

Menzies Stays the Course with a Strong Finish in Tough Conditions

By Jane Raffan, on 20-Nov-2020

With all but one top lot selling on the night, Menzies' auction of *Australian & International Fine Art & Sculpture* produced a strong clearance of 84% by lot. Aided by 30 or so works that surpassed their odds, the sale totalled nearly \$7 million dollars, representing 106% by value (incl. BP).

The best overleaping performance was Robert Dickerson's *Early Morning Randwick*, 1994 (Lot 54 🎯), which shot past its modest estimate of \$50-70K to run away to \$230,000, achieving a new record price for the artist.

Earlier, a more important work by Dickerson, *The Strikers*, 1978 (Lot 36 🎯), also broke ranks to realise \$100,000 in a three-way tussle against expectations in the \$60-80K range.

The special and vaunted catalogue cover lot, *North Shore (Study for Autumn Morning, Milsons Point, Sydney)*, 1988, by Tom Roberts (Lot 28 🎯), clawed its way to \$750,000 after a long stall getting to \$575,000, eventually selling to the phone, with applause, and placing third in the artist's records.

The celebrity lot, Brett Whiteley's *The Sunrise - Japanese: 'Good Morning!'*, 1988 (Lot 33 🎯) had four phone bidders vying, none of whom was bullish. The prize sold for a few bids under the low-end at \$1.425 million dollars; finally entering the artists' top ten on its fifth outing since 2004.

Third best in the numbers stakes was Jeffrey Smart's *The Steps, Palma*, 1965 (Lot 32 🎯), which sold quietly for \$470,000, barely a nose-length under its low-end of \$500K. Bidders for William Robinson's *The Sacred Rock, Carnarvon*, 2006 (Lot 31 🎯) also held against the auctioneer's entreaties to secure the work for \$220,000 (est. \$250-350K).

Following the expected top lot crescendo, Del Kathryn Barton continued her recent good run with *Untitled Girl*, 2005 (Lot 38 🎯) pushing through a tough three-way phone bidding tussle to sell to the internet at \$85,000 (est. \$55-75K). She placed fourth in the sale with her *At What Cost*, 2018 (Lot 42 🎯), which made \$240,000, a mere blink under its low-end. In the same pack, Jeffrey Smart's *Study for The Discussion*, 1969 (Lot 41 🎯), was keenly contested to \$130,000 (est. \$110-150K).

Unsurprisingly, crowd favourite Ned Kelly proved his staying power, with Sidney Nolan's *Kelly I*, 1979 (Lot 34 🎯) chased to \$200,000 (with a few shaved bidding increments in the mix) against odds topping out at \$160K. Eerily close to a self-portrait, compared to the accompanying published photograph of the artist, the Kelly result was prefigured by a more typical apparition-like figure with horse and gun. 'Everything you require from a Kelly', intoned auctioneer Martin Farrah. Despite a small guffaw from a seasoned observer, *Kelly with Gun - Horse in Distance* (Lot 7 🎯) set an early optimistic tone, selling with enthusiasm for \$52,000 (est. \$20-30K).

Bolters always add excitement, eclipsing the disappointment for those with set limits, and the night's program was peppered aplenty.

With a breakaway start, Will Ashton's *Ketch in Sydney Harbour* (Lot 2 🎯) was chased down by a room bidder over 4 phones to finish at \$22,000 (est. \$5-8K). The first of two flaming works by Tim Storrier, *The Night Blaze*, 2009 (Lot 18 🎯), was secured by a man in a mask for \$60,000 after a quick run off its starting call of \$34K (est. \$35-60K), and John Coburn's *Heraldic Landscape*, 1970 (Lot 100 🎯), secured equal



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second top price among his woven oeuvre at \$50,000 (\$15-20K). A turbulent work by James Gleeson, *Irregular Behaviour of a Setting Sun*, 1966 (Lot 108 🍀), with iconography lifted from Hieronymous Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (Museo del Prado), was secured for \$42,000 (est. \$25-35K); second time lucky for the vendor (it went unsold in 2015).

The sale comprised a good cache of \$100-250K lots, which performed well, including Arthur Streeton's *The Ballarat Dump St Gratien*, 1918 (Lot 27 🍀), which went to the phone for \$220,000, just shy of its high-end. Another European work, *La Meuse devant Dordrecht (The Meuse Near Dordrecht)*, 1885, by Eugène Boudin (Lot 25 🍀) settled within estimate at \$110,000.

Fred Williams' *Gum Trees in Landscape III*, 1969 (Lot 29 🍀), made \$190,000, just over its low-end, while Garry Shead's *The Miracle*, 2001 (Lot 35 🍀), saw plenty of activity from all quarters that chased it just over its high end, selling for \$160,000. The esteemed blue chip Arthur Boyd was represented in this category

with an enigmatic melange: a delicate c. 1967 Wimmera landscape with ephemeral Bride motif (Lot 48 🎯), painted in oil and tempera; its allure made apparent with a \$100,000 result (est. \$70-90K).

