

A Tale of Two Sessions: Bonhams' Important Australian Art sale, Sydney, 17 November

By Jane Raffan, on 18-Nov-2021

Bonhams saw out the season with its *Important Australian Art* auction eclipsing records along with a few false starts, to clear 124% by value and 75% by lot. The second session offered up a single owner core: *Sir Sidney Nolan: Selected works from the Estate of Lady Nolan*, which did its job tidying up the rear with a solid performance lacking sparkle.



Bonhams saw out the season with its Important Australian Art auction eclipsing records along with a few false starts, to clear 124% by value and 75% by lot, totalling somewhat shy of \$3 million dollars. The starting mixed-vendor session brought new record prices to the line-up of several artists, as well as a range of others with more modest saleroom profiles. John Coburn's big and bold *Icon*, 1970 (above) stole the show, charging away to \$315,000 on the back of a very cheeky estimate of \$50-70K.

The starting mixed-vendor session (lots 1-86) brought new record prices to the line-up of several artists, as well as a range of others with more modest saleroom profiles. John Coburn's big and bold *Icon*, 1970 (Lot 29 🗨️) stole the show, charging away to \$315,000 on the back of a very cheeky estimate of \$50-70K.

A 1970s still life study in blues and browns by Margaret Olley, *Hawkesbury Wildflowers and Pears I* (Lot 33 🍷), generated an expected tussle, with bids surging from all directions, and in unconventional increments (which became an identifiable pattern throughout the night). One of the better examples of the artist's more considered works, the painting showcased her compositional talent with a well organised confined space employing strong formal devices and great attention to detail. It soared to \$130,000 against an estimate \$45-65K; the gamesmanship drawing expat auctioneer Edward Wilkinson to exclaim along the way, "I do like the bidding in Sydney." The happy result now sits equal with another as the artist's second top price.

Earlier, unconventional bidding on the phone in leaps and bounds was applied to Stella Bowen's delicious (does luscious apply to succulents and cacti?) *Jardin Exotique*, c. 1938 (Lot 3 🍷), which beat out consultant/dealer Annette Larkin to sell at \$100,000, snaring another artist record. The preceding lot by the same artist, *Portrait of Young Boy*, c. 1937 (Lot 2 🍷), also overvaulted expectations, but in a more steadfast manner, to sell to the same 'Bolshy' buyer for \$85,000 (est. \$20-30K) and secure the second top spot in the artist's saleroom history.

A decorative four-fold screen, c. 1880 – with intriguing embroidered panels set within plush velvet covered frames, each topped by a Marian Ellis Rowan watercolour of native bouquets (Lot 12 🍷) – was always going to be an each-way bet: the watercolours being pristine, the embroidered panels (with tantalising Chinoiserie-inching-toward-Aesthetic Movement hallmarks) not having stood the test of time. Within the sociocultural context of our then nascent nation, there is still much to be explored with regards to the thinking about/employment of Australian native flora in applied arts and design by prominent artists from the various colonies. Estimated respectfully at \$18-25K, the screen was carried to a hammer of \$48,000 and now rests in the number two spot for the artist's non-conventional works (no. 4 overall).

Other top lots were secured from colonial ranks, with Eugene Von Guerard's *Wannon Parsonage*, c. 1868 (Lot 11 🍷) finding a buyer mid estimate at \$120,000. Pretty as a picture, the delicate (and small) oil on board bore a rose gilt frame replete with decorative moulding that perfectly accentuated the distance hilltop spotted with trees. A scenic spot in one of the Two Sicily's in the then Bourbon kingdom, *Capo S. Vito from Alcarro, Sicily*, 1844 (Lot 56 🍷) was chased above estimate to \$40,000.

Catapulting to the other end of centuries past, the contemporary core proved its continued march into blue-chip territory, with highlight Tim Maguire's *Untitled 20060905*, 2006 (Lot 24 🍷) meeting expectations at \$80,000.

True blue (albeit expat) Jeffrey Smart carried the moderns, with a solid towards-high-end performance for *Study for Placard and Underpass*, 1986 (Lot 32 🍷), which made \$170,000. A corker of a small, oil on copper Shoalhaven by Arthur Boyd, *Rockface, River and Small Waterfall*, 1976 (Lot 31 🍷), made \$42,000.

