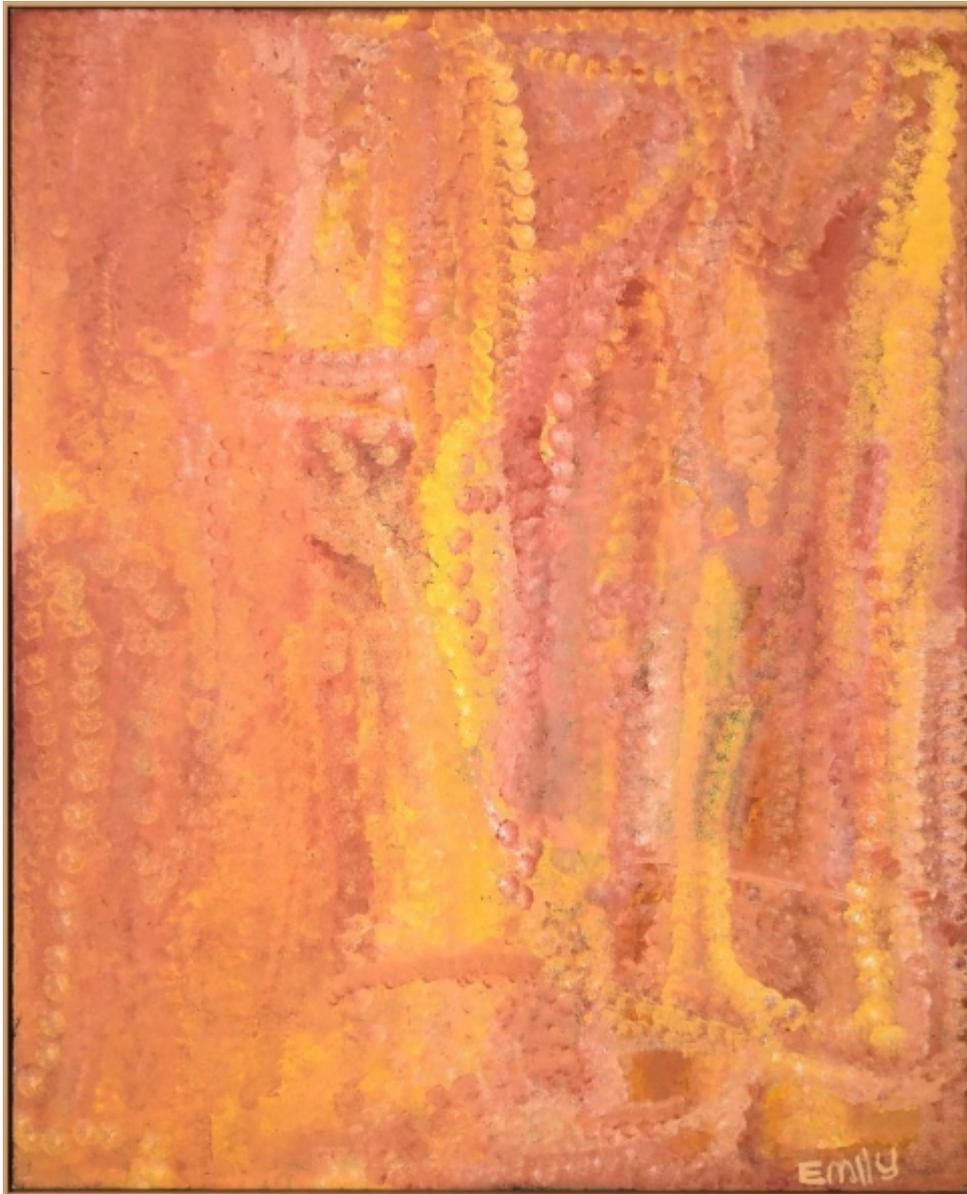


Sydney's east coast low deluge no spirit dampener for Cooee Art's Australian Indigenous Fine Art Auction

By Jane Raffan, on 09-Mar-2022

Auctioneer Anita Archer was so chipper, one wouldn't have known there was a brutal blustering east-coast-low keeping the streets mostly deserted outside Cooee Art's bright new Redfern gallery showroom. Inside, the myriad of sunny pictures lining the walls dazzled with echoes of Country bathed in sunshine; mesmerising in contrast to the wet tempest lashing about in the dark outdoors.



Auctioneer Anita Archer was so chipper, one wouldn't have known there was a brutal east-coast-low blustering outside Cooee Art's bright new Redfern (Sydney) showroom hosting their Australian Indigenous Fine Art Auction. Inside, the myriad of sunny pictures lining the walls dazzled with echoes of Country bathed

in sunshine. Fittingly, the top lot was a glowing yellow/orange mid-career work by the sale's drawcard painter, Emily Kame Kngwarreye, with *Arlatyeye - Bush Potato*, 1994 (Lot 50) making \$140,000.

