

## High Five for a Sale Bursting with Top Five and Record Results: Sotheby's Inaugural US Aboriginal Art Auction Breaks New Ground with a Blitzing 88% Clearance (updated 17/12/2019)

By Jane Raffan, on 16-Dec-2019

**Modestly titled, modestly attended and conducted with a confident yet casual air, Sotheby's inaugural NY *Aboriginal Art* sale blew a raft of records out of the water[i]. With many exceptional works among its compact 33 lots, the sale captured the attention of international collectors on both sides of the Atlantic and grossed over AUD\$4 million incl. BP (US\$2,795,750).**

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doubling the previous top price with its hammer of US\$195K.

Just ahead of the Sotheby's NY sale (and in the nick of time!), Artsy spruiked Emily Kame Kngwarreye in its editorial 'The Most Influential Artists of 2019.' [i] The grand lady of the moment (the century methinks) claimed the sale's quinella, with two works from the Vroom Collection:

*Summer Celebration* (Lot 15 🎯) sold to a private American collector for \$480K (AUD\$862,468 incl. BP), the third highest price on record, and a significant jump in value from *Kame Summer Awelye II*, a glowing yellow work on the same scale that highlighted Sotheby's last London-based Aboriginal art auction (March 2018).

Just outside the artist's top five, but miles ahead of comparable early yam track awelye ceremonial design pictures in this tonal range (all of which are also on the smaller scale of 150 x 122 cm), Kngwarreye's, *Untitled* (Lot 11 🎯), went to a European collector for \$280K (AUD\$506,483 incl. BP).

The painting was underbid to \$270K by Australian dealer D'Lan Davidson who was in the intimate audience of 20-30, only a couple of whom were successful against the phones, which claimed the majority. Davidson was active on ten lots for clients from Europe, the USA and Australia, including the two works by Uta Uta Tjungula from the Brockhoff Collection, both of which muscled into the artist's top five results:

*Untitled (Ceremony - Large Twin Ceremonial Occasion)* (Lot 5 🎯), sold to a European collector for \$55,000 (AUD\$99,488 incl. BP), becoming the fourth highest price in his oeuvre for a board; and Davidson was successful on (Lot 6 🎯), *Untitled (Two Boys' Dreaming - Boys' Hairpiece Dreaming)*, at \$40,000 hammer (AUD \$72,445 incl. BP), now the fifth highest price in this category.

From the same collection, Davidson also nabbed Fred Ward Tjungurrayi's *Patjanja* (Lot 8 🎯) for \$10,500 (AUD \$19,017 incl. BP); another new highest price record, as well as Anatjari Tjakamarra's *Kuningka* (Lot 7 🎯), for \$38K (AUD\$68,823 incl. BP), just under the low-end. This is a new top price for the artist and fourth time lucky for this work—having been offered in Australia under his aka, Anatjari Tjakamarra No III, on three previous occasions in a ten year period by three different firms at \$50-70K [ii]—indicating the vendor has likely been sticking to her guns on reserves.

From a UK collection, Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula's relatively large 1973 board (120 x 90 cm) made for an interesting comparison with the recent US find of a masterful Clifford Possum 1973 board on the same scale [iii], which sold for a bargain at \$93,750 (incl. BP). Warangkula's *Camp at Walungurru - Dingo Camp at Tinki* (Lot 9 🎯), estimated at \$100-150K, sold to a European collector for \$130K, outbidding Davidson (AUD \$235,153 incl. BP), becoming the third highest price for the artist.

Later in the sale Davidson secured a prize large scale work by Wentja Napaltjarri, *Untitled* (Lot 30 🎯), for \$18K (AUD\$32,600); a new record price for this underappreciated artist of limited output. While it sold just under its low-end, the result was more than double the extant record set in 2016 with a smaller *Rockholes* work sold by Deutscher and Hackett.

The auction showcased a welcome and deserving return to attention for Dorothy Napangardi's oeuvre, with the best prices achieved since Cooe Art MarketPlace's late 2018 sale of a Gondwana *Sandhills* painting for \$32,190 (incl. BP):

*Karntakurlangu Jukurpa, Women's Dreaming* (Lot 26 🎯), sold for \$28K (AUD\$50,712), just under the low-end, and *Karlangu (Digging Sticks)* (Lot 28 🎯) sold just over, for \$32K (AUD\$57,965); the latter carrying the prestige of MCA retrospective provenance. Napangardi's work entered the Metropolitan Museum's Modern and Contemporary Art Department in 2016, donated by Robert Kaplan and Margaret Levi, early champions of Aboriginal art in the US.

