

No Longer a Distant Dream – International Collectors Buy up Big at Sotheby's Second London-based Annual Aboriginal Art Auction

By Jane Raffan in London, on 23-Sep-2016

In a sale that grossed £1,613,375 GBP including the buyer's premium and established seven new records, the exchange-rate board accompanying each lot was telling: Great British pounds, American dollars, euros, Swiss francs, Japanese yen, Hong Kong dollars, rubles, but no AUDs.

The top lot, *Five Stories*, 1984 (Lot 60), a seminal work by Michael Nelson Jagamarra with extensive exhibition and publication history topped out at a mind-boggling £330,000 (£401,000 including BP). The buyer, an American, was by far the largest buyer in the sale, purchasing fourteen lots in total.



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The Jagamarra painting was a lynchpin in the groundbreaking 1988 exhibition *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, held at the Asia Society New York (before touring). This exhibition stimulated American appetites for Aboriginal art, and Papunya Tula works in particular, for decades afterwards.

Recently, American collectors John and Barbara Wilkerson have had a significant exhibition of their collection of early Papunya Tula works touring the country. Others who have toured more contemporary works include Dennis and Debra Scholl, and Margaret Levi and Robert Kaplan, the latter having also successfully seeded collections of Aboriginal contemporary art in their home town of Seattle (at the Seattle Art Museum) and at New York City's Metropolitan Museum where, importantly, the works will be presented alongside other global contemporary art instead of the anthropological Oceanic catchall displays.

In addition to the *Dreamings* star lot, Klingender was careful to assemble works that had been exhibited and published in Europe, Russia, The Middle East and Asia, including the important *Aratjara* exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in London, and some that featured in the Papunya Tula extravaganza *Genesis and Genius* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Other works, early barks in particular, carried provenance that included publication in anthropological literature of varying esteem.

In what was a very healthy total by value (76%), this strategy was not enough to secure clearances across all the "tightly curated" selections.

Artefacts, always the most sure-fire category to a Europe audience seasoned to favour a primitive/tribal aesthetic, cleared 100% and provided several of the best-performing lots over estimate (6, 8 and 9) outside of the sale's top three works, while barks (several in tricky condition) only managed 56%. The top lot in this section was a Lower Murray River broad shield (Lot 1 🍷), which made £24,000 (est. £20-30K). These shields starred in the inaugural sale, and have been the subject of recent comments from Indigenous artist Jonathon Jones on the loss of cultural heritage.[i]

Figures and carvings from the 1950s and 1960s sold well at 72% by lot, and a group of seven more contemporary towering carved figures by Mick Kubarkru and Owen Yalandja soared above estimates and cleared 100%, all purchased by the same American buyer at stratospheric prices (around £24K against estimates of £5-8K). Their imposing presence led one audience member to declare the buyer must have wanted to form an army. The top lot in this group was a Mimih figure by

Mick Kubarkru (Lot 78 🍷), which made £28,000. A solid early Yawk Yawk by Owen Yalandja (Lot 76 🍷) made £24,000.

These two categories contributed half of the works in the top ten, including the first big surprise of the day, when (Lot 29 🍷) a pair of male and female carved Tiwi figures from the 1960s, were steadily and slowly chased by another American buyer to a head-shaking and eye-blinking hammer of £205,000, against expectations of 30-50K, establishing a likely unbreakable record for the deceased artist Benedict Palmeiua Munkara, whose previous record sat at \$10,500.

Works of art from the formative years and by blue-chip artists (not all of premium quality) moved at a rate of 53.5%, while more contemporary works struggled, achieving a 40% clearance. This group did, however, produce the sale's third top lot – a large untitled painting by Warlimpirrnga Tjapitjarri from 2007 (Lot 90 🍷), which was competitively chased to £135,000 against a not-conservative estimate of £50-80K. This work had no provenance of note, but the artist was the subject of a solo show in New York last year.

The sale was billed as offering "Masterpieces of Aboriginal Art". Clearly not all collectors agreed as the clearance rate of 68% by lot would attest. The sale's bulk was consumed by four (out of a total in the low twenties) successful buyers, mostly on the phones, who bought 40 from the 91 lots on offer (lot 40 was withdrawn). And while the identity of all the successful buyers was not disclosed, Klingender commented after the sale that Australians weren't really in the mix.

That was not entirely true, as at least two buyers were Australian. They even turned up. This correspondent spotted two local dealers in the audience: antiquarian Tim McCormick (bidding on artefacts) and Aboriginal art advisor/dealer D'lan Davidson, who managed to win out over the international throng and secure seven works (including two of the sale's top ten lots) for several clients, at least one of whom was Australian.

