

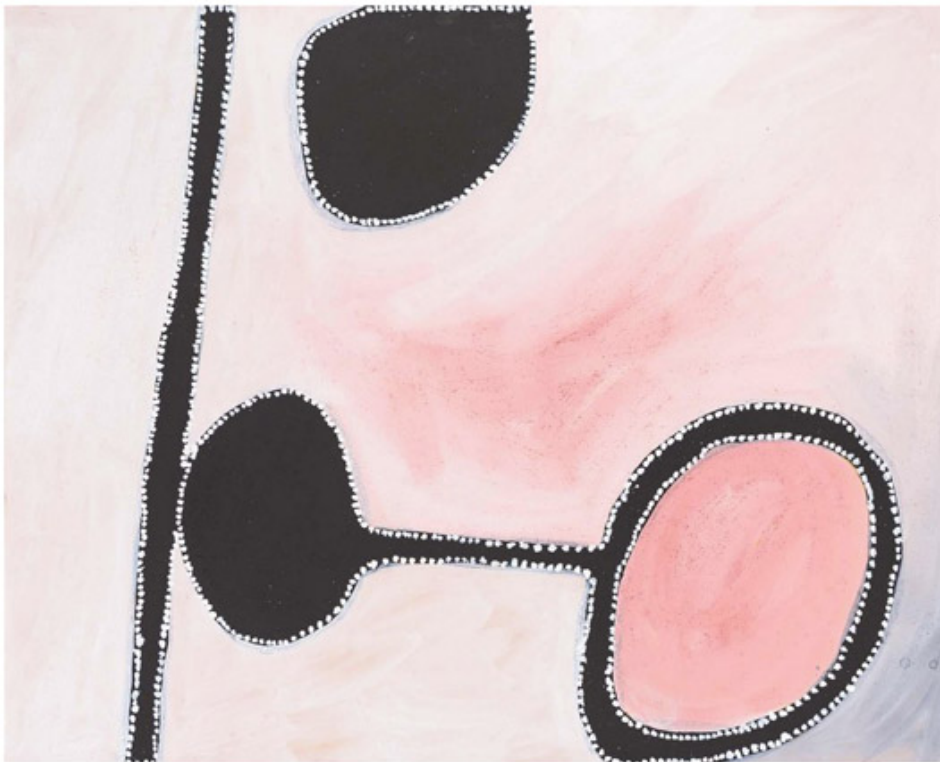
## Mossgreen's Fine Indigenous Art sale fails to fire from lack of focus

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By Jane Raffan, on 17-May-2017

By all accounts so far this year, the non-Indigenous art market looks to be finally breaking out of its “decade of torpor”[i]. The results of Mossgreen's Fine Australian Indigenous Art sale last night, however, would suggest that this sector, while not moribund, is still mired in a morass of its own making.

With a single owner core of 96 works, several of which sold at large discounts to their purchase prices, along with a few contemporary highlights from mixed vendors, and a dose of desperate dealer stock, the 193 lot sale was never going to be a Lavery or Vroom affair. And the market responded accordingly, with only 49% clearance by both number and value, and with the top ten lots all settling in the \$20-50,000 bracket.



The top lot in Mossgreen's Fine Australian Indigenous Art sale held in Sydney on 16 May was Paddy Bedford's *Untitled* (2004) (above), but was one of only a handful of contemporary works that managed to lure buyers over the low-end estimate, selling for hammer of \$48,000 (est. \$40-60K). With a single owner core of 96 works and the balance from mixed vendors, the 193 lot sale achieved 49% clearance by both number and value, with the top ten lots all settling in the \$20-50,000 bracket.

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The sale's top lot, Paddy Bedford's *Untitled (2004)* (Lot 9 🍷) was one of only a handful of contemporary works that managed to lure buyers over the low-end estimate. It sold for a hammer of \$48,000 (est. \$40-60K).

The second-best price for this core, \$30,000, was paid for Rover Thomas' *The Sun-Yalda Country, 1995* (Lot 30 🍷), followed by Robert Campbell Jnr's *Hunting Tucker, 1993* (Lot 3 🍷), which made \$26,000 (est. \$18-25K).

Works by Emily Kame Kngwarreye appeared in the \$20K bracket of the top ten with a late 'dump-dump' *Untitled* work from 1995 (Lot 33 🍷) with Rodney Gooch provenance, which drew in competition to reach \$24,000 (est. \$25-35K), while a smaller, earlier and more beautiful *Untitled* work from 1991 (Lot 37 🍷) with Delmore provenance, made \$17,000 (est. \$18-25K).

Predictably, the early Papunya Tula material attracted interest, fleshing out the top tranche.

Dealer D'Ian Davidson – who sat through the entire sale, unlike most other patrons who left in steady stream – acquired Old Walter Tjampitjinpa's *Water Story, 1971* (Lot 112 🍷) for \$22,000 (est. \$12-18K). This work went unsold through Deutscher & Hackett for the same estimate in 2013. Davidson was also underbidder on Johnny Warangkula's *Old Man's Medicine Story, 1971* (Lot 31 🍷), which sold for \$44,000 (est. \$30-50K).

