

Rediscovered treasures wow art salerooms

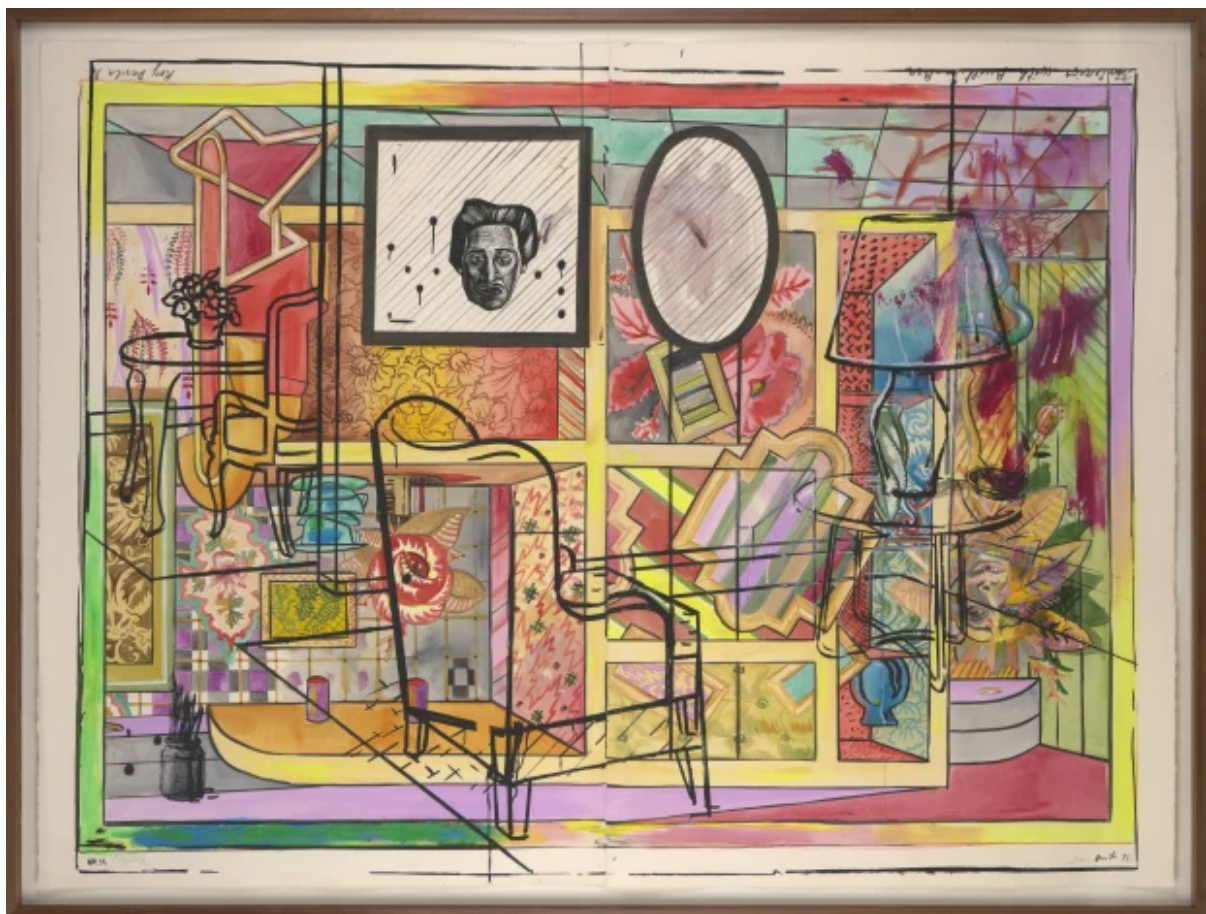


Gabriella Coslovich *Saleroom writer*

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A rediscovered artwork by Howard Arkley and Juan Dávila, a one-off photograph by Bill Henson, and a rare set of sculptures by Robert Owen, all on the market for the first time, are the centrepieces of Leonard Joel's third Centum auction of contemporary Australian art next Monday.

Launched amid the lockdowns of 2020, the annual Centum sale, which presents 100 works by contemporary Australian artists, has gone from strength to strength, with vendors embracing the idea.



