

Are auction prices really indicators of value?

Sporting slimline retro glasses, new look over-stitched denim trousers, an open-fronted, zip to the neck, leisure wear-inspired stripy cardigan and lime green Bailey shoes, my good friend and 20th century design guru Geoffrey Hatty raised a very important point the other day. Over a glass of dry white wine he announced that the values currently achieved at auction for 20th century art and design do not represent the value of the objects themselves.

Bear with me on this one. Geoffrey's clarity of view fundamentally contradicts the widely accepted and long-held art market belief that values achieved at a public auction, an 'open and fair market', create the floor price for an artwork within the secondary market. For decades it has been accepted that if, say, a Del Katherine Barton painting achieves \$150 000 at auction, then a new floor price has been set for all Del Katherine Barton paintings of that date, quality, subject and size. In effect the public auction benchmark, secondary market price trickle down effect. Well Geoffrey and I say that this is often not the case.

Geoffrey's theory states that a price achieved at auction, for example for a Modernist c1940s vase, is the price achieved at the time, at that particular

auction and under those particular circumstances *only*. Essentially, the price realised at auction is not generally indicative of what Geoffrey believes to be the value of the artwork or what he would pay. Geoffrey states (and I fully agree) that the auction sale price in many, many instances can now no longer be considered the benchmark of an artwork's value.

The general idea that auction values are in an outer parallel universe of their own is no recent discovery. After all, over a decade ago I raised in the press the phenomenon of ramping in the art market – that is, the very public pushing up of secondary market auction values by some dealers and artists' agents in order to establish a false primary market (art gallery) price.

Alongside this there is the increasingly common practice of a few disreputable minor auctioneers whereby artworks are knocked down as sold, when in fact they were unsold. The auction houses simply tell out and out porkies, often telling the vendor that the artwork has sold (and taking the recorded sale to the press) only to tell them several weeks later, that the imaginary sale has fallen through – oh my God, shock horror. All these shenanigans take place so that the

auction houses can temporarily prop-up their turnover and 'sold by value' figures; those all important statistics they use to market themselves as successful sellers of art.

These all too common dirty tricks, undertaken in order to falsify public auction values, are widely perpetrated and known about. What my discussion with Geoffrey Hatty added to this mix (again, over more dry white wine) were the new, unexplored and additional features that have come onto the art market to distort auction values further – the rather odd actions of many of those who now buy art at auction.

We are all well aware that over the last decade the Australian economy has been moving through the longest sustained economic boom in Western history (market correction or no market correction). An economic boom that has been fuelled of late by the resources boom in the West and value adding financial services sector explosion along the Eastern seaboard. A hallmark of this economic boom in these two fields has been the concentration of significant wealth into the hands of those professionals who have equity in or work in the resources and finance industries.

You see, added to all this value dislocation of auction prices is the

business and personal psychology of those cashed up resource and finance industry players (particularly finance) who have come a-galloping to the art market at auction and who now make up one of the most significant bodies of art collectors. These largely young to middle-aged male professionals like to win as distinct from merely obtaining or collecting. The act of getting what they go for, of sweeping aside all opposition, of grasping the prize, of openly winning on their terms, is part and parcel of surviving their day job. When taken into the public forum of the art auction these business behavioural traits also play right into the hands of the auctioneers.

Collecting art by winning plays havoc with values. Over the last year or so I have stood next to art buyers at auction who fit this psychological profile perfectly. I have heard and seen art advisors frantically whispering to their clients in an attempt to stop them from bidding but to absolutely no avail. What the art advisors had failed to grasp is that for their client, the act of purchasing had passed being about collecting art, one or two hundred thousand dollars ago. It was all about the public affirmation of their business success and many men who lead highly stressed professional lives, decompress publicly at an art auction. They probably do the same, but not nearly as often, at real-estate auctions.

Hand in hand with bidding as winning, the recent money explosion has birthed an easy come, easy go attitude to flouncing around big bucks. Much of the truckload of cash held by some bidders at auction has been accumulated in five years or less. Not having built up wealth steadily, over time, means that, for some, letting it all flash about in a short period carries no anxiety whatsoever. It came, so it will come again. And quite possibly it will. If cash has come so quickly and in such volume, then often spending of said cash quickly and in volume becomes a business norm and it is a way of

behaviour well suited for the spectacle that is an art auction.

So, taking into account this distorting auction combination of some sellers manipulating the final sale price and a major tranche of buyers with a 'win at all costs' mentality, it is hardly surprising that in many instances the auction price realised for an artwork may be a far cry from its true value. Be aware of this one. ❖

Pricking the conscience

John McPhee

Shocked by a recent article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* ('Angry young artists get the brush-off', 8.8.07) proclaiming 'The angry young man is dead', I began to wonder if it was true. Had some fundamental shift occurred in contemporary art? Was there no longer any art that set itself against the world? Were we now safe in middle-class complacency? Or was something more subtle, perhaps insidious, afoot?

The article, written by Erik Jensen, focussed on nineties naughty boy, Adam Cullen, a Sydney painter who was reported as bemoaning '... the lack of anger in today's art. I hate to say it, it's gone p...arsed. It really has, I even think girl artists would say that. I just think that that we're so f...ing conservative. It's also combined with a complete intellectual vacuum. That, combined with this lack of virility, is obscene. How far can we retreat into an orifice?' His rant is further supported by Andrew Christofides, a lecturer in painting, who describes the work of current painters as '...increasingly technical...', and as, '...invariably formal and quite sedate ... traditional and conservative'.

Well, I am not so sure they have it right. Certainly, Cullen's paintings, which remain easily recognizable

with their 'in your face' style, featuring splashes, drips, all sorts of body fluids and horrific imagery, maintain their energy and continue to feature ugly subjects. Paintings of figures that look like the victims of a road accident and buxom gun-toting strippers, are weird and wonderful. Although not so well known his prints with nightmare images of an Australian family, police, and local government figures, are among the most critical of contemporary society he has produced. Occasionally the imagery is so personal it is impossible for the viewer to interpret the work in any meaningful way. But always their messiness conveys Cullen's urgency and a desperate desire to get it down, whatever it is.

