

A Rita Angus record but is the Clarice Beckett boom over?



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If any more proof were needed that the pandemic has overhauled the way auctioneers do business, we had it last week when a record was set in Sydney for a New Zealand artist few Australians had heard of. With the surge in internet bidding, auctions are increasingly global, meaning that a painting for sale in Australia can attract the most bids from across the Tasman Sea.

And so it was at Deutscher and Hackett last Wednesday night for Rita Angus's vibrantly mysterious work *Hawke's Bay Landscape*, c.1955. Within seconds the painting had exceeded its high estimate of \$450,000 and kept climbing. It sold for \$675,000 (hammer), to a phone bidder, with the new owner paying \$828,409 with buyer's fees included (25 per cent on the hammer price inclusive of GST).



Rita Angus, 'Hawke's Bay Landscape', c. 1955, was estimated at \$350,000 to \$450,000 by sold for \$828,409 including buyer's premium. **Courtesy Deutsche and Hackett**

“It demonstrates the international-ness of auctions these days, through [bidding platform] Invaluable combined with various search engines,” said Deutscher and Hackett’s co-executive-director Chris Deutscher.

While Deutscher was “sworn to secrecy” about who had bought the picture (he did say it was a private collector) it’s fair to assume that the painting will be heading to New Zealand soon.

Angus’s former auction record was set in 2018 in Wellington, New Zealand, for her painting of the same landscape in a darker mood, *Storm, Hawke’s Bay*, 1969, which sold for NZ\$681,500 (AUD\$637,066). Born in the hinterland of Hawke’s Bay, Angus, who died in 1970 aged 61, was recently celebrated with a retrospective at Wellington’s Te Papa museum, and we know how such exhibitions can influence the secondary market.

Angus’s painting realised the highest price at the Deutscher and Hackett sale, surpassing the auction’s cover lot, John Brack’s *Knives and Forks*, from 1958, which sold for \$610,000 (hammer) against an estimate of \$400,000 to \$600,000.

Arthur Streeton’s *Out of the Purple Mountains It Gets Its Waters*, 1928, was third in line, selling for \$450,000 (hammer), more than double its high estimate. The Impressionist has been in demand this year, with works consistently exceeding

their estimates. But the market is nothing if not finicky. Two lots later, Streeton's *Northern View, Olinda, 1933*, which had an estimate of \$250,000 to \$350,000 was passed in, but sold post-auction, for around \$250,000.



Clarice Beckett, *The Red Bus*, sold for \$90,000 after initially being passed in at Deutscher and Hackett in Sydney on May 4.

“It was optimistically priced,” Deutscher ventured. “We had a vendor who would not part with it under \$250,000, so we thought we would try.”

Similarly, two works by Clarice Beckett, whose market soared in the wake of last year's retrospective at the Art Gallery of South Australia

[<https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p599ov>], were also surprisingly passed in. The more evocative of the two, *The Red Bus*, sold soon after at its low estimate of \$90,000.

So is the Beckett boom over?

“No,” says Deutscher.

Rather, the market for Beckett has become “a little more measured”, he says. “A lot of that demand created after the AGSA show has been satisfied.”



Albert Namatjira, *Ghost Gums*, 1954, more than doubled its low estimate to sell for \$60,000, at Deutscher and Hackett in Sydney on May 4.

Albert Namatjira's superb watercolours continue to perform well this year. *Ghost Gums*, from 1954, is a classic example, and more than doubled its low estimate to sell for \$60,000 hammer.



William Robinson, *Sunshowers and Flood Gums*, 1993. sold for \$440,000 (hammer), \$90,000 above its high estimate, at Deutscher and Hackett in Sydney on May 4.

