

'I am woman, watch me soar, with dollars (finally) too big to ignore'

By Jane Raffan, on 09-Dec-2021

What a cocktail: a cavalcade of online-only sales; unseasonably late sales spurred by cabin fever-induced fetishes for in-the-flesh buying; regular buoyant blue-chip sales; all muddled with sparks-flying works by women repeatedly overvaulting expectations. 2021's tally ended up an adversity-beating recent market-high around \$120 million dollars with Deutscher and Hackett atop the leader board for the second Covid-blighted year, this time ending with a tally of nearly \$32.5 million, well clear of the pack.



Bessie Davidson's 'Lecture Au Jardin', c.1935 was the highest priced work by a woman artist sold at auction in 2021, achieving \$810,000 at Deutscher and Hackett's 'Twenty Important Women Artists + Selected Australian and International Fine Art' sale in Melbourne on 10 November, 2021.

Deutscher and Hackett – Boom-tish!

Recent market leaders **Deutscher and Hackett** continued their 2020 showing, with 2021 seeing them atop the leader board for the second year in a row, this time ending with nearly \$32.5 million, well clear of

the pack.

Bookending the year with two important works by Arthur Streeton totalling \$5.5 million helped them achieve a tally \$7 million above nearest rivals, and two of the top three sales for the year: 'The Grand Canal' (1908) selling for \$3.07 million in April, and 'The Centre of the Empire' (1902) for \$1.473 million in November.

Their final sale of 2021, held 8 December and apparently slotted in the calendar because collectors were 'ravenous', cleared all but 3 of the 43 lots and totalled around \$6.4 million. The top lot, Jeffrey Smart's 'The Arezzo Turn-off II' (1973) secured \$1.35 million, making it the second most expensive Smart ever sold, and pushed their earlier impressive Bessie Davidson artist high at \$810K for 'Lecture Au Jardin' (c.1935) out of the top ten list for the year.

New highs for old boys were achieved for George Lambert's wartime portrait snapshot, 'Artist and his Batman, Light Horse Calvary, Jerusalem Heights' (\$374,318), as well as a rare 1935 Benjamin Duterrau 'Self Portrait' (\$196,364), while Margaret Preston's 1925 coloured woodcut, 'Circular Quay' also climbed to a new high (\$67,500).

Other highlights during the year included the usual raft of modern and contemporary blue chip male painters at half-a-million-or-so a pop: Fred Williams, Jeffrey Smart, and John Olsen. Notable new highs among the male cohort included \$515,455 for sculptor Bertram Mackennal's iconic 'Circe' edition from 1902-04, which more than doubled its previous record, and Immants Tillers' poetic riff on Fred Williams, 'Waterfall Variation II', 2012, finally broke the artist's \$100K barrier, selling just under \$129,000.

'I am woman, watch me soar, with dollars (finally) too big to ignore'

Deutscher and Hackett's 'Twenty Important Women Artists' component of their staple November sale saw Bessie Davidson and Grace Cossington Smith claim two of the sale's five highest prices (alongside topping each artist's own). Their star turns (performance over estimate) achieved a tidy \$1.6+ million. The sale also produced another six female artists from across a century of practice achieving new highs.[i]

Smith & Singer also set a new record for a contemporary work by a living female artist, with the sale of 'Wild Carrot Dream' (2015) by Del Kathryn Barton for \$405K. **Deutscher and Hackett** has long fostered this ground, with great success, and the balance of works by living women artists achieving new high prices above \$50K in 2021 fell to their championing,[ii] including Tracy Moffatt's iconic 'Something More' suite (1989), which also made the top ten for Indigenous art (a categorisation the artist shrinks from) at \$270K.

Damian Hackett is happy to bask in their glow: 'It goes without saying that Australian women artists have shone in 2021 ... and Cressida Campbell and Del Kathryn Barton are now firmly placed not only as top contemporary artists, but two of the highest priced living Australian artists, full stop.' **Deutscher and Hackett** carried three major sales of woodcuts by Campbell in 2021, with sales totalling more than \$600K.

In keeping with their contemporary branding, **Deutscher and Hackett's** also achieved new records for several artists working in photomedia with the second sale of contemporary photography from the Corrigan Collection in March, after breaking new ground in the field in December 2020.[iii]

In a tactical move **Smith & Singer** have been encroaching on **Deutscher and Hackett's** dominance in the contemporary sphere over the past few years. In 2021 this saw them net new high prices for works by Michael Zavros. **Menzies** has included select contemporary art in their canon since dot, and they added to this cache with a new high price for a work by Ben Quilty; his muscle cars finally being beaten out of top spot by a budgie called 'Beast' (\$270K).