There is, however, another kind of contemporary art, made by both men and women, which, while not painted in obvious anger, carries potent political and social messages and form part of the tradition of political art which satirizes rather than rants.

Artists have frequently used their work to comment upon the evils and ills of society. Bruegel captured, with a cynical eye, the 'delights' of village life; Goya's etchings, the *Disasters of war*, depicted unimaginable horrors, and his paintings documented the decadence of the Spanish aristocracy; Daumier painted, printed and sculpted savage portraits of French politicians and members of the judiciary, and Manet's depiction of the execution of Emperor Maximilian is one of the most powerful political images of the nineteenth century.

In the twentieth century Picasso, Francis Bacon and Andy Warhol stand out as having painted especially potent images of political and social ills. In Australia we need only remember the imagery of the 1970s poster collectives which protested against almost everything, including women's equality, the treatment of Aboriginal people and Gay and Lesbian rights.

More recently the work of Ian Howard whose anti-war art began with Vietnam and continues with Iraq, and Howard Arkley's images conjuring-up a vacuous suburban dream, remind us that artists have many things to comment upon and many different ways in which to express themselves. They are not always messy, or, so obviously, angry.

The recycled and altered porcelain sculptures of Penny Byrne are good examples of one woman's virulent but subtle criticism of contemporary society. The myth of the prince on a white charger, or a Superman 'to take us away from all this', is frequently blown apart in her work with reminders of the responsibility of caring about the environment, rather than escaping it. Gainsborough's Blue boy impaled with copper nails (the kind used to kill the trees that obscure your view of the Harbour) becomes a modern Saint Sebastian, and a mass of pretty figures in crinolines become chained and orange suited prisoners, souvenirs from Guantanamo Bay. Her small sculptures include George and Laura, dressed to kill in camouflage and carrying machine guns and grenades, setting out to shock and awe, and John and Janette, suitably dressed in Western Desert dots, starting out on the long march (away from an apology). They certainly are not quite what you might want on the mantelpiece or decorating the dinner table. The nuances are subtle and manifold. They are sculptures to take note of. Not because they scream out to you, but because they quietly proclaim that all is not necessarily rosy in our modern gardens.

More subtle are the comments made in the work of John Barbour, who lives and works in Adelaide. In recent years his stained and stitched fabric 'paintings' have directed the viewer's attention to issues of war, invasion, and thoughtless flag-waving patriotism, in the most subtle and seductively beautiful manner possible. In a solo

exhibition in 2006, Barbour exhibited a beautiful work titled *Inherent vice*. Of course, in this stitched and stained piece of cotton, the possibilities are endless. It might be a reference to personal or public vice, of little things like infidelities or the much larger issues of world-wide evil, stained sheets or bloody bandages. However, it is, in fact, a reference to a curator's description of the inbuilt problems associated with the preservation of some work of arts which, because of the way in which they are constructed or painted, will degrade or self-destruct. Known to conservators as 'inherent vice', when Barbour heard the curator using the expression he was, I guess, amused, if not a little annoyed. After all everything must degrade. In world at war and seemingly en route to its own destruction, the museum's desire to preserve everything can seem a little precious.

Perhaps not so subtle are some recent paintings by artists who concern themselves with Aboriginal land rights. Paintings like Gordon Bennett's *Possession Island*, 1991, recently sold for \$384,000, with its bitter comment on the British occupation of Australia. This painting reworked the famous, now missing, painting, *Captain Cook taking possession of New South Wales, 1770*, painted by John Alexander Gilfillan in the mid-1850s. It was a very interesting purchase by the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales. Similarly Daniel Boyd's *We call them pirates out here*, 2006, recently acquired for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, which reworks E Phillip Fox's *Landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay, 1770*, painted in 1902. Boyd's painting shows a piratical Cook directing the erection of the Union Jack, except the centre of the flag features a skull and crossbones. Boyd, a Kudjla/Gangalu person, who lives and works in Sydney, is making a very potent point, albeit without dots, splashes or obvious anger. The often highly politicized art of Aboriginal

people, and those who support their causes, is undoubtedly among the toughest art of its kind ever produced in Australia.

All is not lost. Boys, and girls, are making their points, pricking our consciences, not always screaming, not always messy, but often tougher than we realize at first glance. ❖

Buying right

The value of a particular artwork is indicative of numerous unique subjective considerations. The trick to purchasing a quality painting or other artwork capable of obtaining strong capital growth involves the collector or first-time buyer holding up a 'buying right' template to the picture they are considering purchasing. If, prior to purchase, the collector is satisfied that the intended artwork favourably lives up to or exceeds each subjective consideration, then their art collecting risk with regards to that particular artwork has been minimised—the collector is buying right.

The subjective factors that come into play when assessing the value of an individual work of fine art include the following:

- **The status or standing of the artist in question:** are they already a somebody or, at present, a nobody in the art world? Not surprisingly, quality art buying more often than not relies on artists being already well known to the secondary art market. Collectors are advised to undertake their homework in this area. Take the assertions of the seller with a pinch of salt. Buy Alan and Susan McCulloch's and Emily McCulloch-Childs, *The New McCulloch's Encyclopedia of Australian Art* (2007) and John Furphy's *Australian Art Sales Digest*. If the artist in question is in both these art reference works then they are, at the very least, on the secondary art market radar.

• **Artists have good days and bad days.** Given the general level of substance abuse often found within the artistic milieu, quite frankly it's not uncommon for artists to have good or bad years, or even a decade or two. Although not all artists partake of the dubious fuel of substance abuse, very few artists—like anybody—remain constant in the quality of their output. The trick for any serious collector of artworks is to understand and differentiate between the creative periods within any artist's life, to chart and understand why art scholars and the art market prize one period of time or series of pictures painted within that period over and above other paintings painted in different years. An understanding of the artistic hierarchy of an # How to buy and sell artwork's dates and periods allows the collector to focus their buying, when possible, on those strong artworks or themes from the artist's best years.

• **The medium, condition, provenance, and exhibition and publication history of the work** must pass muster to a standard of good to very impressive. If in doubt, a collector should keep looking.

