

Beyond Sacred, but not Beyond Reach: The Lavery Collection Part III

By Jane Raffan, on 06-Apr-2017

Clearing a very comfortable 93% by volume and a happy 123% by value, Deutscher and Hackett's sale of *The Lavery Collection Part III: Contemporary Australian Art* closed the books on the third and final deaccession from the collection with a solid, if not exciting performance: some strong result for artists, although no new major records, and a few collectors running off with bargains to boot.

With many works featuring in the Lavery's lavish and highly regarded publications (two editions) on their collection: *Beyond Sacred* – it was reported that Elizabeth Lavery found it hard to let certain works go: "That sort of history makes a work terribly hard to sell."^[i] Let go they were, and sell they did, amassing a total of \$2,614,582 (including BP).



Clearing a very comfortable 93% by volume and a happy 123% by value, Deutscher and Hackett's sale of *The Lavery Collection Part III: Contemporary Australian Art* closed the books on the third and final deaccession from the collection, amassing a total of \$2,614,582 (including BP). The most expensive work (and the sale's top lot) was Rover Thomas' *Djugamerri and Bolgumerri*, 1991 (Lot 10), which reached \$240,000 in the room before selling to a phone bidder for the mid-estimate price of \$260,000.

Despite the emotional pull, Elizabeth Lavery was clearly an amenable vendor, with all works estimated to attract

broad appeal. This played out to expectation, as was evident by attendance, which at its peak numbered around 200. And these numbers were bolstered by plentiful bids coming from ten phones, the auctioneer's book, and the internet. Family, friends and past associates dotted the crowd, along with a coterie of dealers and consultants from the Indigenous and non-Indigenous contemporary art sectors.

The sale started with a strategic bang, but the vibe soon became more business-as-usual. Daniel Walbidi's *Kirriwiri*, 2007 (Lot 1 🎯), was swiftly bid to a hammer of \$46,000, against an estimate (but not expectations) of \$18-25,000, with dealer D'Ian Davidson vying with an art consultant at mid-levels before both losing out (more common than not these days) to a phone bidder.

Attendees managed to secure 35.5% of works; the balance absorbed by a typical distribution of phone bidders (51.5%), absentee bids (10%) and internet bids (3%). As is usual practice, absentee bids opened many lots, but more surprisingly, they also won out over active participants to secure some of the sales best performing lots, such as Ildiko Kovacs' *Round About*, 2001 (Lot 71 🎯), which was chased to \$36,000 against \$16-20K. The buyer, and expat based in Germany, was a friend of the family.

Aboriginal art comprised 60% of the 152-lot sale, and contributed the same percentage of top twenty lots. The most expensive work (and the sale's top lot) was Rover Thomas' *Djugamerri and Bolgumerri*, 1991 (Lot 10 🎯), which reached \$240,000 in the room before selling to a phone bidder for the mid-estimate price of \$260,000.

The large and elegant *Mad Gap*, 2005 by Paddy Bedford (Lot 9 🎯), sold mid-estimate for \$125,000, just shy of the previous sale of a more dramatic Bedford from the collection with comparable exhibition provenance, which made \$140K in 2015.

Given the results for Bedford's gouaches on board (lot 7 – \$7.5K and lot 8 – \$8K), a big win must be accorded to a savvy buyer on the books, who bought the artist's untitled third-ever-recorded painting, an ochre on plywood work from 1998 (Lot 6 🎯), for \$20,000.

No contemporary art sale worth its salt goes without a serious painting by Emily Kame Kngwarreye. The Laverty collection offered up two this time around, although not major works: an early (1990) untitled work with the florid Delmore attribution of *Dried Flowers and Fruits* (Lot 11 🎯), which went to a buyer in the room for a below-low-end bargain price of \$55,000, and a more colourful and broadly appealing work with Rodney Gooch provenance, which topped its high end to make \$20K.

A restrained untitled work from 1997 by Kitty Kantilla (Lot 13 🎯) made \$28,000, tipping it into the artist's top ten; and the best result for the artist's work on this modest scale (79 x 96 cm) since 2011.

A dense and iconographically complex work by Wimitji Tjapangarti (Lot 14 🎯) sold mid-estimate for \$22,000. When compared with the Grundy Wimitji – a comparable, albeit slightly more dynamic work executed in the same year and on the same scale – that sold at Sotheby's last September for GBP22,000, one might say the buyer of this Wimitji made out like a bandit.

Later and brighter works from Balgo proved more popular, with two paintings by Elizabeth Nyumi chased well over estimate: *Parwalla*, 2001 (Lot 16 🎯), a very large and not-too-blonde work (180 x 120 cm), was contested by a couple of serious bidders on the aisles to settle at \$31,000 against a giveaway estimate of \$10-15K; and the smaller offering (150 x 75 cm), same name/date, sold for \$22,000 against \$5-7K; both works knocking out others to settle in the artist's top five.