Deutscher and Hackett were certainly the busiest of the big 4, holding ten for-profit sales across the year, five of which, predominantly contemporary works of art, were offered solely online. 2021 also saw them increase staff (now thirteen, including seven art specialists) and complete their fit-out of their new Sydney

premises. Ready and roaring to go in 2022.

And they will be busy early, entrusted alongside **Leonard Joel** with the deaccession of the National Australia Bank's significant collection of over 2,500 works, including major moderns, starting in February 2022. The funds will be funnelled into NAB's foundation supporting communities to mitigate various risks from climate change. Shame they had to sell their art rather than divert profits made from their top-ten-in-the-world-lending to fossil fuel enterprises[iv]...

Smith & Singer – steady on!, and sculpture as an undervalued discipline

In a steady keep-calm-and-carry-on recovery from the loss of cachet associated with their former Sotheby's branding (2010-2019), **Smith & Singer** chalked up \$25+ million tally based on published auction prices, including a cache of new highs for women artists totalling around \$1.9 million[v], with a large Rosemary Madigan sculpture providing the perfect mix of 'undervalued discipline'[vi] and undervalued artist, selling for a phenomenal \$380,455.

Onto a good thing, a rare and enormous sculpture of a pear by George Baldessin pulled in \$196,364, topping the artist's leader board. Same, too, for Akia Makigawa, whose marble sculpture 'Work 1 (Sun)' (1991) made \$135,000.

Not to be outdone, in **Deutscher and Hackett's** final sale for the year, a large modernist sculpture of an athlete by Philippe Hiquily, 'La Marathonienne' (1981), sold for \$417,273, while Fernando Botero's 2009 'Reclining Woman (Donna Sdraiata)', made a chunky \$515,455.

Smith & Singer's top sale in 2021 went to a work by Brett Whiteley, whose market is white hot. 'The Dove in the Mango Tree' (1984) added a cool \$1.964 million to their coffers and flew to number two in the top ten prices for the year. 'What the Little Girl Saw in the Bush' (1904) by long-time popular bush fantasist Frederick McCubbin added another \$1.48 million and settled at number four.

Smith & Singer dominated the top ten list for the year (comprising five male artists), with seven works totalling around \$8.4 million, while **Deutscher and Hackett's** tally for their three in the list was just shy of \$6 million dollars.[vii]

Menzies – down but not out

After a changing of the guard at **Menzies**, including a new Head of Art, Brett Ballard, CEO Coralie Stow is grateful for client support in 'a tricky trading year', which nonetheless helped them 'deliver four very solid auctions' to tally just below \$15 million dollars; the highlight being a classic hyper-realist work by Lin Onus that now sits in the artist's top five at \$515,455.

These solid performances produced a range of other records, mostly in the lower echelons, including new modest highs for women artists Fiona Lowry and Jacqueline Hick.

Noughts and crosses – Covid complications? – naysayers!, let's get agile

Covid business interruptions certainly created havoc with schedules and logistics, but it also gave auction house pauses for thought.

In 2021 **Menzies'** 'brand refresh' included a timed, online sale in September dedicated to Prints and Multiples (AUD \$626,700). According to Stow, the sale is likely to become an annual event. Given that 50+ prints by Banksy alone were sold in Australian and NZ this past year for \$3 million + that sounds like a sage move.[viii]

Deutscher and Hackett has made peace with the online dynamic and while Damian Hackett is still amazed at its popularity, he is pleased with the growth in the platform. Their sales increased from 2019, pre-Covid, at \$775K to \$2 million in 2020 and \$2,58 million in timed online auctions this year.

Menzies' Stow is looking forward to a new year combining live auctions with continued 'meticulous

research'. After a year of new direction under his charge, and having pushed through twice the number of lots in their auctions compared with **Smith & Singer**, Brett Ballard wants to pull in 'more noughts.'^[ix]

Bonhams – a quite race run in Oz while exports fill UK coffers

Bonhams has been navigating a steady-as-she-goes course, largely under the radar. While their tally is modest compared to the big Australian two, it has jumped significantly since 2020 (more than 50%), and they end the year close on **Menzies'** tail, with a turnover just under \$12 million dollars.

Aside from the obvious inclusion of blue-chip artists, **Bonham's** sales are usually peppered with thoughtful and interesting works attesting to their interest in connoisseurship (not just research/significance; look it up).

This year's star turns included achieving a new high price for an earthy 1941 Australian native bouquet composition by Margaret Preston, which saw the artist's work break through the half-million dollar barrier; the Coburn (op.cit.); a rare colonial portrait by convict forger Thomas Griffiths Wainwright (\$123K) and a beautiful botanical work with superb detail in composition and tone by Stella Bowen, which now sits as the top price for the artist at \$123K^[x]. At the other end of the spectrum, a gutsy work by often hard-to-sell Ginger Riley Munduwalawala sold for just under \$200K, placing it in the year's top ten for Indigenous and now the deserving top price for the artist.