In the end, Davidson was only one of three successful in-room buyers in the small multi-national audience (British, American, French and other Europeans), which topped out at around twenty-five people at any one time; the rest went to around twenty absentee bidders, mostly those who fought and bought via phones, the internet and the auctioneers book (three each). As it turned out, one of the internet bidders was an Australian with a residence in Italy, which is where the lovely work by Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri (Lot 58 🏹), *Father/Son/Grandfather Dreaming*, 1978, will reside for the foreseeable future.

Davidson purchased six lots from the sale's opening selection of twelve early artifacts, the highlight being a 19th century Lower Murray River broad shield; and (Lot 51 🏹), *Sandhill Dreaming*, 1972 by Shorty Lungkata Tjungurrayi – the only early Papunya board to find a buyer, somewhat surprisingly – which sold at its low end for £50,000.

Despite the sale's overall unevenness, its dramatic surprise results helped amass a total of £1.6 million (AU\$ 2.8 million). This represents a 55 percent increase in value from the inaugural London Aboriginal Art sale held last year and can be considered a striking success.

Interestingly, London dealer Rebecca Hossack was not present, and has not confirmed to this correspondent that she was an absentee participant. This would suggest that the market for Aboriginal art in London is less than it was in its heyday.

Davidson, however, was certainly cautiously enthusiastic about its growth elsewhere: "The sale results show clear and positive signs of an infant but expanding international market. Works of historical significance and/or strong exhibition history fared very strongly. Judging by a number of the record-breaking results, there can now be no doubt that Australian Indigenous art has broad international appeal. The market is certainly intrigued, let's hope that both Sotheby's and Tim persist."

Klingender's press statement is emphatic on this point: "The remarkable prices achieved in the saleroom today reflect the depth of interest from across the globe in these hugely important works of art. To see so much international bidding – and so many new buyers entering the field – points to an exciting future for this annual event in London."

In all, very good news.

Sale total AUD – \$2,767,590

Top Ten Prices

Private US Buyers (2)

1 – Michael Nelson Jagamara, *Five Stories*, 1984 (Lot 60 🏹)

Hammer £330,000 (est. £150-250K)

Incl. BP £401,000 – AUD \$687,877

New record for the artist, and a new record for a living Indigenous artist

2 – Benedict Palmeiua Munkara, *Purukapali and Bima*, 1960s (Lot 29 🏹)

Hammer £205,000 (est. £30-50K)

Incl. BP £251,000 – AUD \$430,566

New record for the artist, and a new record for Aboriginal sculpture

5 – Charlie Numbulmoore, *Wandjinas*, 1970 (Lot 55 🏹)

Hammer £45,000 (est. £50-70K)

Incl. BP £56,250 – AUD \$96,491

7 – Mick Kubarkku, *Mimih Spirit from Yikarrakkal*, 1995 (Lot 78 🏹)

Hammer £28,000 (est. £5-8K)

Incl. BP £35,000 – AUD \$60,039

New record for the artist

9 – Mick Kubarkku, *Mimih Spirit from Yikarrakkal*, 1995 (Lot 80 🏹)

Hammer £26,000 (est. £5-8K)

Incl. BP £32,500 – AUD \$55,751

10 – Owen Yalandja, *Yawk Yawk*, 1993 (Lot 76 🏹)

Hammer £24,000 (est. £5-8K)

Incl. BP £30,000 – AUD \$51,462

Private European Buyer/s

3 – Warlpirirnga Tjapaltjarri, *Untitled*, 2007 (Lot 90 🏹)

Hammer £135,000 (est. £50-80K)

Incl. BP £167,000 – AUD \$286,473

New record for the artist

8 – Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri, Tjunginpa Tjukurrpa (Spinifex Hopping Mouse Dreaming), 1997 (Lot 71 🗳️)

Hammer £26,000 (est. £12-18K)

Incl. BP £32,500 – AUD \$55,751

Australian Trade (Davidson)

4 – Shorty Lungkata Tjungurrayi, Sandhill Dreaming, 1972 (Lot 51 🗳️)

Hammer £50,000 (est. £50-70K)

Incl. BP £62,500 – AUD \$107,213

11 – Lower Murray River Broad Shield, early 19th century (Lot 1 🗳️)

Hammer £24,000 (est. £20-30K)

Incl. BP £30,000 – AUD \$51,462

Private Australian Buyer

6 – Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri, Kangaroo, Wallaby, Bird Dreaming at Manpinya, 1989 (Lot 61 🗳️)

Hammer £30,000 (est. £30-50K)

Incl. BP £37,500 – AUD \$60,039

[[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>

Sale Referenced: Aboriginal Art, Sotheby's , London, 21/09/2016

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.