

The world is finally woke to Aboriginal art: Sotheby's move its sales from London to the Big Apple amid increasing contemporary art world buzz.

By Jane Raffan, on 28-May-2019

Having rebirthed its defunct Australian 'outpost'[i] auctions in the mother country in 2015 to great success, Sotheby's is now moving Aboriginal art sales to their New York headquarters. This announcement rides on a wave of recent high-profile visibility, critical success and reception to exhibitions of Aboriginal art in the city, the latest of which is actor/comedian/writer Steve Martin's Aboriginal art collection, which is being showcased in Manhattan at Gagosian Gallery until 3 July.



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The Gagosian exhibition of a work by Emily Kame Kngwarreye from the University of Virginia's Kluge-Ruhe Museum amid the private collection of Steve Martin and Ann Stringfield[i] has caused a stir in contemporary art circles, and received a swag of positive critical press, including an eloquent piece in The New York Times championing the value of deconstructing colonisation through indigenous art and the importance of opacity in post-colonial discourse[ii], which has long been a key visual device of much Australian Aboriginal desert painting.

Sotheby's has explained the rationale for moving the Aboriginal art auction on the largely international demographic of buyers at its London sales and increasing interest among US collectors and institutions. Tim Klingender will continue leading the sales, and is pleased to realise a long-held goal, commenting: "It has been my ambition for many years to conduct these sales in New York and 2019 marks 30 years since the landmark traveling exhibition *Dreamings – The Art of Aboriginal Australia* at the Asia Society galleries introduced the city to this dynamic art movement. Since then, interest in the field has grown continuously, and it is now collected in depth by many of the world's leading museums and private collectors."

This landscape is vastly different from the days when Robert Kaplan and Margaret Levi could not get a single US institution to take on *Ancestral Modern*, the critically acclaimed exhibition of Aboriginal art from their collection, which was staged at the Seattle Art Museum in 2012^[iii].

And there are parallels on the commercial side. Indeed, in 2010, when asked about the potential of Australian Aboriginal art in New York contemporary auctions, Tobias Meyer, head of Sotheby's Contemporary department told art consultant David Hulme: "We are not in the business of building markets or making artists' reputations here. For that, you need a game changer. Let's think big here and let's say a big player like art dealer Larry Gagosian was to represent Aboriginal artists. That would of course change everything."^[iv] And so, it has come to pass ... at least insofar as optimistic industry hopes are concerned.

Held four years before heavy hitter and dealer to the stars Gagosian embraced Aboriginal art, Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri's sold-out solo show at Salon 94 in New York is largely credited as being a game changer. Steve Martin bought his first painting on opening night, along with others new to Australian Aboriginal art, and it was Martin who spurred Gagosian's interest^[v].

Christopher Hodges from Utopia Art Sydney described the Gagosian exhibition as "a moment in the spotlight, at the very serious money end of that spotlight."^[vi] The Sotheby's New York move will shine another spotlight on Aboriginal Art at the monied top end of town. And it will represent an important milestone. Its November New York headquarters sale will be the first Aboriginal Art auction to be held outside of Australia or Europe by an international auction house.

Martin now has around forty works in his Aboriginal art collection, and Sydney's Coe-ee Gallery was among the first Australian galleries to benefit from Martin's new-found passion. Coe-ee director Mirri Leven was in New York for the Gagosian opening, and lunched with Martin, who Leven says is "is hooked". And while she is pleased that he is an affirmed dedicated collector, she's more excited about his plans to promote Aboriginal art's specialness: "He's very keen to take it to the next level and build a wider audience for it, but he's keeping tight lipped about that."

Martin maintains that Aboriginal art "can live in the Museum of Modern Art without a special designation"^[vii], and the contemporary context is definitely part of Sotheby's New York appeal, where its press release lauds the fact that the Aboriginal art sale will be held alongside their "marquee auctions of Contemporary Art". D'Ian Davidson, Martin's Indigenous art advisor, agrees that context is everything: "When you take Indigenous art outside Australia, it really does hold its own against the greatest contemporary art in the world."^[viii]

Davidson was also in New York for the Gagosian opening and attended a roundtable meeting of local art world doyens at the Australian consulate organised by the National Gallery of Australia. The conversation turned to the disparate reception to Indigenous art seen at home versus abroad. During the discussion it was mooted that Australia's museum art world hierarchy was actively stymying the promotion of Australian art through vested interests, to which Davidson replied, "That's why I'm here." In early 2019 Davidson revealed that he would be having yearly selling exhibitions of Aboriginal art in New York, which are still being negotiated.

Leven feels the buzz, and reckons the Sotheby's sale is gearing up to be the best seen in a long while. Early additions to the inaugural November auction include two large scale works by Emily Kame Kngwarreye from the Thomas Vroom collection, one of which, *Untitled*, 1990, featured in the touring retrospective co-curated by The National Art Center, Tokyo and The National Museum of Australia, Canberra.

Gagosian director Louise Nerli, who organised the current show, also thinks the time is right for a re-assessment of Aboriginal art's commercial prospects: "Many recent art movements have been subject to economic speculation, in both local and international contexts. In 2008, the markets for modern and contemporary art suffered a dramatic temporary downturn, but regained robust momentum in the ensuing decade. Being an essentially localized market, Indigenous Australian art was left exposed in this downturn and was slower to rebound. Since then, however, a

broader and more inquiring art market, with diverse appetites, has emerged.”[ix] And more crucially, she has declared, "when we take on an exhibition, it always has an impact way beyond the gallery wall.”[x]

That’s still to be tested, as is the success of the Sotheby’s sale. In the interim Steve Martin will be visiting Australia this November for his new show with fellow acclaimed comedian and friend Martin Short. And presumably to go shopping.

[i] *Desert Painters of Australia: Works from the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia and the Collection of Steve Martin and Anne Stringfield.*

[ii] Jason Farago, ‘Can We Start Appreciating Indigenous Art on Its Own Terms?’, *The New York Times*, 17 May 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/17/arts/design/aboriginal-art-australia.html?login=email&auth=login-email>

[iii] Jane Raffan, ‘Ancestral Modern: An American Dream of Aboriginal Art’, *LOOK Magazine*, Art Gallery of NSW Society, September 2012

[iv] David Hulme & Brigitte Banziger, ‘Sothebys New York Contemporary Evening Auction: High Flying Continues with Iconic Warhol Self Portrait doubling its high estimate’, 12 May 2010, <https://www.aasd.com.au/index.cfm/news/113-sothebys-new-york-contemporary-evening-auction-high-flying-conti/>

[v] <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/steve-martin-aboriginal-art-australia-new-york-comedy-a8918366.html>

[vi] Quoted in ‘Steve Martin loans Indigenous Australian art collection to Gagosian Gallery for NYC exhibition’, ABC, 20 April 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-04-20/steve-martin-loans-indigenous-art-collection-to-nyc-gallery/11025190>

[vii] Ibid.

[viii] Ibid.

[ix] Sarah Cascone, ‘Actor Steve Martin Amassed a Stellar Collection of Australian Aboriginal Art at Warp Speed — and Now You Can See It at Gagosian’, *Artnet News*, 3 May 2019, <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/steve-martin-at-gagosian-1530421>

[x] Quoted in ABC, Op.cit.

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.