• **Size matters**, particularly with very, very large contemporary art. Be careful when purchasing your drop-dead wall statement that you are actually able to get that painting or sculpture into the room. Many apartments and their service lifts don't take large art well. Not long ago I was installing a two-metre-plus Baluka Maymuru Larrakitj (hollow log) pole entitled Dhakandjali (2003) in the sitting room of my house. The pole could make it through the door but I just couldn't stand it up—the work missed going under the ceiling by about six millimetres. An artwork that is just too big will have a limited, sometimes only corporate, market to sell into.

• **A painting's subject matter must be neither offensive nor unpopular.**

For example, portraits of somebody else's family are generally not all that easy to sell. However, if you have a portrait to sell, it is better that it is an image of a pretty, young girl with a cute doll, rather than Mr very ordinary John Smith. A picture of any bridge is generally considered difficult to offload. Overtly religious works, sexually provocative works or paintings of dead animals all equate to uneasy subject matters; this also includes artificial legs, slicing machines and so on – men don't normally gravitate towards paintings with meat-slicing machines predominantly illustrated.

• **Whether or not the painting is signed.** This is an entire article in itself, be that as it may, it does help if paintings are signed – somewhere.

• **The artwork's previous appearance on the art market** (and possibly the city in which it is sold) must be taken into consideration. In a nutshell, avoid buying those over-exposed, tired pictures that keep surfacing for sale every two years.

• **Collectors must take into account the cyclical nature of the art market and economy itself.** The common sense strategy is to sell in a boom and buy in a bust. In general, the last seven years have been a good time to sell.

• **The availability and value of other works by the same artist on the market at the same time.** After all, value is comparative.

• **Collectors should consider their final price:** does an auction house buyer's premium apply and are there any hidden costs such as shipping and insurance that may distort the final cost?

• **An understanding of the general vagaries of taste and fashion** is always a considerable help in deciding whether or not to buy art. Artists and subject matter have a tendency to move in and out of fashion. A collector with a mind for a good return on their purchase price should acquire works exhibiting universal themes and emotions.

When not to buy art

Collectors frequently quiz me on how and when to buy art and occasionally what artworks they should buy. Essentially they are enquiring about all those art market things they should do, but it is just as important for collectors to consider what actions or situations should set the alarm bells ringing. As a collector, knowing what to avoid doing is equally as necessary as knowing what to do.

Beware of buying art at night

The chances of buying art impulsively are greater at night than they are during the day. At night your psychological defences are down; you tend to be less focused on rational, practical issues and more interested in entertaining yourself and having a good time. The best approach to considered collecting is to obtain a sneak preview during the day prior to the exhibition opening, or on the opening night place a reserve sticker on the artwork that takes your fancy. In that way, having reserved your artwork you return in the clear light of day to reconsider your possible purchase.

Beware of buying art while on holiday

Holidays are a good time to relax but they are not the best environment in which to buy quality art. It has been my experience that absolute buying and selling meltdown occurs when a collecting # How to buy and sell artwork couple take a rare holiday. It is hardly surprising that many of Australia's largest and most profitable art galleries flourish in holiday destinations.

Beware of buying art based on the artist's name only

Never be starstruck by an artist's reputation. You are, after all, buying an artwork (the object) and not the artist themselves.

Beware of the sale deal

Alarm bells should ring when an art dealer lowers the price of a painting drastically. Ask yourself why they are so desperate for a sale.

Beware of buying art under pressure

Ignore the dealer who stands at your shoulder. You need space and time to make your choice.

Think twice before buying art that is for sale in restaurants

Try to buy only from professionals whose only business is buying and selling art.

Beware of opening night fever

When I come to think of it, I am hard pressed to find any market or industry so fuelled by alcohol as the buying and selling of art. Budding and hardened art aficionados are fêted with exhibition opening night drinks, pre-auction viewing drinks, VIP client dinners and drinks, auction sale night drinks; drinks, drinks and more drinks. On more than the odd occasion, alcohol has prompted an exhibition sale or sparked a competitive bidding duel that has escalated the price of an artwork. Punters, such as the screamingly drunken Tasmanian fisherman-cum-art collector at Christie's a few years ago, may well lose their heads and bid \$16 000 for a painting they didn't really want, but it is well to remember that art gallery and auction house drinks providers rarely cancel sales. Shopping and alcohol is the ultimate bad look. A sober collecting head makes the best art-buying decisions.

Don't be fooled by red stickers

Beware the red spot. Denoting that a work has been sold by placing a small red sticker by its side is a common marketing practice in the art world. But it can also be used as a clever sales tool. Some dealers place red spots next to unsold works in order to give the

appearance that the artist's works are popular and selling well. This is especially useful with prints, when a handful of red dots next to the work will indicate a powerful thumbs-up to any doubting buyers. Try not to be influenced by a sea of red. ❌

Art and corporate cash

Isobel Johnston

Flags fluttered along Macquarie Street and down to the Opera House. The brightly coloured banners heralding **Warhol, Freud, Sherman** and others read like a Who's Who of contemporary art. They are also the names of the artists whose works from the UBS collection were part of the exhibition *An Incomplete World* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

UBS acquired the financial organization PaineWebber in 2000 and along with it their art collection, "one of the greatest contemporary collections in America". The resulting UBS contemporary art collection now rivals that of almost any public museum around the globe. The small, tightly curated selection of these UBS works exhibited in *An Incomplete World* certainly surpassed the works by the same artists held by the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Big business now combines passion with its financial clout to acquire major artworks. The change at UBS from a policy of private ownership and private viewing to showcasing collections in the public domain typifies the evolution of other corporate collections. The UBS corporate sponsorship program is international in scope and enjoys extensive public support. UBS, a major supporter of Art Basel and Art Basel Miami Beach, the Tate Modern in London and MOMA in New York, supports an array of other public

projects including the Australian artists exhibiting at the Venice Biennale.

The inevitable impact of such major financial commitment by corporations to contemporary art means that pivotal and exemplary works of contemporary art belong to global corporations rather than national museums. The Saatchi Gallery is another good example of this shift. Does this matter? Increasingly, the art works shown in public museums and galleries belong to or are donated by corporations rather than having been acquired through the collection policies of a public institution. Whether this makes any difference to the viewing public or to the kind of works that are exhibited is not yet known.

