

Indigenous works leap back to life at auction

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Favourable prices suggest an end to the downturn for painters.

Outstanding prices for the work of stalwarts of the indigenous art market, including Emily Kngwarreye and Paddy Bedford, and for newer painters such as Daniel Walbidi, suggest the long downturn that has slashed Aboriginal art prices since 2008-09 is over.

There were already encouraging signs, such as the enthusiastic response to the \$3.4 million collection of medical duo and inveterate art collectors Colin and Liz Laverty at Deutscher and Hackett in Sydney in March last year.

But this sale, held by the same auction firm in Melbourne last Wednesday, was the first mixed-vendor sale to have so many pricey works exceed expectations, and by so much.

A mixed-vendor sale includes works from a variety of sources, and usually doesn't have the appeal of a one-owner collection.

The strength of the major pictures is demonstrated by the figures, which show the auction was 75 per cent sold by volume and 93 per cent by value, raising just over \$2 million.

There were, however, plenty of unsolds among the mostly modern works offered towards the end of the sale.

"This is the best sale for mixed vendors since 2008," declared Deutscher and Hackett's head of Aboriginal art, Crispin Gutteridge.

"I've never before seen such activity in the room. It was packed, there was a good feeling," he said, in an era when saleroom attendances have tended to dwindle as more buyers turn to bidding online.

Among the outstanding prices were Kngwarreye's *Awelye*, 1995, a 2.16-metre wide work featuring a forest of ribbon-like white tracery on a black background, which brought the top price of the sale, \$158,600 including buyer's premium, against expectations of \$80,000 to \$120,000.

Her *Kame Colour XII* from 1996 brought \$115,900 (estimate \$60,000 to \$80,000).

An unexpected inclusion in the top 10 prices was Albert Namatjira, the pioneer whose distinctive landscapes from the 1930s and 40s arguably put Aboriginal art on the map but have fallen from favour since the advent of the "dot painting" movement in the 1970s.

Namatjira's *Quarta-Tooma* (Ormiston Gorge), dating from 1939, a modest size work in high-key red and yellow, fetched \$85,400 - not far behind his record price of \$96,000 at Sotheby's Australia back in the boom days of 2006.

Johnny Warangkula's Tjupurrula's Mala (Rufous Hare Wallaby) Dreaming, a small but intense work from the dawn of the desert art movement at Papunya in 1971, brought a multi-estimate \$65,880, suggesting its importance had been substantially re-rated since it last changed hands for \$22,800 at Sotheby's in 2004, after being apparently unwanted at auction in the bicentennial year, 1988.

Contemporary Broome artist Walbidi's two-metre wide Kirriwirri from 2013, in dazzling colours, set a record price of \$79,300 for the artist, against an estimate of \$30,000 to \$50,000.

His previous record was \$51,240 set at Mossgreen's sale of the estate of Ann Lewis in 2014. The work is apparently a view of the multi-award-winning artist's ancestral lands in central Australia, which he had not visited at the time.

A smaller work by Walbidi, also called Kirriwirri but from 2014, brought \$18,300, also above estimates.

Both paintings, like several Aboriginal artworks offered in recent years, were dispersals from a superannuation fund under the stricter rules governing super investment introduced in 2011.

Robert Campbell Junior's epic Killed in the Line of Duties ... based on the tragic death of David Gundy, shot in bed by police in Sydney's Marrickville in April 1989, brought \$48,800 - a record for the urban artist - on a \$10,000 to \$12,000 estimate.

Other outstanding prices included Paddy Bedford's Untitled from 2004 at \$70,760, and Sally Gabori's My Fathers Country from 2007 at \$15,860.

The Aboriginal art bubble burst under the onslaught of the global financial crisis, the rising Australian dollar, the introduction of resale royalty for artists, and changes that made it unattractive for small superannuation funds to invest in art.