

## Panache amid pandemic: Deutscher and Hackett's Important Australian Aboriginal Art sale sails through with strong support across the board

By Jane Raffan, on 20-Mar-2020

**Panache amid pandemic: Deutscher and Hackett's *Important Australian Aboriginal Art* sale on March 18 2020 in Melbourne sailed through with strong support across the board and an 80% clearance by lot on the night, securing 16 new artist records. A few after-sales bumped the tally to 83% and \$2.4 million dollars (incl. BP).**



Deutscher and Hackett's return to a dedicated multi-vendor Aboriginal art sale cut through the pandemic tumult and restrictions. The *Important Australian Aboriginal Art* sale saw strong support, generating 83% clearance by lot and \$2.4 million dollars. Works by leading light Emily Kame Kngwarreye secured three top ten prices—unsurprisingly, given her growing international profile—including *A Desert Life Cycle III*, 1991 (Lot 9), from the important early period, which made its high-end of \$140,000.

Along with considered estimates (and no doubt the usual hard work pre-selling behind the scenes), the auction cut through what could have been a disastrous tumult, given the restrictions currently being imposed on the broad populace. Instead, 14% of the offerings were chased above their high-end estimates, while a solid 40% were hammered down within expected ranges. Impressively, considering the dramas that unfolded over the course of the viewings, the ban on large gatherings that occurred on auction day itself forcing a flurry of remote bidding registrations, and a series of crazy last-minute technical hurdles, the sale secured one of the highest totals for a mixed vendor Aboriginal auction in recent times.

Shored up by two interesting single-owner collections and a number of key highlights, along with quite a few vendor reserves set with consideration of the times, the return to a dedicated multi-vendor Aboriginal art sale after four years was sensibly sized at 105 lots, and offered collectors tempting quality works from most of the field's representative periods and leading artists.

Works by leading light Emily Kame Kngwarreye secured several of the sale's top ten—unsurprisingly, given her growing international profile, especially among American collectors—with *Desert Winter*, 1994 (Lot 8 🎯) marking a successful return to market after just under two years selling at \$260,000 (est. \$250-350K). Whether they took their lead from the US fanfare or not is unknown, but this work was acquired by a local collector.

Green works are anecdotally tricky to move compared to warm-toned paintings, and there were two by the artist in the sale to test this: *A Desert Life Cycle III*, 1991 (Lot 9 🎯), from the important early period in the artist's oeuvre, made its high-end of \$140,000, while arguably the prettiest painting among the four (Lot 31 🎯) sold under its low-end for \$26,000.

The surprise result in the group was for *Ceremony*, 1994 (Lot 30 🎯). It last traded in 2007 at \$36,000, and despite the auction house's expectation of only a modest rise, it was chased to \$85,000, well above its estimate of \$45-65K. The painting is one of only a few signed on the front by the artist, so definitely a stand-out in that respect.

New York, one of the art universe's major centres, has recently been showcasing a select group of star works by Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Ronnie Tjampitjinpa and early Papunya Tula painting through the auspices of dealer D'Ian Davidson. Amid the pandemic's evolution, the selling exhibition has had to close early, but its success was already secured, with over four million dollars in reported sales, many of which will be staying in the city.

The Deutscher and Hackett sale featured an array of quality work by notable Papunya genesis male painters, four of which made top ten results, along with one by a female artist among the leaders from the second wave:

*Story of Two Old Men*, 1972 (Lot 5 🎯), a rare-to-the-market diminutive early board by Charlie Ward Tjakamarra (he mainly painted later, on canvas), met its assertive low-end estimate of \$50,000, while Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri's untitled board (formerly *Wind Story*) from the same year (Lot 6 🎯) was well bid to mid estimate, with the hammer falling at \$60,000, representing a sizeable profit for the vendor from its 2007 purchase at \$24K. There's no record of the Tjakamarra having sold publicly, but this writer knows it was found in a goodwill store in an eastern US state. Happy hunting indeed.

Sharing the prize result in the contemporary category were two large scale, fresh-to-the-market works with matching results, albeit under expectations. *Marawa*, 2004, a dazzling monochrome by Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri (Lot 19 🎯) sold for \$70,000 (est. \$80-120K) as did Ningura Napurrula's highlight lot, *Women at Ngaminya*, 2005 (Lot 21 🎯). Ronnie Tjampitjinpa's *Palkarulkulnga*, 2002 (Lot 17 🎯), sold for \$50,000 (est. \$55-75K) later in the evening, as did Charlie Wartuma (Tarawa) Tjungurrayi's, *Tingari At Nyirripi*, 1990 (Lot 15 🎯), for \$20,000 (est. \$20-30K).

