

Crowdfunding secures Mirka Mora's legacy

Australian art The Heide Museum of Modern Art raised \$180,000 to buy 31 works ahead of auction.

Bo Seo

The Heide Museum of Modern Art has acquired 31 personal items of the late Melbourne-based visual artist Mirka Mora, after a \$180,000 crowdfunding campaign to keep the artifacts in the public eye.

On Wednesday, auction house Leonard Joel confirmed the acquisition, which brings down the number of artworks and personal effects up for sale to the 700s. The auction is scheduled for March 3 in South Yarra.

Among the Heide acquisition is the previously undiscovered Sidney Nolan piece *Figures with Flowers*, which depicts a ghostly woman painted on moody-grey slate. It was estimated at \$60,000.

Mirka's son and independent gallerist William Mora said he had discovered the Nolan piece wrapped in lace and stored in his mother's underwear drawer.

"She loved all her objects and she had a keen eye for beautiful things. Every little thing had a story for her," he said.

Born to Lithuanian-Romanian Jewish parents in 1928, Mirka Mora and her family escaped a concentration camp and survived the Holocaust by



hiding out in rural France.

She migrated to Melbourne with her husband Georges in 1951. The couple settled into the conventional trades of European-scented bohemia: art, galleries, and cafes.

Between the Mirka cafe on Exhibition Street and later Georges' Tolarno Galleries in St Kilda, the Moras played host and caterer to the city's avant-garde.

At their studio apartment on 9 Collins Street, the re-established Contemporary Art Society – featuring the likes of Arthur Boyd, John Perceval, Joy Hester and art patrons John and Sunday Reed – held early exhibitions and bacchanal parties.

It was the same group that, since the 1930s, had loosely co-inhabited a former dairy farm called "Heide" on the Yarra River.

The Heide Circle is now considered

the vanguard of 20th century Australian modernism. Their old farmhouse is the Heide Museum of Modern Art, where the 31 newly acquired personal items of Mirka Mora will soon be on display.

Mirka Mora worked across drawing, painting, doll-making and sculpture until her death, at age 90, in August 2018.

Ahead of her state memorial at Palais Theatre, Victorian premier Daniel Andrews pronounced her a Melbourne icon.

"Mora drenched our city and our state with colour," he said.

For patrons in search of bright colours, an untitled mural by Mora herself – a frame crowded with iconography and rainbow hues – remains up for sale. It is likely to be the highest grossing item at the auction, with an estimated value of \$60,000 to \$80,000.



There is also the vintage globe on barley twist stand, the rustic French butter churn, and the wooden spinning wheel each valued at between \$50 and \$100. Mora's collection of French and German dolls, sold in small clusters tucked into baskets and prams, are expected to fetch between \$200 to 400 each.

The modest price tag and pop-up installation setting give this auction a more democratic feel than the average art sale. Mirka Mora was after all an artist of the people – a beloved fixture of Melbourne bohemia who lent as much to its distinctive culture as she took after it. Anna Grassham, head of modern design at auction house Leonard

Joel, said personal items tended to draw buyer interest because of the "human stories" attached to them.

Though there is a robust resale market for personal artifacts, she said the motivations for purchasing Mora's possessions were more likely sentimental than commercial.

"People want to own a little piece of Mirka, and to have her in their homes ... Everything in this room exudes her being, her love, and her passion for life and the arts," Ms Grassham said.

William Mora said he had extensively discussed with Mirka what his family would do to preserve the artist's memory after she passed on.

"It's being done with love," he said.



Clockwise from main: Mirka Mora in 1955; her studio has been recreated for the auction; Mirka Mora's items on display in her recreated studio; *Good Morning Angel* and a previously unknown slate painting by Sidney Nolan were bought by Heide Museum of Modern Art ahead of the auction.



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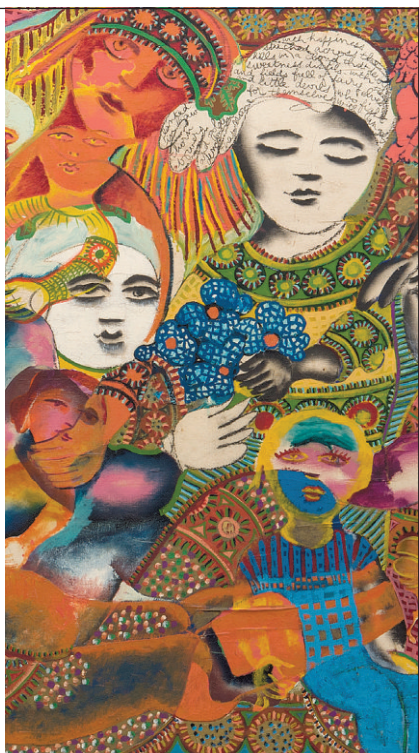
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George Michael's test

The art collection of singer and songwriter George Michael, who died in 2016, has been touring the world this month, stopping off in New York, Los Angeles and Hong Kong. Next month, it will be land at Christie's London, where it will be sold at auction on March 14, and online from March 8-15. It's a big collection – 170 works with an estimated value of £6-9 million (\$11-\$16 million). A couple of Damien Hirsts could make more than £1 million; works by lesser-known artists should fetch around £2,000.

Most of the collection was bought between 2006 and 2008, when the market was booming, and is focused almost entirely on British contemporary art of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, when the so-called Young British Artists – led by Hirst, Tracey Emin, Jake and Dinos Chapman and Sarah Lucas – overturned art world protocol and the long-standing dominance of American art with a succession of shocking, irreverent artworks. Whether they still carry the same weight is one of the tests the sale faces. THE TELEGRAPH, LONDON