Three other works in the top ten results sold just above estimate: John Mawurndjul's *Buluwana*, 2001 (Lot 5 🎯), which came with excellent exhibition history, for \$32,000; Makinti Napanangka's *Kungka Kutjarra*, 2000 (Lot 44 🎯), which shared the limelight with CoBrA artists in an exhibition at the soon-to-be-closed Utrecht Aboriginal Art Museum (AAMU)[ii], for \$22,000; and the very elegant *Warlawoon Country*, 2007 by Rammey Ramsey (Lot 88 🎯), showcased in a Laverty Collection exhibition at the AAMU, which was fiercely bid to \$21,000 (est. \$10-15K).

Amongst the top performing lots by estimate was *Crocodile Hole*, 1998 (Lot 85 🎯), by Freddie Timms (sadly recently deceased; not noted in the catalogue), which made \$16,000 against an estimate range reserved for decorative works on the same scale, of \$4-6K.

Major works by William Robinson starred in the non-Indigenous core of sixty with four of the section's top five results:

Carrying the artist's QAGOMA retrospective provenance, the fabulously whimsical farmyard deconstruction,

Birkdale Farm Construction with Willy Wagtail, 1983/84 (Lot 22 🍷), hauled in \$210,000, a discount from low-end of 16% to the buyer. The much smaller world-turned-upside-down landscape, *Springbrook and Numinbah to Mt Warning*, 1996 (Lot 23 🍷) sold towards its upper estimate, chocking up another \$110,000.

On a more modest scale, a seascape, *Clearing Storm to Fingal*, 1996 (Lot 55 🍷), sold close to its low-end against the internet for \$68,000; while the wonderfully wrought ceramic, *Board Riders and Sunbathers on the Beach*, 1995 (Lot 57 🍷), was carried on a wave of enthusiasm to sell to the book for \$35,000, just over its high-end.

Completing the top five, Rosalie Gascoigne's *Rose Pink*, 1992 (Lot 19 🍷) just managed to reach its low-end plus 1 to make \$46,000. With a decades-in-the making and rumoured-to-be excellent monograph on the artist due out any year now, the buyer of this work should expect to bask in the glow of renewed acclaim for this artist.

Robert MacPherson's oeuvre is filled with intriguing works, and there should have been no surprise that this rare to the market four-panelled conceptual piece would outperform expectations: (Lot 29 🍷) *Mayfair: Red Fiji, Four Signs for K.L.*, 1993 caused a genuine bidding tussle and sold for \$44,000, \$10K above its high end, achieving the second highest price for the artist's work.

Ditto Richard Larter, whose pop always proves popular these days; best performing amongst the group of four was the celebrated *Dithyrambic Painting*, 1965 (Lot 31 🍷), which was keenly contested by all bidding avenues, including dealer Annette Larkin, to sell to the phone for \$40,000, double its high end.

The Ken Whisson core (Lots, 25, 26, 66) was also a drawcard; all sold within estimate with the best performing being the least attractive, *Untitled (Carlton Café Kitchen)*, 1969 (Lot 66 🍷), which sold to an otherwise unsuccessful underbidder for \$26,000.

Works by Dick Watkins, another Laverty favourite, performed slightly better, with *Untitled*, 1972 (Lot 76 🍷) selling to a relieved John Cruthers just over its high end for \$24,000 who won over spirited bidding in the room. Against Cruthers' long list of targeted works were more crosses than ticks; amongst them a Whisson, lot 25, and another Watkins from 1978, lot 27.

Colin Laverty hailed "the restorative power of abstract art"[iii], and the sale offered a core of such work, including four by Aida Tomescu. Best performing was *Basm Unu*, 1993 (Lot 78 🍷), which attracted a flurry of bidding in the room after reaching its high end of \$15K to sell for \$22,000.

Always with an eye to the overlooked and underappreciated, Melbourne mid-century art dealer Charles Nodrum was active on most works in his field, and was the buyer of the enormous 4m Carl Plate work *Graph Segments No. 1*, 1961 (Lot 24 🍷) at low-end for \$20,000, and Michael Taylor's *Beach Painting*, 1966 (Lot 113 🍷) for \$8,500.

Amongst the best performing of the modest works was Noel McKenna's *Flying Owl*, 1996 (Lot 59 🍷), which soared to \$9,500, more than double its high end.

Aside from dealers and consultants, the sale attracted collectors of all types: those looking for a slice Laverty cred, a memento of a friendship, that one work they've been coveting for years, or perhaps a statement piece that just leaps off the catalogue page. Penelope Seidler chased, unsuccessfully, Louise Weaver's sleek white sculptural work *Ermine (Speed Racer)*, 2002 (Lot 60 🍷), which sold for \$11,000; the perfect luxe contemporary art table piece for a mid-century modern-influenced white interior.

[i] Jeremy Eccles, *A Parting of the Ways*, Aboriginal Art Directory, <http://news.aboriginalartdirectory.com/2017/04/a-parting-of-the-ways.php>

[ii] Breaking with Tradition: CoBrA and Aboriginal art <http://www.aamu.nl/en/to-see/our-exhibitions/id/56/breaking-with-tradition-cobra-and-aboriginal-art>

[iii] Eccles, *ibid*

Sale Referenced: The Laverty Collection - Part III, Deutscher and Hackett , Sydney, 05/04/2017

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 &

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