in search of the value of self

JANE RAFFAN TALLIES THE SALES FROM THE AUSTRALIAN AND INTERNATIONAL ART MARKETS

Self portraiture within an artist’s oeuvre is generally attributed to three factors traceable to the early Renaissance: technical achievements in the manufacture of flat of mirrors; improvements in oil painting pigments and techniques; and the elevation through patronage in the status of artists from artisan to societal elite. Today, self portraits are readily found amongst the submissions of Australia’s twenty-five or so annual portraiture prizes, exhibitions of which are hugely popular and draw significant audience participation. In contrast, relatively few self portraits are found amongst the top echelon of Australia’s auction results. It’s another story in the international marketplace, however, where self portraits are esteemed and achieve staggering prices.

While there are certain commonalities amongst the key points of attraction to potential buyers of self portraits in both arenas, most particularly the mystique of the auteur and the status of the artist in question, the disparity between the two markets is stark. A snapshot of select works from each sheds some light on this contrast and the influences that have informed and continue to characterise their difference.

Francis Bacon and Andy Warhol account for eight out of the ten highest prices paid for self portraits in the international market, totalling a whopping $245 million dollars. The other artists in this tier are Vincent van Gogh and Edouard Manet. Viewed through the value prism of mystique, it is not surprising to find van Gogh topping the chart with a sale of US$65 million dollars for a rare unburned self portrait. Van Gogh is the undeniable pin-up boy for those seeking to fill the ‘self portrait as reflection of troubled artist’ niche in their collection (private and institutional). The artist painted around forty self portraits, only two have ever been offered at auction.

Warhol’s cachet as the ‘pop of pop’ also carries bad boy movie star glam and irresistible allure mystique. Warhol overturned art practice and commodified the contemporary artist as cultural icon. The top prices paid for his self portraits occurred in 2011, when a European collector trumped rivals at US$34.25 million for the artist’s first Self Portrait, a work in four panels from 1964 showing Warhol wearing dark glasses and trench coat with the artist striking Fellini-like filmstar poses. The painting generated a bidding war that lasted sixteen minutes, reportedly the longest in auction history.

While Warhol’s decapitated floating head operates as an in-your-face graphic vanitas or memento mori motif, portraits by Francis Bacon, who critic John Berger coined the ‘prophet of a pitiless world’, offer a more penetrating insight to the human condition. In a 2004 review for the Guardian, Berger assessed his work thus: ‘He repeatedly painted the human body, or parts of the body, in discomfort or agony or want. Sometimes the pain involved looks as if it has been inflicted; more often it seems to originate from within, from the guts of the body itself, from the misfortune of being physical’. Bacon’s portraits were predominantly graphic, and often nude, featuring the human body in contorted positions, often with visible wounds or marks of torture. The artist was known for his use of bold, contrasting colors and his attention to detail, creating a sense of tension and unease in his portraits. His work often explored themes of identity, sexuality, and the human condition.

Self Portrait 1963–64
Andy Warhol
acrylic and silkscreen ink on canvas
© Estate of Andy Warhol, Photo © Christie’s Images, The Bridgeman Art Library

Landscape with Sunset and Self Portrait
William Robinson
oil on canvas
© William Robinson, Photo courtesy Sotheby’s Australia

What price self?
Vincent van Gogh  
Portrait de l'Érable sans Barbe 1889  
us$85,000,000  
Christie’s New York, 19 November 1998

Francis Bacon  
Self Portrait 1979  
gb£17,819,250 (us$30,729,160)  
Christie’s London, 30 June 2008

Edouard Manet  
Autopaisage à la Palette 1878  
gb£22,344,250 (us$36,074,000)  
Sotheby’s London, 14 November 2007

Andy Warhol  
Self Portrait 1964  
us$29,000,000  
Sotheby’s New York, 12 May 2010

Francis Bacon  
Self Portrait 1969  
us$29,000,000  
Sotheby’s New York, 22 June 2010

Francis Bacon  
Three Studies For Self Portrait 1975  
gb£17,819,250 (us$30,729,160)  
Christie’s London, 10 June 2008

Damien Hirst, reportedly the richest artist in the world, outbid diamond traders and hedge fund managers to secure his fourth work by Bacon, a foot-square Self Portrait from 1969 for us$29 million.

Photographs of Eadweard Muybridge’s figures in motion from Animal Locomotion 1887 and photographs of male patients in convulsion.

Writing for a 2005 exhibition of his portraits and heads at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, Richard Calvocoressi noted that Bacon regularly quoted Muybridge’s visual lexicon, especially the chance pose or fluid movement (that) led Bacon to develop portraits of a fleeting glance or manner of expression’. Bacon used this device to great effect on himself in Three Studies for Self Portrait, 1975, which sold for us$30.75 million in 2008. In the triptych format, features are smeared and sliced across three canvases. The end result is a portrait that appears to resemble a series of stop-motion film stills that regurgitate some darker element of the psyche/soul, akin to the canvas in the Picture of Dorian Gray. Bacon wanted his pictures ‘to look as if a human being had passed between them – leaving a trail of the human presence’. The majority of Bacon’s self portraits remain in private hands, which is not surprising as few institutions can compete with prices around the $30 million mark. In 2007, the artist Damien Hirst, reportedly the richest artist in the world, outbid diamond traders and hedge fund managers to secure his fourth work by Bacon, a foot-square Self Portrait from 1969 for us$29 million. The most expensive self portrait by Bacon is a full-length work – one of only twelve known to exist – which sold for $33.6 million dollars in June. The exceptional result.