Aside from new artist highs, **Bonhams** pulled in a range of works by blue chip artists prices to sell, including a Fred Williams You Yangs landscape, which topped half a million dollars.

Pursuing big bucks for-and-from collectors aside, **Bonhams' Director Merryn Shriever** is proud of the \$1 million+ raised locally for Amnesty International and Médecins Sans Frontières via the Estate of Richard Green sale in August.

While **Bonhams** is 'running a quiet race' in Australia, they were busy sending prime works sourced locally back to Blighty, with well over \$12 million in resulting sales, highlighted by an impressionism consignment in November that featured Renoir, Raoul Dufy and Giorgio Morandi, which collectively made over \$5 million dollars.

Estate works from another Australian philanthropist, John Schaeffer, will bring up the end of year for **Bonhams** Australia (in London, 14 December). The \$700K+ core is highlighted by a conservatively estimated Pre-Raphaelite work, 'Clotilde at the tomb of her grandchildren' (1858), by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836-1912), for which they 'expect fireworks'. If they achieve that, it will sum up their operation: fireworks without fuss or fanfare.

Leonard Joel – playing the long game

Australia's fourth largest auction house (by fine arts turnover) ends the year with fine art sales (alone) totalling close to \$9 million dollars.

Leonard Joel's long game (in the biz since 1919) has seen the company explore and develop a range of niche, avant-garde and 'new collector' elements to its programming, which extends well beyond fine arts to encompass a broad range of specialist departments, and – unlike the Know-My-Name bandwagon sales pitches over the past two years made others – has held dedicated Women Artists auctions for the past five years. Their best result in this category in 2021 was for a small Clarice Beckett, which sold in October at a-soon-to-be eclipsed \$153,409; the price now in the artist's top five. In all, 2021 saw twelve sales of works by the artist for around \$1.6 million dollars.

Going about their biz, Leonard Joel's major art sales also set new records for a slew of artists under the \$100K level, with the top price in this set being David Bromley's 'Celebration', which sold for \$67,500.^[xi]

Novelties and On-the-nose Non-Sales

With all the scrutiny and hoo-ha over works by Whiteley continuing behind the scenes,^[xii] it was a surprise

to have an unknown work pop out of the blue: 'Harry's Building - Sydney Harbour', 1976, with a sketchy Seidler Blues Point Tower foreground, became a bona fide addendum to the 2020 Whiteley catalogue raisonné. The mixed media work sold through **Menzies** in November for \$115,364, becoming the highest price for a Whiteley with a printed component (previously \$79K); and sits just outside top ten for a work on paper.

Bonhams produced a fresh and dazzling work by John Coburn that ranked among the year's top ten-star performers against estimate, selling for \$387,450; a new high for the artist. Also new to the market (via a lowly UK arbitrage) was Ralph Balson's magnificent 'Painting no. 13', 1941, which gave **Smith & Singer** a \$430K addition to this category[xiii], and the 2nd highest price for the artist.

As for non-sales, no surprises, the top twenty were filled with the same names as the list of top prices, headed by Jeffrey Smart (4 works).[xiv]

The 'Others' category

At \$26.4 million, the 'Others' category in the AASD leader board processed around 22% of fine art market sales in 2021. Over the past two (Covid) years, these firms have seen a jump in successful throughput of around 20%, more than double the previous trend, and likely due to the need for liquidity; their more regular auctions enticing cash-strapped vendors.

A few, including **Cooee Art** (Sydney), **Shapiro** (Sydney), **GFL Fine Art** (Perth) and **Elder Fine Art** (Adelaide) held million-dollar sales, and produced new artist highs, mostly in the under \$50K range. Some of these sales featured collections from notable art world personae; always an added draw.[xv] The standout by performance in this group was **GFL**, who achieved a new record price of \$172,500 for a sunset on the Swan River by colonial artist James Peele; quite the step up from the artist's previous high of \$38,500.

Art world personae sales

End-of-an-era stock and collection sales from notable art world figures also bolstered the tallies of some among leader board players. While **Bonham's** scored (and revelled in) the Lucio's closing sale, grossing \$1.6 million dollars in May and setting six new artists high prices[xvi], **Davidson Auctions** snaffled minor works, adding a considerable \$930,000 to their annual totals.

Relative newcomer **Artmarketplace's** sale of stalwart Nevin Hurst's Hobart-based Masterpiece Gallery works in May was a lesson in how not to risk retail pricing at auction for seasoned stock, with the \$1 million + sale grossing shy of \$166K. With similar inputs, but guided by a more cautious trajectory, **Cooee Art's** first Contemporary Fine Art sale on 24 June brought a hammer around 50% of its million-dollar expectations.