A striking *Plant Study*, 1955 by Sidney Nolan (Lot 49 🍷) was chased from all quarters, finally selling to Sydney-based consultant David Hulme for \$40,000 (est. \$15-25K). Earlier, Melbourne-based dealer Paul Auckett, who was also in the room, snared Robert Dickerson's *The Dancing Lesson*, 1951 (Lot 30 🍷) for \$38,000.

Both parties, known to call out bids disruptive to normal increments, were active on a number of lots, with the auctioneer accepting all oddities, at first. By the end of the sale he had grasped the measure of the game and began to refuse bids out of step with his inclination, at one point declaring in mock exasperation 'you've started a horrible trend here, sir!'

Wilkinson, Bonhams' Global Head of Indian, Himalayan and SE Asian Art, conducted the sale with aplomb, with a lively mix of joviality and charming engagement. He was particularly adept at facing down the camera to draw bids from the internet, which worked well, as around 15% of buyers in the first session came from that source, split fairly evenly between Bonhams.com and 'the aggregator'. With bids on the books, people coming and going from the saleroom again (around 15 patrons), along with two terminals covering the internet and more than a handful of phones going most of the time, Wilkinson was kept busy, at one point quipping good humouredly 'there'll be dive-by bidding before we know it ...'

The second session (lots 101-181) was devoted to the works of Sidney Nolan from the Estate of Lady Nolan, of which 71 were works on paper covering diverse themes (Kelly, Africa, Gallipoli, classical narratives, poetry and theatrical imagery, birds and flowers) and multi-media technical approaches employed in his oeuvre. In this outing, which cleared 88% by lot, flowers and birds (and elephants) beat Kelly hands-down, the highlight there being *Kelly and Face*, 1958 (Lot 132 🍷) which sold for \$10,000 (est. \$7-9K).

In between theatrical melodrama and other typically fraught works, the ethereal and exquisitely controlled flower and bird pictures (all in the \$3-6K range) were a delight, and drew competitive bidding throughout the session: *Flowers and Landscape*, c. 1981 (Lot 127 🍷) \$7,500; *Rose*, 1982 (Lot 128 🍷) \$6,800; *Flowers*, 1962 (Lot 173 🍷) \$5,000; *Bird of Prey*, c. 1969 (Lot 174 🍷) \$5,000.

Of the session's ten big pictures, four were major works from the Antarctica series. Trained to understand the plight (and endorse the mythology) of the heroic explorer lost in remoteness under the searing Australian sun, collectors didn't warm to Nolan's depiction of the earth's southernmost and coldest continent. The two landscapes, more palatable than the explorers, went unsold (lots 114, 146). In comparison, the sale's central Australian landscapes (all works on paper, lots 124, 125, 143, 144, 176, 177) fared quite well.

And the heroes? Vaunted on par with Burke and Wills, the two grim Antarctic explorers did not pull at the same heartstrings, or purse strings for that matter. *Antarctic Explorer*, 1964 (Lot 133 🍷), with its death's head exposed to the elements, drew enough interest to sell at \$50,000, a couple of bids below its low end (est. \$60-80K), and the bearded and bemused companion piece, *Antarctic Explorer (Fergie)*, 1964 (Lot 159 🍷), went the same way.

Antarctica is the most dramatic place on earth I've travelled. It smacks one in the face with the realisation of humanity's smallness in the big picture, which is then amplified with a dose of dread by one's awareness of humanity's apocalyptic capacity to corrupt and destroy (haven't been to the Brazilian rainforests). The sale's two Antarctic explorers are the latest in a line-up that have emerged from previous Lady Nolan estate sales, all painted in the same manner. There's no validation of civilisation or the great capitalist enterprise in those visages, just shock and awe. Perhaps it's their stricken sense of isolation that cooled appetites this time around. Haven't we all had enough of that?

All prices are hammer prices in \$Au unless otherwise noted.

Sale Referenced: Important Australian Art; Sidney Nolan: Selected Works from the Estate of Lady Nolan, Bonhams, Sydney, 17/11/2021

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.