Study for Self Portrait 1964 depicts Bacon seated on a bed, his head in havoc, against a seemingly blood splattered cage/box. The Art Gallery of New South Wales has another full length portrait study that depicts the artist in the same cross-legged pose as the Lucian Freud/Bacon figure, on a chair within a cage in the fashion of his early portraits of popes and others, and with the head defined by a similar dens black box. Both works are strong examples of the artist’s interest in literal self-effacement. In the Art Gallery of New South Wales’ major Bacon show that opened in mid-November, heads, portraits and self portraits number nineteen amongst the fifty-four works on display (see page 57 for exhibition details).

Manet’s depiction of himself with palette aside, the top ten self...
Top results courtesy of the Australian Art Sales Digest

Hammer and premium, excluding auction house charges, results courtesy of the Australian Art Sales Digest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Auction House</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Price</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John Olsen</td>
<td>Self Portrait (Afternoon walk, Dunmoochin)</td>
<td>Sotheby's Sydney</td>
<td>22 July 2003</td>
<td>$117,500</td>
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<tr>
<td>John Olsen</td>
<td>Self Portrait by the Sea</td>
<td>Sotheby's Sydney</td>
<td>31 August 2010</td>
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<td>William Dobell</td>
<td>Self Portrait (Afternoon walk, Dunmoochin)</td>
<td>Sotheby's Sydney</td>
<td>7 May 2007</td>
<td>$696,000</td>
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<td>Jeffrey Smart</td>
<td>Self Portrait</td>
<td>Christie's Melbourne</td>
<td>28 July 1992</td>
<td>$41,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nora Heysen</td>
<td>Self Portrait 1993</td>
<td>Sotheby's Sydney</td>
<td>31 August 2010</td>
<td>$568,000</td>
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<td>George Lambert</td>
<td>Self Portrait with Gladioli 1922</td>
<td>Sotheby's Melbourne</td>
<td>19 August 1996</td>
<td>$278,500</td>
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<td>William Robinson</td>
<td>Landscape with Sunset and Self Portrait</td>
<td>Sotheby's Australia</td>
<td>4 November 2003</td>
<td>$442,500</td>
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<tr>
<td>John Brack</td>
<td>Self Portrait 1955</td>
<td>Sotheby's Melbourne</td>
<td>28 June 2000</td>
<td>$442,500</td>
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<td>William Robinson</td>
<td>Landscape and Self Portrait a/c 1987</td>
<td>Christie's Melbourne</td>
<td>18 June 2008</td>
<td>$306,000</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

- The domination of the fine art market of all time, totalling $10.68 million.
- The National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
- The Bridgeman Art Library.
- Helen Brack.
- Christie's Images.
- Photos courtesy of the Gallery's Women's Association.

- Self Portrait 1993
- Self Portrait (Afternoon walk, Dunmoochin)
- Self Portrait by the Sea
- Self Portrait
- Landscape and Self Portrait

- There is no ‘tightrope walk’ between the abstract and figurative in John Olsen’s Self Portrait by the Sea, which sold for $696,000 in 2010 and sits sixth in the Australian top ten. His identity as one of Australia’s formative landscape artists and Sydneysider is made apparent by the painted simuous line that is unmistakably Olsen. The artist’s central casting and prominent figuration in Afternoon walk, portrait of himself against a hoarding. Like Brack, he is contextualised by the identifiable iconography of his oeuvre and bears the deadpan expression he gives the players in his paintings. Like Lambert, his attire, in this case open neck shirt and cravat, speaks volumes about his sense of self. The work is now in the collection of the University of Queensland.

- Painters are important reminders of our humanity, and self portraits offer artists the chance to move beyond likeness to push the boundaries of enquiry further. As the critic John Russell points out, Bacon’s heads are ‘about the disintegration of the social being that takes place when one is alone in a room’. Perhaps it’s the relative youthfulness of our nation that compels us to constantly contextualise our place in the world, or perhaps it’s the Antipodean light, but it seems that the landscape and its peoples. The work is now in the collection of the University of Queensland.

- Lectures are more easily read in terms of traditional portraiture. John Brack’s Self Portrait from 1955 is a very example of proclaiming artistic intent through self-portraiture. Brack has been christened the ‘master of urban irony’, and in this intimate but sterile space he grasps through the imagined mirror to meet us, the subjects of his painterly enquiries. This striking work was repatriated from America in 2000 as part of the dispersal of the Mertz Collection from the University of Austin, Texas and claims the second highest price for a self portrait at auction. It is fortunate for our cultural patrimony that the market here is a few zeros off international price. The National Gallery of Victoria was able to acquire the work with the assistance of the Gallery’s Women’s Association for $442,500.

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