Indigenous art

In contrast, **Cooee Art's** June seasoned Indigenous Fine Art Auction fared well, securing above the annual clearance average to total \$1.53 million dollars. Despite tricky clearances in their all-in-one, all-together sales, **Bonhams** is persisting with a combined approach.

Deutscher and Hackett is pleased with their efforts in this quarter, noting that while the sector is still buoyed by strong international collectors, they are seeing much stronger local support, and are continuing with a dedicated indigenous art department and stand-alone indigenous auctions (since 2009), for which they are very proud. This year they took out six of the top ten results for Indigenous works of art, led by Lin Onus (\$478,636) and Emily Kame Kngwarreye (\$429,545), the two of whom dominated the list (with eight works between them; Onus an astonishing six).

2021 wraps up with a tally around \$120 million, nearly \$12 million more than last year. Seems agility in the face of adversity runs deep in the auction biz, which is good news for vendors, collectors and dedicated employees alike, especially with more jockeying to come in 2022.

Note: prices include Buyer Premium and several whole figures have been rounded up.

[i] Bessie Davidson (\$810 K), Grace Cossington Smith (\$797,727), Margaret Olley (\$208,636), Mirka Mora (\$171,818), Frances Vida Lahey (\$104,318), Sally Gabori (\$79,773), Josephine Muntz-Adams (\$73,636), Chris Canning (\$51,545)

[ii] Tracey Moffatt (\$270K), Yukultji Napangardi (\$85,909), Sally Gabori (\$79,773), Chris Canning (\$51,545), Dora Nakamarra reid (\$51,545)

[iii] Petrina Hicks (\$46,636), Rosemary Laing (\$39,273), Anne Ferran (\$34,364), Anne Zahalka (\$27K), Julie Rrap (\$19,636), Trent Parke (\$13,500) <https://www.aasd.com.au/index.cfm/news/907-deutscher-and-hacketts-sale-of-contemporary-indigenous-photograp/>

[iv] James Eyers, 'NAB is a top-10 global fossil fuel lender: Dutch group', AFR, 26 October 2021, and <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/nov/09/nab-pledge-to-limit-funding-for-fossil-fuels-full-of-loopholes-activist-investor-group-says>

[v] Bessie Davidson (\$540K), Del Kathryn Barton (\$405K), Rosemary Madigan (\$380,455), Clarice Beckett (\$331,364), Constance Stokes (\$220,909)

[vi] Geoffrey Smith, quoted in Gabriella Coslovich, 'Records fall as millions spent on paintings, diamond', AFR, 21 April 2021

[vii] Smith & Singer: Brett Whiteley x 1, Frederick McCubbin x 1, Jeffrey Smart x 2, Arthur Streeton x 2, Fred Williams x 1; Deutscher and Hackett: Arthur Streeton x 2, Jeffrey Smart x 1

[viii] Top Australian result: 'Love is in the Air', 2003 (ed. 500), \$184,091, Smith & Singer (13 May), eclipsed by the same print, International Art Centre, Auckland at \$222,310 (27 July); top price achieved 2021: 'Choose Your Weapon - Soft Yellow', 2010 (ed. 25), International Art Centre, Auckland, \$420,791 (30 March)

[ix] Quoted in Gabriella Coslovich, 'Check your attics: landscapes join women on art's hot list', AFR, 24 November 2021

[x] Other highs under \$100K include John Longstaff, Celica May Gibbs, Jean Mary Bellette, and Terry Wilson Ngamandarra

[xi] David Bromley, John Peart, Peter Wegner, Christine Yukenbarri, Louise Feneley, Sophia Hewson, Pasquale Giardino, and George Hyde Pownall

[xii] Gabriella Coslovich, 'Banksy and Whiteley works benefit from notoriety', AFR, 14 October 2021, and 'Fake art victim chases defacto as fraudster claims bankruptcy', AFR, 27 October 2021

[xiii] They achieved four others with a Whiteley (op.cit.), two foreign Streetons (Venice and Cairo) totalling approx. \$1.7 million, and a Bessie Davidson (op.cit.).

[xiv] Jeffrey Smart (4 works), Sidney Nolan (2 works), John Brack (2 works), and 1 work each by Tom Roberts, Lloyd Rees, John Olsen, Fred Williams, John Glover, William Robinson, Arthur Streeton, Charles Conder, William Dobell and Rubert Bunny

[xv] Shapiro: Australian and International Art incl. Chinese Contemporary Art from the Estate of Ray Hughes Session I (\$1.407 million) and Session II (\$795K)

[xvi] Laura Jones (\$42,350), Luke Sciberras (\$24,200), Ken Johnson (\$22,990), Stephen Bird (\$15,730), Brian O'Dwyer (\$14,520), Greg Weight (\$12,100)

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.

[User Info](#) [Links](#) [Contact Us](#)