Art is big business. Australian art sales reach record highs each financial year. The benefits to the arts of purchases, patronage and sponsorship from business are well known. The pay-off to business is just as beneficial as they become associated with 'art and culture'. Today most major Australian businesses own or rent contemporary art.

In this current climate of a growing number of sophisticated and challenging corporate collections, it is interesting to reflect on the continuing popularity of *The Archibald Prize* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales which still rates as the most popular Australian art event. Remarkably it is also one of the top 100 exhibitions in the world, an extraordinary fact made possible because the public have embraced it as their show; an annual event, like the Melbourne Cup, on the nation's calendar. We await with anticipation the live radio announcement of the winner and have come to expect the annual beat-up over what constitutes a portrait. Everyone has an opinion because we all think we know what a person looks like and what we expect to see in the painted representation. This feeling of public ownership of *The Archibald Prize* has fuelled its popularity. It is not always necessary actually to

buy or physically possess the work but it is nonetheless essential to feel a sense of ownership of it in a broader sense.

Business has long recognised the value of art beyond mere ownership. Put it on your walls and it attests to anyone who steps into your offices that you are a participant in 'high' culture. Through its art collection a business enhances its public profile and allows its employees to enjoy the works in the collection.

To avoid potential pitfalls larger businesses often employ art consultants and in-house curators with commercial or public gallery experience to manage their art collections. It is easier and safer to follow the recommendations of these experts than blindly to plunge into the art world.

Art and business are just beginning to recognise just how much they can benefit each other. Art is everywhere. It is not just in our public galleries and museums but also on our office walls. Art is available for all to see and to enjoy a shared sense of ownership in, no matter who pays for it. ❌

What has happened to colonial art

John McPhee

In 2004 I was researching the whereabouts of the paintings of the convict artist Joseph Lycett for an exhibition and publication for the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales. I was surprised to find that almost all of his paintings were in public collections. Nearly all the watercolour landscapes, preparatory works for his *Australia Illustrated, or New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land delineated*, published in London in 1824-25, which had come onto the market in Melbourne in the 1970s and at that time been snapped-up at auction by

collectors of Australian colonial art and a few public collections, had since been acquired for public collections.

At the same time, looking through auction catalogues of the 1960s and '70s to trace these works, I was reminded of the much greater number of colonial paintings that appeared in auctions in the 1970s and 1980s.

What has happened to colonial art today? Where has it gone?

The answer is really rather straight forward. Increasingly few examples of colonial art appear on the market, and most of these are minor works. The best works have almost already been swallowed-up by public collections and a very few private collectors.

(At the recent exhibition *Australian Impressionism* at the National Gallery of Victoria, an exhaustive survey of the paintings of the period, I was surprised to see that there were so few significant works on loan from private collections. It was obvious that nearly all the most important known paintings are now in public institutions.)

The National Gallery of Australia developed in the 1970s a policy to collect and present a comprehensive display of Australian art for its opening in 1982. The interests of several state and regional galleries, especially the Art Gallery of South Australia, over the past few decades, have meant that these institutions have also been a considerable force in the market place. However, because national and state art galleries are public institutions with limited acquisition funds, they are very wary of establishing high market prices. Seldom buying at auction, the galleries courted dealers specializing in colonial art, such as Joseph Brown in Melbourne and Frank McDonald in Sydney, to ensure that they were the first to be offered significant works.

At the same time a few private collectors maintained low profiles and have been able to acquire significant

works through the sale rooms. For example, the purchase by a very discrete collector of colonial art, of the extraordinarily rare painting by Charles Alexandre Lesueur, *Animaux De La Nouvelle Hollande*, 1807, which sold through Christie's in 1997 for \$211,500. However, no dealer specializing in significant colonial art has emerged.

The interest shown in colonial art by public institutions in the 1970s and '80s may have stimulated the market but it was also responsible for the gradual drying-up of the market. The limited supply of surviving colonial art, and enthusiastic private collectors, meant that soon less and less was available. As a result of this, the broader range of collectors of art appear to have turned to other aspects of the colonial period, such as historical material and the decorative arts, or turned away from the colonial period altogether to other periods of Australian art, or indeed stopped collecting.

Over the past decade examples of colonial art have become rarities in the salerooms and there are few dealers who specialize in the area. Most works offered for sale are rather ordinary, only occasionally does an exceptional painting appear. These most often have been found in Europe where they have languished undiscovered and their worth in the Antipodes been unknown. The international auction houses, such as Christie's and Sotheby's, have regularly fed these paintings into the Australian sales. Perhaps the most notable of these was the 2001 Christie's sale of John Glover's extraordinary *Mount Wellington and Hobart Town from Kangaroo Point; These Natives Danced and Bathed at the Request of the Artist. the Females are Very Expert in the Water, the Heels of One Woman are Perceptible Above the Water*, about 1834, for \$1,762,500. Not known until its discovery in Europe earlier that year, the painting was of such signif-

icance that the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery agreed to pool resources with the National Gallery of Australia to ensure it was acquired for a public gallery. Only the most determined private collector might have been successful against their bidding, as was the case when at a Christie's auction in 1996, for a reason never quite explained, Andrew Lloyd Webber, an enthusiastic collector of British Pre-Raphaelite art, spectacularly outbid the Geelong Art Gallery when he paid \$1,982,500 for Eugene von Guerard's *View of Geelong, 1856*. This is the highest price every paid for a von Guerard or any example of colonial art.

The curiosities of colonial art that occasionally appear at auction sales can attract a high degree of interest. The displays of Australian colonial art in public galleries, not just paintings and sculpture but also works on paper, decorative arts, including furniture, silversmithing and jewellery, and increasingly photography, are considered by some curators to be those of the greatest interest to their visiting public. The addition of work by less well known artists and less familiar material gives greater depth to a collection. Public institutions have become eager to add to these collections works of sufficient quality to be displayed alongside their masterpieces, and have been forced to bid at auction and often pay previously undreamed of prices. At a recent Deutscher Hackett Melbourne auction the National Gallery of Victoria purchased for a record \$810,000 a rare painting by the minor Tasmanian artist Robert Dowling, *Masters George, William and Miss Harriet Ware with the Aborigine Jamie Ware, 1856*.