Howard Arkley and Juan Dávila's *Interior with Built-in-Bar*, 1992, estimate \$55,000 to \$75,000, for sale at Leonard Joel's Centum auction on Monday 9 May in Melbourne.

“I don’t have to pitch the concept as heavily now,” says Leonard Joel’s head of art Olivia Fuller.

Arkley and Dávila’s *Interior with Built-in-Bar*, 1992, which had never been seen in public, is a major gouache on paper, and was a preparatory work for a well-documented edition of six silkscreen prints of the same title. The collaborative work has been added to Arkley’s online catalogue raisonné, *Arkley Works*, which is managed by John Gregory, author of the seminal book *Carnival in Suburbia: The Art of Howard Arkley*.

“It’s clearly an important missing link,” Gregory says of the preparatory drawing. “Olivia got in touch with me because she wanted to know whether I knew the work, and at that stage it wasn’t in my catalogue. I didn’t know what to think until I had seen it and when I saw it I thought, ‘wow’, it’s a seriously important work. I am pretty gobsmacked that it has been hiding all these years and I am pleased to see it.”

A diptych measuring a total of 159cm by 216cm, the work has serious wall presence, and a price to match, with an estimate of \$55,000 to \$75,000. It represents a turning point in the intense, decades-long collaboration between Arkley and Dávila, artists with highly distinctive styles, Arkley known for his psychedelic, airbrushed paintings of suburban houses and interiors, Dávila for his expressive, sexually explicit and fiercely political works. *Interior with Built-in-Bar* merges the artists’ idiosyncratic visions without diluting their individual power, so that it appears the work of one artist.



Bill Henson's *Untitled 2009-2010*, an edition of one, estimate \$20,000 to \$30,000, for sale at Leonard Joel's Centum auction on Monday 9 May in Melbourne.

Of course, any Arkley-associated work that arrives out of the blue must be treated with caution, as Gregory's website makes clear. Only artworks with a verifiable history are included in the catalogue raisonné and statutory declarations or vague claims identifying works as "formerly owned by Arkley's greengrocer", as the website mockingly puts it, are not accepted.

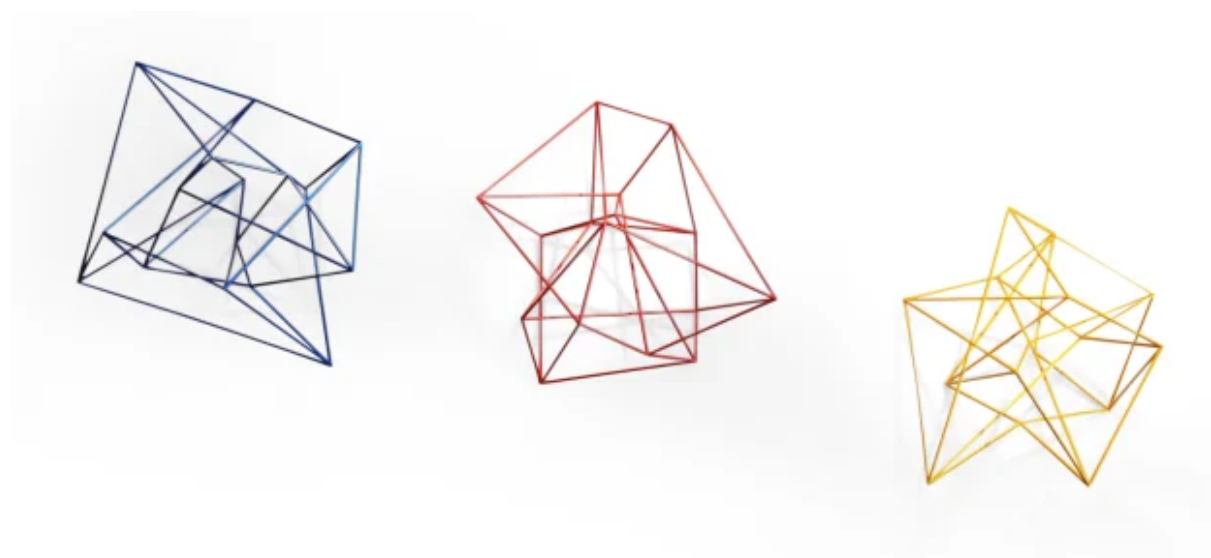
Arkley died of a heroin overdose in July 1999, tragically at the height of his career, aged only 48, having just returned to Australia after his success at the Venice Biennale. Like Brett Whiteley, who also died of a drug overdose, Arkley has been prey to those who try to pass off fake works claiming that they were bought directly from the artist in need of drug money. Problematic paintings attributed to Arkley

have been the subject of litigation. But there's always a chance that a work that hasn't surfaced before is the real thing, and in this case Juan Dávila, very much alive and practising, has confirmed the veracity of *Interior with Built-in-Bar*.

