

Tapestries weave magic at NAB art sale

Gabriella Coslovich *Saleroom writer*



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Part two of the National Australia Bank art collection sale

[\[https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p59ws6\]](https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p59ws6) saw another record-breaking night with eager buyers pushing prices well above their estimates for artists across a spectrum of styles, mediums and eras. Twenty-nine artists' records were set and all 129 lots sold during the marathon 3½-hour auction at Leonard Joel in Melbourne last Wednesday, which was happily free of internet hiccups.

The sale marked a renewed interest in tapestries, with Mirka Mora's joyous *Curlews in the Garden*, woven in 1980 by the Victorian Tapestry Workshop, selling for \$160,000 (hammer), more than three times its high estimate of \$45,000. The tapestry was the night's most expensive work and an auction record for Mora, whose previous high of \$140,000 (hammer) was set at Deutcher and Hackett last November for the 1960 painting *Self Portraits*.





The Mirka Mora tapestry *Curlews in the Garden*, 1980, sold for \$160,000 (hammer), more than three times its high estimate, at the Leonard Joel sale of the NAB Collection.

“Tapestries are back!” said Leonard Joel’s Head of Art, Olivia Fuller, who was thrilled with the overall results. The auction rose \$700,000 above its high estimate to bring in a total of \$1.95 million, or \$2.39 million with buyers’ costs included.

“You could not pick a better collection to get back into the swing of things,” Fuller said.

Sydney art dealer Tom Silver placed the winning bid on the Mora tapestry on behalf of a private Sydney collector who Silver described as having “one of the most prestigious collections in Australia”.

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When Silver spotted the vast tapestry in the Leonard Joel catalogue, he thought to himself “one of my clients must buy it”.

“It was so striking,” said Silver, who has been in the art trade for more than half a century.

The John Coburn tapestry, *Bushfire*, c. 1976, sold for \$70,000 (hammer), more than double its high estimate, at the NAB Collection auction at Leonard Joel last Wednesday, February 23.

“When you have been in the game for as long as I have, you have an instinct about certain works. I just thought, this is mind-bogglingly good. It’s hard to imagine anyone who would not enjoy this work.”

The exuberant tapestry, woven from wool, cotton and glistening lurex, is classic Mora, combining elements of folk art, child-like whimsy, and Chagall-inspired surrealism. Mora’s husband, the prominent Melbourne gallerist Georges Mora, was the NAB’s original art advisor and it was he who encouraged the bank to commission tapestries by artists who had never before worked in the medium.

Some of those tapestries were among the most contested works last Wednesday, including two by John Coburn, *Bushfire*, c. 1976, which sold for \$70,000 (hammer),

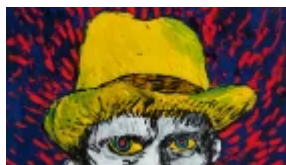
more than double its high estimate, and *Arabian Sun*, 1976, which achieved \$55,000 (hammer) against a high estimate of \$40,000.

Jeff Makin's 1979 tapestry, *Port Campbell*, of Victoria's coastal town near the famed Twelve Apostles rock formations, flew to \$30,000 (hammer) against an estimate of \$6000 to \$8000. This too was an auction record for the artist. Interestingly, an oil painting by Makin of the same composition sold for \$28,000 (hammer).

The Jeff Makin tapestry, *Port Campbell*, 1979, flew to \$30,000 (hammer) against an estimate of \$6000 to \$8000 at the Leonard Joel sale of the NAB Collection.

Two other Victorian Tapestry Workshop creations, Lesley Dumbrell's *Snakes and Ladders*, 1979, and Jan Senberg's *West Melbourne*, 1979, also rose above their estimates to sell for \$26,000 (hammer) and \$24,000 (hammer) respectively. Leonard Joel applies a 25 per cent buyer's premium inclusive of GST to the hammer price of every lot.

The tapestry buyers ranged from current collectors of the medium, to those attracted foremost by the artists, to others who were new to the medium but had been captivated by the tapestries in the NAB collection.



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"The fact that tapestries are being seen in people's private collections more, and that they are in vogue in interior design, make them quite desirable, so that too encouraged people to consider them for their art collections more than they might have 10 or 20 years ago," said Fuller.

Sculpture is another medium gathering momentum as confirmed in the NAB sale with the sensational performance of Greg Johns' corten steel work *At the Centre there is Nothing* (2009), which sold for \$75,000 (hammer), more than nine times its high estimate of \$8000.

"I had no less than 15 people a day asking me about that sculpture ... so I knew there would be a lot of interest," said Fuller. "He is a remarkable sculptor and his work rarely comes to auction"

WORK RARELY COMES TO AUCTION.

Greg Johns' sculpture *At the Centre there is Nothing* (2009), sold for \$75,000 (hammer), more than nine times its high estimate of \$8000 at the Leonard Joel sale of the NAB Collection.

Measuring 130cm by 130cm, the sculpture is the maquette for a larger work that is in the public collection of the McClland Sculpture Park + Gallery in Melbourne's south-east. It too set an auction record for the artist.

"When it's something with great provenance, that's a rarity at auction and by a desirable artist, there's almost no limit," said Fuller.

Other record breakers include the following (all prices are hammer):

Judy Cassab, *Red Desert*, 1972 - \$70,000 (estimate \$6000 to \$9000);
 Paul Partos, *The Flow*, 1992 - \$36,000, (estimate \$12,000 to \$18,000);
 Jasper Knight, *They Used to Call me Psycho*, 2012 - \$17,000 (estimate \$7000 to \$9000);
 Katherine Hattam, *Pink Armchair Green Light*, 2002 - \$15,000 (estimate \$2500 to \$4500);
 John Rowell, *In Red Gum Country*, 1940 - \$15,000 (estimate \$1500 to \$2500);
 Peter Neilson, *Play on Words* (The Journalist), 1998 - \$13,000 (estimate \$4000 to \$6000);
 Deborah Russell, *Angel's Window*, 1989, - \$13,000 (estimate \$1500 to \$2500);
 Sarah Tomasetti, *Milford Sound III*, 2002-03 - \$11,000 (estimate \$4000 to \$5000);
 Darren Wardle, *Gecko Gate*, 1999 - \$11,000 (estimate \$4000 to \$6000);
 Marion Borgelt, *Ancestral Mind*, 1988 - \$10,000 (estimate \$6000 to \$8000);
 Stephen Haley, *Double Echo*, 1996-97 - \$9500 (estimate \$5000 to \$7000);
 Ashley Jones, *On the Edge – Red Chair*, 1978 - \$9000 (estimate \$1500 to \$2500);
 Wendy Stavrianos, *Mind Doors*, 1975 - \$5000 (estimate \$3000 to \$5000);
 Mark Galea, *Cadmium Cadmium*, 2007 - \$4000 (estimate \$2000 to \$3000).

The NAB collection will keep on giving, with another round of works to be included in Leonard Joel's prints and multiples sale in April, and a key work earmarked for the Centum contemporary art sale in May.

Gabriella Coslovich is an arts journalist with more than 20 years' experience, including 15 at The Age, where she was a senior arts writer. Her book, *Whiteley on Trial*, on Australia's most

audacious of alleged art fraud, won a Walkley in 2018.