

And the Oscar goes to ... Deutscher and Hackett's Melbourne 'Important Aboriginal Art' sale offered up plenty of best performances

By Jane Raffan, on 31-Mar-2022

I'm not a mathematician or scientist, but I deeply appreciate the value of statistics in bringing order and clarity to the world, especially in the face of data cacophony and wordy spin. The stats for the Deutscher and Hackett Melbourne auction of *Important Australian Aboriginal Art* reveal a highly successful sale, with 87% clearance by lot and 127% by value. Better still, the deeper the dive shows over 40% of sold lots soaring over estimate – many by a three and fourfold margin – to secure a total of \$2.1 million (hammer). The auction's swag of works by Emily Kame Kngwarreye found their rightful place in the top lots, but the apex was claimed by Rover Thomas, whose canonical revered figure of an owl, *Tumbi*, 1989 (Lot 9) made \$210,000 (est. \$200-300K).



Statistics bring order to the tumbling cacophony of data noise, and spin. The stats for the Deutscher and

Hackett Melbourne auction of Important Australian Aboriginal Art reveal a highly successful sale with 84% clearance by lot – of which over 40% soared past estimates – to tally \$2.106 million (hammer). The swag of works by Emily Kame Kngwarreye found their rightful place in the top lots, but the apex was claimed by Rover Thomas, whose canonical revered figure of an owl, *Tumbi*, 1989 (Lot 9) made \$210,000.

Back using my right brain, and onto aesthetics and design. The 69 works were given a lot of catalogue real estate, which is a big investment, given the price of printing (Australian) and distribution. For those unable, or still unwilling, to mingle with other humans to view them in situ, the works seemed buoyant on their white walls made of paper. And this extended to the online platform's backlit illumination. At the height of the sale's online interest, 308 parties were actively watching, and plenty participating (308 bidders can't all be vendors in a sale of 69 lots). In the end, more works were sold to bidders from various quarters being handled by Deutscher and Hackett in the room than online, although keyboard warriors secured three major works by Emily Kame Kngwarreye (lots 29, 37 and 38) and underbid many more, including Thomas' *Tumbi*.

In line with her renown, Emily Kame Kngwarreye secured four of the sale's top ten prices with representative works from across the breakthrough stages of her oeuvre: her *Country in flower, Merne (Everything)*, 1991 (Lot 5 🍷) made its low-end estimate at \$180,000; her dynamic late career urging, *Bush (Emily's) Dreaming*, 1996 (Lot 37 🍷), settled within estimate at \$120,000; the richly layered/coloured *Merne Edunga*, 1993 (Lot 29 🍷) garnered plenty of attention and heavy bidding to overleap its high end, selling online for \$100,000 (est. \$40-60K); and the early *Alhalkere Country*, 1990 (Lot 38 🍷), with the artist's batik utility on full show, made \$85,000 (est. 60-80K).

Another test of a sale's overall strength is the performance, or more precisely, the performance over estimate, of calibre works that don't carry lofty expectations. Two watercolours by Albert Namatjira, strategic sale openers, kicked off the trend, which was continued throughout the sale. Tick!

A gutsy and beautifully coloured central desert landscape with hero gum tree, *Looking West Spring Gap* (Lot 1 🍷), drew bids from everywhere (no walls or chandelier), to sell for three times its mid estimate at \$90,000; a new record for this category. The more elusive passage-through-a gorge-view, this one at Glen Helen (Lot 2 🍷), was heavily bid via D&H staff and the room to \$100,000 (est. 35-45K). The exquisitely wrought work, with its stunning sunlit highlights on the foreground rockfaces, and a golden, distant, vanishing-perspective central outcrop drawing the viewer through the passage, deservedly attracted the highest price achieved for the artist for a gorge landscape; the sum equalling the previous record across his whole oeuvre, set in 2016. Both works were acquired in an English sale in 2001. No doubt for pennies.

The star turn among this core was a magnificent premier work by the always-waitlisted-at-retail Bidyadanga artist Daniel Walbidi. *Kirriwirri*, 2008 (Lot 26 🍷), which flew to \$85,000 after an opening bid of \$28K (est. \$30-50K). A slower tussle thereafter saw it secured for \$105,000, double its previous high (2011) and setting a significant new benchmark for the artist.

John Mawurndjul, bark painter extraordinaire and one of the first bark masters to be recognised among the contemporary avant-garde, was represented by four works. Interestingly, the two best performers were from his traditional figurative repertoire. *Ngalyod Rainbow Serpent*, 2004 (Lot 12 🍷), a large, magnificently composed work with superb, finely detailed *rarrk*, passed its high end after a delayed climb from a Fair Warning at \$65K to reach \$100,000 (est. \$70-90K), equalling his hammer price auction record for a work in abstract style.

At the end of the sale, a small fresh-to-the-market, delightful and quirky *Lightning Spirit Namarrkon*, c. 1980, (Lot 64 🍷), raced away to \$20,000; a fourfold vault from its low end of \$5K. The remarkable image appears to show the spirit figure birthing, in place of the usual lightning bolts emanating from testes ... or the testes themselves have taken on an anthropomorphic guise, letting loose the power with a great roar. The other two works by the artist, executed in his minimalist style adopted in the 1990s, drew mixed

results, with one passing (Lot 6 🍷) and the other selling for its low end of \$40K (Lot 7 🍷), a top-5 result in his oeuvre for this style of work, nonetheless.