Says Gregory: "This is a fantastic example of a work that I have no qualms about at all."

The work comes with a certificate of authenticity signed by Dávila and The Estate of Howard Arkley.

Another noteworthy Centum consignment is the Bill Henson work *Untitled 2009-2010*, of two young lovers, their scuffed, sweaty skin catching the light in classic *chiaroscuro* style. It's unusual for a Henson photograph to be an edition of one. Generally, his photographs come in multiple editions. But Henson has verified that this work was indeed a one-off and a gift to the late Nikola Matovinovic, with whom he became friends after becoming a regular at Nikola's famed Melbourne store Audiophile, a magnet for audio buffs. Henson and Nikola shared more than a love of music and quality hi-fi equipment: they had the same birth date, and Nikola too was a photographer.



Robert Owen, *Shadow Play – Fourth Constellation*, 2011, estimate \$60,000 to \$80,000, for sale at Leonard Joel's Centum auction on Monday 9 May in Melbourne.

"It was like a kismet moment," says Nikola's wife, Rosanna, who has mixed feelings about selling the Henson work, but needs to scale down following her husband's death two years ago and the closure of the business.

"I feel really bad, and it's not that we didn't appreciate this work," she says.

The photograph has an estimate of \$20,000 to \$30,000.

“It if doesn’t sell, that means that Nik doesn’t want to let it go either,” Rosanna says. “And I’m fine with that”.

Leonard Joel’s National Australia Bank collection sale in February was a resounding success and the auction house will continue to release works from the collection in its sales throughout the year. Two NAB collection works are included in Centum: the small Vivienne Shark Lewitt oil painting, *The More Fool I, So Great a Fool To Adore*, 1991, with an estimate of \$1500 to \$2000, and a major sculptural work by Robert Owen, *Shadow Play – Fourth Constellation*, 2011. Commissioned by the NAB, the Owen work comprises three large geometric wall sculptures, measuring 198cm by 190.5cm by 101.5cm each. Sculptures of this scale by Owen are rare, and this group of three is estimated at \$60,000 to \$80,000 placing it immediately in potentially record-making territory. Only those with enormous mansions – or a sculpture park – need apply.



Huon pine chest of drawers, from c. 1830, sold for \$79,200 (hammer) at Hobart auction house Gowans last Tuesday, April 26, against a reserve of \$20,000.

In total, the auction has estimate of \$790,000 to \$1 million, making it the most valuable Centum sale to date. Following viewings in Sydney last week, Centum goes on show in Melbourne from tomorrow.

Moving to the historical, an auction in Tasmania last week is proof that there is still a market for rare colonial furniture. A finely-crafted, Huon pine, chest of drawers, c. 1830, sold for \$79,200 (hammer) at Hobart auction house Gowans against a reserve

of \$20,000. The chest is stamped with a broad arrow, signifying its convict-era heritage. Although of Tasmanian origin, the chest of drawers found its way to the mainland where the current vendor bought it in the late 1970s at a clearing sale in the Upper Murray region of Victoria, before bringing it back to the island.

“Believe it or not, down here there are still a few treasures,” said Gowans’ co-owner Tim Burt, who is full of yarns about the stuff that ends up at his auction house.

Like the 19th century sofa that a vendor brought in a few years ago which had been languishing in the shed.

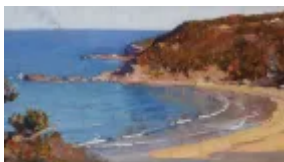
“They wanted to sell it to pay for a picket fence,” Burt says.



Detail of the broad arrow carved into the chest of drawers sold at Gowans.

The sofa made \$330,000 at auction, snapped up by the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.

Must have been some picket fence.



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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.