

Bonhams' Important Australian and Aboriginal Art Sale carried by the distinguished Hobbs Collection and bonhomie

By Jane Raffan, on 21-Jun-2018

Bonham's Sydney auction of *Important Australian and Aboriginal Art* was billed as 'including *The Hobbs Collection* and *The Croft Zemaitis Collection*', but it quickly became apparent that the crowd came to secure works from the former. In what felt like a loving celebration more than a commercial business event, the room was alive with beaming faces, many of whom were family and associates of the esteemed collector, and who wandered around hugging and chatting all night in between chasing lots.

And chase them they did, from the little to the big. The prize piece and catalogue cover lot, Ralph Balson's sublime *Painting no. 36, 1956* (Lot 66) was pushed by the room to \$100,000 before giving over to a phone battle which saw the work sell for \$240,000, double its high-end estimate and the second highest price achieved for the artist (although judged on scale, this small work at 59 x 66.5 cm takes the cake).



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The Balson result enjoyed rapturous applause, which occurred throughout the three-and-a-half hour sale, as excited bidders won their sought-after works and family members approved of results for certain favoured pieces, many of which were first-time appearances by the artists at auction: twenty in total.

First time on the (chopping) block is always a scary prospect for contemporary artists (and their dealers), but it was announced in advance of one lot that the artist was especially pleased that the Hobbs collection sale was the context for her first outing.

And on the topic of firsts, Bonhams can be rightly proud that this sale represented an industry first of an altogether more significant kind: with the ratio of works by male to female artists in the mix at a ratio of 50:50. It was both fitting and a delight to see Bonhams' Australian Director and auctioneer, Merryn Shriever, make this announcement from the podium to cheers and applause.

The Hobbs Collection comprised 104 of the sale's 162 lots (64%), and cleared 84% by lot, with the top ten works also equally divided on the basis of gender.

Following Balson, the next highlight was Cressida's Campbell's hand painted woodblock *Michael Hobbs' View*, 1985 (Lot 90 ☈), which sold within estimate for \$85,000 after a tussle between Hobbs' son and daughter (she won).

Campbell and Rosalie Gascoigne each took out two places in the top line-up, with Campbell's unique state woodblock print *Mandarin with Chinese Plate*, 2004 (Lot 137 ☈) selling to determined art consultant David Hulme for \$20,000 (est. \$12-18K).

Hulme also secured Gascoigne's *Nuggets*, 1991 (Lot 106 ☈) for \$60,000 (est. \$30-50K), while family again sparred for the artist's other work, *Pavement III*, 1998 (Lot 138 ☈), which sold just under its low-estimate at \$45,000.

And who'd claim a star female line-up without Bronwyn Oliver? Her spirograph-like *Spin*, 2003 (Lot 129 ☈) was fiercely contested on the phones to reach \$75,000 (est. \$40-60K). Shriever's bringing down of the hammer was outdone by a defeated bidder crashing the phone into its cradle, to which she quipped after a startled recovery "it's like you just broke up with them!" (Hang up your gloves McIlroy.)

Interestingly, all the top lots by male artists were from bygone eras.

Abstract Accordionist, c. 1928 (Lot 144 ☈) by John Joseph Wardell Power made \$32,000 against an estimate of \$20-30K, despite whispered reservations about its appeal. The result was a sizeable jump from its 2013 sale at \$15,000 and moved the work into the artist's top five.

An interesting work by Sidney Nolan with clumsy sections, *Bottlebrush*, 1953, (Lot 99 ☈) sold at its low-end of \$25,000; Robert Klippel's elegant *Opus 240* (Lot 59 ☈) reached its top-end of \$15,000, and the most peculiar lot from the old boys, Clement Meadmore's foreshadowing of Kelly as ET (Lot 60 ☈), sold for \$20,000 (est. \$4-6K). Of course, ET wasn't around when the sculpture was produced c. 1955, and being a Kelly, a contest was always on the cards, but the level achieved amused art consultant David Hulme, who uttered in sardonic sotto-voce "Do they know it's not by Nolan?"

The plethora of small domestic-scaled works by mid-century to contemporary artists were eagerly sought-after by the 100-odd crowd, with most eclipsing their conservative estimates.

Amongst the best performing was John Peart's gem *Untitled*, 1967 (Lot 70 ☈), which raced off to \$2,800 (est. \$800-1,200), and Victor Vasarely's *Tsillag*, 1970 (Lot 71 ☈), which sold for \$3,200 (est. \$1-2K).

Lewis Miller's *Oysters II*, 2005 (Lot 80 ☈) sold for \$4,000 (est. \$900-1,500) to a man who gobbled up quite a few of the food/culinary images in the sale, although the internet landed Nicholas Harding's sought-after *Yellowtail*, 1997 (Lot 84 ☈) for \$4,200 (est. \$800-1,200).