While the catalogue included some minor works on bark, presumably for the sake of consignment protocols, showcasing them in a contemporary context was an important statement; their success in this context along with the more obvious works on canvas reflected in Tim Klingender's comment, "We hope the results from this sale will mark a new era for Aboriginal artists to be recognised as significant contemporary artists in their own right."

The major work in this set found favour, with *The Seagull* (Lot 2 🎯) soaring to \$45,000 (AUD\$65,250). This is a new high by some margin, with lots of clear air between it and the artist's next best hammer result of AUD\$36K, and a tidy recoup on its lavish 2005 purchase price at auction of AUD\$42,800 incl. BP.

Another work from the Brockhoff Collection caught the attention of a local, who secured *Untitled* (Lot 1 🎨) by a once known Kunwinjku artist. Having originally aired at a 2005 Sotheby's sale, where it overleaped its low-end estimate nearly threefold to sell for a hammer price of AUD\$11K (perhaps due to the tempting catalogue entry 'bearing stylistic similarities with Yirawala and may prove to be painted by him'), the striking bark with unusual subject matter (praying mantis) sold at its low-end of \$10K (AUD\$18,111); the exchange rate proving helpful in the vendor-net-return stakes.

There's almost little point talking about the exceptional provenance for the top five works in the sale, as most carried worthy exhibition histories, many significant.

Gordon Bennett's acclaimed and well-known post-colonial critique, *Self Portrait (But I Always Wanted to Be One of The Good Guys)* (Lot 12 🎨) is a case in point. Defending the pre-sale estimate challenged elsewhere, Klingender vouched (in what one imagines was a slightly exasperated tone) "it is arguably his most important work, having just won the Moët & Chandon Fellowship, and (it) featured in several major exhibitions in Asia, Europe, the UK and Australia, and (was) published in dozens of contemporary art publications."

Without knowing whether the irony of this work's 'Cowboys and Indians' reference struck home with Americans, or was a factor in its success (it was bought by a European collector), the lauded work broke a record drought for the tightly held artist with its sale at the low-end of \$350K (AUD\$633,104 incl. BP) eclipsing his top price set in 2007.

And in the same vein, it's no surprise that a work depicting an angry black man challenging hegemonically enshrined racism did not appeal to American collectors (or Australian ones, for that matter). Richard Bell's early signature work, *Pigeon Holed* (Lot 14 🎨) went unsold without drawing a bid.

Back to pretty pictures ... The sale featured two handsome works produced in collaborations, which are often a risky bet at auction, where collectors seek a sole authoritative and bankable hand, but not this time, with both works setting records:

Yuendemu elders Paddy Jupurrula Nelson and Larry Jungurrayi Spencer's lovely and warm *Yarla Jukurrpa (Bush Potato Dreaming)* (Lot 10 🎨), sold for \$32K (AUD \$46,400), a new record for both these important genesis painters, being two of the five that painted thirty school doors in Yuendemi in 1983, birthing the painting movement there.

The Kayili Artists Collaborative, *Yunpalara (Lake Blair)* (Lot 31 🎨) was fresh from a long hiatus off the market. It was last seen at Sotheby's in 2008, where it achieved a staggering (at the time) \$100,000; unheard of for a collaborative work. Well-contested on the phones, it sold to an American collector four bids over the high end at \$130,000 (AUD\$235,153 incl. BP), eclipsing the previous recent high of \$60K for a collaborative work from the APY Lands[iv].

Yunpalara (Lake Blair) chronicles the creation goanna ancestor's victorious encounter with a large group of emu ancestors at a large claypan surrounded by sandhills to the west of Patjarr, wherein the emu ancestors were dispersed across the landscape. This story resonates with the lived experiences of the Kayili artists on more than a spiritual level. In 1994 the Patjarr community, a 'tiny flyspeck on a map' of remote WA, was established by Ngaanyatjarra elders who had been dispersed and dislocated from country due to British rocket testing.

