

New York Times Artists of Color and Women Soar at Christie's '21st Century' Sale

Because of strong demand, young artists' typically long journey to the world stages has been accelerated.

By Robin Pogrebin, May 10, 2022.



Ouattara Watts's "Afro Beat," a collage with acrylic, oil, oilstick, metallic paint and inkjet on canvas. Courtesy of Christies

While the usual suspects continue to command the highest prices at auction — as evidenced by Monday night's \$195 million sale of Warhol's "Marilyn" — the art market also continues to seize on the potential next hot thing.

On Tuesday, Christie's turned its attention to some of those prospects at its 21st century contemporary evening sale — which totaled \$103 million, on a high estimate of \$106 million. The auction of 31 works brought strong prices for works by Black artists like Amoako Bofo, Reggie Burrows Hodges and Ouattara Watts.

Also faring well were women — including Shara Hughes, Ewa Juszkiewicz, Elizabeth Peyton and Lisa Yuskavage — along with relative unknowns like the 27-year-old painter Anna Weyant, whom the mega dealer Larry Gagosian recently started representing (and dating). And Refik Anadol, a Turkish-American data artist, offered the evening's only NFT.

"We are defining what will be the next great generation of artists," said Ana Maria Celis, a Christie's specialist. "Ultimately the market will decide that."

There is a limited supply of blue chip works in the world and collectors — as well as auction houses — remain hungry for inventory. Because of that demand, artists' typically long journey to the world stages of a Christie's or Sotheby's has increasingly been accelerated.

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Just last year, for example, Hodges, a figurative painter, had his first New York solo show at the Karma gallery on the Lower East Side and only eight months later set an auction record when one of his paintings, estimated at about \$40,000 to \$70,000, sold for more than \$600,000. At Christie's on Tuesday, his "Intersection of Color: Experience," which depicts a crowd of figures, sold for \$706,000, having been estimated at \$200,000 to \$300,000. His work of three figures watching a sports event comes up for the same estimate at Phillips next week.

In part, market experts say, this has to do with collectors' attention to artists of color in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement. "Everything shifted in 2020," said Mashonda Tifrere, an art adviser. "Since December 2021, I've sold over maybe 60 works of emerging artists from Black and brown people."

Ouattara Watts, an artist from Ivory Coast, whose painting, "Afro Beat," sold for \$781,000 on an estimate of \$100,000 to \$150,000, has been around for some time — he had a solo at Gagosian in 1995 — and currently has a show at Karma Gallery.

"Now you're discovering artists that should have been in conversation," said Gardy St. Fleur, an art adviser. "They're finally getting their due."

Works by artists of color soared over their estimates. Boafo's "Yellow Dress" sold for \$819,000 on an estimate at \$250,000 to \$350,000; a work by the Pakistan-born artist Salman Toor, "Girl and Boy With Driver," sold for \$882,000, having been estimated at \$150,000 to \$200,000. A somber Glenn Ligon from the artist's "Stranger" series sold for \$1.6 million, over an estimate of \$600,000 to \$800,000.

A wide range of female artists also fared well. Weyant's work, "Summertime" — featuring a prone young woman with bare skin — kicked off the evening at Christie's Rockefeller Center showroom, selling to an unidentified buyer on the phone in Hong Kong for a staggering \$1.5 million on an estimate of \$200,000 to \$300,000 after eight minutes of competition among 11 bidders. "What a way to start the sale," said the auctioneer Georgina Hilton.

A fantastical landscape by Hughes, who last year had a show at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, sold for \$2.9 million on an estimate of \$500,000 to \$700,000. And "Portrait of a Lady (After Louis Leopold Boilly)" by Juskiewicz, who explores gender and class in European painting, went for \$1.6 million, having been estimated at \$200,000 to \$300,000.

Nearly a third of all the lots Tuesday night were works by women, which together achieved more than three times their combined low estimates. (On Monday evening, Ann Craven's 2003 canvas of three birds, "I Wasn't Sorry," sold for \$680,400, more than 20 times its high estimate of \$30,000.)

Giovanna Bertazzoni, vice chair of the Christie's departments of 20th and 21st century art, made the point that the strong presence of female artists in the auction echoed the emphasis on women in the current Venice Biennale, organized by Cecilia Alemani.

"Christie's is consciously trying to go in the same direction," Bertazzoni said, noting that the growing number of women in leadership positions at Christie's may have something to do with that. (All of its regional offices are now headed by women.) "There is a female perspective in both cases, and I celebrate it."

Similarly, in next week's auctions, both Sotheby's and Phillips lead off with Weyant, as Christie's did. In Sotheby's Now Evening Auction next week, 14 of the 24 lots are by women artists, including Simone Leigh and Christina Quarles, both of whom were featured in the Venice Biennale. And at Phillips's upcoming 20th Century & Contemporary Art Evening Sale, 14 of the 37 artists in the sale are women, including Amy Sherald, Issy Wood and Robin F. Williams.

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On Tuesday night, sales of some of the more established artists were less buoyant. A deep red Gerhard Richter, the highest priced lot in the auction, sold for \$36.5 million, just over the estimate of more than \$35 million; Sigmar Polke tanked at \$819,000, below the low estimate of \$1.2 million.

Attesting to the mercurial nature of the art market — how an artist's fortunes can sag — an abstract by Adrian Ghenie, recently all the rage at auction, sold for \$2.2 million, below the low estimate of \$2.5 million.

Two Basquiats, consigned by the same owner, were withdrawn from the sale — typically, an indication that the reserve price would not be met. “It’s never an easy decision,” said Guillaume Cerutti, Christie’s chief executive. “We don’t want to sell at any price. We want to sell at a price that is relevant for the artwork and a price that the client wants.”

Anadol’s dynamic NFT, inspired by the facade of Antoni Gaudí’s Casa Batlló in Barcelona, sold for \$1.4 million, having been estimated at \$1 million to \$2 million. (The NFT, based on climate data, was installed outside Christie’s headquarters in advance of the sale.)

Despite the froth that seemed to surround some artists at Christie’s, art world observers say it is heartening to see artists of color playing in the auction major leagues, commanding big prices.

“Auction is a way of solidifying the contributions of artists of color to the canon,” said Phyllis Hollis, the host of the podcast Cerebral Women Art Talks. “People are recognizing the talent of underrepresented artists, and that’s promising.”