And while on the earthier works ...

Yirawala's very striking and boldly designed *Barramundi*, c. 1968 (Lot 13 🍷), drew in strong interest, selling for \$26,000 against a reel-them-in (lower-than-last-time) estimate of \$10-15K.

Owen Yalandja was represented with a stunning *Yawkyawk*, 2007 (Lot 8 🍷), which doubled its top-end (and a bit) to make \$42,000 (auction record). The ghostly water spirit, more siren than mermaid (as they were once translated as, for those needing western context), was last on the market in 2014, where it sold at its low-end of \$15K.

Paddy Bedford's early and raw, *Untitled*, 1998 ochre on composition board (Lot 31 🍷), replete with sterling exhibition provenance, charged away to \$40,000 (est. 20-30K). The sale featured three such works, the other two selling just below their low-end of \$20K. The lead work had all the hallmarks of the artist's mature style, and coming to the market fairly soon after the last estate release was sure to be a highlight.

Other masters of colour fared well too ...

Sally Gabori was well represented with several mid-career works that showed the breadth of her audacious vision. The nicely balanced *Dibirdibi Country*, 2008 (Lot 36 🍷) saw plenty of online activity, and the contest saw it doubling its high end to make \$30,000. Earlier, a larger and more gestural work with same title/date (Lot 30 🍷), sold near its high-end for \$28,000, while another *Dibirdibi Country*, 2008 (Lot 25 🍷), with strong compositional elements and Laverty collection provenance made \$25,000 (est. \$15-20K).

Makinti Napanagka's *Lupulnga*, 2008 (Lot 21 🍷) looked positively staid in comparison. These bold and raggedy hairstring designs were at first considered tough compared with the artist's late 1990s lyrical circular melanges and her first forays into neater linear work thereafter. In keeping with the story it reflects, it travelled well to reach \$20,000 (est. \$14-18K), setting a new record for a work on this small scale (106 x 91 cm).

Another high achiever from the dazzling desert core was Murtiyarru Sunfly Tjampitjin's *The Artist's Country*, 1989 (Lot 14 🍷), which last had an outing in 2005. This magnificent prefiguring of what would become Balgo bold, safely navigated beyond its expected path to land in the top ten at \$80,000 (est. \$50-70K).

A masterwork from the tri-state desert-based Jimmy Baker, (Lot 48 🍷) replete with *NGA Culture Warriors* triennial provenance, easily surpassed its \$20-30K estimate to make \$50,000, a huge leap forward from the artist's previous record at auction of \$15K. No surprise given its scale, rare among the artist's oeuvre, whose output was also relatively small.

Toned-down in comparison, but big on design, Ronnie Tjampitjinpa and George Tjungurrayi were the early poster boys of Papunya Tula op art, creating big and bold geometric works that leapt out at one. While the next generation perfected the art with even tighter geometric works that vibrated through optical effects, the shimmer resonating with the power of a secret/sacred story withheld, early works by these two masters retain broad appeal.

A Telstra Awards finalist in 1995, George Tjungurrayi's *Untitled (Wala Wala Rockhole)* (Lot 18 🍷) entranced enough collectors to draw bidding over the high end, selling for \$24,000 (est. 12-18K). And at the end of the sale, *Wiyanggarri*, 1994, by Ronnie Tjampitjinpa, a lounge-room-scaled work with strong design (Lot 69 🍷), carried the sale's momentum right to the last hammer fall, making \$9,000 against a throw-it-at-the-wall estimate of \$2,500-3,500.

Institutional darling Lorraine Connelly-Northey was showcased with a superb early *Narrbong (String Bag)*. More complex and delicate than her later rural fence wire works, this *narrbong* (Lot 44 🍷) saw plenty of finger work online to get it to \$17,000 (est. \$5-7K), a new auction record for the sculptor.

And there were plenty more performers of that ilk, ratio-wise (more maths!):

Sally Gabori (Lot 45 🏹) – \$18,000 (est. \$8-12K)

Regina Pilawuk Wilson (Lot 51 🏹) – \$20,000 (est. \$10-15K)

Albert Namatjira (Lot 52 🏹) – \$32,000 (est. \$18-24K)

Lin Onus (Lot 54 🏹) – \$50,000 (est. \$25-35K)

Maria Josette Orsto (Lot 59 🏹) – \$24,000 (est. \$10-15K) – new record

Rammey Ramsey - (Lot 62 🏹) – \$11,000 (est. \$4-6K)

Major unsold lots:

Ginger Riley (Lot 3 🏹) – estimate \$70-90,000

Ginger Riley (Lot 35 🏹) – estimate \$60-80,000

Ronnie Tjampitjinpa (Lot 17 🏹) – estimate \$40-60,000

John Mawurndjul (Lot 6 🏹) – estimate \$30-40,000

Sale Referenced: Important Australian Aboriginal Art, Deutscher and Hackett , Melbourne, 30/03/2022

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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