

Howard Arkley dominates list of year's top art sales

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Languorous Lavender Bay on Sydney Harbour gave way to lurid Melbourne suburbia as **Howard Arkley** shouldered **Brett Whiteley** off the winner's podium in the Australian art auction stakes this year.

With auctions all but over for 2025, the statistics tell the story of this year's love affair with Arkley and his spray-painted odes to the modest brick homes of his Melbourne boyhood.



Two of Arkley's paintings shared the top price paid for a work of art at auction in Australia this year, with collectors forking out \$2.5 million for each of his paintings, *Contemporary Units*, 1988, and *Neapolitan Delight*, 1993.

These prices also set a new auction record for the late artist. (All prices in this report will include the buyer's premium.)

John Peter Russell's *Portrait of Dodge Macknight*, c.1888, achieved the third top price of \$2,312,500 in a year when the market traded \$148.49 million worth of art (as of December 10, with several smaller auctions still to take place).

Arkley also took out fourth and fifth spots in the rankings. The rest of the top 10 prices went to paintings by **Arthur Boyd**, **Jeffrey Smart**, **Frederick McCubbin**, **Arthur Streeton** and another work by Russell.

Arkley was the most traded artist by value this year, his works fetching a total of \$10.5 million. **Brett Whiteley** was second with \$8.4 million, followed by **Arthur Boyd** with \$8.2 million.

At \$2,312,500, *Portrait of Dodge Macknight*, c.1888, by John Peter Russell was the third-highest sale of the year at Deutscher + Hackett in November.

For Deutscher + Hackett's Damian Hackett, who sold Arkley's *Neapolitan Delight* and two of the other Arkleys on the top 10 list, the success of the artist this year was generated by the high quality of the individual works on offer.

"To be honest there's always been a demand for Arkley, or at least over the last 20 years," Hackett said. "What he's experienced this year is that some remarkable, amazing major works have been offered."

Can the market expect more top-notch Arkleys to be offered next year?

"An exciting price does help to loosen up a hesitant vendor," Hackett said. "There's some absolutely fantastic works (by Arkley) out there."

Smith & Singer chairman Geoffrey Smith, who sold Arkley's *Contemporary Units* in August, said Arkley "has sort of replaced Brett Whiteley this year".

"What I think has occurred is that great works by the artist came forward," Smith said.

Top 10 prices at Australian art auctions in 2025*

Price (\$m)	Artwork	Seller
2.5	<i>Contemporary Units</i> , 1988, by Howard Arkley	Smith & Singer
2.5	<i>Neapolitan Delight</i> , 1993, by Howard Arkley	Deutscher + Hackett
2.3	<i>Portrait of Dodge Macknight</i> , c.1888, by John Peter Russell	D+H
2.1	<i>New room</i> , 1993, by Howard Arkley	D+H
1.9	<i>The freeway</i> , 1999, by Howard Arkley	D+H
1.8	<i>Bride in Hibiscus Bush</i> , 1958, by Arthur Boyd	S&S
1.6	<i>Night stop, Bombay</i> , 1981, by Jeffrey Smart	D+H
1.5	<i>The Lime Tree (Yarra River from Kensington Road, South Yarra)</i> 1917, by Frederick McCubbin	Leonard Joel
1.5	<i>La Salute</i> , 1908, by Arthur Streeton	D+H
1.5	<i>Vue de la Seine, Bougival (View of the Seine, Bougival, Spring)</i> , 1887, by John Peter Russell	S&S

* Including buyer's premium

Source: Australian Art Sales Digest

Contemporary Units, for example, had been in the same collection since 1988 when the owner paid \$8500 for the work. It had never been published in colour before appearing in the Smith & Singer catalogue.

Smith said there was a deepening appreciation for the spectrum of Arkley's work.

"Until this year, his top prices were all interior subjects," he said. "You now have a freeway painting and an exterior in the top four prices."

Such imagery was "timeless".

"We've all struggled to buy a home. It's the vernacular journey of what being Australian is," Smith said.

Untitled (Awelye), 1992, by Emily Kame Kngwarreye, blew past its estimate of \$400,000 to \$600,000 at Deutscher + Hackett in March.

Arkley generated compelling compositional tensions in his work through his use of perspective and patterning, Smith said.

Back to the results and Arkley took out the top three spots on Australian Art Sales Digest's "star performers" list of works that exceed their high estimate by the largest amount.

The two women on the star performers list were **Emily Kame Kngwarreye** at number seven and 10, and **Dorrit Black** at nine. Kngwarreye's *Untitled (Awelye)*,

1992, sold for \$1,218,750 against its estimate of \$400,000 to \$600,000.

Sicilian Mountain (1928), by Dorrit Black, was estimated at \$120,000 to \$180,000 at Smith & Singer in November but sold for \$687,500.

Black's *Sicilian Mountain*, 1928, sold for \$687,500 against its estimate of \$120,000 to \$180,000.

While there were no women in the list of top 10 prices this year, they did feature strongly in the list of artists whose work achieved a record price at auction this year. **Grace Cossington Smith's** *The reader (the school cape)*, c.1916, fetched \$1 million.

The reader (the school cape), c.1916, by Grace Cossington Smith, was estimated at \$400,000 to \$600,000 at Deutscher + Hackett in August but sold for \$1 million.

