

Collector appetite and catalogue mix bring fanfare to Menzies' calendar-opening 'Important Australian and International Art' sale

By Jane Raffan, on 02-Apr-2022

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The openers were soft works aimed at small targets: 1895 watercolours by John Campbell of premier eastern suburbs waterfront locales Double Bay (Lot 1 🎯) and Vaucluse (Lot 2 🎯), then unobscured by the mansions that are now constantly being built, bulldozed and rebuilt to maximise the aspect. Sure enough, they were snapped up by a well-heeled woman in the room, each for the low-end estimate of \$12,000. The first handful were all aimed at that market, and so the sale eased gently through to the nitty gritty collector lots filling the under/around \$50K band.

William Dobell, who was represented with an interesting array of studies, made the first mark in this core with the delightful *Woman with Sparrows*, 1931 (Lot 7 🎯), which sold for its low-end of \$30,000. Jeffrey Smart's *First Study for 'Morning Jogger in Parking Garage', Adelaide*, 1987 (Lot 10 🎯) ended mid-estimate at \$55,000, and Garry Shead's *Piano Poem*, 2009 (Lot 11 🎯), was the first to signal a trend to come, with the small oil heavily contested to \$46,000, more than double its low-end.

John Coburn's *Flying High*, 1976 (Lot 14 🎯) took off, hitting heights at \$55,000 (est. \$25-35K), quickly followed by David Larwill's *The Juggle*, 1997 (Lot 16 🎯), which was more of a fastball, ripping away to \$50,000 (est. \$30-40K). Then came "the first of three important works" by Ben Quilty ... says the auctioneer ... but for the keeper of the coffers ne'er a truer word, for his *Self Portrait as a Budgie*, 2004 (Lot 17 🎯), saw plenty of chirruping from the phones and the room before selling to the auctioneer's book for \$120,000.

Menzies' bold play with Helen Johnson's reasonably recent work *Death Painting (Knowledge Transfer Ghoul)*, 2017 (Lot 19 🎯) paid off, with the edgy work well bid over its high end to \$95,000. Suitably matched in vibe, Elenberg's Darth Vader-like *Head III*, 1978 (I'm with catalogue essayist Ashleigh Wilson on the likely influence there ...) marched to \$170,000 (Lot 20 🎯) and into the artist's top ten.

Another auction record for international works in Australia was set with David Hockney's *Lithograph of Water Made of Thick and Thin Lines and Two Light Blue Washes*, 1978-80 (a poet he ain't). The aqua experiment in depicting water (Lot 21 🎯) reached \$200,000 (est. \$140-180,000), settling comfortably in the sale's top 5. Later in the sale, a quirky Lowry sketch made \$22K (Lot 71 🎯), one of only a handful of lots to sell below estimate; and a Picasso earthenware jug (Lot 95 🎯) sold to the books for \$20K, just over its high end, and the second highest price set locally for the artist's vessels.

Popular John Olsen readied the room for the title act to follow. *Where Wattle Pollen Stains the Doubting Heart*, 2014 (Lot 27 🎯) was steadfastly bid to its mid-estimate of \$160,000.

The auction's prospective big ticket lots were grouped together, with mixed expectations and with mixed results.

The first of these, Arthur Boyd's *Etham Dam*, 1959 (Lot 28 🎯), stalled just below its low-end, giving auctioneer Martin Farrah his first consternation. The deathly pall stretched, spurring Farrah to utter a familiar quip, "there should be hands everywhere!" Enter Denis Savill, stage right. Staying in the shadows near the entrance to the room, he leapt into the fray (affixed to his spot) with a range of gestures that

coaxed out competition. Bulldozing their bids, he snared his prize for a whopping \$410,000 (est. \$180-220K), **his actions captured in verse in the next article.**

It was great spectator sport for the room, but didn't have any impact on the anonymous phone bidders who quietly pushed Jeffrey Smart's *Pylon 1*, 2006 (Lot 29 🎯) to its high end of \$700,000, taking out the sale's second top spot. The less gritty and far less interesting *Bus by the Tiber*, 1977-78 (Lot 31 🎯) failed to score a bid, even with a \$50K discount from its hammer price in 2018.

The Smarts bookended the sale's cover lot, an important and career pivoting work by John Brack. But it wasn't a commercial picture. The auctioneer teased out bids from the phones, getting *The Wedding Breakfast*, 1960 (Lot 30 🎯) away near low-end for \$850,000 (est. \$900K-\$1.2M).

With the big-top high-wire act over, Farrah led the sale through its paces with his usual good grace, embracing bids from every which way, and the sale segued across genres and decades. By the end, around 40% of works had sold beyond their high-end estimates, drawing new records in a range of categories.

Emanuel Phillips Fox's languid *En Dishabille*, c. 1911 (Lot 33 🎯) surpassed expectations, selling for \$170,000 (est. \$100-150K) to a visibly relieved young male agent with an Orson Welles-like *sotto voce*, who'd been kept on a tight leash by the buyer on the phone until his first and final bid.

A new record was set for Michael Johnson's oeuvre, with *Earth Line*, 1997-98 (Lot 40 🎯) making \$70,000 (est. \$45-65K).

