

June 10th, 2014

A Tale of Two Art Sales

by Jeanne Schinto



Swann Galleries, New York City

Photos courtesy Swann's

Swann Galleries made the unusual decision to hold two art sales within three days in June. The scheduling was well advised. Todd Weyman, director of the prints and drawings department, said his June 12 sale of American art (watercolors, drawings, paintings, and sculpture) was Swann's "strongest ever in this category." Nigel Freeman, whose African-American fine art department offered 1940s works and beyond on June 10, said he was "happy to see the enthusiasm for American art across the board."

The auction house hosted separate but overlapping previews for the sales on the two floors of its building in downtown's Flatiron District. Logistics were tricky and space was Manhattan-tight. Nonetheless, Weyman said, it "definitely produced the cross-pollination we were looking for," as bidders who came in person to preview one exhibition often went to see the works in the other. "That was fertile ground," he observed. "Given that opportunity again, we'd certainly repeat it." The outcome was an impressive combined total of more than \$2.25 million (including buyers' premiums).

June 10

The top lot for African-American art was a very early work by William T. Williams (b. 1942). Estimated at \$75,000/100,000, the painting sold for a new artist's price record of \$137,000. The previous record of \$120,000 was also achieved at Swann. Within the last couple of years, the firm has in fact sold two Williams artworks at that level. One of them, *Up Balls*, I'm now at liberty to say, went to the Sheldon Museum of Art on the campus of the University of Nebraska in Lincoln (Swann, February 14, 2013). The other, *Eastern Star*, as already reported, sold to an unnamed collector (Swann, February 16, 2012).

Born in North Carolina in 1942, Williams earned an MFA degree from Yale University in 1968, the same year he was invited to participate in "The Black Artist in America: A Symposium" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The following year, he painted *Truckin*, a geometrical abstraction in acrylic on canvas. In 1998 a California collection gifted it to California State University in Fullerton. The university deaccessioned it, consigning it to this sale. Their loss is another public collection's gain. Its new owner is an institution, which Freeman was not yet allowed to identify, but I'll hope to name it in the future.

An artist whose record price took a much greater leap at this sale is Walter Williams (no relation to William T. Williams). Until now, works by the Brooklynite hadn't achieved anything over \$35,200 at auction. This time, a collector went all the way to \$81,250 (est. \$20,000/30,000) for the painting that is Williams's best known. Titled *Southern Landscape*, the oil and collage on masonite board has been widely exhibited in museum shows including David C. Driscoll's landmark survey of 1976, *Two Centuries of Black American Art*. It has also been published in the exhibition's catalog of the same name.

The quintessential work displays Williams's usual palette of pinks, oranges, browns, and black and incorporates the artist's signature themes of children playing, flowers blooming, moths, and blackbirds. Don't be fooled by the seeming sentimentality of the subject matter, however. As Freeman pointed out, "In some ways it's a dark painting. The roots you see are the roots of an uprooted tree—a metaphor for the civil rights struggle." *Southern Landscape* dates from height of the movement, 1963-64.

"This was the right painting" to bring Williams into his new price bracket, Freeman continued. "There were very determined bidders and a lot of interest. I personally felt very strongly about the work—writing about it in detail in the catalog and putting it on the cover—and it's always nice to see that the audience agrees."

Barkley L. Hendricks is a Philadelphia-born artist whose bold, bright, life-size portraits of young, hip models and friends have sold extremely well through this department. On October 6, 2011, at Swann Galleries a dealer paid \$108,000 for his diptych *Twins*. At Swann on February 14, 2013, a collector bought his likeness of a Philly deejay, *The Hawk, Blah, Blah, Blah*, for \$132,000. And on October 8, 2009, the Sheldon Museum bought his *Bid 'Em In/Slave* (*Angie*) for what remains the artist's record price of \$144,000 (est. \$60,000/90,000) at Swann.

This time, a 1972 work, *Sergio*, achieved another six-figure result, selling to a dealer for \$106,250 (est. \$80,000/120,000). Consigned by a private collection, it has been widely exhibited as well as published in *Barkley L. Hendricks: Birth of the Cool* (2008). The subject is a Yale University undergraduate who posed for Hendricks in 1971, while the artist was finishing his MFA degree there. Interviewed by Freeman in the gallery at an invitation-only evening "Conversation" and reception on June 5, Hendricks, wearing a black beret and brandishing a wry sense of humor, reminisced a little about his long-ago model and other subjects.

