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Tricks to bagging bargains (and a Warhol) at Sydney's biggest art fair



Linda Morris

September 4, 2023 – 11:58am

Two million-dollar paintings and early pre-pop works by Andy Warhol will head to Australia's largest annual salesroom this week, in a test of the resilience of the art market amid rising recession anxiety.

Regarded as part trade fair, part cultural smorgasbord, Sydney Contemporary opens on Thursday with works by 500 artists represented by 96 galleries, including a growing overseas contingent from Singapore, Indonesia, New Zealand, and Japan.



Works for sale at Sydney Contemporary include works by Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Suzanne Archer, Andy Warhol's Flowers, and a Campbell's Soup-inspired one-wear paper dress.

All eyes will be on the show's two big-ticket items: a late-career work by Emily Kame Kngwarreye, an eminent Indigenous artist of the late 20th century, to be sold by Utopia Art Gallery, and a monumental waterfall painting by leading contemporary Japanese artist, Hiroshi Senju, available through Paddington's Justin Miller Art. Each is for sale for \$1 million.

"The fair will be a pretty good measure of how the market is going," Ralph Hobbs of Nanda/Hobbs said.

"Everyone was very gung ho about the results of the fair post-COVID but since then interest rates have gone through the roof, so I think for the casual art buyer, that market is going to be affected.

"The big collectors will still be there because there is still money around and people prepared to collect art. It comes down to the right artist and the right art."

Fellow gallerist Michael Reid said Sydney Contemporary opens at a time of strong auction results in the secondary market.

"It's a two-speed economy in that there are some of us anxiously awaiting what cash rates will do on Tuesday and there are others who simply don't care, and it's that latter group who tend to collect art," he said.

"I was bidding on a painting by Robert Johnson at Bonhams this week with an estimated price guide of \$2000 to \$3000, and I stopped at \$10,000, and it went for \$12,500. That's how strong the market is."

Gallerists pay tens of thousands of dollars for a booth at the art fair and carefully curate work for sale as they vie for the interest of art collectors, dealers and public museum and gallery curators. Selected artists make specifically for the show, while others raid their archives.

[Sullivan + Strumpf](#) is taking 22 artists to Carriageworks, including Lindy Lee, Sam Jinks, and Alex Seton who will be exhibiting large-scale interactive works at the art fair.

"It sounds like a lot, and it is – we have a large stand and always bring our best game to this fair," Ursula Sullivan says.

The Adelaide-based APY Art Centre Collective will be presenting for the first time since allegations surfaced of improper interference by studio assistants in the making of paintings representing Dreamtime stories.

The collective has strenuously denied the claims made by *The Australian* and an inquiry has [cleared works destined for a major National Gallery of Australia](#) exhibition of any provenance concerns.



Paddington gallerist Justin Miller, with works which include Andy Warhol (pictured) ready to be moved from the gallery to the Sydney Contemporary art fair. LOUIE DOUVIS

"Resilience is not a new thing for us," director Sandra Pumani said.

"We look forward to meeting our friends in Sydney [this] week, the public and making strong sales on behalf of the artists as always."

Reid says the Indigenous market is experiencing a renaissance and immense momentum heading into the fair. Resilience and artistic excellence were driving its return after bottoming out during the Global Financial Crisis.

He expects works by Christian Thompson, Owen Yalandja, Gaypalani Wanambi, Betty Chimney and Regina Pilawuk Wilson to sell out.

"From contemporary photography to traditional bark painting, ceramics to film and textiles, weaving to sculpture, and works on paper to fashion, the creative spectrum knows few bounds," he said. "The richness of this creative experience depends on no one community, or grouping of artists."

Utopia Art Gallery says collector interest in Kngwarreye remains as high as ever.

"Kngwarreye enjoys an international reputation that reaches beyond the Australian market," it said.

It's the second year back for Sydney Contemporary which went into a physical hiatus during the pandemic, a time in which the art market defied expectations of a downtown and took off.

Rain, hail, or economic downturn, Sydney gallerists tend to be an ever-optimistic bunch but most have observed a "flight to quality" in recent times.

The post-pandemic craze in NFTs or non-fungible tokens, has tempered somewhat: "I like my art to exist," quips Hobbs.

"I've definitely noticed a slowing in sales generally, but then again we've had some amazing months. It goes back to the fact that, if your shows are interesting and appropriately priced, art will do well."

Recently returned from London summer auction sales, Justin Miller said secondary art markets remained strong in Australia and overseas. He is presenting three Andy Warhols, predating the artist's pop art stardom.

"In times of flux, great art is seen as both a respite and also a solid and tangible investment," Miller says.

Who is the next big thing? "Well, you don't know," Miller says, but it helps to familiarise yourself with contemporary art galleries and auctions, befriend art dealers, who are invariably enthusiasts, and then develop your own interests.

"Initially, spread your tentacles wide and then at one stage work out what turns you on," he said. "Reward favours the patient and the informed."



The Andy Warhol Souper dress for sale at Sydney Contemporary for \$16,500.

How to snare what you're looking for

- The blue chip: If your budget doesn't make it to Warhol's early works or Senju, Miller is selling a one-wear Andy Warhol Souper Dress, a paper dress sent to women who entered two soup labels and \$1 in post. A related work is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum in New York. "It's the Andy Warhol to have when you don't have an Andy Warhol," Miller says.
- The next big thing: Since 2018, the National Art School has presented the next wave of Australia's artistic talent. This year it will show works by eight recent graduates including Justine Roche, who experiments with photographic practices, printmaker Annabelle McEwen, for whom big things are predicted, and painter Frances Meow who sold-out last's year's graduate show.
- Women rule: Pitjantjatjara artist Dora Parker (D'Lan Contemporary), Yona Lee (Fine Arts), Petrina Hicks (Michael Reid) and Marlee Dobell (Sutton) are presenting. Wynne Prize winner, Suzanne Archer, a contemporary of Elisabeth Cummings, has been painting vast paintings since 1967. "If she was a male painter in the era, with the same CV and included in the same collections with the same quality of work she would be worth north of \$100,000 for major pieces," says Hobbs.
- Bargain buys: Kack Studio in PAPER has artist books and risograph books available for purchase for between \$35-75. Prints, drawings, etchings, monos and mixed media works by leading artists range from under \$100 to \$2,000.

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Linda Morris is an arts writer at The Sydney Morning Herald. Connect via [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) or [email](#).