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Controversial ‘curiosity piece’ to test art market’s appetite for scandal

West Australian blue blood Elizabeth Durack outraged the art world when she started painting as Indigenous artist “Eddie Burrup”.

Elizabeth Fortescue

Mar 8, 2023 – 12.35pm

Who remembers Eddie Burrup, the man who never was? The appearance of an abstract painting in a Perth auction catalogue has conjured the spectre of one of Australia’s most celebrated cultural controversies.

Among 144 relatively affordable works by artists including Sidney Nolan and Tim Storrier, Burrup’s *Glimpse of Ngarangani* is a pleasant abstract, evoking sunlight on shallow green water. About the size of an exercise book, the painting is estimated to fetch between \$600 and \$900 at GFL Fine Art’s auction on Sunday, March 12.



Perth artist Elizabeth Durack in 1997 with a work by her alter ego, Eddie Burrup. "Big Sorry" expresses "his" feeling at the loss of Princess Diana. **Sharon Smith**

So far, so good. But the clue is in the maker's name, which is listed as "Eddie Burrup/Elizabeth Durack". The two artists were not collaborators, mind you. They were one and the same person.

Elizabeth Durack CMG, OBE was born in 1915 into a prominent Kimberley grazing dynasty that employed many local Indigenous people on its cattle stations, Argyle Downs and Ivanhoe. Her sister Dame Mary Durack wrote the Australian classic novel, *Kings in Grass Castles*.

Elizabeth became a successful artist, often painting portraits of Indigenous people – some of which appear in this sale – and exhibiting her work under her own name.

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"Glimpse of Ngarangani", by Eddie Burrup/Elizabeth Durack, recalls one of Australia's most resounding cultural controversies. Measuring 29cm x 23cm, it will be offered through Perth's GFL Fine Art on Sunday March 12 with an estimate of \$600 to \$900.

In 1997, Elizabeth Durack outed herself as the artist behind the Burrup name. The revelation that Burrup did not in fact exist, and that a privileged white woman had been making pictures that purported to be Indigenous, outraged much of the Australian art world.

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Indigenous creators attained a new importance. For Mr Mundine, who met Elizabeth Durack, *Glimpse of Ngarangani* is now just “a curiosity piece”. “I’m mellowed with age, but I was really pissed off at the time,” Mr Mundine said.

Elizabeth Durack died in 2000 aged 85. Only one other “Eddie Burrup/Elizabeth Durack” has ever come to auction, and that was in 2014. The work was passed in.

It’s a fair bet there will be no “Eddie Burrups” offered when Sotheby’s holds its just announced sale of Aboriginal Art in New York on May 23. Deutscher and Hackett’s sale of Important Indigenous Art on March 22, [previewed here last week \[https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/arts-and-culture/can-gabori-s-giant-contemporary-indigenous-work-set-a-record-20230301-p5coek\]](https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/arts-and-culture/can-gabori-s-giant-contemporary-indigenous-work-set-a-record-20230301-p5coek), is also short on Burrups. Viewings for that sale take place in Sydney from Thursday March 9 until March 12, and in Melbourne from March 16 to March 21.

Leonard Joel’s first major Fine Art sale for the year takes place in Melbourne on March 21 and is laced with fascinating histories.

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Australian modernist Clarice Beckett's misty "Princes Bridge", c.1930, in oil on board, is estimated to fetch \$70,000 to \$80,000 in Leonard Joel's Fine Art auction to be held in Melbourne on March 21.

Clarice Beckett's tranquil *Princes Bridge*, c.1930, carries an estimate of \$70,000 to \$80,000. The work bears an authentication label on the back by Hilda Mangan, who was so instrumental in bringing her sister's artistic brilliance to public attention in the 1970s.

Hundreds of Beckett's paintings rotted away in a shed before she came to prominence. Similarly, many works by the wonderful Ethel Spowers (1890-1947) were destroyed by her family who never realised she would one day be acclaimed for her exquisite linocut prints.

