

Strike Three! and definitely Not Out: Sotheby's third London-based Aboriginal art auction sets a new course.

By Jane Raffan, on 16-Mar-2018

Sotheby's third London-based auction of Aboriginal art attests to a growing depth and sophistication in the international market for Indigenous art, beyond reliably saleable pre-contact artefacts, whose attractiveness to the European market is grounded in the problematic paradigm of the primitive, fuelled by colonial mythology and early modernist fascination.

The auction attracted bidders from eighteen countries across four continents and grossed £1,625,375 (AUD \$2,879,338) incl. BP, a new record for a sale of aboriginal art outside Australia, and a smidgeon up from the 2016 record of £1,613,375.



From left: lot 46, Abie Tjangala *Rainbow Dreaming (Mungurlarni Water Dreaming)*, £13,750; lot 21, Tobacco Crop Guardian Figure, £87,500; lot Tjumpo Tjapanangka, *Wati Kutjarra at the Water Site of Mamara*, £75,000 (photo Tim Acker).

Sotheby's 3rd London Aboriginal art sale attests to growing sophistication in the international market with bidders from 18 countries across 4 continents. Grossing £1,625,375 (AUD \$2,879,338) incl. BP, the sale set a new offshore record. Emily Kame Kngwarreye's, *Kame-Summer Awelye II*, 1991 (Lot 38), made £309,000 (AUD \$547,391), the 2nd highest price for her work at auction. In addition, 5 new records for other artists were established (or 7, if you count records broken twice in the same sale).

The sale's top lot, Emily Kame Kngwarreye's, *Kame-Summer Awelye II*, 1991 (Lot 38 🌟), made £309,000 (AUD \$547,391), and stands as the second highest price achieved at auction for the artist. In addition, the auction established five new records for other artists (or seven, if you count records being broken twice in the same sale).

The catalogue elegantly profiled works by artists in sections, which added gravitas to aesthetic allure, and showed a determined confidence in contrast to local sales that always pepper works throughout. This was made easier by the fact that the bulk of the paintings core came from two sources: Miami based Debra and Dennis Scholl (31 lots) and Swiss collector Stefano Spaccapietra (9 lots).

Dennis Scholl—whose collections of Aboriginal contemporary art have been touring the US for the past few years in two gender-divided exhibitions—was in attendance in the private client room. Scholl is on record stating he grew

uncomfortable with his role at one point, reflecting that he and his wife Debra “were the market for a few years.”^[i] He can take comfort in the growing buyer diversity and attendance of these sales, with in-room numbers around fifty, doubling last year’s turnout.

And the market can take comfort in the growing world-wide appreciation of Aboriginal contemporary art, too long dominated by the focus on and drive for ‘genesis’ works from Papunya Tula Artists. The auction featured a single PTA provenanced work from the early 1970s (lot 32; unsold), and the bulk of the sale’s top ten prices were set by works painted in the past thirty years. In contrast, the previous sale’s top ten was dominated by early artefacts and carved figures.

Artefacts cannot be discounted, of course, and the core of twenty works attracted significant competition, all selling bar one (and lot 3; withdrawn).

The top lot in this section was a Murray River broad shield (Lot 4 🎯), which made £58,000 (AUD \$128,433; est. £20-30K). These shields starred in the inaugural sale, as well as the 2016 auction, and their commercial rotation continues to attract derision from Indigenous communities and museum staff alike^[ii].

The withdrawn item (“no comment” from Tim Klingender), another Victorian broad shield, could easily have been the core’s star lot. Indigenous researchers are working hard to identify the makers of early material, and this shield is likely to have been by “the master of the red diamond.”^[iii] Elsewhere, academics are cataloguing works without artist attributions as “artist once known”, in an attempt to highlight the human connections, and the loss of cultural history since contact^[iv].

As with previous sales, dealer D’lan Davidson showed up in force, but with more competition this time around, even having to juggle two clients competing for the same two lots (lot 7 and 9). Davidson was beaten by a phone bidder on lot 2 and 18, and secured another 8 lots (1, 4, 7, 11, 12, 13, 19 and 20), with the highlight being a 19th century Queensland Rainforest Shield (Lot 7 🎯), hammered down for £30,000 (AUD \$43,550) against an estimate of £10-15K. Also active in the room were Barbara and Julien Hardy on lots 8 and 10; most other action came from the phones.