John Glover's undated *Morning Mist* (Lot 45 🎯), with its English locale attributed through research, doubled its low-end to make \$110,000.

Haughton Forrest's dramatic Scottish harbour and crags sold well above the other two quieter offerings, with *Brodict Bay and Goatfell, Isle of Arran, Scotland (also known as Cowes)*, 1872 (Lot 47 🎯) sailing away for \$55,000 (est. \$12-18K).

And in a masterstroke of arbitrage, Agnes Goodsir's *Standing Nude*, 1902 (Lot 52 🎯) – acquired from the Masterpiece stock sale in June 2021 for \$7,500 – sold for \$28,000, setting a new record (by a long shot) for an artist with a history of scattered sales.

Robert Dickerson, once a darling of the saleroom, but whose work has fallen off a tad in popularity over recent years (other than racing-related pictures), featured with several works, including two oils from his early and later career. After a dead start, and then being declared unreserved, *The Literates*, c. 1949 (Lot 72 🎯) was chased to a near high-end \$28,000. His more formulaic and dour *Paddy's Markets*, 1975 (Lot 43 🎯) was unsold, its \$60-80K estimate too rich for the depression-era-like subject; not even its fresh-to-the-market status and offer of "free delivery?" tempted.

Margaret Olley, on the other hand, whose oeuvre is filled with pretty pictures, keeps on pulling in the punters. The sale included four works, with the most interesting, *Kitchen Cupboard with Pomegranates*, c. 1979 (Lot 34 🎯), selling for \$65,000 (est. \$40-50K). The slightly larger *Flannel Flowers* (Lot 24 🎯) went the same way.

Often it is a catalogue's back end where all the fun resides; the first 100 lots covering all the serious stuff. And those in the audience who have patiently been waiting for their coveted lots have loosened up (and/or liquored up). The sale's lead lots for this section set the right tone, with levity, nudity (Gleeson man bods) and lightweight works on paper.

Robert Clinch's *No Standing*, 1998 (Lot 98 🎯), a Wynne Prize finalist in the day, saw lots of phone action before selling at \$40,000 (est. \$25-35K). And similarly, John Kelly's *Study for Man Wearing a Cow's Head*, 1994 (Lot 99 🎯) raced away to \$30,000 (est. \$14-18K).

The suite of Nolan *Ned Kelly Series II* screenprints from the late 1970s was a boon, with action from all

quarters seeing (Lot 123 🏹) more than double its low-end, reaching \$46,000.

As has become usual, a slew of Whiteley works on paper, coveted by dealers and privates alike, brought up the sale's end. Both lots of 1990 French etchings eclipsed estimates, with (Lot 127 🏹), four lesser images lumped together, making \$21,000 (est. \$8-12K), while the hero image *Arc de Triomphe* (Lot 128 🏹) was hunted to \$15,000 (est. \$4-6K).

And after treading water in the \$15-25K range for literally decades, the off-set lithograph *The Arrival*, 1988, (Lot 130 🏹) has broken records with an astonishing result at \$36,000. Menzies has also claimed a new high price for lot 132, Whiteley's screenprint *The Lovers*, 1975, jumping the \$20K barrier to reach \$22,000.

Menzies' inaugural sale adds substantially to the year's tally, now sitting at \$30.5 million (same time last year \$13.1 million). Even discounting the manna-from-heaven February NAB sales (around \$10M), that's quite a season kick-off.

Other top lots

Jeffrey Smart (Lot 25 🏹) – *Third Study for the Two-up Game*, 2006 – \$120,000

Other high performing lots

Albert Namatjira (Lot 9 🏹) – *Central Australian Landscape (Finke River)*, c. 1955 – \$44,000 (est. \$30-40K)

Tim Storrier (Lot 38 🏹) – *Boy's Own - Flight Home*, 2007 – \$85,000 (est. \$60-80K)

Ethel Carrick Fox (Lot 64 🏹) – *Cottages at Dax* – \$10,000 (est. \$4-6K)

Ray Croke (Lot 73 🏹) – *The Heat of the Day* – \$24,000 (est. \$15-20K)

James Gleeson (Lot 80 🏹) – *Rite of Passage*, 1981 – \$16,000 (est. \$7-9K)

John Olsen (Lot 84 🏹) – *Vervet Monkeys* – \$28,000 (est. \$15-20K)

Sidney Nolan (Lot 104 🏹) – *Central Australian Landscape*, 1967 – \$17,000 (est. \$8-10K)

Sidney Nolan (Lot 108 🏹) – *Greece*, 1954 – \$20,000 (est. \$6-8K) – new record for subject in this media

Major unsold Lots

Jeffrey Smart (Lot 31 🏹) – *Bus by the Tiber*, 1977-78, estimate \$650-750K

Sale Referenced: Australian & International Art, Menzies, Sydney, 31/03/2022

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, and Vice President of the Auctioneers & Valuers Association of Australia. Jane's experience spans more 20 years working in public and commercial art sectors, initially with the AGNSW, and then over twelve years in the fine art auction industry. Her consultancy focuses on collection management, advisory services and valuations. She is the author of *Power + Colour: New Painting from the Corrigan Collection of Aboriginal Art*. www.artifacts.net.au.

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