William Robinson, whose disorienting landscapes have waxed and waned in market popularity, was back in vogue, posting his second highest auction result with the work *Sunshowers and Flood Gums*, 1993. Fresh to the market and from the prestigious Laverty Collection of contemporary Australian art, the painting sold for \$440,000 (hammer), rising \$90,000 above its high estimate. Another Robinson in the sale, *Late Afternoon with Flowering Palms*, 2007, was also the subject of sustained bidding, selling for \$190,000 (hammer) – \$100,000 above its high estimate.

Overall, the sale made \$5.9 million (hammer), against a low estimate of \$4.5 million, representing 131 per cent by value. It's only May and Deutscher and Hackett has already turned over \$21 million in sales – \$13.6 million more than its closest competitor, Menzies. At this pace, the company will easily surpass last year's \$32.5 million, its biggest turnover since 2017.



Jan Nelson Walking in Tall Grass Gracie II, 2011, made a new auction record for the artist, selling for \$15,000, hammer, at Leonard Joel in Melbourne on Monday May 9

“Every auction we wonder what state the market will be in, but it’s held up very strongly,” says Deutscher.

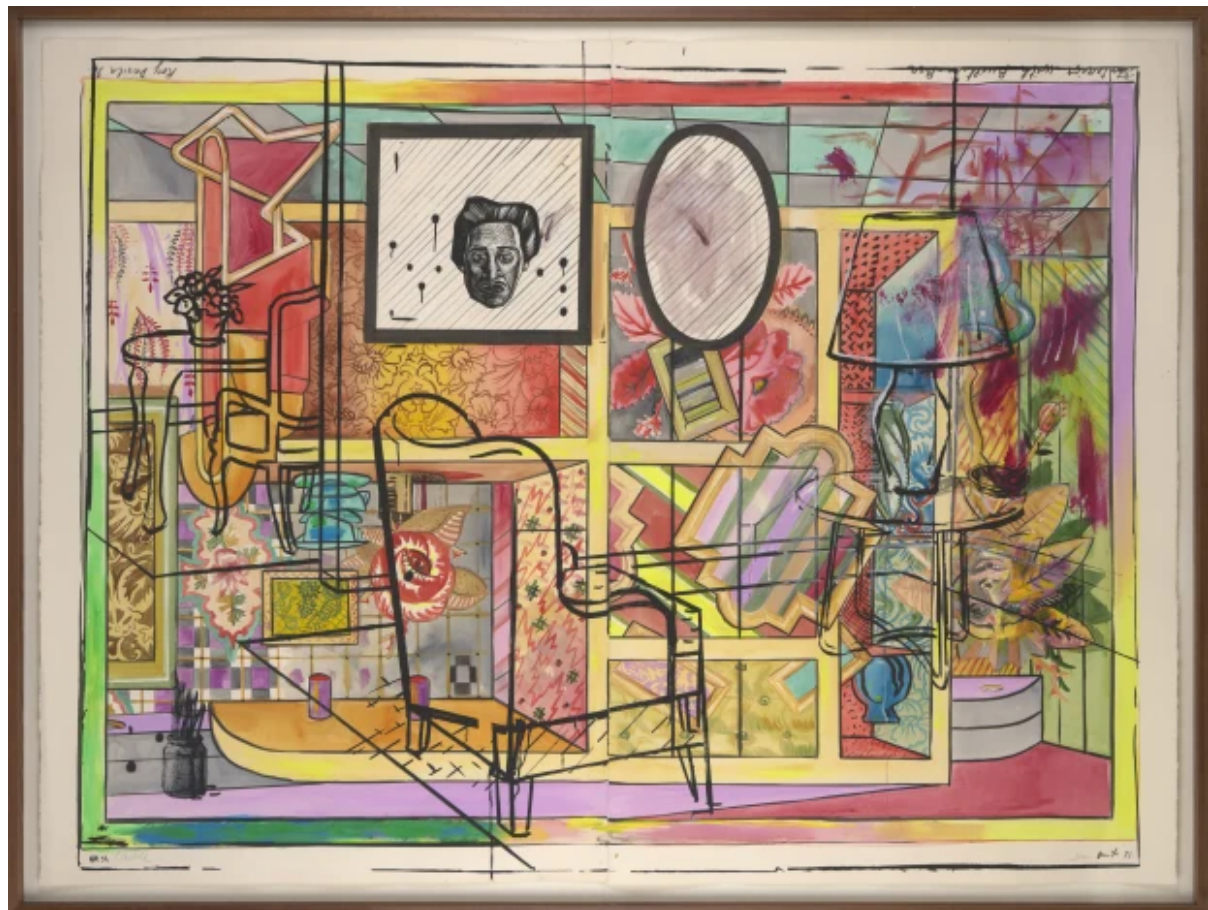
He credits the National Australia Bank collection auction in February with attracting a broader audience and new buyers. Deutscher and Hackett’s next sale on September 14 is also scheduled for Sydney. The company is making up for a three-year absence from the harbour city due to lockdowns.



