

What's a name worth? Millions. Deutscher and Hackett's Important Australian and International Fine Art Sydney soars on the back of seven blue chip lots consigned by two VIP collectors

By Jane Raffan, on 15-Sep-2022

It's rare to find the weight of a sale's expectations so early in a catalogue. The first seven lots represented 65% of the sale's pre-sale low-end value (\$7,819,500). There's momentum to build, or so the traditional thinking goes ... And yet Deutscher and Hackett just gets on with business. No pretences about the need to wait for the room to show up. Especially with the majority of activity on the phones and the internet; auctioneer Roger McIlroy pronouncing a staggering 850 entities online at the sale's start.

Allstars from the Clemenger Collection[1] kicked off the night: four works by Whiteley, Smart, the aforementioned Williams and Brack. The group had been afforded a dedicated supplement with extended entries from those in multi-vendor catalogue.

Brett Whiteley's astonishing *Self – Portrait*, 1977 (Lot 1 🎯) set the tone of the sale, being quietly contested to a remarkable \$550,000 (est. \$280-350K); the diminutive work (30.5 x 25.5 cm) becoming the most valuable among Whiteley's prices based on size.

Jeffrey Smart's *Portrait of Germaine Greer*, 1984 (Lot 2 🎯) was a drawn-out endeavour to reach \$1 million (est. \$1-1.5 million). A bid increment of \$25K was declined, and in the pall waiting for the called-for \$50K, high bidder gallerist Stuart Purvis responded with exasperation from the back of the room, "knock it down will you Roger". Dutifully, McIlroy complied. The work now sits at no. 4 in the artist's top ten.

And in another turn-up for the books, John Brack's *Posies*, 1990 (Lot 4 🎯) sold to the auctioneer's book for \$480,000 (est. \$600-800K). Now that's carefree bidding.

Three divestments from the Reg Grundy and Joy Chambers-Grundy collection followed: Ian Fairweather's rhythmic *Gamelan*, 1958 (Lot 5 🎯) – a much less rigidly structured work than the vaunted *Gethsemane* painted in the same palette and same year (and sold by D&H in 2010 for hammer \$800K). Phone bidders toughed it out to \$950,000, just over its high end; the work now nestles at no. 2 in the artist's echelon of sale records.

In stark aesthetic contrast, Rosalie Gascoigne's *Autumn*, 1989 (Lot 7 🎯) was more quickly bid to its low-end of \$180K. The other Grundy highlight, Brack's quirky *Elastic Stocking*, 1965 (Lot 6 🎯) failed to attract interest on the night despite its significant published academic support.

So expected was the run of multiple noughts, auctioneer McIlroy found himself calling fair warning at \$750,000 instead of \$75K for the first of the multi-vendor core of 76 lots, Arthur Boyd's *Cleft Riverbank with Bush and Fern*, 1976 (Lot 8 🎯). Correcting himself, the work was hammered down to Denis Savill. The following lot by Brett Whiteley, *The Frenchman*, 1987 (Lot 9 🎯), passed during the sale, and sold afterwards for \$250,000 (est. \$350-450K).

Highlights thereafter covered expected ground, from colonial though to mild-mannered impressionist works and strong moderns; all interspersed with contemporary hot-things.

Another diminutive work (25 x 48 cm), Smart's *Study for the Evening on the Esplanade*, 1988 (Lot 10 🎯), was keenly bid on phones to \$130,000 (est. \$50-70K). Ben Quilty's portrait of 'Pat' as a budgie from 2004 (Lot 12 🎯) had the phone bidders chirruping away (cue soft groan). The portrait of businessman collector and philanthropist Pat Corrigan sold just over the low-end for \$105,000 and now finds a place in the artist's top ten, at number 7.



Deutscher and Hackett's bold opening seven-lot sally in its Important Australian and International Fine Art Sydney sale racked up \$5 million from blue chip artists consigned by two VIP collectors, with Fred Williams' restrained masterpiece, *Lysterfield Landscape*, 1968-69 (Lot 3) taking out the sale's top lot, selling close to its high-end at \$1.9 million, catapulting the work to second top result for the artist and helping the market leaders secure another \$10.5 million dollar-plus result (incl. BP).

Later in the sale, Bruce Armstrong's powerful limited edition eaglehawk sculpture *Bunjil*, 2009 (Lot 47 🗳️), had five phones on its tail. An approachable-sized variation of a highly popular Victorian public sculpture, the *Kulin* people's creator deity soared to \$82,000 (est. \$10-15K) where an internet bidder fended off all-comers.

At the front of the catalogue, Frederick McCubbin's mauve impressionist *Kensington Road, South Yarra*, c. 1908 (Lot 21 🗳️) was contrasted by Bessie Davidson's mauve landscape, which was placed towards the back of the sale. The former's high-end estimate of \$40K was met by the internet, while Davidson's more gestural picture, *The River Leysse, Chambery*, c. 1930s (Lot 60 🗳️), doubled its conservative high-end to make \$30,000. French works by expat impressionists are usually less favoured than homespun scenes, but Davidson's work has seen a recent hot streak.

