

# An ivory campaign turns into global sale

## Outsider art Leonard Joel to raise money for endangered elephants.

Gabriella Coslovich

It's art for art's sake and nature's too when outsider art from across the globe goes under the hammer at Leonard Joel next month to raise money to help save Africa's elephants.

Leonard Joel has teamed with the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) to present the ambitious auction of works by artists with disabilities from supported studios in Australia, Canada, South Korea, Britain, and the United States. The money raised from the sale will be evenly split between the artists and IFAW's "Room to Roam", a campaign to protect the wild habitats of threatened African elephants and other animals.

"It's the first time we have ever done an art auction of this scale," said IFAW's Oceania Regional Director Rebecca Keeble. "Partnering not only with Leonard Joel but also with these incredible artists and studios around the world is really special."

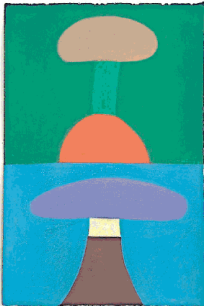
Leonard Joel is doing it all for free – the company's chairman, John Albrecht, is an Australia board member of IFAW. Ironically, the relationship developed after a 2016 IFAW report identified Leonard Joel as the worst offender when it came to the selling of objects made from ivory (elephant tusks). In response, Albrecht imposed an immediate ban on the sale of unworked ivory, regardless of age, and of tusk horn.

"It says a lot about a person and the company they represent, that they would receive our report findings, accept that their actions were part of the problem and then choose to work so closely with us on finding solutions," Keeble says.

"Leonard Joel really is leading the way championing policy change within the auction industry here in Australia and also internationally." Streamed live from Melbourne, with Albrecht on the rostrum, the Art to Roam auction will feature 94 artworks from 10 supported studios. The artists, from Melbourne, Perth, Sydney, Seoul, London, Glasgow, Calgary, Washington and Chicago, live with a range of conditions: intellectual and physical disabilities, mental ill-health, neurodegenerative and brain injury. But better to focus on their extraordinary creative abilities. The art on offer is distinguished by its rawness, immediacy and authenticity. There's no sense here of artists subjugating their instincts to fashion or academia. The work is bold, non-conformist, dynamic, intense, original, even wonky and weird.

In the words of one of the participating artists, Sam Jevon, from London's Submit to Love studios: "I wouldn't describe myself as disabled at all, I'd describe myself as different."

All of the artists from Submit to Love have a brain injury. Jevon's is the result of a car accident she had in 2006 when



The paintings include two Julian Martin abstracts, left, which were sold as a pair. Rehan Yousof's *Pakistan Chairlift*, above. Stephen Staunton's *Hidden Sounds*, below. Steven Reilly's *Kings and Queens*, below left. A sculpture by Alan Constable, *Blue Super 8 Camera*, bottom left, has an estimate of \$3600 to \$4200.



she was in her late 30s. Interestingly, she could barely draw a matchstick figure before the accident. Now she creates intricate, brilliantly asked, ink-on-paper drawings, three of which are in the auction, with estimates ranging from \$1000 to \$2000. Fellow studio artist Stephen Staunton cannot hear or speak, but has developed a unique language of gestures and noises to communicate. His boldly coloured abstract painting, *Hidden Sounds*, from 2015, has an estimate of \$2600 to \$3400.

In the 1940s, French artist Jean Dubuffet coined the phrase "art brut", or raw art, to describe the uninhibited, visceral creations of artists working outside the mainstream. In 1972, art critic Roger Cardinal dubbed it "outsider art". More recently, the category

has been described as "vernacular art" at Christie's auctions.

But Sue Roff, the executive director of Melbourne-based Arts Project Australia, would rather that the work of such artists simply be known as an extraordinary thread of contemporary art.

Arts Project Australia was founded 47 years ago, as Australia's first full-time studio for artists with an intellectual disability. Two of the studio's longest standing artists, Julian Martin, known for his velvety pasted abstracts, and Alan Constable, who makes glazed earthenware sculptures of analogue cameras, have been collected by state galleries and are represented by commercial galleries overseas. Both have works in the Art to Roam auction.

It's well known that artists have been sorely affected by the pandemic, but the additional needs of those in supported studios make them particularly vulnerable to the isolation of lockdowns. On top of that, Arts Project Australia's income has taken a hit since JobKeeper payments ended.

"At the moment, it's tough. We are losing probably \$25,000 a week," says Roff. "I realise now why I have worked hard to develop reserves over the past 12 years."

The Art to Roam auction offers the chance for the studio's artists to boost their income and their profile.

"It gives us access not only to the Leonard Joel buying audience, which is huge, but also the combined collecting audiences of all the supported studios represented around the world," Roff says. "It opens up our collector base exponentially and gives the chance for the work of supported studios to be spotlighted internationally, which is fantastic."

Whatever you want to call it – art brut, outsider art, vernacular art, naive art – the category is increasing in popularity with collectors and curators. Notably, at the 2013 Venice Biennale the works of outsider artists were shown alongside those of established artists at the Encyclopaedic Palace exhibition in the Arsenal.

Christie's specialist Cara Zimmerman has said of the category: "It is

impossible to get outsider art that is removed emotionally and personally from its maker."

Flipping through Leonard Joel's online catalogue one certainly gets that sense.

Glasgow's Project Ability studio, for example, has some gems, such as Rehan Yousof's *Pakistan Chairlift*, 2016, which has an estimate of \$1000 to \$3000. Fellow artist Steven Reilly's *Kings and Queens*, 2018, is a mad trio of portraits of King Henry VIII, Queen Elizabeth I and Mary Queen of Scots, with an estimate of \$1000 to \$3000. Looking at Reilly's work one can't help but think of Andy Warhol's far more expensive screenprint quartet, *Queen Elizabeth II*, 1985, being auctioned tonight at Mezzies' inaugural timed online Prints & Multiples sale for \$800,000 to \$1 million.

Albrecht hopes to make the Art to Roam auction an annual event and encourage more supported studios from around the world to get involved. He'll be auctioning the works from 7am on Tuesday October 5, which will be Monday for bidders in the UK, US, and Canada – and World Animal Day. The auction's total estimate ranges from \$182,000 to \$283,000. Buyer's premiums will not be charged, and the invaluable bidding platform has waived its usual 5 per cent fee. Buyers will, however, have to pay for shipping costs.