With only a few exceptions the collectors of Australian colonial art appear to have stopped adding to their collections because the work appearing on the market is seldom of great quality. When an exceptional work is offered

for sale there are no longer bargains, the competition, especially from public collections is strong, and very high prices are paid. Some new collectors of colonial art have developed specialist interests, and a highly refined knowledge, of less fashionable genres, such as colonial portraiture, where they have few competitors. I believe it is these few specialist collectors who are now creating the most interesting collections of Australian colonial art. ✘

Tasmania in true style

Is it time to get away without going too far from home? Over 40 years of well-founded experience in luxury travel Abercrombie & Kent know how to help! A short trip across the Tasman, to our amazing Apple Isle, and you will enjoy a 4 night journey full of style, intrigue, pure indulgence and rejuvenation.

Forget the map or GPS and be met by your own personal A&K guide and private vehicle. Have an afternoon indulging in local wines at Coal Valley Vineyard, followed by a tour covering the growing process of the farmed Barilla Bay Oysters. The locals will tell you about the tides, weather and the environmental affect on oysters and you'll see how they are packaged for shipment. On the return, you'll stop in at Meadowbank Wines for a guided tasting and a chance to taste cheeses from King Island Dairy.

Spend the night at the stunning Islington Hotel. Nestled amid ancient gardens, in the dress circle of Hobart, with stunning views of Mount Wellington, this luxurious exclusive enclave has 11 rooms, each of a distinctive character. Built in 1847, Islington is a fine example of Regency architecture recently restored to showcase its original glory and

updated to include the little luxuries and amenities our forebears overlooked, such as ensuite bathrooms, a Mountain View pavilion and fine wine cellar.

On your second day in Tassie, begin the day by traveling around the historic birthplace of Hobart including Constitution Dock and Battery Point before driving toward the dry eucalypt forest areas. Enjoy breathtaking views of the Huon River pausing at the wooden boat centre to see master craftsman at work. Walk above and through the treetops some 20 metres above the forest floor at Tahune Forest Air walk. Continue to Huonville, Port Cygnet and around the coast to Peppermint Bay for a delightful lunch of fresh local fare overlooking the Bay. After lunch board a sleek modern catamaran for a special cruise through Hobart's magnificent sheltered waterways. Sit in the wheelhouse lounge with the Skipper who gives a personal account of the rich maritime history and nature's secrets on a screen with powerful underwater cameras. See Kelp forests and leaping salmon in floating fish farms. Return to the Islington for another night of luxury indulgence.

The next morning depart Hobart for a short drive to meet your cruise boat. With a dramatic and impressive backdrop the cruise meanders to the wilderness camp located in the remote and pristine Bryans Beach in Freycinet National Park.

Local hosts and chef at the eco-campsite are all friendly and intensely proud, passionate and knowledgeable about the natural environment that they are privileged to share. At the architecturally-designed wilderness camp, you'll soon discover that being transported to a remote Tasmanian beach doesn't mean missing out on excellent service and the special touches of luxurious comfort. Expect to enjoy fine food and wine, prepared and served with skill and flair, featuring

the freshest Tasmanian produce and wonderful cool-climate wines. Enjoy an inviting queen-size bed and wooden floors – certainly not ‘good old fashion camping’ as we used to remember it!

The luxurious campsite is only part of this magical experience. As the two nights/ three days unfold, you will certainly achieve a sense of peace and calm that’s unique to the wild natural surroundings – the sea breezes in the casuarinas, the whisper of waves on sand, birdsong from the bush, friendly wallabies grazing at dusk, the evening sky ablaze with sunset and a night sky full of stars. You can choose to do as little or as much as you like – bushwalking on tracks to magnificent ocean views; wandering along the deserted beach; enjoying close encounters with wildlife; snorkeling, sea kayaking or fishing.

Return to Hobart feeling refreshed and rejuvenated and ready to tackle the world again! ❧

For more information about Tasmania in true style contact Abercrombie & Kent on 1300 851 800 or go to www.abercrombiekent.com.au

New awards signpost the best in contemporary Indigenous art

Solenne Ducos-Lamotte

Until recently the contemporary Indigenous art scene has been punctuated by only one major event, the annual *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award (NATSIAA)* at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory. Running for over twenty years, the coveted \$40 000 award showcases around 100 finalists selected from up to 500 entries and its opening in early August usually sees

the whole Aboriginal art world gathered in Darwin.

Since last year a number of new, dedicated reference events have started to appear including other national and regional awards as well as landmark exhibitions celebrating leading living artists. The three most noticeable and important events are the *Xstrata Coal Emerging Indigenous Art Award*, the *Togart Contemporary Art Award*, and the very first *Triennial of Indigenous Art*.

This is excellent news for Aboriginal art collectors. In a fast paced market in which new artists and art are constantly appearing, it has become increasingly difficult to recognise which artists stand out and what prices their work should command. Awards and landmark exhibitions presenting the best contemporary Aboriginal artists are thus helpful tools, providing collectors with insights into what is good – or even exceptional – contemporary Aboriginal art.

NATSIAA also offers information on value. Indeed the main award of \$40 000 and the four category awards of \$4 000 each are non-acquisitive and the hundreds of works of art presented are up for grabs according to a public sales price list. This year the prices stretch from several hundreds of dollars to \$193 000. Aiming at promoting appreciation and understanding of the quality and the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art from across the country, the award showcases both established and emerging artists working in a wide range of themes, styles and media. A look at the last five years’ Award winners proves it: an acrylic painting by urban-based Queensland artist Richard Bell in 2003; a group of hollow-log coffins by Arnhem Land artist Gulumbu Yunupinguu in 2004; a real-size Toyota woven sculpture by Tjanpi women weavers in 2005; an acrylic painting by Central Desert artist Ngoia Napaltjarri Pollard in 2006; and a monumental bronze sculpture by Torres Strait Islander artist Dennis Nona in 2007.