One of the sale's points of interest was the number of small sculptures on offer from the Hobbs Collection, numbering around thirty pieces. Many were by artists having their first auction outing, with most finding homes; too many to recount here.

Upon introducing the sale, Merryn Schriever told the audience how Michael Hobbs always described his collection impulse as having "an art attack." Towards the end of the sale, as Melissa Coote's very beautiful bronze *Heart B*, 2014 came up (Lot 150 ☈), Michael Hobbs' daughter rose and asked to speak. In an extraordinarily vivid speech about her father dying from a heart attack, she spoke about the harmony of the bronze heart being in sight nearby

at the time. And so, the loop closed. Coote's heart sold for \$2,600 to applause and tears.

The event felt like it was all about Michael Hobbs, especially since the sale of his collection stretched out over 2 and half hours for the 104 lots, but there were gems and top lots amongst the other 58 works from mixed vendors and the *Croft Zemaitis Collection* earlier in the night, which sold at a faster pace.

A slew of always-reliable artists filled the first section: Ethel Spowers kicked the sale off with a print ne'er seen before. *The Timber Crane*, 1926 (Lot 1 ) quickly sold for \$18,000 (est. \$10-15K). Yet another 1970s print of Dupain's 1937 iconic photograph, *Sunbather* (Lot 5 ), albeit signed and dated '37, made its low end of \$30,000. *Cornflowers and Apples*, 1991 (Lot 7 ) by Margaret Olley, sold mid-estimate for \$45,000. A sombre scene of lovers on a beach by Arthur Boyd (Lot 9 ) made its low-end of \$28,000, a darkly dynamic *Leda and Swan*, 1960, by Sidney Nolan (Lot 10 ) made \$45,000, just over its low-end, and a small Wanjina on canvas from c. 1980 by Alec Mingelmanganu with Mary Macha provenance (Lot 12 ) reached its low-end estimate of \$25,000.

The most interesting (and academic) work in the sale's intro set was Herbert Badham's exercise in perspective played out in a prosaic street scene. *The Bus Stop*, 1958 (Lot 2 ), safely made its low-end of \$40,000 without fanfare. And the top lot from among the mixed vendor component was John Beard's *Adraga 81*, 1994 (Lot 19 ), which saw strong competition on the phones tip it over its high-end to reach \$60,000.

The Croft Zemaitis Collection comprised 39 lots, of which 28 (72%) were Aboriginal works of art. This core cleared at a very healthy-for-the-market 72%, with the top lot being a very strong composition — Bill Whiskey Tjapaltjarri's *Rockholes and Country near the Olgas*, 2007 (Lot 49 ) was bid back-and-forth until settling at \$15,000 (est. \$10-12K).

Most other works from among the Indigenous works sold at the low-end or within estimate; a few shy of low-end. A striking incised and decorated pearl shell by Aubrey Tigan (Lot 44 ) was chased to double its low-end, selling for \$1,200, and an unusual and early work by Lance Peck, *Eagle*, 2007 (Lot 51 ), attracted lots of competition before selling to the internet for \$3,000 (est. 1,500-2K).

From among the 11 non-Indigenous works in the Croft Zemaitis Collection, a large and bold picture of Angela Brennan's 'things', *Mes Choses*, 2005 (Lot 20 ), caused the most excitement in the room and was quickly bid to \$22,000 (est. \$10-15K). Cressida Campbell saw early confirmation of her top ten status with her hand-painted woodblock print *Kitchen Utensils*, 1993 (Lot 21 ), making its low-end estimate of \$50,000. And Elisabeth Cummings' *Crossroads*, 1996 (Lot 22 ) made up the female top-lot trifecta, also selling for its low-end, at \$15,000.

Bonham's auction of *Important Australian and Aboriginal Art* carried a pre-sale estimate of \$1,132-1,681 million, a modest tally compared to most big fine art sales. The sale achieved \$1,628,282 with buyer's premium, and cleared well overall at 80% by volume and 118% by value.

It's the other numbers, however, that showed Bonhams' class on the night, and the goodwill they attracted: too many people in attendance (around 120) to be seated in the 80 plus chairs (most of whom stayed right to the end), 150 internet bidders, 20 new artists presented to auction with 85% clearance, and a 50:50 ratio of male to female artists, with a near equal ratio in the top ten across the board (55:45 M/F works sold \$20K and above).

Sometimes small points of distinction are more meaningful than big dollars.

Sale Referenced: Australian Art & Aboriginal Art, Bonhams, Sydney, 20/06/2018

About The Author

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