

Saleroom

Dealers show of strength

Terry Ingram

Auction goers were treated to two displays of dealer strength at the art auctions in Melbourne this week, but much of the time the dealers took a back seat.

On Monday night Mr Denis Savill took the turf war to Melbourne and made sure everyone was aware of the size of his overdraft limit.

Apart from spending more than \$700,000, he protected his stock by making others pay. The most dramatic of these protective sorties was the underbidding of Arthur Boyd's *Riverbank with Bathers and Mars*, which went to the telephone for \$128,000.

Mr Savill's thrust did not seem to be parried by Melbourne dealer Mr Rob Gould, who appeared to start the turf war by opening a gallery in Sydney earlier this year. (Mr Savill is now opening a gallery in Melbourne.)

The second display of dealer strength was in the overseas paintings where local private buyer confidence tends to be limited. An unprecedented offering of works by Britain's matchstick man, L.S. Lowry, attracted competition from Sydney dealers Mr Martin Browne and Mr Michael Nagy (bidding on the telephone presumably for his brother Richard who is a dealer in London) and Auckland's Mr Jonathan Gooderham, who often buys for London's wealthiest dealer, Mr Richard Greene.

Three out of four, including *Figures in an Industrial Landscape*



Keen bidding pushed this Noel Counihan to \$68,500. Picture: PETER BRAIG

at \$163,000, went to Mr Gooderham. Mr Browne gave \$62,000 for *The Convict Ship* by Sir Frank Brangwyn, a painting with a chequered history which, however, will be lost on any London buyers should it be returned there.

At Christie's, Dr Joseph Brown made strong bidding on Lucien Pissarro's *The Village at Chideock, Dorset* but it went to the telephone for \$85,000. He did better at Sotheby's, with *Flannel Flowers* by Margaret Preston for \$74,000. *Cat-*

tle Muster by Eugene von Guerard for \$112,500, and Blackman's *Playing Mozart* for \$72,900.

At Christie's, Mr William Mora gave \$41,400 for Joy Hester's *Three Figures* (to some applause) and \$5,275 for Harry Hartog's *Melbourne Street Scene* and underbid Wakelin's *The Rocks*, which made \$44,700 at Sotheby's.

Mr Coles gave \$17,250 for J.S. Watkins' *Andromeda chained to the Rock*, like the Brangwyn a former Michael Nash picture, John Buck-

ley gave \$21,750 for Sali Herman's *Fig Tree House* and \$48,300 for Margaret Olley's *Basket of Oranges, Lemons and Jug* at Christie's and \$13,800 for *Sydney Harbour near Cremorne* by J.R. Jackson and \$42,050 for Nolan's *The Steel City* at Sotheby's.

Mr Nagy gave \$20,750 for Lloyd Rees's *Evening Waverton* at Christie's and \$14,525 for the same artist's *The Harbour* at Sotheby's.

Ms Vivienne Sharpe had several commissions she could not fulfil, but secured Streeter's *Green Valley* for \$46,000. Mr Brian Kino, who underbid the Joshua Smith portrait, gave \$64,500 for the Whiteley sculpture *Bather* at Sotheby's.

Mr Nevin Hurst of Hobart purchased Heyson's *Early Morning* for \$20,700 on Christie's first night and was a strong bidder at the same firm's afternoon session, buying Aboriginal works and more typically Tasmanian ones. New private buyers gave colonial Australian a belated push along, although it was consultant Mr David Thomas who gave \$69,000 (for the National Library) for a pair of colonial portraits.

Old-time collector Mr Pat Corrigan threw in a lot of bids, particularly on the Whiteleys. However, those who had entered the market with a big splash in the early 1990s like Mr Fraser Hopkins had difficulty competing with even newer saleroom money, but he secured *Landscape with Hillock* by Fred Williams for \$74,000.

The art of selling

There was no obvious Mrs Slocombe on Christie's catalogue pages of staff profiles but there was a rogues' gallery of Christie's staff pictured and profiled at the beginning of the catalogue.

But Christie's may be over-doing the "Are You being Served" bit.

Members of the old school of auction-going like to make their own finds hidden near the ground in a far corner of the room. Sectionalisation of the catalogue also limited Christie's options in presenting work in the best order to start the sale. The Melbourne firm of Joel's has long provided a lesson for the majors in finding a lowly estimated attractive lot for lot one in the catalogue.

Sotheby's developed this by finding 23 readily salable lots so that it was not until lot 24, a J.C. Waite that anything was passed in. While the painting had been dragged out of the back room of Joel's many years ago even this might have sold given that it was an attractive subject, a young boy in a sailor suit.

Lot one, Lloyd Rees's *Afternoon Middle Harbour* of circa 1927 was widely admired and sold for \$59,700 to the telephone against an estimate of \$15,000 to \$20,000. The touch-and-go lots were concentrated towards the end of the sale by which time the room was oozing confidence.

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