The auction brought to light six Kimberley paintings by Jirrawun artists from the collection of Helene Teichmann, a former chairman of the organisation. The best performing was Paddy Nyunkuny Bedford's sizeable *Jinanggany – Cattle Creek*, 2004 (Lot 23 🎯), which sold for \$105,000 (est. \$120-150K), just outside the artist's top ten. From another vendor, Paddy Bedford's marvellous early inky work, *Camel Gap*, 2001 (Lot 36 🎯) made \$75,000 against \$80-120K.

Jack Britten was an early Kimberley auction market star, and *Purnululu (The Bungle Bungles)*, 1993 (Lot 62 🎯), also from another vendor, was the star performer, making \$36,000 against expectations of \$10-15K. This work remained unsold only 3 years ago on the back of a \$7-10K estimate with another firm, proving timing, context and marketing is everything. Paddy Jaminji's *Untitled*, 1987 work (Lot 61 🎯) sparked academic collector appetite, selling just over its high-end for \$16,000.

The Teichmann collection's offering by Freddie Timms climbed into the artist's top five results, just under another three-metre diptych, with the red-emboldened *Jack Yard* from 2005 (Lot 24 🎯) making \$32,000 in the mid-estimate range. The most atypical Kimberley-style painting in the collection—a work by Rammey Ramsey, among his most experimental and interesting expressionist works— didn't sell on the night (Lot 25 🎯), but was added to the total the next day at \$12,200 incl. BP (est. \$12-15K).

That sale is a good sign, as comfort food is normally the go in troubled times. Specialist in charge Crispin Gutteridge was pleased with the turnout at viewings, saying that the quality of the works generated excitement amongst prospective buyers, and Damian Hackett was doubly pleased those that showed their hands early actually "did what they intended to do" given the circumstances.

Buyers rallied for Sally Gabori's *Dibirdibi Country*, 2011 (Lot 57 🎯), which made \$15,000 over a modest estimate of \$6-8K, and particularly dramatic work by Makinti Napanangka, another early master of painterly individuation, contributed a major highlight, with her *Lupulnga*, 2008 (Lot 22 🎯) selling at \$29,000, almost doubling its low-end estimate of \$15K, and jumping into the artist's top ten with the best price for a work on this scale since 2008.

Another highly individuated talent from Arnhem Land, Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, made its high-end, with *Limmen Bight Country Suite*, seven works on paper from 1995 (Lot 71 🎯), selling for \$35,000, while Bill Whiskey's *Rockholes Near The Olgas*, 2008 (Lot 7 🎯) made its low end of \$40K, now the second best price for a work on this scale. The major work by Ginger Riley (Lot 12 🎯) *Limmen Bight Country*, 1992 (estimate \$30-40,000) didn't move on the night, but sold privately the next day for an undisclosed sum and isn't included in the sale's figures[i].

Not every work can be a sure bet, except perhaps a superb ghost gum picture by Albert Namatjira. *The Ghost Gum of Palm Valley*, c.1943 (Lot 2 🎯), easily made its high-end of \$40K, establishing a pattern in the sale that helped shore up the healthy tally. Among the 12% of works that achieved this rank was a group of Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) paintings from the tri-state border region of South Australia, the Northern Territory and Western Australia, including Dickie Minyintiri's *Wati Wiilu-Ku Inma Tjukurpa*, 2010 (Lot 94 🎯), which made \$12,000; a veritable steal for a rare large work by this important individual talent.

The Minyintiri stemmed from the sale's other single owner core – contemporary works from the Maclean collection, which comprised 39 of the sale's 105 lots and featured very fine examples of bark painting and sculptural works from Northern Territory artists, in addition to canvases from artists stemming from the APY Lands.

The Maclean collection cleared above 75%, but more importantly, most works (84%) sold on the night within or above estimate, with the best performing stemming from the collection's northern representation.

Gulumbu Yunupingu's two works added more solid data to the artist's growing record of successful secondary market sales, with a group of three intricately painted hollow logs, *Garak (Larrakitj)*, 2011 (Lot 40 🎯), more than doubling its low-end estimate, making \$32,000 (est. \$15-20K), while a flat-earth bark version, *Garak Universe*, 2011 (Lot 41 🎯) settled at \$8,800 (est. \$5-7K).

A painted hollow log by Malaluba Gumana, *Dhatam (Larrakitj)*, 2012 (Lot 85 🎯) achieved \$16,000 against an estimate of \$5-7K, and the striking painted knobby hollow log by Nyapanyapa Yunupingu, *Untitled (Circles In Grey And Black)*, 2013 (Lot 44 🎯), made its high-end of \$10-15K; both new records for the artists.

