

# 'Australia's French Impressionist' kicks off year

**Affordable art** A work by a friend of Van Gogh is up for auction.

Elizabeth Fortescue

The summer break is over for Australia's art and collectable auction market after last year's positive results.

Saleroom reported in December that with all the major arts sales completed for the year, the industry's total auction tally was \$141 million, up on the previous year's \$120.8 million but still behind 2007's whopping \$176 million.

Although most of the larger players are yet to reveal their choicest catches for this year, other houses have already offered some interesting minnows.

First of all, who is L.T.C.?

Leonard Joel is set to offer a luminous watercolour by celebrated expat Australian painter John Peter Russell. Where the signature usually goes, the picture carries the inscription "JP Russell to L.T.C."

The work, *Belle-Île*, 1903, is in Leonard Joel's Collector's Auction, which is viewing on Friday, Saturday and Sunday in Sydney's Woollahra before a live sale on February 21.

Russell was dubbed "Australia's French Impressionist" by the Art Gallery of NSW when it opened a beautiful retrospective exhibition of his work in



John Peter Russell's *Belle-Île* (above) has an estimate of \$5000 to \$7000, while Jordan Kerwick's *Introversion #2* (right) has an estimate of \$18,000 to \$24,000.

2018, and with good reason. Russell knew and worked with Claude Monet, and imbued his paintings with the ephemerality of light that was a feature of French Impressionism.

Russell inherited a fortune in 1879 and left Sydney for London's Slade School of Fine Art.

He later moved to Paris, where in 1886 he met Vincent van Gogh while both were studying at the Atelier Cormon. The two remained close friends.

Russell painted Van Gogh's portrait, which now hangs in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. In a letter to

his brother Theo, Van Gogh urged him to take good care of the portrait.

In the late 1880s, Russell and the noted beauty Marianna Mattiocco, who modelled for the sculptor Rodin, settled on the remote and rugged island of Belle-Île-en-Mer, off the coast of Brittany. Russell met Monet, who was painting outdoors on the island, and in 1895 Henri Matisse arrived and learnt valuable lessons about colour from the affable Australian.

Back to the identity of L.T.C.: he was English-born Lionel Townsend Crawshaw (1864-1949), another artist who came to Belle-Île in the mid 1890s to meet Russell. At one point he contracted typhoid and was nursed by the hospitable Russell.

Crawshaw was identified as the person in an inscription on *Rocher au Chien, Clos Marion, Belle-Île*, 1897, an oil on canvas by Russell that was sold by Deutscher and Hackett in April 2019 for \$320,000 (\$390,400 including buyer's premium).

Russell made further gifts to Craw-

The Ormiston Gorge, Central Australia, 1959, by Dora Toovey has an estimate of \$300 to \$500.



shaw, and it appears the Leonard Joel offering is one of them. *Belle-Île* carries an estimate of \$5000 to \$7000, a level that reflects its smaller size at 30cm x 45cm and the fact that watercolours are not typically valued as highly as works in oil.

Russell returned to Australia in 1924, living in relative obscurity in Watsons Bay until his death in 1930. Today his work is prized, with a top auction price of \$1.8 million (including buyer's premium) achieved by Sotheby's in 2007.

Also in the Leonard Joel's Collector's Auction is a painting by Jordan Kerwick, a young self-taught Australian artist (born 1982) who lives in France and was virtually unknown until a year ago when his attractive paintings started fetching startlingly large amounts. Kerwick's auction record is \$US277,200 (\$380,179) for a large work titled *Le Tigre*, 2020, which sold last March at Sotheby's New York.

But has the gloss gone off Kerwick? Menzies, Smith & Singer and Leonard Joel all failed to move their Kerwicks late last year. Now Kerwick's market is about to be tested again with Joel's offering of *Introversion #2*, a mixed media work on canvas of a vase of flowers and a stack of books whose titles reference uber-hip benchmarks including artist Jean-Michel Basquiat and journalist Hunter S. Thompson. *Introversion #2* carries an estimate of \$18,000 to \$24,000. Plenty of eyes will be on the result of that one.

Leonard Joel chairman John Albrecht said Kerwick's seesawing values were to be expected while the market was still getting his measure.

"There are not enough secondary market results for Jordy Kerwick to identify what a sustainable, logical price is for those works at auction," Albrecht told Saleroom.

"He's not the first artist to experience this and he won't be the last. Probably in two or three years you and I will be able to say we know what a Jordy Kerwick is worth at auction."

"I'd be almost concerned if the trajectory of them was perfect. You can read into that what you may," he said.

Unlike the ruggedly self-taught Kerwick, Australian artist Dora Toovey (1898-1986) trained in Sydney, then at the Académie Julian in Paris and with famous Welsh painter Augustus John in the south of France. In the 1970s in Sydney, Toovey was a two-time winner of the Portia Geach Memorial Award for women's portraiture.

So far, however, Toovey has been overlooked in the great reappraisal of Australian women artists that has sent values of paintings by the likes of Clarice Beckett soaring.

No fewer than 17 paintings by Toovey are in Theodore Bruce's Interesting and Affordable sale, a timed auction closing on February 23.

Theodore Bruce fine art specialist Sally Hardy said Toovey has played second fiddle on the market to her first husband James R. Jackson (1882-1975) whose gleaming Sydney Harbour landscapes are common on the auction market.

Toovey and Jackson lived on Sydney's North Shore. In later life, Toovey enjoyed painting in Central Australia wherever her son Murray, a geologist, was working. The current offering includes many works from this period of her life.

"Apparently she was working towards an exhibition of Central Australian paintings prior to her death, and then they cancelled it before she died. So she was really cranky," Hardy said.

Toovey and Jackson's granddaughter Sue Sears is a Sydney high school art teacher who remembers her grandparents well.

"She used to read our palms. We'd go painting with her and she'd set up her easel at the Spit Bridge. She didn't care if people watched her painting. She had a beautiful garden and lots of camellias and she'd always serve coffee cake."

"She loved going on camping trips and bus adventures, and she would paint at breakfast, lunch and dinner."

What's next? Key dates include March 10 for Bonhams' auction of prints and multiples from The Sherman Collection; March 22 for Deutscher and Hackett's Melbourne auction of Important Australian Aboriginal Art; March 29 for Menzies' Important Australian and International Art, in Melbourne, and May 2 for Smith & Singer's Important Australian Art, in Sydney.

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Sunday  
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## Auction:

Sunday  
February 19th  
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