The new *Xstrata Coal Emerging*

Indigenous Art Award launched by the Queensland Art Gallery (QAG) in Brisbane last year is also an annual prize for Indigenous artists from throughout Australia working across all media but it differentiates itself from other awards by focusing on emerging artists and inviting only a few artists – ten last year and nine this year. Interestingly enough the acquisitive award of \$30 000 has so far been taken out by young NSW based artists (Jonathan Jones in 2006 and Genevieve Grieves in 2007). That this new award is innovative and different should not come as a surprise. Its organisers at the dynamic QAG have been organising the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, ‘the only major series of exhibitions in the world to focus exclusively on the contemporary art of Asia and the Pacific’, since 1993 and also mounted the beautiful exhibition ‘Story Places: Indigenous Art of the Cape York and the Rainforest’ in 2003.

A very interesting aspect of the Xstrata Award is that it showcases several creations for each artist, allowing for deeper appreciation of an artist’s work. It certainly offers a new perspective on emerging art. Gulf of Carpentaria’s Bentinck Island women painters appear as promising stars as well as Sally Gabori whose strikingly energetic and colourful compositions were included in the inaugural award last year and can also be seen in NATSIAA 2007. In the footsteps of this fast-rising elder artist, Emily Evans and Netta Loogatha were invited to participate in the Xstrata Award respectively in 2006 and 2007. At Michael Reid we are delighted to represent the Bentinck Island painters in New South Wales and very excited to organise a major community exhibition with them in 2008.

Sally Gabori was also selected for another new award this year, the *Togart Contemporary Art Award* held at Parliament House in Darwin in

July. A non acquisitive annual prize showcasing both Indigenous and non Indigenous artists from the Northern region, it provides an interesting colour-blind outlook. Darwin artist Chayni Henry (from a New Zealand's Maori father and a European mother) has won the main award of \$15 000, and Arnhem Land artist Wukun Wanambi from Buku Larrngay Mulka has taken out the \$5 000 People's Choice prize.

The bombshell event dedicated to Indigenous art remains the first *Triennial of Indigenous Art* to be held at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra from mid-October. A major survey exhibition celebrating Indigenous Australia's leading contemporary artists, *Culture Warriors: National Indigenous Art Triennial* constitutes a historic milestone, certainly as important as the *Aboriginal Memorial* in 1988 and the *Australian Indigenous Art Commission at the Musée du Quai Branly* in 2006. As with the Xstrata Award, the artist participation is by invitation only and the exhibition features up to four works for each artist. However unlike most awards, the four-month exhibition is curated and themed. Among the 31 artists selected by inaugural guest-curator Brenda L. Croft (Senior Curator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art, National Gallery of Australia), around half are urban-based. It also comprises five artists referred as 'the big guns' – Jean Baptiste Aputimi, Philip Guthaykudthay, John Mawurndjul, Lofty Bardayal Nadjamerrek and Arthur Koo'ekka Pambegan Jnr. All community-based, their careers span the four decades since the 1967 Referendum in which non-Indigenous Australians voted to include Indigenous Australians on the census as citizens. The selection includes a number of NATSIAA winners such as Richard Bell, Gulumbu Yunupinguu and Dennis Nona.

The new awards also confirm the integration and strong recognition of the urban-based artists. For instance

Perth artist Julie Dowling – for whom we had the pleasure of organising a solo exhibition at the gallery in 2005 – was a finalist of NATSIAA in 2004 and 2006, and is part of the Triennial. Similarly Canberra-based emerging artist Danie Mellor appears in both NATSIAA and the Triennial this year. In addition he is holding his first solo exhibition in Sydney in October which we are thrilled to host and curate in conjunction with Wally Caruana. *What we have (is it just Danie Mellor or something?)* is on display at Caruana & Reid Fine Art – Michael Reid gallery from 17th October to 3rd November 2007.

After a decade in which this sector has flourished and developed, these new art reference events complement the prominent NATSIAA (which can show only a very limited number of Australian Indigenous artists) and give much needed visibility to the contemporary Indigenous art scene and market.



The 24th Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award (NATSIAA)

Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin
10 August – 18 November 2007

Xstrata Coal Emerging Indigenous Art Award 2007

Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
4 August – 11 November 2007

The inaugural Togart Contemporary Art Award

Parliament House, Darwin
10 July – 1 August 2007

Culture Warriors: National Indigenous Art Triennial

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
13 October 2007 – 10 February 2008

Dredged from the Mists

The following looks back to my early days at Christie's in London where I soon discovered that aside from the art, some of great joys of the art world, are to be found in the people, the most extraordinary people, who populate that strange and unique industry.

Having idled past the rather grand entrance to Christie's every day on my way to catch the underground to my rather befuddling workplace in the City of London, I eventually summoned up the physical gall to cross an auction house threshold. Within seconds I had found my vocation. After all, it looked glamorously languid with everyone seemingly standing around the most astonishingly beautiful paintings and objects. Snapping out of a half hour wander around and stare cum dribble, I went on to make enquiries at the front desk as to the possibilities of employment.

"Just write a letter," she said.

Some weeks later my rather blunt application letter went in – without references. In the missive's less robust moments, I slipped in;

"I have been in London now for quite some time and have, on the whole, been rather bored by the employment opportunities on offer. If I do not obtain an interesting position soon, I will return to Australia"

Christie's interviewed me. Primarily, I suspect, as part of an anthropological experiment undertaken to observe exactly what type of specimen would indeed write such a demand.

At the employment inspection, wedged between a Tribal art and Porcelain specialist, I vividly recall only one question, laid on me by the three-piece baby-blue linen suit-wearing, gold fob chain-dangling, goatee-adorned Porcelain person. He, she, it or whatever, asked me "Was the University of Sydney anything like the University of Bombay?" (Mumbai was then still called Bombay). Goatee had at least read

my CV and had quite rightly figured out that we had very little in common. I guess it was at least a clutched straw, he must have been to India.

What do you say to a question like that? At that time Australia, had a population of around 18 million people and India around 890 million; their cities and universities were similarly unlike. I remember mumbling something along the lines that we were both members of the Commonwealth family and as such had almost nothing in common but the game of cricket and a loathing for rice pudding (a terrible waste of rice).

