

# SOTHEBY'S CELEBRATES 10TH ANNIVERSARY WITH ABORIGINAL ART SALE

NEWS/MELBOURNE

by Michael Desmond

SOTHEBY'S JULY 31 MELBOURNE SALE of Australian Aboriginal Art, marking the auction house's 10th anniversary in Australia, was timed auspiciously: the Musée Quai Branly had just opened in Paris with great fanfare and coverage of the Australian indigenous art in its collection. While the French museum included relatively small displays of aboriginal art, architect Jean Nouvel commissioned a number of murals by Aboriginal artists, covering entire walls and ceilings with indigenous motifs. Located in both public and office areas of the museum, these attracted considerable attention. Sotheby's, hoping to capitalize on the publicity, held a preview in London following the Musée Quai Branly's inauguration, as part of the auction house's strategy to introduce indigenous art to a worldwide audience. (Previously, Sotheby's has staged previews in London, New York and Los Angeles before sales in Sydney or Melbourne.)

Despite this build-up, the sale itself did not achieve the results its organizers expected. Lots were arranged chronologically, with ethnographic material such as shields, baskets and bark paintings on the block in the first half followed by early paintings on panel from Pupunya, where the use of colorful acrylics originated, and closing with the Western Desert acrylic paintings on canvas most favored by collectors.

Prices for traditional bark paintings and x-ray art (in which the internal organs and bone structures of kangaroos and other creatures are visible) have been rising slowly, but remain a specialized taste. This made for a slow start to the proceedings with many lots unsold. The National Museum of Australia bought two early 20th-century bicornial baskets from North East Queensland at AUD 38,000 and \$12,000, respectively.

A number of bark paintings went under the hammer for respectable prices between \$20,000 to \$30,000, signalling an expanding market. A bark by Yirrawala, one of the most important painters from the Northern Territory's Arnhemland, *Male and Female Kangaroos* (1965), a stylized painting of two kangaroos in pipe clay and natural ochres, sold for \$31,200. Senior artist Mick Kubarkku's early 1970s painting *Namorul and His Two Brothers*, a creation story showing the three protagonists in near abstract fashion, went to a discerning buyer for \$26,400. Such work would have sold for under 10 thousand dollars 10 years ago. There were great expectations for John Mawurndjul's *Billabongat Milmilngkan* (1993), a large painting on bark displaying a field of fine *rrark* or cross-hatched lines. It failed to meet its expected \$100,000, a disappointing result given Mawurndjul was one of the artists represented at Quai Branly.

However, a painting by Rover Thomas, listed as one of the highlights of the sale, did not disappoint. *Bugaltji—Lissadell Country* (1986) sold, after spirited bidding, to a telephone bidder from London for \$660,000, almost within sight of the record for indigenous art achieved by Thomas' *All that Big Rain Coming from the Top Side* (1991), which was purchased for \$778,750 by the National Gallery of Australia in 2001. Thomas' "Bugaltji" paintings are not acrylic like the Western Desert paintings. They are painted in earth pigments bound with natural gum on canvas. *Lissadell Country* is one of a

series based on Cyclone Tracey, which destroyed the city of Darwin in 1972. The dark painting is a premonition of the cyclone and a fine example of the artist's economic use of line to depict complex historical and spiritual matters.

The sales of early Pupunya paintings, much favoured by collectors, achieved uneven results but included some notable successes. A major work by a seminal figure Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, *Kangaroo at Ritjulnya* (1982), depicting an abstract map of his country with campsites, hunting grounds and trails painted in a subdued palette of earth colors, reached \$204,000, setting a record for the artist. Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's *Possum Travelling Love Story* (1973), a monumental abstraction recounting a dreamtime creation story and emblazoned on the cover of the auction catalogue, reached \$240,000, twice the high estimate. *Budgerigar Dreaming* (1972), a slick composition of radiating forms by Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, also exceeded its estimate at \$216,000. Disciple surpassed master when Otto Pareroultja's watercolor of the desert landscape, *Central Australian Landscape*, from the late 1950s, sold for \$84,000, well beyond the original estimate of \$30-50,000. It bettered a modest painting by Hermansberg painter Albert Namajira, Pareroultja's one time teacher.

The Australian Taxation Office's current guidelines for investment in superannuation are still ambiguous as to whether works of art may be displayed and enjoyed at home for personal use or can only be kept in storage as an investment, and many potential buyers were cautious. Sales totalled \$3.9 million, against Sotheby's estimate of \$5 million. Nearly 40 percent of the lots went unsold and the strategy of a chronologically-ordered sale is being reevaluated. Bark paintings still cannot compete with the bright acrylic paintings from the Central Desert school and remain a niche market. On a positive note, some 58 percent of the sales went to overseas buyers, vindicating the touring schedule and demonstrating the enthusiasm European and American collectors have for Australia's indigenous artists.



■ Tim Leura (Tjapaltjarri) — *Kangaroo at Ritjulnya* (1982) Synthetic polymer paint on linen, 152 x 181 cm. Courtesy Sotheby's, Melbourne.