The other women artists with new auction price records were **Criss Canning, Florence Fuller, Margaret Olley, Carol Jerrems, Inge King, Naata Nungurrayi, Doreen Reid Nakamarra, Kate Bergin, Angela Brennan, Elizabeth Gray, Doris Hope Weston, Janice Murray Pungautiji, Ann Thomson, Jorna Newberry, Tjungkara Ken, Margo Lewers and Angelina George.**

The market has still not hit the pre-GFC highs of 2007, when total sales were \$175.63 million. However, this year's total of \$148.79 million (so far) does show an increase over \$135.79 million at the same time last year and \$141.28 million in 2023.

The overall clearance rate this year was 61 per cent, and the average price paid for an artwork at auction was \$9527. (Saleroom spotted one work that fetched just \$30 this year.)

The Island of San Giorgio Maggiore from the West (top) and View of the Cannaregio, with the Ponte dei Tre Archi and the Palazzo Surian-Bellotto, by Francesco Guardi (1712-1793). **Leonard Joel**

The final major sales took place this week, with Leonard Joel achieving \$3,532,500 for Old Master Paintings from the Robert Compton Jones Collection, held on December 8 in Sydney.

The clearance rate was 173 per cent by value and 89 per cent by number, Leonard Joel specialist Madeleine Mackenzie said.

The old master sale – one of just two single-owner auction sales to top the million dollar mark this year – brought international buyers out of the woodwork to secure almost half of the 28 lots on offer.

The top price of \$1,062,500 went to lot 14, **Francesco Guardi's** twin paintings of Venice titled *The Island of San Giorgio Maggiore from the West*, and *View of the Cannaregio, with the Ponte dei Tre Archi and the Palazzo Surian-Bellotto*.

The estimate on the pair of paintings was \$500,000 to \$700,000.

Those two little gems (46 x 65.5 cm each) are heading off to a new international home. Lots 1, 5 and 16 were also bought by the same bidder, so presumably they are departing our shores too. Those lots, respectively, were by **The Master of San Torpè**, **Paolo Di Stefano Badaloni**, and **Circle of Giuseppe Maria Crespi (Lo Spagnuolo)**.

Lot 17 was withdrawn from the catalogue just before the auction. This item was **Carlo Maratti's *Portrait of a woman, half length, in a black and white lace dress with red bows, holding a fan***. Its estimate was \$100,000 to \$145,000.

Mackenzie said all the other works in the sale were cleared by the Art Loss Register, the London-based private database of stolen artworks.

However, the Art Loss Register had sought more clarity around the provenance of the Maratti portrait – specifically, who owned it prior to the late Italian art historian Giuliano Briganti who sold it in about 1970 to Colnaghi & Co in London, from where Compton Jones bought it in 1971.

“It’s a bit of a fun research project for me,” Mackenzie told Saleroom.

Once the Art Loss Register has certified the Maratti, it will be offered for sale next year, Mackenzie said.

Deutscher + Hackett’s last outing of the year was its online Australian Fine Art + Indigenous Art sale on December 9, whose results brought this auction house’s 2025 total sales to \$41.13 million.

Geoffrey Smith, left, with artist Michael Eather at the Smith & Singer viewing in April of Lin Onus’s painting titled *Michael and I are Just Slipping Down to the Pub for a Minute*, 1992. The work sold for \$312,500.

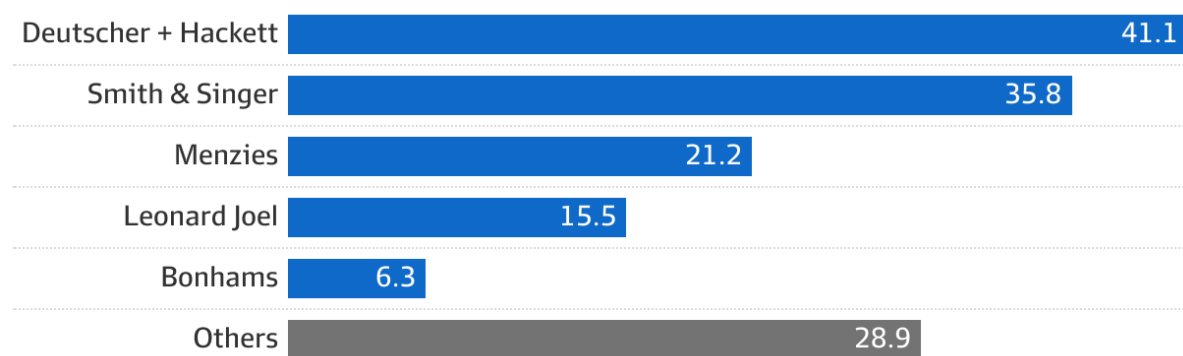
Smith & Singer came in at \$35.8 million in total sales, but Geoffrey Smith said he offered fewer than half the number of artworks as Deutscher + Hackett.

“Our average per work of art is phenomenally high,” Smith said.

Smith & Singer’s private sales (as opposed to auction sales) quadrupled in value this year, he said. For example, the firm is currently holding an exhibition in its Melbourne rooms of paintings and sculptures by **John Kelly**.

Auction sales league table (\$m)

TOTAL: \$148.79m



Source: Australian Art Sales Digest

Menzies auction house came in third with sales of \$21.2 million, Leonard Joel was fourth at \$15.46 million (more than double it’s 2024 sales), and Bonhams fifth at \$6.29 million. According to AASD, “other” auction houses sold art to the total of \$28.95 million.

And a final word on **Brett Whiteley**. While the great Australian artist was absent from the league ladder this year, he still holds the Australian art auction price record of \$6.136 million for *Henri’s Armchair*, 1974-75, sold through Menzies in 2020.

Whoever's star might rise on the market next year, Saleroom looks forward to reporting on it.

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