

A Landmark Achievement for a Painting by a Woman, Upstaged by a Man



Jenny Saville's "Propped," first shown in 1992, set an auction high for a living female artist when it sold for 9.5 million pounds, or about \$12.4 million, at Sotheby's "Frieze Week" evening sale of contemporary art. 2018 Jenny Saville / 2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS); New York / DACS; London; Courtesy of Sotheby's

By Scott Reyburn

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LONDON — She should have been the center of attention, but somehow everyone got distracted.

The nude self-portrait "Propped," by Jenny Saville, was bought by a telephone bidder at Sotheby's on Friday night for 9.5 million pounds, or about \$12.4 million. That should have made plenty of headlines: The price paid for the work, part of the "[Sensation](#)" show of Young British Artists that caused such a stir in London and [New York](#) in the late '90s, was a new auction high for a living female artist.

The result, more than three times the low estimate, was acclaimed in the salesroom with a huge round of applause. But before anyone had time to reflect on its significance, Banksy's [\\$1.4 million "self-destructing" painting](#) intervened, and the world was talking about a sensational stunt, rather than the way that female artists, and artists from other long-disempowered sectors of society, were reconfiguring the art world.

Ms. Saville's seven-foot-high canvas was the standout piece in a desirable group of 25 contemporary artworks from the collection of a New York management consultant, David Teiger, that kick-started Sotheby's "Frieze Week" evening sale.

Made when the artist was a student and first seen in Edinburgh in 1992, "Propped" depicts a radically de-idealized young woman sitting naked on a stool. She appears to be gazing into a cloudy mirror, on which lines by the French feminist writer Luce Irigaray are scrawled.

Susannah Pollen, the former head of 20th-century British art at Sotheby's who is now a London-based art adviser, said the piece "questions all the conventional and historical notions of female beauty."

"It's a strong political and feminist statement," Ms. Pollen added. "And it's a knockout painting."

There are moments in the art market that signal wider change. In May, [Kerry James Marshall's 1997 painting, "Past Times,"](#) sold for \$21.1 million at Sotheby's, an auction high for any living African-American artist. Now a work by Ms. Saville has smashed through the \$10 million barrier. Both results were public confirmations of how collectors' tastes have shifted toward black and female artists.

Current shows in London galleries, such as those of Martine Syms at Sadie Coles, Doris Salcedo at White Cube, Kaari Upson at Massimo De Carlo, and Rochelle Feinstein at Campoli Presti are cases in point. And an exhibition of Mr. Marshall's work is at David Zwirner.

"The people I work with have been collecting female artists for some time," said Heather Flow, an art adviser based in New York who was in London for the week of the [Frieze London and Frieze Masters](#) fairs. "But there are more female collectors," she added, "and they now have buying power."

The American collector [Beth Rudin DeWoody](#), for example, is renowned for her provocative and diverse taste. Last week, she attended the [1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair](#) at Somerset House in London, where she bought "DP40," a fantastical head-and-shoulders portrait of a woman wearing an elaborate headdress of crocheted doilies, by the British-Trinidadian artist Zak Ové. The work was offered by the London-based Vigo Gallery, priced at £15,500.

Mr. Ové's large-scale sculptural installation, ["Invisible Man and the Masque of Blackness,"](#) is currently on show in the Civic Center Plaza in San Francisco. The piece consists of 40 identical life-size resin and graphite figures standing with raised hands, inspired by an African sculpture owned by the artist's father, the Trinidadian filmmaker [Horace Ové](#).

“It wasn’t considered at the point of making, but now it has resonated with the Black Lives Matter movement,” Mr. Ové said, adding that he was enthused about the surge in commercial and institutional interest in African-American art.

“It’s become a big part of America’s ‘cool’ factor,” Mr. Ové added. “Part of the push is because there’s a lack of those issues being addressed in the real world.”

Though black British artists such as Chris Ofili, Yinka Shonibare (both of whom were also featured in “Sensation” 20 years ago) and Steve McQueen have become established in the international art world, there are fewer names from an earlier generation for the market to rediscover.

The major exception is the Guyana-born artist Frank Bowling, who was the one British artist included in Tate Modern’s influential exhibition, “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power,” which has now transferred to the [Brooklyn Museum](#).

During the early 1970s, Mr. Bowling lived and worked in New York. There he produced his large and sumptuously colored “Map Paintings,” evoking (as the Tate catalog put it), “a moment when constant exile becomes a new way of belonging to the world.”

The [Alexander Gray gallery](#) in New York is holding an exhibition of new work by Mr. Bowling, priced between \$80,000 and \$450,000. In June, in the “Unlimited” section of the Art Basel fair, the gallery negotiated the sale of the 17-foot-wide Map painting “False Start,” dating from 1970, for more than \$1 million.

“It’s only to do with capitalism. Art by black people has value, as if it’s compensation for the Middle Passage,” said Mr. Bowling, referring to the sea route through which millions of Africans were transported to the West Indies during the slave trade.

“But I have a lot of time for money,” he added. “‘You should be paid for what you do.’ That was a phrase I learned from [Clement Greenberg](#),” Mr. Bowling said, referring to the guiding critical light of the Abstract Expressionist movement.

Mr. Bowling is now 84 and is still working at his studio in the Elephant and Castle area of London. Proceeds from his sales fund two [scholarships for masters students](#) at Chelsea College of Arts in London. Tate Britain is scheduled to hold [a retrospective of his work](#) next year.

Mr. Marshall, the African-American artist, has included four works titled “History of Painting” among the 12 new paintings in his [second solo show at David Zwirner in London](#). Made in acrylic on PVC, the pieces recall notable contemporary-art auction prices from the boom year of 2007 in the style of grocery store circulars.

Mr. Marshall has used this mode before to highlight the commodification of art. But, given that he has now become the world’s most expensive living African-American artist at auction — and with prices for his work at this gallery starting at \$1.2 million — his stated aim to “examine the endpoint of what paintings end up being after their original use has been exhausted” has — rather like Banksy’s [self-destructing painting](#) — become a tad contradictory.

For artists toward the other end of the price scale, the art market, for all its excesses, can be the beginning of something.

At Frieze London, for instance, the young African-American painter Devan Shimoyama’s reputation as [a name to watch](#) received a validation of sorts when there was a waiting list of collectors to buy “Weed Picker,” a self-portrait of the artist sitting on a flower-strewn patch of grass. The painting was sold for \$50,000 on the booth of the Chicago gallerist Kavi Gupta, a longtime champion of emerging black artists.

Banksy certainly is good at grabbing a headline. But behind the bold type, the high prices being paid for works by Ms. Saville, Mr. Marshall and Mr. Bowling suggest that in today’s market there’s still plenty of encouragement for young artists trying to build a successful career — whatever their background.

