City III*, 1968-69 (Lot 40 ) sold in 2010 for \$840,000 (incl. BP) and has reappeared with additional promised exhibition provenance and with genuine expectations carrying a pre-sale price of \$550,000–750,000.

Menzies might only have faint hope of breaking the drought since the last million dollar sale at the beginning of our long wet summer, but with a pre-sale tally of \$8.8–11.7 million and a solid chock of fresh works in the \$100–400K range, they are definitely looking to steer ahead and take advantage of a hoped-for seasonal art deluge.

[1] *Australian Symbolism: the art of dreams*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 11 May – 29 July 2012.

[2] Noted in Candice Bruce's biography of Mary Edwards (Edwell-Burke), in Joan Kerr (ed.), *Heritage, The National Women's Art Book*, Craftsman House, 1995, p. 346.

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

About The Author

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