From amongst the figures and carvings, a Torres Strait Islander *Tobacco Crop Guardian Figure* (Lot 21 🎯) stole the limelight, selling for £87,500 (AUD \$155,006; est. £70-100K). The carved figure last sold at Sotheby’s in 1967 for a mere £18. The other four 3D lots saw a 50% pass rate. Those sold, two figures by Enraeld Djulabinyanna Munkara (lots 25 and 26), doing so just under estimate.

From among the bark component of just six works, a good-sized rare Wanjina with extensive pigment losses by Alec Mingelmanganu (Lot 31 🎯) headlined, making its low-end of £50,000. The usually reliable Charlie Numbulmore was represented by two Wanjinas (lots 20 and 30), neither of which sold, possibly due to the fact that they were near identical (provenance aside) and not executed in his prettier creamy powdery palette.

Contemporary painting dominated the catalogue (44 lots) and cleared 73%, which was also the overall clearance by lot for the sale.

1980s PTA works have long been out of favour on the local market, and works without academic support, even grand scale ones, carry derisive estimates should they even make it into a major sale catalogue in Australia. Davidson bought a 183 x 183 cm work by Dini Campbell Tjampitjinpa (Lot 34 🎯) for a local client. The painting was offered at £5-7K and Davidson was easily able to secure it at the low-end, venturing that “this period and style is greatly underappreciated presently.”

Not so works from the same period by Rover Thomas and Emily Kame Kngwarreye. The sole work by Thomas, *Untitled*, 1989 (Lot 33 🎯), easily made its low end of £40,000, and six of the seven works by Kngwarreye were strongly contested. *Fertile Desert*, 1992 (Lot 39 🎯), was arguably the most stunning of the core, and quickly ran up bids to sell at £65,000 to the phone, underbid by Davidson who was acting for “a major international collector.” The domestic-buyer-pitched-work in the set, *Desert Abundance*, 1993 (Lot 42 🎯), made £17,000 against an estimate of £7-10K.

And speaking of under-appreciated ... Abie Tjangala finally scored a good result, with a record set by the largest and most dynamic of his works to reach market. *Rainbow Dreaming* (Lot 46 🎯) realised £11,000 (AUD \$24,327 incl. BP; est. £4-6K), a significant increase on the best of his recorded auction results, \$13,800, secured almost twenty years ago.

In the catalogue sections grouping works by artist, Butcher Cherele (lots 48 to 52) fared the worst, with only one selling. Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri, on the other hand, sold strongly, benefitting from the rise in interest since his contemporary art world baptism at *Documenta 13* in 2012, and the more recent solo show in New York.

Former AAMU curator[v] Georges Petitjean secured the major lot from the Scholl collection for £75,000. *Mamultjungkunya*, 2009 (Lot 55 🎯) featured in *Documenta 13*, and has toured America for two years as part of the men's painting exhibition *No Boundaries*.

Prince of Wales (Midpul) was represented by two very strong works, both of which sold. *Body Marks*, 2000 (Lot 57 🎯) was knocked down to a room bid of £40,000 from a London-based private equity investor, achieving the second highest price on record for the artist.

Two out of three works by Tjumbo Tjapanangka made the cut, with the well provenanced and extensively exhibited work from the Scholl collection, *Wati Kutjarra at the Water Site of Mumara*, 2000 (Lot 58 🎯) secured by Petitjean for its upper-end estimate of £60,000, much to the chagrin of underbidder Davidson.

Petitjean also bought lot 59 by Tjapanangka, and was unsuccessful chasing the smaller of the two works by Paddy Bedford, *Merrmerr*, 2004 (Lot 61), which sold to another European buyer for its low-end of £40,000 (AUD\$88,575 incl. BP).

On a roll, Pettijean outbid Davidson on two works by Tommy Mitchell (lots 63 and 64), the chase tipping them over their upper estimates, while the least formally structured and prettiest of the four on offer, *Warlpapuka*, 2012 (Lot 65 🎯) sold to the phone for £4,000 (est. £2.5-3K).

