

Sotheby's sets new records with aplomb in a sale headed by a rare and important early Dobell and a catalogue full of fresh works

By Jane Raffan, on 10-Apr-2019

William Dobell's *Woman in a Restaurant*, 1934 (Lot 8) does it again. After smashing records at the ground-breaking 1962 Norman Schureck sale[i], the small painting, fresh from long term loan to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, sold last night at Sotheby's *Important Australian and International Art* auction in front of a hushed audience of about 70 people and a film crew at Sydney's Intercontinental Hotel for the new record of \$770,000, against a size-matched diminutive estimate of \$80-120,000.

Described in the catalogue entry as a 'jewel-like composition', the study of a rather ungainly figure shrouded and accessorised in the obvious trappings of wealth, and captured in an unflattering moment lighting a cigarette in a dark restaurant setting, is certainly a jewel in the crown of the artist's small genre pictures from the 1930s, most of which reside in the collections of public institutions, where, most likely, this work will have found a new home.



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An ABC film crew was on site to record the obvious-but-not-to-be sale of the million-dollar Blackman *Alice* (Lot 24 🎯), and luckily will have a better story to tell, as the battle for the Dobell dominated the sale's first half hour. Auctioneer Martin Gallon was exuberant in front of the camera, but the bidding mood was sober in contrast, and most of the work was done on the phones: eight to begin with, down to two at the last in a drawn-out contest that included a rather dull conference-call hiatus.

Not everyone was happy about the lengthy goings-on. One elderly gentleman kept huffing "Come on, knock it down". Turns out he was waiting for the next Dobell lot, a Wangi painting, which he won with no other competition.

The sale was peppered with other paintings that went uncontested bar-one bidder, but overall most works were well covered, and mostly won by absentee buyers, with occasional interventions and success from the room: dealers, agents and privates all in the game.

Auction agent Bob Lavigne was successful with Brett Whiteley's *Bather Showing Arm Movement*, 1963 (Lot 1 🎯) for just over its high end at \$105,000, and Denis Savill bought a pretty, albeit rather oddly worked Elioth Gruner, *Mosman Bay*, 1919 (Lot 6 🎯) for \$65,000 (est. \$40-50K) against two phones. The work's background sky is rather strangely painted in a manner that creates an illusion of massive conifers looming in the distance (the same distraction occurs in the water, foreground).

Appealing to the most academic amongst us (and discerning collectors) was Hilda Rix Nicholas' early and intimate portrait of her sister Elsie, dressed in a robe that the artist herself is depicted in elsewhere (*La Robe Chinese*, AGWA). Art consultant and valuer Adrienne Carlson missed out on *Purple and Blue*, circa 1911-13 (Lot 59 🎯) in a tight and quick contest with another man in the room (blink and it's over); the picture selling for \$75,000, just below its high-end.

An elderly gentleman was determined to win Margaret Olley's excellent career-early *Ipswich Hotel*, 1948 (Lot 11 🎯), which was pushed to \$100,000 against an estimate of \$55-75K. And a husband and wife couple of the same vintage claimed several works in the auction, including the very good Margaret Preston, *Red and White Gumblossom*, 1929 (Lot 13 🎯) for \$170,000 (est. \$ 100-150K), along with the humdrum tick-a-box late Cossington Smith, *Still Life with Black Vase No. 2*, 1971 (Lot 14 🎯) for \$120,000 (est. \$80-100K).

Melbourne-based dealer/consultant Paul Auckett and Sydney-based art consultant David Hulme were both active on Cressida Campbell's *Interior with Sunflowers with Figs*, 1998 (Lot 17 🎯); their bids eclipsed early, it sold to the phones for \$165,000 (est. \$80-120,000). This new record price for the artist[i] was subsequently smashed by the strategically-placed late-in-the-sale *Interior with Wheat*, 1996 (Lot 75 🎯), which achieved a whopping \$210,000, selling to David Hulme, who this time beat out 7 phones and other activity from the room to nab his prize.

Cressida Campbell's unique impressions, which usually start off lifted from incised and painted woodblocks, are unusual print/paintings[ii]. The works themselves are variously described in auction catalogues as woodblocks, unique prints from woodblocks and so on. Her method does comprise hand-painting in watercolours post-impression and it's a conundrum for the AASD, where these works are categorised as prints. Regardless, her extraordinary talent producing intricate and painterly sublime images is finally being recognised by stalwart buyers of oils on canvas.

Campbell's sunny interiors also happened to be two of fairly few bright works in the sale, which was replete with dour and dark 'winter is coming' early moderns, including the failed top-lot by Charles Blackman, *Dreaming Alice*, 1956 (Lot 24 🎯). Martin Gallon's whispered "at \$950,000 now" after the usual vendor-bid escalation drew no action, and his referral at that level went without recording a bidding number, as was the practice on a few other high-priced lots that did not draw interest. The best of the sale's dark pictures was Arthur Boyd's *Williamstown Winter*, 1959 (Lot 33 🎯), which deservedly shot over its high-end to sell at \$260,000.

There was plenty of interest, however, in John Olsen's sunny *Seafood Paella*, 2007 (Lot 27 🎯), which sold towards its high-end for \$850,000 after stalling at \$800K. Another bright work by South African Irma Stern, *Congo*

Landscape, 1945 (Lot 62 🎯), sold at its low-end for \$380,000. Following the 2015 surprise \$1.5 million-dollar sale of a work found in London being used as a kitchen pin board[iii], it's not surprising that expats in Australia, or their descendants in this case, would be looking to cash-in. This work did not have the gravitas or politically connected provenance of the London picture, however, just palm trees.

