Sale of Indigenous art expected to fetch up to $3.9 million at New York auction

Matthew Knott

A blockbuster year for Indigenous art in America, which has featured exhibits in several of the country's best known galleries, is culminating in the first major auction of Indigenous art in the United States.

Auction house Sotheby's decided to move its annual Indigenous art auction from London to New York this year to capitalise on the surge of interest in Indigenous art in the US.

Paintings by some of Australia's most famous Indigenous artists are expected to fetch prices of up to $650,000 each at an auction at Sotheby's headquarters in Manhattan on Friday (Saturday Australian time).

It is the first time an international auction house has held a sale entirely of contemporary Indigenous art outside of Australia or Europe.

The sale of 33 works is estimated to raise between $2.8 and $3.9 million (US$1.9m and US$2.7m) in total.

"Aboriginal art has a lot of momentum here at the moment," Tim Klingender, Sotheby's longtime consultant on Indigenous art, said during a tour of the auction exhibit on Manhattan's Upper East Side.
"There has been a lot of interest in recent years in art that comes from outside the Western canon."

Collectors, he said, are increasingly looking to diversify beyond artists who are white and male.

Klingender said the auction showed how much America's appreciation of Indigenous art had matured since the breakthrough exhibit *Dreamings - the Art of Aboriginal Australia* 30 years ago. That showing, at New York's Asia Society galleries, was the first time many Americans had been exposed to Indigenous art.

Margo Smith, director of the University of Virginia's Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, said: "This is a vibrant area of contemporary art that is exploding right now.

"When Americans think of Aboriginal art they tend to think of historical artefacts. They are often amazed when they come to a gallery and see such spectacular and relevant contemporary works of art."

The growing number of Indigenous art exhibits has attracted the attention of the US media. Trade publication Artsy described 2019 as a "record year for Aboriginal art in New York City" while *The New York Observer* asked in June: "Why the sudden spotlight on Australian Aboriginal Art?"

Smith said a turning point for awareness of Indigenous art was the headline-generating show *Desert Painters of Australia* at the Gagosian Gallery in New York in June.

Most of the works were on loan from actor and comedian Steve Martin, who has become an avid collector and champion of Indigenous art in recent years.
Martin's interest was sparked by a visit to a 2015 New York show by Western Desert artist Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri, where he promptly bought a painting for his collection.

"Steve's show created a lot of buzz and generated a lot of interest among people who wouldn't have been familiar with Aboriginal art," Fred Myers, an expert in Aboriginal art at New York University, said.

Former tennis star John McEnroe, a passionate art collector, was among those who attended the Gagosian exhibit.

Actor and comedian Steve Martin has become a passionate supporter of Indigenous art.

Earlier in the year Yukultji Napangati made her US solo debut with an exhibit on Manhattan's lower east side. Pop star Beyoncé and husband Jay Z have acquired several of Napangati's paintings for their collection.

In June MoMA PS1 in Queens presented the first solo US exhibit of Northern Territory media art group the Karrabing Film Collective. The retrospective, featuring nine short films, received a rave review in The New York Times.

The interest isn't limited to New York. The Menil Collection, one of the top art galleries in Houston, Texas, is currently staging a major exhibit featuring more than 100 Indigenous artworks on loan from the Fondation Opale in Switzerland.

All the works for sale at the Sotheby's auction are contemporary, painted from the 1950s onwards. But they feature a wide variety of styles.

There are bold geometric designs, vibrant colours, minutely-detailed dot patterns and traditional bark paintings depicting snakes, goannas and praying mantises.

*The Seagull*, a painting by Mawalan Marika that was displayed in a landmark 1963 exhibit of Indigenous art in New York, has returned to the city after almost six decades.
Works featuring explicitly political themes also feature, most prominently Gordon Bennett's well-known *Self Portrait (But I Always Wanted to Be One of the Good Guys)* from 1990.

It shows Bennett, who died in 2014, as a young boy dressed in cowboy garb and explores how racial stereotypes help construct identity.

The post-modern painting, which has been exhibited in biennales in Venice and Shanghai, has the highest price estimate in the auction. It is expected to sell for between $500,000 and $650,000.

One of the other headline works is *Summer Celebration*, a brightly-coloured painting by Emily Kame Kngwarreye featuring large yellow, lilac and pink dots. It is expected to fetch up to $580,000.

"I wouldn't be surprised if it makes a really big price," Klingender said.

Other prominent artists include Ronnie Tjampitjinpa, Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri and Dorothy Napangardi.

In *Pigeon Holed*, artist and activist Richard Bell portrays himself as an "angry black man" in six adjacent photographs to subvert negative stereotypes of Aboriginal men.

Most of the works for sale were consigned from the private collections of two Melbourne women, gallerist Gabrielle Pizzi and landscape designer Fiona Brockhoff, and Dutch collector Thomas Vroom.

Klingender said he expects to see more indigenous art auctions in New York in coming years. "This is the centre of the world's art market," he said. "It's where you want to be."