The Porcelain specialist, clearly a *joys of Empire man*, looked at me as if I had just dropped one of his early Meissen figurines of a shepherdess in a multi-coloured dress, playing a flute beneath the branch of a vine entangled tree. To tell the truth I wish I had, those little dust catchers are nothing more than quaint knick-knacks and deserve to be expunged. (Funnily enough, the contemporary Australian artist, Penny Byrne, now makes a tidy living and somewhat of a big art world splash, smashing up and reconfiguring Meissen knock-offs. In much contemporary art, as in society itself, it is all a matter of who comes first. Though I may have had the idea and desire to obliterate figurines – for all the wrong reasons – Penny did the deed. It is all in the doing.) Anyway, as it turned out the Tribal art specialist *had* been to Australia so we talked at length about the flies, the sense of alienation, the hardships and clannish rituals that one comes across in Melbourne.

They asked for references.

Well, easily done. My mate (the one with the subsequent mental health issues), who had been working at the investment bank JP Morgan for all of two weeks wrote me a glowing reference on their letterhead. My other London friend, who paraded herself around as a qualified actuary (not

and scored a job on said basis, wrote another beaming endorsement. A little over eight months later when on a Wednesday foray into the company stationery cupboard on behalf of the Book Department, I took a swift detour into the personnel department, pulled out my file and trashed my references. It was for the best.

I was only the second full-time Australian employed by Christie's London. I remember very distinctly, that across the top of the first page of the Human Resources employment form ran the heading TITLE. As I was not a Marquis, or the second son of a Duke, there were around fifteen lines or so to leave blank. So I turned over the page, to tick the category that said Mister.

Christie's London was, and is, another world in a galaxy far, far away, peopled by the most extraordinary beings, many of whom have been saved from full time institutional care and a life time encased in a pharmaceutical strait jacket by their sheer incandescent brilliance. I think it was the author F. Scott Fitzgerald who said, 'the rich are different' and well and truly they are. However, I can assure you that my old mate Fitzie had never worked at Christie's. Had he done so he would undoubtedly have qualified this assertion; 'the rich are different and those working as Christie's London specialists are unmoored from the jetty of life'.

Let me tell you about the administrator of the Book Department, one Beatrice Boyle, niece or something like that to the Earl of Glasgow. Beatrice or 'B' as she was known, was, it transpired, the first person in her entire extended family to obtain paid employment in something like 400 years. Yep that's right, the five brothers, including a Jockey and a Jackie, lived in shabby genteel splendour on an island off the west coast of Scotland. They still wore kilts and had serfs (although in the late twentieth century I think they called them tenants).

Every workday on the crack of 9.45am B would sweep into the department on her bicycle, to which was affixed a large cane basket. Once seated at her desk she proceeded to receive a burst of telephone calls. Relatives, flung hither and yonder across huge swathes of the west coast of Scotland would telephone to enquire as to her previous day. In the Book Department you could hear these relations as they shouted into the telephone, their aged help positioning the telecommunications device near the enquirer's face. B would in great detail regale the relatives with the intricate details of typing three whole letters, dealing with two members of the actual public, putting information into a computer and going out to lunch. No employment detail was too mundane for the Boyle clan. It was all such jolly make do, London Blitz stuff.

B did not speak, she boomed. Hers was a forthright, matter of fact, from the bottom of her cable knit jumper boom; " I SAID TO CLARIA, SUCH A SMART GAL IS OUR CLARIA...BALLS, BALLS, BALLS". B boomed and bustled. She took the Book Department by the administrative throat and dragged it back centuries. B was subversive. The straight forward act of typing out the Head of the Book Department's letters to his clients may well have started out (as they were intended to), all dry and full of leathery bibliographic detail and business but they never ended up that way. B inevitably knew the recipient, their estate, the maiden aunt and the health and success of the current pack of hounds. So many of these business letters went out something like this:

Your Grace,

Having paginated your fine copy of *Peasants I have Flogged*, privately printed in Norfolk, 1835, First imprint of the first edition; with variations to the title page; significant blood stains to front end cover; a minor tear to the bottom left hand corner of the hand coloured woodblock illustrated cartouche of, *Uncle Silus*

beating the stable boy senseless I must say... blah, blah, blah

At the end of all this would be scribbled:

Eddy, it's B

Are you going to Georgiana's Thursday week? Helena has a new picnic basket.

Jockey the bloody idiot, fell over and broke his toe last week. We roared and roared. B.

The world loved B. She was at that time going out with a frightfully tall Welsh Rugby Union player – they later married. Although her family never really approved of mixed marriages, the sporting prowess of B's beau together with his command of English as a second language, soothed troubled waters and over the decades created the family ties that bookbind. Last heard of B was a bookbinder herself, living back on the family island, in another century and wearing a cable knit jumper.

All manner of types dropped into the Book Department; the studious, the enquiring, the dedicated and the most glamorous sex industry worker in London, who was quite possibly a combination of all three. You see Dudley, a junior book cataloguer and godson to the famous children's book author Roald Dahl, shared his Barons Court abode with a professional escort. As you do.

Having a sex industry worker as a flat mate has its benefits. Yes that. While working different hours, Dudley and Samantha never crossed paths and as for his lodger having the financial wherewithal to pay the rent, that was seriously not a problem. Sam, with the visage of an angel and the mouth of one who had grown up a Cockney on the Isle of Dogs, was forever misplacing her apartment keys (I dare say it was all that professional disrobing, in differing venues that did it) hence the fleeting departmental visits in need of Dudley's keys. Working two weeks on and one week off – and flown to Greece for the sun in the off week – our dear Sam worked exclusively from the Ritz

Hotel and only for gentlemen of middle eastern appearance. Each morning Edmund would tell us exactly how much cash Sam had left on the kitchen table – never less than fifteen hundred pounds and often around five thousand pounds. At 19, Sam was awash with cash.

Amidst the nightclubs, the holidays and the drugs, Sam had her overheads. The Ritz accommodation bill and so on went on the client's tab as did Sam's fee (the cash was essentially a tip) but Sam was required by her booking agency only ever to wear Chanel. Sam was tailored and packaged to the extent that, just before Dudley left for work each morning, and long before Sam awoke Dudley signed for the black cab delivery of Sam's lingerie – new silks from Harrods. Sam had a very high stakes, high maintenance career befitting a businessperson who planned never to work again after her 27th birthday.