Sotheby's can be commended for offering a catalogue of fresh works by important artists, all of which found buyers, if not all heavily contested, including Ian Fairweather's *Mother and Child*, circa 1955 (Lot 4 🎯), not seen since 1967, and which sold at its low-end for \$180,000; Russell Drysdale's, *Landscape of Rocks*, 1949 (Lot 7 🎯), in one family's possession since its first outing at The Macquarie Galleries, Sydney, and which sold for the same price (its low-end); the afore-mentioned Margaret Preston, in a private collection since 1950; ditto the Dobell and Boyd, and Charles Blackman's *Listening to the Night*, 1963 (Lot 22 🎯), which sold for \$120,000 (low-end).

And some more recent turnovers did well: Albert Tucker's *Explorers Forging the River*, 1987 (Lot 23 🎯), almost hit its top-end with a hammer of \$340,000. It first appeared at Bonhams and Goodman in 2007, where it sold for \$228,000. And Russell Drysdale's *Boy on a Log*, 1953 (Lot 28 🎯) finally sold after failing three times prior (2012 and 2013), making its low-end of \$250K ... it sold to the couple who also snapped up the tick-a-box Cossington-Smith. Phew.

The catalogue, small by most standards these days at 81 lots, had a dose of big-ticket and littler things by the same blue-chip artists, and which meant that a few attendees were in with a chance (or so they thought). There were two Kellys by Nolan: the big one, *Ned Kelly: Bridge*, 1964 (Lot 32 🎯), was quickly pursued to \$650,000 on the phones (est. \$500-700K), while the small one, a crisp and nicely structured oil on paper, *Ned Kelly*, 1966 (Lot 43 🎯), was chased to \$34,000 by dealers, agents and privates alike, before also going to the phones. There were plenty of body bits by Whiteley, including the afore-mentioned top lot (1), but the aesthetic prize was an exquisite Central Ranges watercolour *Winter Willows*, 1979 (Lot 47 🎯), which sold mid-estimate to the phones for \$70,000.

And from the small (qty) sculpture component, Clement Meadmore was represented by two works including the delightful and playful and seemingly affordable (at \$15-20K) *Fidgety Feet*, 1978 (Lot 36 🎯), which was bid up quickly to sell at \$33,000, while Joel Elenberg took out the top spot with *Mask D*, 1980 (Lot 26 🎯), which sold for \$110,000, just above its low-end.

The Schureck sale is widely documented as heralding a new dawn in the Australian art market[iv]. The Dobell sale this time around doesn't do this, of course, as the market here is now well established and has greased wheels, but judging by the results for the Campbells alone, it has reached a new level of maturity.

Other top-lots

Arthur Boyd, *Diamond Bay*, 1957 (Lot 18 🎯), sold \$100,000 (low-end)

Fred Williams, *Australian Landscape*, 1969 (Lot 25 🎯), sold \$175,000 (est. \$180-220K)

Albert Namatjira, *Ghost Gum, Central Australia* (Lot 44 🎯), sold \$60,000 (mid-estimate)

Other major unsold lots

Albert Tucker, *Cratered Head*, 1974 (Lot 19 🎯), est. \$180-220,000

Rupert Bunny, (*Au Soleil*), circa 1906 (Lot 54 🎯), est. \$140-180,000

Norman Lindsay, (*Summer Idyll*), circa 1938 (Lot 57 🎯), est. \$220-280,000

William Robinson, *Nimbin Rocks in Fog*, 1996 (Lot 76 🎯), est. \$150-200,000

Other small/interesting/lovely works

Brett Whiteley, (*Untitled*), 1960 (Lot 2 🎯), sold \$42,000 (est. \$35-45K)

John Passmore, *Blue* (Lot 3 🎯), sold \$35,000 (low-end)

Cressida Campbell, *Jonquils and Newspaper*, 1990 (Lot 37 🎯), sold \$38,000 (est. \$25-35K)

David Larwill, *Contemplating His Place in Humanity*, 2011 (Lot 42 🎯), sold \$29,000 (est. \$25-35K)

Arthur Boyd, *The Thicket*, 1950 (Lot 46 🎯), sold \$20,000 (low-end)

Nora Heysen, *Camellias*, 1949 (Lot 50 🎯), sold \$34,000 (est. \$25-35K)

Guy Grey-Smith, *Salt Lake*, 1966 (Lot 71 🎯), sold \$37,000 (est. \$20-30K)

And the winner for the Jodi McKay MP (NSW) lookalike picture is ...

Robert Dickerson, *The Woman in Red*, 1994 (Lot 80 🎯), sold \$30,000 (low-end)

[i] Previously \$122,000 for *Gumblossom*, 2000, Deutscher and Hackett, *Important Australian & International Fine Art*, Melbourne, 28 November 2018

[ii] Peter Crayford (ed.), *The Woodblock Painting of Cressida Campbell*, Public Pictures, Sydney, 2008

[iii] *Arab in Black*, Bonhams, 9 September 2015, <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/22364/lot/12/>

[iv] See Shireen Huda, *Pedigree and Panache: A History of the Art Auction in Australia*, ANU E Press, Canberra, 2008

Sale Referenced: Important Australian Art, Sotheby's, Sydney, 09/04/2019

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.

The Australian Art Sales Digest is published by John Furphy Pty. Ltd., Melbourne, Australia.

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