Two of these warm works took out the top lots: *Arlatyeye - Bush Potato*, 1994 (Lot 50) —a glowing yellow/orange mid-career work by the sale's drawcard painter, Emily Kame Kngwarreye—secured the peak spot, reaching \$140,000, just below its low end. And an expansive three metre, multi-toned red depiction of country by Yannima Tommy Watson took out the second spot, with *Iyarka, adjacent to Mount Connor*, 2015 (Lot 55), selling mid-estimate for \$85,000.

Attended by a small gathering comfortably seated with room to move in this, our new socially distanced world, the sale of 103 lots cheerily cleared 70% by volume in around two hours (80% with aftersales), and with only a few glitches; a couple of lots were hampered by dropouts during the event from internet difficulties (our NBN: copper wires under flooding streets, remember). Slow phone connections gave the auctioneer opportunities to ham it up, however, which went down well with attendees, who appeared happy to soak up any levity in the midst of all the gloom.

Several other works by Emily Kame Kngwarreye missed the mark, but an important early (1990) *Women's Dreaming - Awelye* (Lot 30), emblematic of the period and her name: *kame* meaning seed, was snared by a phone bidder against the room for \$70,000 (est. \$80-110K).

In lock step was the next finely dotted work, Bill Whiskey Tjapaltjarri's *Rockholes near the Olgas*, 2006 (Lot 31), which sold to one of the two internet platforms operating on the night for \$65,000 (est. \$70-90K). Another finely dotted work by Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri was one of the highlights among the core of results in the \$30-50K range, with *Mouse Dreaming*, 1996 (Lot 62) selling for \$36,000, just below expectations.

The sale's two works by Albert Namatjira proved a top draw. His early (c. 1950) poker-work piece, *Dogs Hunting Kangaroo* (Lot 33), replete with NGA exhibition provenance, was heavily bid to \$5,500 against a come-'n-get-it estimate of \$1.5-2.5K. Following, his strongly coloured *Western McDonnell Landscape* from 1945 (Lot 34) was chased from all quarters to \$44,000 against a generously modest estimate of \$18-25K; the result among the top ten for a work on this scale and, drilling down, the best result for this sub-genre on that scale (standard ranges/plains view with non-hero gum tree/s foreground).

The vaunted 1972 Papunya Tula genesis boards offered divergent results, with the Charlie Taruwa Tjungurrayi (Lot 35) remaining unsold on the night. Newly unearthed from a basement in the northern reaches of the Commonwealth, Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra's *Possum Dreaming* (Lot 36) was chased well over its high-end of \$50K by a room bidder who secured it on behalf of a European 'with very deep pockets' for \$62,000, the fourth highest result on record for the artist. Earlier, a 1960s carved and painted shield by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, together with a decorated woomera by the master-then-still-to-be (Lot 19), were frenetically bid to \$8,500 against an estimate of \$4-6K. And late in the sale, a seminal period work, *Possum Dreaming*, 1996 (Lot 87), drew solid bidding from phones to secure a mid-estimate result at \$40,000.

Another early career board, this time by Kimberley master Rover Thomas, *Three Owls at Pompei Pillar*, 1981 (Lot 38), was bid to mid-estimate, selling for \$70,000. Birds are enduringly popular subjects for Australian artists, and buyers. They are among Brett Whiteley's most prized pictures, for example. Earlier, two Wandjina bird paintings by Kimberley centenarian Patsy Lapundja drew keen interest, with a group of seven (Lot 25), the biggest and most dramatic, selling for its low-end of \$12,000.

The auction included a number of lower-valued attractive works strong on design that pulled in domestic buyers (many of whom were likely domiciled in the gallery's locale, judging by those who walked home)[1], including two very elegant 1960s bark paintings of kangaroos that sold above estimate: John Namerredje Guymala's, *Rock Kangaroo and Snake* (Lot 43) for \$4,200, and Sam Manggudja Garnarradj's *The Red Kangaroo* (Lot 44) for \$5,500; both new records in the respective artist's oeuvres; the former for the

subject (versus spirit figures) and the latter being the top recorded result for the artist, full stop. Late in the sale, an apocalyptic (but very stylish) work by Jonathan Brown Kumuntjara saw bids overvaulting each other, to sell for \$10,000 against an estimate of \$4-6K. *Grandfather's Country - White Sand Dunes near Yalata*, 1996 (Lot 100 🎯), now sits equal third in the artist's sales records.

Another perennial market favourite, Minnie Pwerle, was well represented with four works, offering different glimpses into her output. The best of them was *Bush Melon Seed*, 2001 (Lot 59 🎯), created with energetic brush wielding at close quarters from all sides, which made \$7,500 (est. \$5-6K). Earlier, *Awelye Atnwengerrp*, 1999 (Lot 7 🎯), a controlled repetition of breast markings painted on the same scale, achieved the same sum (est. \$8-12). In between, *Bush Melon Seed*, 2004 (Lot 53 🎯), a typical late career work exhibiting a melange of both subject iconographies, made \$8,000 against higher expectations (est. \$9-12K).