Dudley was ... well ... a Dudley. Coming from an established publishing family, Dudley was Bertie Wooster personified; a character from a comedy of manners upper middle class English novel who just happened to live with a sex industry worker. His three-piece suits were at any given moment ready to burst open like some over-ripe tomato. His large dining room table sized multi-coloured handkerchief, remained poised, to be dragged out from deep within his suit, like some magician's act, to mop said feverish brow, even in the depths of winter. There was something Bloomsbury set about Dudley, a chronically inept book cataloguer (who read more than he actually catalogued). Dudley loved a jolly chin wag and was often noted AWOL late afternoon having just nipped upstairs at 10am to value a 19th century bible (this normally takes 22 seconds max).

Dudley was a tremendous colleague and the bane of Adam's (Head of Book

Department's) life. Adam or Adders as I called him... "My name is Adam"... he would reprimand me three times a day, was a reed thin, bespectacled two-piece tweed suit wearing man. His family were old army and his older brother was a notorious upper class drug addict, busted on the island of Jersey alighting from a helicopter with the Marquis of Bristol and 1 kilogram of cocaine (for personal use). Not to worry, the chaps had a delightful internment on the Isle, and his Lordship was referred to in the press as the most polite prisoner in Britain.

Adam's family had 'issues', so running the Book Department was a doddle and a haven. Wanting nothing more than to design and make wooden furniture, and currently living in a ruined Spanish castle, Adam collected trees and gutted whole packets of Silk Cut cigarettes with a single glance. Adam did not so much smoke, as occasionally breathe oxygen between fumes. Whilst cataloguing the most divine, rare and astonishingly important books known to mankind, Adam would perch transfixed, reading early Greek, cigarette in paw with ash teetering towards an early Christian illumination. The next second, with not a stir of movement, the ash would be gone. Go figure. To this day I think Adam may have considered ash to be a food group.

In a rather spooky coincidence, many within Christie's were ex-army or came from military families and were running away fast from that fate and barking mad into the bargain. An obvious case in point being the Arms and Armour specialist, Albury, a distinguished former officer in the Guards and world authority on all manner of things designed to kill. I had the enormously edifying experience one day of being allowed into the Arms department. You had to be buzzed in, after all, there were guns. There I found Albert astride a bronze cannon, wearing

a Napoleonic French cavalry helmet and coat, illustrating to all and sundry the slash forward and backwards of the early nineteenth century sabre charge. The back slash is, contrary to popular perception even *more* important when cutting down a man on foot, than the more heroically depicted forward slash. You heard it first from me.

When faced with that juicy little morsel so early in the morning, I quietly excused myself. However from then on I took every opportunity to visit the Arms and Armour department to take part in their mildly serious military re-enactments. The Arms and Armour department once had an enquiry about selling a German Panzer tank – yes, some are in private hands – and there was some animated discussion amongst the specialists of recreating Stalingrad or the D-day Landings in the department. Apparently you could smash through one of the walls and annex the canteen (Poland). Ah the dreams.

James, in the decorative arts department, wore a tiara at his desk. It was paste mind you, but when you took in the spectacle as a whole – the tiara with the pink boa ensemble – it was agreed by all to be most fetching. James was not ex-military, though on many wistful occasion he dreamt of things that could well have been.

And the Doll Department, run by the delightfully quirky Helena Bristol, whose primary school age son, in shorts with cloth cap Biggles (yes, his name was Biggles Bristol), rampaged in and out of the Toy, Aeronautical and Doll departments on a weekly basis. Olivia was a member of a VERY select club of rather senior ladies who

each had an exact dolls house replica of a residence on Eton Square. Once a year the Duchesses of this and that got together and reformed Eton Square in exact miniature. Ah, the time they had. The drugs they must have done, the Clubbing, the vomiting. You could only become a member of this circle (or rather square) on the death of a member, whose rather grand terrace in miniature you would inherit. Receiving a dolls house via testamentary succession, how jolly.

These Eton Square little dolls house get together discussed the occasional refurbishment of a tiny little room, the purchase of some early nineteenth century chair, in micro, for the sitting room, that kind of thing. They also passed on the tricks of the doll trade. You see, aside from dolls houses these chicks collected all manner of early dolls, their clothes and accessories. One of the big and rather nasty tricks in the doll trade was to attend an auction viewing with a pencil. When no one was looking, the prospective bidder would draw very fine lines, in difficult to see places, mimicking fine cracks to porcelain. Well that devalued the doll on the spot. You then attended the sale, purchased the doll on the cheap and went home to wipe off the pencil marks. In the same manner, furniture collectors used to steal all the keys from cabinets and clocks. Without an important key, values head south.

The textile department was ensconced at the back of the main building and somewhat around the corner. They sold antique lace, 18th century frock-coats, vintage shoes and handbags, that kind of thing. From an outsider's point of view, textile sales all looked a bit of a mishmash, with racks

of old clothes and large tables strewn with fabric. Textiles sales were great fun for people spotting; "Oh look, there is Karl Lagerfeld," kind of spotting; "Look at the crazy woman attempting to undo the stitching to see how the garment was constructed," Vivienne Westwood moment. Have absolutely no doubt that most fashion designers are creatively bankrupt. They can do a good season or two but very few and I mean very few, are creative in the mid to long term. To overcome a total inability to come up with anything new (and let's face it, how many ways can you design a shirt?) the frock designers big and small trawl the antique clothes auctions for inspiration.

The Head of Textiles, Edwina having almost unlimited access to other people's used clothes dressed accordingly. Rumour had it that Edwina dressed each morning in the department and did not as such have many of her own clothes. She favoured large printed 1950's cocktail dresses topped with an Alice band. In a major departmental coup cum argy bargy, the Textiles and Pop Memorabilia department jointly took in for sale the Ruby Red shoes as worn by Judy Garland in the movie, *The Wizard of Oz*. Needless to say, the shoes made a world record for shoes. In eternal celebration of this milestone Edwina had a replica copy made. Every day, there she was in another 1950s cocktail frock or such, scooting along in Red Ruby shoes. Barking mad and I mean woof, woof.

Part II coming soon

This article does not represent any person(s) living or deceased.

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