# CENTRAL ASIAN ARTISTS BRING SILK ROAD TO CHICAGO

NEWS/CHICAGO

by Jennifer S. Li

KYRGYZ HUSBAND AND WIFE TEAM Muratbek Djumaliev and Gulnara Kasmalieva will make their U.S. museum debut at the Art Institute of Chicago with two works in "Silk Road Chicago," a year-long exhibit that opened in May 2006 celebrating travel, culture and history along the ancient trade route. The exhibit, mounted in partnership with cellist Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Project foundation, is one event in the largest program ever held at the Art Institute, involving special exhibits, lectures, seminars, performances and artists and musicians in residence.

From February through May 2007, the contemporary galleries of the Art Institute will feature the video installation *Trans Siberian Amazons* (2004), a story about two Kyrgyz women hauling goods back and forth between Central Asia and China on trains. A version of the split-screen projection was exhibited at the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005 where it attracted the attention of Lisa Dorin, a curator at the Art Institute. "I invited the couple to the 'Silk Road Chicago' project," she says, "sensing that they could approach the

idea of the Silk Road from a critical contemporary perspective."

The pair is also working on a second piece for "Silk Road Chicago," a video installation that follows another odyssey of economic resourcefulness, this time on trucks instead of trains. Kasmalieva and Djumaliev document a convoy of Kyrgyz traders loading their trucks with scrap-metal bound for the building boom in China, where the cargo is exchanged for clothing.

The inclusion of Kasmalieva and Djumaliev's work as the contemporary component of "Silk Road Chicago" will raise the visibility of Central Asian artists in the U.S. The artists, considered pioneers in Kyrgyzstan, address the complex mix of tradition, history and politics that characterize the Central Asian countries of the former Soviet Union. However, turbulent economic and political change cannot sweep away memories of the past. As Kasmalieva and Djumaliev point out, "It really is amazing that the people here still call it the Silk Road."



# SPEAKING OUT IN ASIA

NEWS/VARIOUS LOCATIONS

by Elaine W. Ng

THE FALL SEASON KICKED OFF WITH A number of high profile panels and speakers in the China and Hong Kong regions. In Shanghai, Pearl Lam's Contrasts Gallery organized the "Crossovers" symposium to coincide with the opening of this year's Shanghai Biennale, which focused on "Hyper-Design."

Held in Lam's new warehouse space on Ruijin Road, the symposium continued over morning and afternoon sessions. The morning session added to current discourse surrounding the overlap between art and design. Participants included Philip Dodd, former director of London's Institute of Contemporary Art; Tim Hunt, director of prints and photography at the Andy Warhol Foundation; Marie-Laure Jousset, chief curator of design at Centre Pompidou in Paris; Lorenzo Rudolf, former director of Art Basel; Li Xu, former director of academic research at the Shanghai Art Museum; and Hongxing Zhang, head of the Chinese department at the Victoria & Albert Museum. Judith Benhamou-Huet from France and Beijing-based art historian and critic Karen Smith moderated the discussion.

The afternoon session addressed the visions of private collectors Bonko Chan of China Assets, Dai Zhikang of Zendai Group, former Swiss ambassador to China Uli Sigg, Zhang Lei of Beijing Modern Group and Craig Robbins of Dacra Development.

Having completed her first stint in Laos for the ongoing "Quiet in the Land" series of community-based art and education projects there, Marina Abramovic spoke at Hong Kong's Academy for the Performing Arts on September 8th. Abramovic captivated the

audience of nearly 1000, chronicling her career as the "Grandmother of Performance Art." She spoke at length with Hong Kong critic and art historian Pamela Kember about her works from the 1970s and 1980s including *The Lovers—The Great Wall Walk* (1988), Abramovic's first project in China, which documented the end of her relationship with long-time collaborator Ulay.

After the talk, Jane DeBevoise, former deputy director of the Guggenheim Museum and current chair of Hong Kong-based Asia Art Archive, enthused about the artist, recalling Abramovic's recent "Seven Easy Pieces" (2005) at the Guggenheim, for which she reenacted Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972) by masturbating in the museum for seven hours.

The following week, the curatorial team of the upcoming *documenta 12* in Kassel, Germany, descended upon Hong Kong for a three-day transregional meeting at the Goethe-Institut. Their main focus was the project *documenta 12 magazines*, a magazine of magazines, directed by Vienna-based editor, author and curator Georg Schöllhammer. Magazine editors from the mainland met with counterparts from Russia, Sweden, New York, Indonesia, Romania and Chile to discuss the coming publication.

Also appearing in Hong Kong was Dr. Chaitanya Sambrani, scholar and curator of notable exhibitions such as "Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India." Speaking at Asia Art Archive, Sambrani shared his thoughts about the current state of contemporary art in India and Indonesia.

■ Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev — Film still from video installation *Racing* (2006) Various dimensions. Courtesy the artists.