And the duo (amusingly seated next to each other) also sparred for works by Billy Thomas: Petitjean securing lots 70 and 71, and Davidson securing the major lot, *Gunambalayi - Travels of the Black Snake*, 2004 (Lot 72 🎯) for an international client at £18,000 (AUD \$39,808 inc. BP). Last offered in Australia in 2011 at \$30-40K (unsold), this work now sets the record for the artist at auction.

Capping a successful run, a red work by George Tjungurrayi lit a fire under bidders, with the winner outbidding the auctioneer's book to beat off competition at £9,000 (est. £5-8K).

When asked if he was pleased with his haul, D'lan Davidson was simultaneously relieved and excited, adding that the sale was "much stronger than last year ... it feels like things are building."

In contrast to the patchiness of the September 2016 outing, with its dramatic wild-card results that propelled the 'Masterworks' sale to its grand total, the results of the 2018 London sale suggest a more educated audience, and a more balanced and promising market expansion.

The success of the contemporary works is particularly encouraging. In this area, at least, being able to secure quality vendor stock shouldn't be a problem. If international buyer appetite for these works continues to sharpen, then we should see the local market stabilise and grow, which will also have a direct flow-on for artists and their descendants[vi] in both primary and secondary markets. And those of us along for the ride might finally move from white-knuckle, bone-rattling roller-coaster climbs and slides into cruise mode. At least for a while ...

Sale total GBP – £1,625,375; AUD – \$2,879,338

Top Ten Prices

1 – Emily Kame Kngwarreye, *Kame-Summer Awelye II*, 1991 (Lot 38 🎯)

Hammer £247,200 (est. £300-500K)

Incl. BP £309,000 – AUD \$547,391

***Second highest price achieved at auction**

2 – Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri, *Mamultjungkunya*, 2009 (Lot 55 🎯)

Hammer £75,000 (est. £80-120K)

Incl. BP £93,750 – AUD \$166,077

***Second highest price achieved at auction, exceeded by lot 90 from the 2016 Sotheby's London Aboriginal Art sale**

3 – Tobacco Crop Guardian Figure, *Sokop Madub*, circa 1888 (Lot 21 🗳️)

Hammer £70,000 (est. £70-100K)

Incl. BP £87,500 – AUD \$155,006

Last sold at Sotheby's in 1967, for £18

4 – Emily Kame Kngwarreye, *Fertile Desert*, 1992 (Lot 39 🗳️)

Hammer £65,000 (est. £60-80K)

Incl. BP £81,250 – AUD \$143,934

5 – Tjumbo Tjapanangka, *Wati Kutjarra at the Water Site of Mamara*, 2000 (Lot 58 🗳️)

Hammer £60,000 (est. £40-60K)

Incl. BP £75,000 – AUD \$132,862

***New auction record**

6 – *Broad Shield*, Murray River, South Eastern Australia, 19th century (Lot 4 🗳️)

Hammer £58,000 (est. £20-30K)

Incl. BP £72,500 – AUD \$128,433

7 – Alec Mingelmanganu, *Wanjina*, 1976 (Lot 31 🗳️)

Hammer £50,000 (est. £50-80K)

Incl. BP £62,500 – AUD \$110,718

7 – Emily Kame Kngwarreye, *Kame Awelye*, 1995 (Lot 41 🗳️)

Hammer £50,000 (est. £50-70K)

Incl. BP £62,500 – AUD \$110,718

8 – Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri, *Kalparti*, 2003 (Lot 53 🗳️)

Hammer £44,000 (est. £30-50K)

Incl. BP £55,000 – AUD \$97,432

Last sold 2013 - AUD \$19,250 incl. BP

Sotheby's, The Anthony & Beverly Knight Collection of Early Papunya Art (Lots 1 – 46); Important Aboriginal & Oceanic Art (Lots 47, Melbourne, 28/05/2013, Lot No. 99

9 – Lin Onus, *24 Hours by the Billabong Late Morning* (Lot 43 🗳️)

Hammer £40,000 (est. £50-80K)

Incl. BP £50,000 – AUD \$88,575

Last sold 2012 – AUD \$171,818 incl. BP

Menzies, Important Australian and International Fine Paintings and Sculpture, Sydney, 13/09/2012, Lot No. 28

9 – Rover Thomas (Joolama), *Untitled*, 1989 (Lot 33 🗳️)

Hammer £40,000 (est. £50-80K)