And the Pintupi optic wonders that appear to have mesmerised Americans and generated the slow burn in recent interest didn't disappoint, with works by Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri, Ronnie Tjampitjinpa and George Tjungurrayi all achieving outstanding results.

From Australian pilot and art dealer Helen Read's collection, George (Tjampu) Tjapaltjarri's *Karpadi* (Lot 29 🎨) sold one bid over the high-end for a new record price of \$55K (AUD\$99,488 incl. BP), while her chic painting by Ronnie Tjampitjinpa, *Designs Relating to the Site of Kampurarrpa* (Lot 21 🎨), sold for \$50,000 (AUD\$90,433 incl. BP), entering the artist's top five.

Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri's 2015 NY solo exhibition is widely reported as the spark that ignited the fire. That show caught the attention of late-to-the-party-but-oh-so-important collector and Aboriginal art champion, Steve Martin, who this year showcased his collection brimming with Pintupi painters' works, among others, in NY and LA through Gagosian. Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri's *Marawa* (Lot 32 🎨) sold to a man on the aisle for \$80K (AUD\$144,709 incl. BP) and moves to number four in the top five results for the artist, with all three above having been sold through Sotheby's rebooted London Aboriginal art sales.

The success of the NY sale builds on the momentum that has been developing in the US throughout 2019[v]. D'Lan Davidson see this auction as "a barometer for what's to come; it's strong result shows there's clearly a

growing appetite for Australian Indigenous art in America and abroad.”

Tim Klingender should be confident of Aboriginal art’s place in Sotheby’s NY calendar for the near future, especially since vendors came from both hemispheres.[vi] And, there is new blood in the game from buyers too, which bodes well. Klingender has revealed that “bidders were active from all over the world, with a large concentration of new bidders from the U.S. and Europe”. One of the sale’s top lots apparently went to a new client initiated at the LA Gagosian exhibition.

Klingender believes the auction was “a watershed moment for Aboriginal art, and an incredible introduction to auctions of Aboriginal art of this scale in the United States.” And this might just be the key to unlocking the floodgates of monied interest. Klingender acknowledges that showcasing the sale in Sotheby’s New York galleries “was a significant statement of the value of these artists on the international market.”

Deutscher and Hackett will be encouraged by the “very enthusiastic” global response. With a dedicated Aboriginal art sale back on the calendar for March 2020, the Sotheby’s result is likely to bolster consignments from hesitant vendors and, more importantly, provides assurance of the field’s growing international appeal.

Prices listed are hammer results, unless annotated with BP (buyer premium)

Prices listed are in US dollars unless prefixed with AUD.

Exchange rate USD = 1.45 AUD

[i] 13 new records across 21 individual artists represented in the sale (one work was unattributed); there are two collaborative works, both of which also set records

[ii] ‘The Most Influential Artists of 2019’, *Artsy*, 11 December 2019, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-influential-artists-2019>

[iii] 2006: Sotheby’s; 2011 - Bonham’s; 2014 - Deutscher & Hackett. The catalogue entry’s only listed provenanced sale was Sotheby’s: 2001, where it carried the title ‘Porcupine Danger Men Only’, and where it sold for \$AUD\$35,750 incl. BP.

[iv] Anne Kugielsky, ‘Dallas Auction Gallery Romances Bidders with Aboriginal and Native American Art’, *Antiques and the Arts Weekly*, 3 December 2019, <https://www.antiquesandthearts.com/dallas-auction-gallery-romances-bidders-with-aboriginal-native-american-fine-art/>

[v] Kungkarangkalpa Tjukurrpa (Seven Sisters Dreaming), Bonhams, Aboriginal Art, Sydney, 28/06/2011

[vi] Jane Raffan, ‘The World is Finally Woke to Aboriginal Art: Sotheby’s Move its Sales from London to the Big Apple Amid Increasing Contemporary Art World Buzz’, *AASD*, 28 May 2019, <https://www.aasd.com.au/index.cfm/news/808-the-world-is-finally-woke-to-aboriginal-art-sothebys-move-its-sa/>

[vii] Australian collections 54.5%; USA 9.1%; Europe (incl. UK) 36.4%

Sale Referenced: Aboriginal Art, Sotheby’s, New York, 13/12/2019

### 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](http://www.artifacts.net.au).

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