

Bonhams takes on the C-word with connoisseurship cutting through the Covid pall.

By Jane Raffan, on 25-Aug-2021

With a clearance by lot of 83% (104% by value) that secured \$2,925,000 (incl. BP) for the trust coffers, the Bonham's sale of *Important Australian Art* might have well said Covid-what?

Market observers are used to auction firms promoting their 'tightly curated sales'. Bonhams didn't use that C-word in its promotions, but it certainly showed engagement with an unfashionable one: connoisseurship.

Connoisseurship took a battering in the 20th century, becoming another dirty 'C-word'. In the second decade of the 21st century, with cryptocurrency fuelling the rise of ridiculous sums paid for NFTs – the emperor's new clothes of art – there are plenty of industry commentators that believe it's time connoisseurship made a comeback.[i]



Held amid a Sydney spring maelstrom that threatened internet bidding viability, Bonhams' director Merryn Shriever embodied the British mantra 'keep calm and carry on'. And it paid off: clearing 83% (104% by value) to tally \$2,925,000 (incl. BP) for trust coffers, the promos for the Important Australian Art sale might

have well said 'Covid-what?' What's more, the worn expression 'tightly curated' wasn't used to pitch the 112-lot sale, but Bonhams did indulge in another unfashionable C-word: connoisseurship.

Whether the rise of price-fuelled poor taste purchases amid the pandemic will be 'a second renaissance', [i] or play out as an expensive spike on a trend graph of results – a consequence of cashed-up dudes going berserk with cabin fever – is a matter best left to history (and art databases).

Regardless, the duel between price and value (investment value versus cultural/historical value) will forever be a market factor, so, while art historians grimace and shake their heads, the art business continues apace.

In this context, it's an absolute pleasure to see auction houses consider history and aesthetics in their sale presentation, as well as (or perhaps instead of) normal and always pressing commercial marketing imperatives.

The Bonham's catalogue featured 112 works, with a significant proportion of 2D works, nearly 40%, depicted in their frames, and with plenty of white wall around. In most other auction catalogues, the real estate taken up by the image of a work of art leaves barely room to jot down a result.

The rationale for the usual 'in the raw' [ii] approach is, of course, the bigger the picture, the bigger the price. But bigger isn't always better; a painting's mystique appeals more to most than its brushwork (enlargements are readily available online).

In the intertwined history of pictures and their frames, presentations of picture without frame have the effect of 'domesticating' the work of art, 'taming' them by removing the previous owner's taste, or worse, an artist's original concept, a conflict that arose from the contradictory interests of artists and patrons, which almost always resulted in the painting being deprived of its original frame. [iii]

While Bonhams didn't presume that the frames of all such works depicted in them were artist choices, it does pay homage to this history and to the work of art's aesthetics, a directorial choice quite distinct from illustrating a work's commercial value based on scale of reproduction alone.

And it works. The paintings seem more personal, closer to what Degas and Van Gogh considered art to be – an 'ineluctable' necessity rather than a luxury. [iv]

And there's another important flow-on effect: embellishment, or rather, ornamentation, something that one historian specialising in art-designed frames describes as a manifesto, "proof that painting wants to reconquer the wall it represents. ... works were not conceived as interchangeable, placeless consumer goods, but rather as an integral part of their environment, ideally – like a mural – inseparable from it ..." [v]

Certainly, some of the best performing works were highly ornamental, including Clarice Beckett's *Moonlight and Calm Sea*, 1931 (Lot 4 🍷), which was one of the most competitively bid works on the night, selling for \$95,000 (est. \$60-70K). The glowing verticals of the gilt frame perfectly complementing the formalism in the work, with strong uprights and horizontals showcasing the central moon and its watery reflection.

A record was set for May Gibbs' *Chrysanthemums*, 1894 (Lot 6 🍷), which scooted along to \$32,000, making the estimate of \$2-3K look like a typo. Watching the lot bidding online, the work on screen was pallid in comparison to the gilt framed painting, wherein the frame's radiance seemed to have emanated from the chrysanthemums themselves.

And the opening trifecta was completed with the rare and fresh *Mother and Child* (Lot 7 🍷), an undated work catalogued with an interesting theosophical interpretation. Regardless of the artist's intention, the work carried particular poignancy in our current era of state-imposed estrangements and distanced intimacy. Bonham's director and auctioneer Merryn Shriever did an excellent job of building excitement throughout the bidding, leaning over the rostrum to stare at personnel on phones and computers and take

their bids with dramatic emphases. So doing, she steered the sale to a new record of \$180,000 (est. \$30-50,000). The picture's simple frame worked a treat, adding a warm blush without interrupting the scene.

Jeffrey Smart's small and fresh-to-the-market painting, *The Road*, 1961 (Lot 15 🎯) would have sold illustrated as a postage stamp, such was its calibre. A beautiful and restrained study of balance in curves, with sombre looming shadows playing perfect counterpoint to the peachy highlights, the painting settled comfortably in its estimate range at \$320,000 after a battle made engaging by Shriever's dramatic enunciations, with "the Sydney bidder" beating out "the Melbourne bidder".