Photography was represented with two iconic images; both sure bets: David Moore's *Migrants Arriving in Sydney*, 1966 (Lot 71 🎯), a larger than usual signed print, sold for \$35,000 (est. \$14-18K), while a signed 1972 print of Dupain's *The Sunbaker* from 1937 (Lot 72 🎯) made \$65,000 (est. \$30-50K). Copyright restrictions prevented the illustration of lot 70, Rosemary Laing's *Groundspeed (Red Piazza #2)*, 2001, but that proved irrelevant, with the work eclipsing its estimate range (\$14-18K) to make \$26,000, matching its best of series 2015 price.

The Menzies catalogue had a good core of fresh to the market contemporary works, many of which were being sold by 'motivated vendors'. This meant strong results for some, and bargains on others. David Larwill's *About Envy*, 2004 (Lot 56 🎯) galloped to \$26,000 (est. 16-24K), while Noel McKenna's sardonic *Big Things Australia*, 2004 (Lot 66 🎯), replete with recent QAGOMA survey provenance, shot to \$32,000 (est. \$22-28K), a new record price for the artist.

At the other end of the spectrum, Guan Wei's *Looking for Enemies #4*, 2004 (Lot 65 🎯) — part of a suite of works that reflects on political narratives of invasion, and tropes such as 'the war on terror' — was given away for \$4,250 (est. \$15-20K). Tellingly, the artist has also employed the figure of Ned Kelly in his works. Australian wartime experience is in the news at the moment, and for disturbing reasons contrary to the mythologised heroic exploits of the ANZACs. Ben Quilty's searingly painful portrait of *Air Commodore John Oddie, After Afghanistan, No 2*, 2012 (Lot 37 🎯) attracted broad interest, selling within estimate at \$50,000.

And in case you've been asleep, feminist exhibitions have been in play this year, led by the National Gallery of Australia's major campaign, *Know My Name*, which showcases works by women artists in its collection, and includes a dedicated website with a 'mea culpa' to past collecting biases. Two recent Sydney Morning Herald articles picked up on this theme with regard to biases at play in the broader art market and results for works by women at auction.[i]

Including Del Kathryn Barton, who is listed among the top artists in the SMH article, and who snared top status among paintings by women in the sale, the Menzies catalogue featured twenty-three works by sixteen women artists. Four of those were small works by Emily Kame Kngwarreye.

The best performing apart from Barton was Bessie Davidson, who was represented with *Still Life with Books and Candlestick*, 1959 (Lot 84 🎯), which made \$34,000 (est. \$35-45K). Deutscher and Hackett achieved a top five record price last week for *Interieur*, c.1938 (\$147,273 incl. BP); the Menzies result is the next highest price for her work since *Purple Flowers* (\$51,240 incl. BP) sold in Bonhams' 2017 Estate of Lady Nolan sale.

The American feminist collective, The Guerrilla Girls, made a splash with their 1989 poster charging, "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met Museum?" Until recent times, the same could be said for most auction catalogues.

While the Menzies sale was devoid of the usual Lindsay nudes, it is interesting to review the way women were presented by male artists: a blousy Dobell featured a woman as 'The Gossip' (Lot 89 🎯), Tony Tuckson used a seated female figure in a Picasso-esque study (Lot 107 🎯); and Sam Fullbrook utilised the figure of a girl (that looked like a granny) holding a galah in a formal exercise in colour and composition (Lot 102 🎯). The only work in the sale that addressed a woman as subject directly was Frederick McCubbin's impressionistic depiction of a woman washing clothes (Lot 26 🎯), which was knocked down to an older woman in the room under its low-end estimate with the comment, qualified in retraction immediately thereafter, "It's very you."

There's been a lot of press this year about market woes, given the ups and downs and interruptions to business from various levels of Covid-19 restrictions (the Menzies sale operated an 'audience capped at

60' policy, with a separate viewing only room). At the moment, the totals are tracking around 84% of those at this time last year. With more than \$10 million in pre-sales listed to come, including Menzies' offering next week of a potentially record-breaking work by Brett Whiteley estimated at \$5-7 million alone, the doom and gloom may well be relegated to noise. What is certain, however, is that companies have had to become more flexible and agile in their operations, and that's a good thing.

Note: results are reported as hammer figures unless otherwise qualified.

[i] <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/blind-viewing-shows-how-female-artists-are-undervalued-20201109-p56d0v.html> and <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/blind-viewing-shows-how-female-artists-are-undervalued-20201109-p56d0v.html>

Sale Referenced: Australian & International Fine Art & Sculpture, Menzies, Sydney, 19/11/2020

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.

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