In general, works by women painters fared better than their male counterparts, in particular with regard to the contemporary core populated mainly with works from painters associated with Papunya Tula, which dominated the second half of the sale.

Unlike the more synchronous jewel-like works of Balgo artist Mille Skeen (lot 10; sold \$12K) as compared with Yuendumu artist Paddy Sims Tjapaltjarri (lot 83; unsold), the current dichotomous appeal of the aesthetics in women's and men's Papunya Tula painting was made all-the-more obvious by the results. Many of the pricier works in both categories (also the largest among those on offer) did not find buyers. Some, such as Paddy Japanangka Lewis (Lot 75 🎯), were clearly not priced at auction market entry levels. Cooee Art is in the fortunate position, however, to be able to shift such works to their two gallery environments for ongoing retail exposure, where the foot traffic would be unaware of such metrics (or past auction presentations).

The best results for this contemporary core on the night were medium sized works pitched at the \$20K level, including Nyurapayia Nampitjinpa (Mrs Bennet)'s *Untitled*, 2008 (Lot 47 🎯), which sold at its low-end for \$20,000, Naata Nungurrayi's, *Marrapinti*, 2012 (Lot 48 🎯) which cleared just below its low-end of \$30K, and Thomas Tjapaltjarri's large *Tingari*, 2014 (Lot 90 🎯), which sold to the internet for \$15K, at a discount from its low-end of \$18K.

Unique voices proved an easier sell, with Regina Wilson's large *Syaw (Fish Net)*, 2006 (Lot 63 🎯) skipping along to make \$24,000 (est. \$18-22K). Another more boisterous work (and more recent, being executed in 2020) by Yaritji Young, *Tjala Tjukurpa - Honey Ant Story* (Lot 52 🎯), was snapped up for \$16,000 (est. \$20-30) by a man in the room who was buying, I heard tell, for 'his business'. This particular unassuming buyer (who was sitting with his mum) was active from lot 1, was rarely the underbidder, and ended up snaffling around 10% of the sale. They later disappeared into the night in gleaming black hire car.

The Cooee Art sale (and ongoing enterprise) is an exercise in democratising a divergent market: attractive works from a variety of sources, with a variety of buyers being courted. And doing it their way, without demeaning (devaluing) works for throughput alone. And happily, with a clearance of 73% by value (around \$1.5 million), they have another solid showing to boot.

Major aftersales

Lot 29 - Emily Kame Kngwarreye, *Anooralya*, 1995, 130 x 80 cm, \$40,000 (est. \$50-60K)

Lot 61 - Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula, *Straightening Spears*, 1998, 150 x 183 cm, \$40,000 (est. \$50-70K)

Lot 76 - Nyurapayia Nampitjinpa (Mrs Bennet), *Untitled*, 2007, 153 x 183 cm, \$42,000 (est. \$45-65K)

Lot 79 - Emily Kame Kngwarreye, *Arlatyey Pencil Yam Dreaming*, 1996, 191 x 66 cm, \$38,000 (\$40-60K)

Lot 86 - Yannima Tommy Watson, *Iyarka*, 2013, 153 x 183 cm, \$38,000 (est. \$45-65K)

Major unsold lots

Lot 35 - Charlie Taruwa Tjungurrayi, *Cave Dreaming*, 1972, 122 x 62 (\$60-80K)

Lot 49 - Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, *Fishing and Hunting in Limmen Bight*, 1987, 178 x 124 cm (\$80-100K)

Lot 54 - Emily Kame Kngwarreye, *Yam Dreaming*, 1996, 122 x 92 cm (\$90-110K)

Lot 60 - Kathleen Petyarre, *Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming - Sandhill Country*, 1999, 183 x 183 cm (\$40-60K)

Lot 75 - Paddy Japanangka Lewis, *Mina Mina Jukurrpa*, 2008, 183 x 305 cm (\$80-120K)

Lot 77 - Lorna Ward Napanangka, *Marrapinti*, 2012, 183 x 244 cm (\$28-35K)

Lot 78 - Dorothy Napangardi, *Sandhill Country*, 2006, 122 x 198 cm (\$35-45K)

Lot 80 - Naata Nungurrayi, *Marrapinti Rockhole and Soakage Site*, 2008, 153 x 183 cm (\$45-65K)

[1] Cooe reported 6% of sales to Swiss buyers, 15% UK, 6% US, and the rest Australian, with 5 in room buyers local to the area

Sale Referenced: Indigenous Fine Art , Coee Art, Sydney, 08/03/2022

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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