The same battleground, if not the same bidders, was fought across for the cover lot, Fred Williams' *Crooked Tree, You Yangs*, 1978 (Lot 35 🎯), a work considered to exemplify his transition from minimalism to a more expressive approach. The inter-city tussle took bidding to the low-end of \$420,000 and provided the sale's top lot.

The auction's pre-press focussed on two lots by Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, convicted forger and suspected poisoner, transported to the colonies in 1837. In London, the artist moved in elite flamboyant circles and was known to Oscar Wilde. After his downfall, Wilde wrote an essay on the subject, 'Pen, Pencil and Poison', with the closing line: "To be suggestive for fiction is to be of more importance than a fact." *Dorian Gray* was not a portrait of Wainewright, but the artist certainly influenced the book. The main tenet being Wilde's concern about the disastrous effects of life on art, and of confusing ethics with aesthetics. In the essay he writes: 'The fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose. The domestic virtues are not the true basis of art, though they may serve as an excellent advertisement for second-rate artists.'

Bonham's secured a new record result for its major work by Wainewright – *Robert Kennedy Nuttall*, 1842 (Lot 62 🎯) – without much fuss or fanfare, at the low-end of \$100,000. The same buyer also acquired (Lot 63 🎯), a profile with augmentation by the sitter's son, for its low-end of \$30,000. And on a run, they snagged the John Longstaff portrait of *Master Rupert Ryan*, 1898 (Lot 64 🎯) – a picture of poise and of the confidence and status that was to play out in the child's later life – for \$50,000, well above the modest estimate of \$15-25,000, almost doubling the extant high for the artist.

Pivoting to the moderns, Arthur Boyd's *Lovers with Blackbird*, c.1960 (Lot 72 🎯), a small and highly emblematic version of the famous theme, made \$80,000 (est. \$70-100K). Another work from the same estate, a bustling Wimmera from 1974 (Lot 77 🎯), was more keenly sought after, selling for \$105,000, just over its high-end, and jumping into the sale's top five. Proceeds from both works are being directed to aid the good works of Médecins sans Frontières.

The Aboriginal art core had mixed fortunes, with new highs, two major lots unsold and some strong performances among modest works.

Naata Nungurrayi's *Untitled 2003* (Lot 86 🎯) was heavily bid to \$11,000 (est. \$5-7K), while the exuberant telephone bidding on Makinti Napanangka's *Untitled 2002* (Lot 87 🎯) actually broke Shriever's compose, she briefly indulging in a giggle fit.

Terry Ngamandara Wilson's *Gulach*, 2001 (Lot 24 🎯) set a new benchmark for his barks, at \$9,500 (est. \$6-8K), and was the only offering in this core to sell. Sculptural figures, however, pulled their weight, with John Mawurndjul's chunky Mimih Spirits having the strongest appeal: (Lot 23 🎯) made \$15,000 (est. \$8-12K) and the larger, more heavily decorated (Lot 33 🎯) made \$19,000 (est. \$15-20K).

Early shields, generally reliable, also performed well, with the three offerings all exceeding expectations: (Lot 53 🎯) making \$12,000 (est. \$7-10K), (Lot 57 🎯) selling just above its high end at \$32,000, and the alluring tattoo-like (Lot 58 🎯) realising \$14,000 (est. \$8-12K). A carved night bird by Narritjin Maymuru (Lot 95 🎯) was chased to \$2,500 (est. \$800-1,200). While not an uncommon subject in his oeuvre, this piece was a fine early example with very gutsy formal qualities.

At the end of the sale, (Lot 99 🎯), a small Sidney Nolan painterly work on paper (which was all about brushstrokes) was chased to \$6,500 (est. \$3-5K). And in the monochrome set, an elegant ink and wash by John Coburn (Lot 102 🎯) made \$5,000 (est. \$2,5-3.5K), while a 'lifetime' print (c. 1970) of Max Dupain's iconic 1937 image *Sunbaker* made its mid-estimate of \$40,000.

The sale ended, literally, with a bang (and not a whimper) with a nicely curated bookend for our apocalyptic times: Leonard French's *Seventh Day of Genesis* (Lot 111 🎯) was carried to \$7,500 (est. 3-5K), followed by Ex De Medici's *Unnatural History (Detonating at Bikini Atoll)*, 2002 (Lot 112 🎯), which sold for \$4,000 after a string of absentee bids against the phone.

[i] Scott Reyburn, 'NFTs and colossal prices have turbocharged the art market—but has something died in this 'second renaissance'?', *The Art Newspaper*, 5 May 2021 <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/analysis/the-second-renaissance-is-here-but-has-something-died-too>

[ii] Van Gogh considered all unframed works to be 'in the raw'. Eva Mendgen (curator), *In Perfect Harmony: Picture and Frame 1850-1920*, Van Gogh Museum (exhibition catalogue; introduction), 1995, p. 9

[iii] Werner Schmalenbach quoted in Mendgen, Op.cit., p. 9

[iv] Mendgen, ibid.

[v] Mendgen, ibid., p. 10

Sale Referenced: Important Australian Art, Bonhams, Sydney, 24/08/2021

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.

The Australian Art Sales Digest is published by John Furphy Pty. Ltd., Melbourne, Australia.

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