Superstar John Mawurndjul added a sale highlight (from another collection), with his elegant *Billabong at Milmilngkan*, 2006 (Lot 1 🎯) selling just under the low-end at \$42,000.

Strong performers from among the Mclean collection APY works included *Wakalpuka*, 2012 (Lot 54 🎯) by Tommy Mitchell, which made \$12,000 (est. \$8-10K), and Sylvia Ken's *Seven Sisters*, 2010 (Lot 91 🎯), which just pipped its upper end, selling for \$7,500, along with three others that made their high-end estimates (lots 49, 90 and 92). Another notable APY work from among single-vendor consignments was the striking *Antara*, 2015, by Betty Kuntiwa Pumani (Lot 75 🎯), which was snared for \$5,000 on the back of its bargain-basement estimate of \$3-4K; another new best result for an artist with a scant secondary market profile.

There were few lots by eastern seaboard/koori/contemporary urban-based artists in the sale (some work to be done there), but from this sub-set Robert Campbell Jnr's *Untitled*, 1989 (Lot 78 🎯), a picture in the same vein as his top-ten work, *Looking After Baby*, 1988, sold for \$10,500 against an estimate of \$6-8K.

The work of highly collectable contemporary Indigenous photographers is now generally showcased in fine art sales, and it may be that prospective highlights in this area are being reserved for Deutscher and Hackett's next

Australian art sale in May, especially given the likely bifurcation in collector demographics. One for one, however, as up-and-coming printmaker/photographer Robert Fielding's screenprint *Milkali Kutja*, 2015 (Lot 100 🎨), sold at its encouraging low-end of \$4,000.

The big wide world is now woke to Aboriginal art. Davidson has indicated that he has works firmly planted in NYC where he has "intentions of gaining a foothold and further forging this most important market." A recent article on the aboriginal art market suggested that his success in New York might not be characteristic of the local market, and that this Deutscher and Hackett sale would be the real litmus test<sup>[ii]</sup>.

In another article, the same author indicated that Deutscher and Hackett might find Menzies' opening season result 'sobering news'<sup>[iii]</sup>. Since the GFC, Indigenous art sales have generally been a harder ask than those filled with pictures in gold frames, which is why dedicated multi-vendor sales have been missing in action for the past few years. And that's an easy thing to do when quality single-owner collections, such as the Laverty Collection come to pass (secured by D&H in 2017). In the recovery, buyers mostly branched out on different forks with speculator investors all but disappearing from the Indigenous art sector. In the case of the Menzies sale, the spokesperson linked their result to the coronavirus and attendant local stock market falls, a clear sign of who their major buyers are.

Damian Hackett indicated that 82% of works went to Australian collectors, slightly higher than specialist Crispin Gutteridge's declaration that the local absorption in the secondary market for Aboriginal art sits around 80%. And this includes the two major works by Kngwarreye. So, by all accounting we can credit 'litmus test' success in that regard.

Hackett is keen to utilise the shake-up of the current world as an opportunity to look at their systems going forward. It is unclear how constrained operating conditions will affect auction calendars industry-wide, but Deutscher and Hackett's successful sale on the brink of mayhem should be taken as a positive sign. As their EDM chirpily put it, 'a little ray of sunshine' indeed.

Major unsold lots

Lot 14 – Mawalan Marika, *Djan'kawu at Yalangbara*, c.1961, est. \$20-30K

Lot 18 – George Tjungurrayi, *Untitled*, 2005, est. \$25-35K

Lot 34 – Eubena Nampitjin, *Kinyu*, 2005, est. \$20-30K

Lot 35 – Tjumbo Tjapanangka, *Untitled*, 2002, est. \$15-20K

Lot 39 – John Mawurndjul, *Lorrkon*, 2007, est. \$25-35K

Lot 70 – Ningura Napurrula, *Rockholes at Wirrulinga*, 2003, est. \$15-20K

Note: all figures quoted in the article, unless otherwise stated, are hammer prices.

[i] So too for Lot 80 and Lot 82.

[ii] Gabriella Coslovich, 'Emily Storms NY as Indigenous art trends up', *Financial Review*, 11 March 2020. Of the 22 reported sales, 11 were acquired by New York collectors, two by Los Angeles buyers, six by Europeans, and by Australians.

<https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/arts-and-culture/emily-storms-ny-as-indigenous-art-trends-up-20200310-p548mt>

[iii] Menzies results were reported as 70% by lot, 75% by value. Gabriella Coslovich, 'Virus hits sales at Menzies' art season opener', *Financial Review*, 4 March 2020 <https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/arts-and-culture/virus-hits-sales-at-menzies-art-season-opener-20200303-p546h6>

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