Money for myth

AUSTRIAN CHARACTER ON THE MARKET. BY JANE RAFFAN.

Amid the cacophony of celebration, national anniversaries give rise to reflections on nationhood and national character. In 1988, two hundred years after the First Fleet’s arrival, and again in 2001, the centenary of Federation, after the First Fleet’s arrival, and again the media and film, television industries – as marking the birth of the ‘digger’, who possesses a ‘bush born’ Australian identity and character distinct from British antecedents. Academia offers a contradiction: in a new exhibit about colonial artist ST Gill, Professor Sasha Grishin claims Gill invented the character of the digger with illustrations of gold prospectors in the 1880s exhibiting ‘resilience, anti-authority attitude and dry humour.’ Meanwhile, contemporary mythologising continues, with the media repeatedly describing all injured/killed soldiers as diggers, one wonders how they’ll reference the first female soldier to fall. Bushranger and murderer Ned Kelly espouses the digger’s characteristics and is venerated as a cultural symbol. Meanwhile, contemporary mythologising continues, with the media repeatedly describing all injured/killed soldiers as diggers, one wonders how they’ll reference the first female soldier to fall. Bushranger and murderer Ned Kelly espouses the digger’s characteristics and is venerated as a cultural symbol.

More recently, the Gallipoli centenary offered sombre contemplation on an episode indelibly inked into our history. Despite the terrible defeat, the campaign is emblemised in our collective consciousness – with significant mythologising by early war historians, the secondary market has long supported an idealised view of our early history, with several works by Frederick McCubbin amongst the top twenty recorded sales. McCubbin’s paintings carry intensely poetic titles that serve to disguise their subjects’ toil, such as Bush Idyll, 1893 (sold 1998 for just over $2.3 million), and Whispering to the Wattle Boughs, 1890 (sold 2012 for $1.2 million). Like the French artist Millet’s depictions of peasants ploughing under a glorious sunset, this genre served to keep the privileged classes comfortable in the

In contemporary times, where the term ‘battler’ is regularly parodied by politicians in aspirational outer-urban marginal seats to court votes, the impact of the foundational image of the bush battler has somewhat faded from collective memory – but not on the secondary market, where portrayals of ‘The Old Bush Drove’, ‘Warrego Jim’ and the like, regularly achieve sums well over $1 million.

Australia’s foundational narratives are inextricably tied to the landscape. There are no great history paintings of convict life. Instead, our public art institutions are filled with pictorial visions of sun-bleached pastoralists and wooded idylls, where pioneers toil or itinerant workers pause to contemplate life on the wallaby track (collection AGNSW), a euphemism that offered the prospect of independence from master/overlord, tied to the promise of bounty from the land. Coincidently, or perhaps not, Australia’s first recorded million dollar sale on the secondary market occurred in 1998, the bicentenary of the first convict arrivals. What better way of saying ‘we’ve made it!’ The aspirational buyer was Alan Bond. The secondary market has long supported an idealised view of our early history, with several works by Frederick McCubbin amongst the top twenty recorded sales. McCubbin’s paintings carry intensely poetic titles that serve to disguise their subjects’ toil, such as Bush Idyll, 1893 (sold 1998 for just over $2.3 million), and Whispering to the Wattle Boughs, 1890 (sold 2012 for $1.2 million). Like the French artist Millet’s depictions of peasants ploughing under a glorious sunset, this genre served to keep the privileged classes comfortable in the

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knowledge that the working poor were (and are) a content, and won McCubbin significant praise and patronage.

The approach of McCubbin’s Heidelberg group compatriot, Arthur Streeton, was somewhat more direct and robust, if not factual. Settler’s Camp, executed in the centenary of British colonisation, set a record price for an Australian work executed in the centenary of British colonisation. The real-life subjects of most settler pictures depicting colonial settlement, Australia hosted the tenant farmers. Robertson’s work – where carefree play is disrupted by a central warning sign – can be read as a comment on loss. In the artist’s case, it is maternal loss, foregrounded with a mother and baby evoking The Pietà and, in a broader cultural context, as an observation on the absence/loss of men due to war. One of the most popular narratives on the secondary market is exploration, or more accurately, the explorer. Modernists Sidney Nolan and Albert Tucker, in particular, repeatedly turned to this theme in their oeuvres. Stoicism, resilience, blind ignorance and masculine heroism fill canvases. And the landscapes are terra nullius. Nolan did tackle a couple of stories of women and the landscape, both with Indigenous connections – Daisy Bates and Eliza Fraser – but these ‘imaginary portraits’ were exceptional, utilised chiefly for expressing alienation rather than pioneering spirit or resilience.

Nolan fixed on Burke and Wills (268 sales; top price $532,000 in 2009), whose follies were exploited for poetic drama, while Tucker developed a type, or ‘refracting prism for the human drama’, that usually dominated the landscape. Various titles Antipodes Head, Pioneer Head and Explorer; the latter performs best, despite clearly utilising the same head. The depicted work, Explorer, which made nearly $218,000 (2002), was originally sold in 1974 as Antipodes Head.