Incl. BP £50,000 – AUD \$88,575

9 – Paddy Bedford, *Merrmerji*, 2004 (Lot 61 🗳️)

Hammer £40,000 (est. £50-80K)

Incl. BP £50,000 – AUD \$88,575

9 – Prince of Wales (Midpul), *Body Marks* (Lot 57 🗳️)

Hammer £40,000 (est. £50-80K)

Incl. BP £50,000 – AUD \$88,575

Last sold 2013 – AUD \$61,000 incl. BP

Bonhams, The Lavery Collection: Contemporary Australian Art, Sydney, 24/03/2013, Lot No. 41

10 – Tommy Mungatopi, *Coral* (Lot 28 🗳️)

Hammer £34,000 (est. £35-50K)

Incl. BP £42,500 – AUD \$75,289

Last sold 2012 – AUD \$60,000 incl. BP

Bonhams, Aboriginal Art; Aboriginal Art from The Superannuation Fund of William Nuttall and Annette Reeves, Sydney, 28/05/2012, Lot No. 159

Other New Auction Records

Billy Thomas Joongoorra, *Gunambalayi – Travels of the Black Snake* (Lot 72 🗳️)

Hammer £18,000 (est. £20-30K)

Incl. BP £22,500 (AUD \$39,808)

Last offered 2011 (est. \$30-40K; unsold)

Deutscher and Hackett, Important Aboriginal + Oceanic Art, Melbourne, 18/05/2011, Lot No. 35

Abie Tjangala, *Rainbow Dreaming (Mungurlarri Water Dreaming)* (Lot 46 🗳️)

Hammer £11,000 (est. £4-6K)

Incl. BP £13,750 (AUD \$24,327)

Boxer Milner Tjampitjin, *Purkitji* (Diptych) (Lot 68 🗳️)

Hammer £15,000 (est. £15-25K)

Incl. BP £18,750 (AUD \$33,174)

Last sold 2013 – AUD \$26,840 incl. BP

Bonhams, The Lavery Collection: Contemporary Australian Art, Sydney, 24/03/2013, Lot No. 20

Boxer Milner Tjampitjin, *Purkitji* (Lot 69 🗳️)

Hammer £15,000 (est. £7-10K)

Incl. BP £18,750 (AUD \$33,174)

[i] Gareth Harris, 'Miami collector Dennis Scholl – 'I got burnt out in the contemporary art world'', *Financial Times*, 7 December 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/2517c5fc-d9cf-11e7-9504-59efdb70e12f> (emphasis added)

[ii] Matt Poll, 'What are the financial benefits for Aboriginal artists, whose art sold for almost \$3M in the UK?', NITV, 26 Sep 2016, <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/nitv-news/article/2016/09/26/what-are-financial-benefits-aboriginal-artists-whose-art-sold-almost-3m-uk?cid=inbody:elton-johnowned-kngwarreye-painting-auctioned-in-sydney>

[iii] Debbie Cuthbertson, "Aboriginal artefacts in Sotheby's auction prompt questions over provenance", *SMH*, 11 September 2016, <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/melbourne-arts/aboriginal-artefacts-in-sothebys-auction-prompt-questions-over-provenance-20160902-gr7509.html>

[iv] Kerrie O'Brien, 'Can we achieve reconciliation through art? NGV's Colony shows make a start', *Sydney Morning*

Herald, 6 march 2018, <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/can-we-achieve-reconciliation-through-art-ngvs-colony-shows-make-a-start-20180304-h0wygx.html>

[v] The AAMU (Aboriginal Art Museum of Utrecht) closed in July 2017; its entire collection and library entered the collections of other Dutch museums, see Jeremy Eccles, 'The End of AAMU, Aboriginal Art Directory, <https://news.aboriginalartdirectory.com/2017/07/the-end-of-aamu.php>

[vi] For example, refer to comments regarding the Resale Royalty and primary markets by Coo-ee Director Mirri Leven in Claudianna Blanco, 'Who really benefits from the multi-million dollar Aboriginal art trade?', NITV, 14 November 2017, <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/nitv-news/explainer/who-really-benefits-multi-million-dollar-aboriginal-art-trade>

Sale Referenced: Aboriginal Art, Sotheby's , London, 14/03/2018

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