The Spowers print in the Leonard Joel sale is the delightful *Still Life*. 1932.

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Ethel Spowers' "Still Life", 1932, a linocut printed from five blocks, will be offered at Leonard Joel's March 21 Fine Art sale with an estimate of \$12,000 to \$18,000.

Still Life is number 21 in an edition of 30, but it's unlikely the full edition of such a delicate work survived, according to Leonard Joel head of art, Olivia Fuller. At least one more impression of this work does exist, and it's safely kept in the National Gallery of Australia collection.

Bush, c.1940, is a gorgeous landscape by modernist Grace Cossington Smith who is best known for painting beguiling interiors of her home on Sydney's north shore. *Bush* is estimated at \$20,000 to \$25,000.

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"Bush", c.1940, by auction favourite Grace Cossington Smith, carries an estimate of \$20,000 to \$25,000 in the catalogue for Leonard Joel's Fine Art auction to be held in Melbourne on March 21, 2023.

Cossington Smith's somewhat similar painting, *Untitled, Landscape with Trees and Fences*, sold at auction last month for \$17,980 (including premium) against an estimate of \$5000 to \$8000. Perhaps Leonard Joel has good reason for its higher estimate.

Some beautiful abstract works are in the Leonard Joel sale, including Lesley Dumbrell's *Gamboge*, 1987, in which spiky yellow forms assert themselves over a background of cooler colours.

Almost two metres square, *Gamboge* carries an estimate of \$9000 to \$12,000. The work is from the National Australia Bank collection, which was the focus of a major offering in February 2022 that raised \$10.5 million

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Contemporary Australian artworks coming under the gavel at Leonard Joel's sale include one by Michael Zavros, the Queensland artist and show horse rider.

Zavros' *Ennui*, 2019, in charcoal on paper, is estimated at \$12,000 to \$16,000. *Ennui* depicts a skeletal hand cupping the chin of a human skull.

Where Zavros is meticulous with whatever medium he uses, Dale Frank literally pours his coloured varnishes on to linen, where they mix and swirl to create seductive, translucent surfaces. Frank's approximately two metre square canvas, its long title beginning with *Tapping into the Desire for Something ...*, 2010, is estimated to fetch \$40,000 to \$50,000 in the Leonard Joel sale.



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The late Sydney “grunge” artist Adam Cullen never shied away from taboo subject matters. His *Zoma the Sadist*, 2005, depicts a violent assault with a knife. The estimate is \$25,000 to \$30,000.

Cullen’s annual auction turnover peaked in 2022 with combined sales of \$363,173. Perhaps the market is getting harder to shock.

Elsewhere in the Leonard Joel sale, there are well-known contemporary Australian artists Alex Seton, Janet Laurence and Fiona Lowry, and a gaudy but wonderful satire of Chinese capitalism by the Luo Brothers, whose works were first brought to Australia from China by the late, pioneering art dealer Ray Hughes.

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"Welcome", 2009, by the Luo Brothers, is estimated to fetch \$5000 to \$6000 at Leonard Joel on March 21, 2023.

The family of Melbourne social realist Noel Counihan is selling one of his highly personal paintings. *Confrontation*, 1983 (estimated at \$4000 to \$6000), was painted after Counihan had recovered from a series of strokes. He noted: "There is a celebration in this picture, because this is where I

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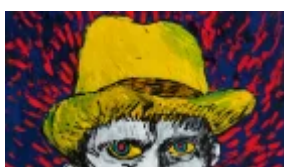
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Melbourne social realist artist Noel Counihan's oil on masonite painting, "Confrontation", 1983, is being sold from the artist's estate. Leonard Joel estimates it will fetch \$4000 to \$6000 at its March 21 Fine Art auction in Melbourne.

A heavy drinker who was inclined to dogmatism when he was young, the artist matured into a "gentle and humorous soul", Mr Counihan said.

Leonard Joel's Fine Art auction is viewing in Melbourne only, from March 17 to March 19 or (by appointment) from March 20 to March 21.



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