In 1938, the sesquicentenary of colonial settlement, Australia hosted the Empire Games (now Commonwealth Games) for the first time, and Charles Meere, who designed the posters, commenced Australian Beach Pattern, 1940 (collection AGNSW). Painted a year after Max Dupain’s Sunbaker, this work has become an iconic representation of nationhood for its depiction of ordinary Australians as ‘heroic symbols’ exhibiting health and vitality – an extension of the ideals credited to Tom Roberts’ young woman in Australian Beach Pattern.

In 1989, photographer Anne Zahalka produced The Bathers (collection AGNSW), a work that replaced the bronzed Aussie mono-racial figures in Meere’s work with a representation of multi-cultural Australia. In 2013, she updated the work with The New Bathers, which depicts an even greater racial mix and centres on a Muslim woman wearing a hijab. Painted by Meere’s student/assistant, Freda Roberts, Australian Beach Pattern, 1940, is a markedly different version of Meere’s narrative. Its compositional devices place the focus on women; men are all but absent. It sold for $475,500 (1998), more than five times the top price for the artist, and was acquired by a private collection by curator John Cruthers who has long championed women painters. Roberton’s work – where carefree play is disrupted by a central warning sign – can be read as a comment on loss. In the artist’s case, it is maternal loss, for-grounded with a mother and baby evoking The Pietà and, in a broader cultural context, as an observation on the absence/loss of men due to war. One of the most popular narratives on the secondary market is exploration, or more accurately, the explorer. Modernists Sidney Nolan and Albert Tucker, in particular, repeatedly turned to this theme in their oeuvres. Stoicism, resilience, blind ignorance and masculine heroism fill canvases. And the landscapes are terra nullius. Nolan did tackle a couple of stories of women and the landscape, both with Indigenous connections – Daisy Bates and Eliza Fraser – but these ‘imaginary portraits’ were exceptional, utilised chiefly for expressing alienation rather than pioneering spirit or resilience.

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Brett Whiteley, too, ventured into this territory with his 1985 simous homage to Ernest Giles who ‘discovered’ and named Kata Tjuta (‘The Olga’), currently the third top selling work at auction, at close to $3.5 million (2007). Contemporary Indigenous artist, Gordon Bennett, has repeatedly addressed the explorer/colonist trope in his work, challenging this heroic masculine canon in Australia’s narratives by reinstating Indigenous presence and adding political comment.

In Zones of the Marvellous: In Search of the Antipodes (2009), artist Martin Edmund described Bennett’s depiction of Burke in Haptic Painting Explorer (The Inland Sea), 1993, as ‘burning as he drown in a sea of his own territorialising imagination.’ Bennett has the heroic explorer sinking beneath a dotted sea, referencing central desert art, amongst the flesum and jentum of previous colonial naval explorers (sold 2012 for $380,000). In search of portrait depictions of national character on the secondary market – as opposed to our national institutions, where they abound – there are few compared with types. Where portraits have sold well, they tend to be unnamed sitters, a play to draw attention to the work’s aesthetics. Named sitters are typically society people, or from the artist’s circle. Ex-pat Jeffrey Smart’s portraits, rare in the oeuvre, focussed on Australian intellectual and artistic pioneers (David Malouf, Germaine Greer, Clive James, Margaret Olley). Despite this, in most cases they are still ‘chess pieces’ in his chief aim of highlighting the banal, sometimes sinister and alienating effects of our urban environment.

Smart’s works are a far cry from masculine heroic narratives of pioneers and pastoralists, explorers and bush battlers, diggers and drovers. He and satirist John Brack, in particular, share the secondary market limelight
Brack’s famous depictions of rushing workers, ballroom dancers, jockeys, shopfronts, domesticity and the car, ground contemporary Australian experience in the suburban, where the charade of heroic character gives way to the mundane, in which his subjects nevertheless still express the ‘resilience, anti-authority and dry humour’ assigned to characterisations of Australianness.

Works by both artists factor in the top prices paid at auction each year, with Brack currently claiming three places in the historical top-ten, totalling nearly $7.65 million. *The Bar 1954* ($3.2 million, sold 2006; collection NGV) is a parody of Manet’s famous *Un bar aux Folies Bergère* and a comment on the infamous ‘six o’clock swill’. Curiously, the profiles of the patrons exhibit strong similarities to Tucker’s Antipodean heads developed a decade later.

For Smart – who, along with Brack, Nolan and Drysdale are four of the market’s most traded artists – it is a self-portrait that currently ranks top in the artist’s œuvre: *Self Portrait at Papini’s 1984–85* (sold 2014 for $1.26 million). Smart depicts himself smiling ambiguously out at us. Here we have the mature artist confidently front and centre of his own story. This work comes closest to the examples of notable people lauded by our public institutions for their personal achievements as Australians, but they are few and far between on the secondary market, where espousals of national mythologies and masculine types still fill the front of catalogues and bring the biggest bucks.

*Auction results courtesy of the Australian Art Sales Digest (AASD)*