And from amongst the sale's hefty bark painting component (25%), two works by master Yirawala made solid contributions:

*Kunapipi (Sacred and Secret)*, circa 1965 (Lot 74 🍷), sold for \$19,000 (est. \$20-30K), sold to D'Ian Davidson, while the more striking *Sacred Black Kangaroo, 1951* (Lot 79 🍷), sold for \$15,000 (est. 15-20K).

While estimates were generally quite optimistic for most of the more run-of-the-mill works, the above-low-end estimate purchases showed up the handful of special works in the sale, several of which were tell-tale placed in the first 10 lots to spice up the vibe.

A bold and gutsy *Untitled* work by the rare-to-the-market, but perhaps died-too-soon into her career Mitjili Gibson Napanagka (Lot 1 🍷) kicked off the sale with a just-over expectation hammer of \$8,500 (est. \$6-8K).

Peter Maralwanga's delicately aged bark painting, *Borlung the Rainbow Serpent* (Lot 4 🍷), pulled in \$9,500 (est. \$6-8K).

A stunning *Yawk Yawk* with rare addition of a baby creature by Owen Yalandja (Lot 5 🍷), made \$17,000 (est. \$12-18,000).

And then, after a stretch of passed-in works stalled momentum, a very strong and well balanced composition by Sally Gabori, *Dibirdibi Country, 2012* (Lot 20 🍷), pulled in \$10,000 (est. \$5-7K).

And then the struggle really set in.


Later in the sale, Minnie Pwerle's gleaming and very beautiful *Awelye Atnengerrp, 2005* (Lot 115 🍷), almost tripled its low-end of \$7-10K to make \$17,000, the best price for a work on this scale by the artist since 2007.


From amongst the Kimberley core, which had patchy results, a work by recently deceased elder and Kimberley cultural leader Freddie Timms, *Scrub Creek (Bow River), 1996* (Lot 139 🍷), doubled its low-end to sell for \$12,500.

Paintings from Timms oeuvre, likely many Aboriginal artists, bear several provenances. Jirrawun Arts, for which he was chairman, was late to the party, but its reach was expansive, its programme avant-garde and it propelled the career of Timms, Paddy Bedford and several others. The cultural legacy of this important centre is now apparently to be revived some seven years after the centre's closure, to be fostered anew by neighbouring stalwart Warmun Arts[1].

The sale featured another work from this centre by four young sisters known collectively as "The Jirrawun Girls": Remika, Ramona, Tennielle & Vondean Nocketta – a high art transfer of brash street language and graffiti tags commonly seen on the walls of their town. *Sux, 2006* (Lot 166 🍷) was amongst the best performing works in the sale, making \$8,500 against a cheap-for-size (180x150cm) and play-it-safe estimate of \$4-6K. This work had its own street cred: a first outing at Sydney's Sherman Galleries in one of Jirrawun's breakthrough exhibitions,

'Womens Business' (not mentioned in the cataloguing).

At the other end of the scale, the cover lot, a large scale non-community provenanced work by Yuendumu master painter Maggie Watson Napangardi with international exhibition history, *Ngalyapi Vine (Snake Vine)*, 1996 (Lot 36 ), failed to fire at \$60-80,000, a decade down the track from its \$100-150K unsold outing at Sotheby's in 2006; one of five works in a string of top lots that met this fate in the first section of the sale before the artefacts.

And as for the artefacts: on a day that Chanel launched the sale of its \$2,000 boomerang 'accessory' to great uproar<sup>[2]</sup>, barely any interest was shown in the real deal. Out of seventeen lots that featured the iconic symbol of Aboriginal Australia, only four sold. The top lot, a transitional boomerang from southern Qld, circa 1900 (Lot 40 ) , which featured beautiful incised decoration made \$2,400.

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Major unsold lots:

Lot 32, Anatjari Tjakamarra, *Untitled*, 1972, est. \$70-100,000

Lot 34, Emily Kame Kngwarreye, *Winter Exposition*, 1992, est. \$60-80,000

Lot 35, Eubena Nampitjin, *Untitled*, 1992, est. \$40-60,000

Lot 38, Nyurapaiya Nampijinpa, *Untitled*, 2007, est. \$30-50,000

Lot 114, Bill Whiskey Tjapaltjarri, *Rockholes and Country near the Olgas*, 2007, est. \$25-35,000

[1] <http://mailchi.mp/artgallery/desert-river-sea-april-2017-newsletter?e=40d979f36a#Warlayirti>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2017/may/16/channels-2000-boomerang-criticised-for-humiliating-indigenous-australian-culture>

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2017/may/16/channels-2000-boomerang-criticised-for-humiliating-indigenous-australian-culture>

Sale Referenced: Australian Indigenous Art, Mossgreen Auctions, Sydney, 16/05/2017

#### 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](http://www.artifacts.net.au).

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