Another impressionist on a hot streak is Clarice Beckett. The sale featured three works, none of which would be called hero pictures. *Bathing Boxes, Beaumaris*, 1928-1930 (Lot 26 🗳️) topped the three, making its high-end of \$80,000. Just last year, D&H estimated another Beaumaris bathing boxes picture at \$40-60K. It made \$115,000. And onwards and upwards they go.

The core of colonial works offered interesting early city scenes, pastorales, along with majestic mountain-top and shadowy valley views.

Introducing the run, S.T Gill's *Port Adelaide*, 1848 (Lot 13 🗳️) settled close to its top end for \$110,000, adding

another top ten (at no. 4) to Deutscher and Hackett's haul. While the rare *Panorama of Hyde Park*, c. 1893 (Lot 16 🍷), comprising a series of painted photographs by John Rae, hit the mark at \$40,000 (est. \$40-60K). It was snapped up by Adrienne Carlson, a valuer/consultant known to act for public institutions that chase historical materials.

Eugene Von Guerard's *Mount Arapiles Towards The Grampians*, 1870 (Lot 14 🍷) saw competitive bidding from the internet that eventually lost to the phones at the estimate's top end of \$180,000. Arthur Streeton's *Melbourne from Sassafras*, 1871 (Lot 19 🍷) saw the hammer fall just shy of its low-end, at \$110,000, while the much later, and much more dramatic and broody work, *Boronia Peak and Stawell*, 1920 (Lot 20 🍷) met its expectations at \$200,000.

And the sleeper in this category was H.L. Van Den Houten's *Melbourne as it was in 1837*, painted in 1873 (Lot 53 🍷). The balance of the title – *From the Emerald Hill Side Near the Falls* – situates the picture in what is now South Melbourne; the name Emerald Hill enduring from 1855 to 1883. The city was founded in 1835, hence the picture showing a sparse encampment (if you look hard) rather than a town, which might account for the estimate at \$10-15,000. In private hands since 1977, it raced away with five phones chasing to sell for \$70,000; the result rocketing up the charts to land the work in second top place for the artist.

Hoofed beasts featured across a hundred-year plus painting divide. Louis Buvelot's bucolic *Bacchus Marsh Pasture*, 1876 (Lot 17 🍷) overleaped expectations to run away to \$200,000 (est. \$100-150K). Later in the sale, yet another Holstein by John Kelly from 1992 nearly doubled its estimate, selling to the internet for \$75,000. The result for *Dobell's Cow – Painted* (Lot 45 🍷) is nowhere near the recent record of \$290,000 (holy cow!) for a much larger picture of a bovine being hefted by a man, but it nonetheless had several stalwarts in the audience shaking their heads. Also known for his whimsy, William Robinson's *Sunset Encounter*, c. 1988 (Lot 44 🍷) trotted away to \$65,000, just over its high-end.

Two commanding works by John Coburn evoking sun and heat attracted strong interest, with both works nearly doubling their low end. *Mexico II*, 1968 (Lot 41 🍷) was fought over on the phones versus the internet, selling for \$58,000, while the smaller of the two, *Spirit of Fire II*, 1982 (Lot 42 🍷) made \$38,000.

By far and away the most esoteric find of the sale, academically speaking, was a collection of nine works sourced from Italy by the Bauhaus-trained avant-garde German *émigré* Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack.

The lead work, *Red, Grey and Orange Composition*, c. 1935 (Lot 61 🍷) was a rare oil painting – only the second to have come onto the Australian market – and the estimate of \$30-50K seemed within comfortable range; the 2016 top price for the artist (the other oil) coming in at \$53,000 (hammer). That record has now been blitzed. The bidding just- kept- going. In the end, a sole room bidder lost out to the phones for \$115,000. The best of the works on paper, all of which carried estimates of \$4-6K, was *Composition*, 1962 (Lot 62 🍷), whose twisted abstract geometric forms hinted at the haphazard strain of architecture's Brutalism[2], a movement birthed from the Bauhaus. The work claimed a new record for the artist in the medium, at \$14,000.

Earlier, marvellous Modernist Weaver Hawkins' excellent chock-a-block exercise in compositional dynamics, *Concrete Mixers*, 1946 (Lot 27 🍷), made short shrift of its \$30-40K estimate, selling for \$60,000; equal fourth in the artist's top tally.

An unassuming interior with figure provided the sale's last surprise. Max Meldrum's *Ida in the Studio*, 1943 (Lot 80 🍷) – on first look a straightforward depiction of his daughter at a piano, but on deeper examination an interesting formal treatment in composition and colour – was among the best performing works of the sale based on estimate. Modestly set at \$8-12K – around the same price as its first outing in 1999 – the painting found a new home at \$60,000.

[1] <https://www.deutscherandhackett.com/selected-works-collection-joan-and-peter-clemenger-melbourne-lots-1-4>

[2] See buildings *Habitat 67* (1962), Montreal, and *Geisel Library* (1970), San Diego

All prices shown are \$Au hammer unless otherwise indicated.

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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