Louis Pratt, *Whatever*, 2012, made a new auction record for the artist, selling for \$15,000, hammer, at Leonard Joel in Melbourne on Monday May 9

In Melbourne, meanwhile, Leonard Joel held its third annual Centum sale of contemporary art. As a concept, the dedicated contemporary art auction has been a hard-sell in Australia, as Sotheby's, Christie's, and Mossgreen found. But Leonard Joel is pushing ahead with the idea and on Monday set three new records for contemporary artists: Archibald Prize winner Vincent Namatjira (great-grandson of Albert), for his whimsically subversive portrait, *Prince Phillip and Queen Elizabeth*, 2014 (\$16,000, hammer); Jan Nelson for her soulful, hyper-real painting *Walking in Tall Grass Gracie II*, 2011, (\$15,000, hammer) and Louis Pratt's sculptural homage to disenchanted youth, *Whatever*, 2012 (\$15,000, hammer).

The auction highlight was the rediscovered Howard Arkley and Juan Davila collaboration, *Interior with Built-in Bar*, 1992, which sold for \$90,000 (hammer) – \$25,000 above its high estimate. Bill Henson's one-off photograph, *Untitled 2009-2010*, a gift to the vendor from the artist, sold within its estimate for \$25,000 (hammer).



Howard Arkley and Juan Dávila's *Interior with Built-in-Bar*, 1992, was the top seller at Leonard Joel's Centum auction on Monday 9 May in Melbourne.

But Robert Owen's massive three-piece sculpture *Shadow Play – Fourth Constellation*, 2011, from the NAB collection, stalled at \$46,000, failing to reach its low estimate of \$60,000 to \$80,000. Leonard Joel is negotiating with a potential buyer post-sale.

In total, the Centum auction made \$648,000 on the hammer, a marginal increase on last year's \$635,250, and 2020's \$619,950. It's not a huge money-spinner, but that's not entirely the point, says Leonard Joel's head of art Olivia Fuller.

"We always knew, going into it, that's it a tough category," says Fuller. "Collectors are not buying contemporary art at auction in the same way you see overseas, but that's one of the reasons we wanted to do it."



"Shot Sage Blue Marilyn" by Andy Warhol. **Courtesy of Christie's**

Well, yes. Compare the week's biggest news, the mind-boggling US\$195 million (AUD\$281 million) paid by mega-dealer Larry Gagosian for Andy Warhol's 1964 portrait of Hollywood siren Marilyn Monroe, *Shot Sage Blue Marilyn*, at Christie's in New York. That's the highest price paid for an American artwork at auction ever. The contrast couldn't be greater – the Warhol is more than one and a half times the value of the total takings at auction in Australia in the boom year of 2007.

Finally, about that colonial era chest of drawers that sold for \$90,000 at Gowans in Hobart. Saleroom noted that it was built from Huon pine, but auctioneer Tim Burt tells us that it was the drawer's wavy grain blackwood veneer that made it rare. So now you know, and Saleroom does too.

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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.