"Sergio thought of himself as a Latin lover of the Yale campus," who would boast about his romantic exploits, the artist said with a laugh. He was "a brother who had an ego." Speaking more broadly, Hendricks said, "These were some characters." His camera was on the table in front of him. Decades ago, he was introduced to a darkroom in Philadelphia when he rented a studio and the previous tenant, having had "to get out of town quick," left all his equipment and chemicals behind. Asked by Freeman if he used photography in his art process, the artist said he has increasingly, "given the changes of address and busy schedules" of his models. Hendricks also explained how he created the distinct "wet/dry" look of his portraits. "The figure is oil; the background is acrylic," he said. "The quality of oil, the consistency of acrylic come together and give me the kind of quality I like."

This department often introduces an artist's first significant work to the secondary market. This time, that artist was Noah Purifoy. A previous auction record shows a minor work of his selling for \$2400. At this sale, a collector bought his untitled (*Standing Figure*) for \$62,500 (est. \$60,000/90,000). The nearly human-tall (51½") assemblage construction was made of wood, wood veneer, and leather in 1968-70. It had been in the collection of sculptor Artis Lane, who had bought it directly from Purifoy just before he moved from Los Angeles to the desert lands of Joshua Tree, California. Today visitors may go there to see an outdoor museum of his works that are made entirely of junked materials (www.noahpurifoy.com).

Freeman's sale offered 157 lots, 75% of which sold. His next sale, on October 9, will offer approximately the same number, but there will be two catalogs. One will feature various consignments; the other will be devoted to some 50 works from the estate of Richard A. Long (1927-2013), a well-known and highly respected professor, scholar, writer, and connoisseur of African-American history, arts, and culture, who taught at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, for many years. "We're looking at a person whose collection was built up over thirty or forty years," said Freeman. More details will be forthcoming.

June 12

When Weyman and his assistant Erin Bennett went on the house call, they arrived knowing the would-be consignor was a descendant of James D. Smillie (pronounced "smiley"), the important 19th-century banknote engraver, printmaker, and landscape artist. The descendant initially presented what they had seen in images, which were prints by Smillie and some other artists including James McNeill Whistler. Then they found the work that became the highlight of the American art sale.

"We thought the Whistlers might be nice," said Weyman, "and previously we had sold a set of proofs of Smillie's *Lander's Peak* from the same collection." (Swann's April 29, 2014, auction of old masters through modern prints featured the very scarce set of 12 proofs of Smillie's most celebrated engraving, *The Rocky Mountains [Lander's Peak]*, 1865-66, after a painting by Albert Bierstadt. The group sold in one lot for \$27,500.) "But when we got there, we saw a little stack of drawings with a Homer on top. When I say 'discovery,' it truly was." He laughed.

Study: Fresh Air, a 7 7/8" x 4 7/8" pen-and-ink full-length depiction of a woman in windblown Victorian dress and hat, circa 1879, directly relates to the watercolor *Fresh Air* by Winslow Homer in the collection of the Brooklyn Museum. The drawing wasn't signed but was inscribed "Winslow Homer," and the provenance "certainly sealed the authenticity," said Weyman. A dealer paid \$106,250 (est. \$40,000/60,000) for it, and the price is a new auction record for a pen-and-ink drawing by the artist.

As it happened, Smillie now has a new auction price record of his own as a result of the descendant's consignment of works to this sale, since a collector paid \$11,875 (est. \$3000/5000) for Smillie's oil on board *Sunset over a Lake*. "Because we tend to look so much toward Modernism today, Smillie is one of those somewhat forgotten artists," Weyman noted. But the contemporary of Homer came from a family of artists and was "quite an important fixture in the American art scene in what were the formative years of the generation of the middle to late 19th century." A founder of the American Watercolor Society, Smillie also helped organize the New York Etching Club and was the club's liaison to the Painters-Etchers Society in London. "What he did for, among other things, printmaking in America was huge," said Weymann. In many ways, Smillie was "responsible for bringing the importance of printmaking to America."

Another fresh discovery that did well at Weyman's sale was *The Peters Mills* by Preston Dickinson, who was known as an American Precisionist. Done in ink, wash, and color pastels, it depicts the M.C. Peters Mill Company industrial complex in Omaha, Nebraska. A similar example, *Grain Elevators*, is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. *The Peters Mills* came in as a single consignment and was given a fairly conservative estimate at \$15,000/20,000. Bidders dated hard over it. Signed and dated 1924, the same year as MoMA's *Grain Elevators*, it sold to a dealer for \$60,000. The price is the new record for a watercolor, gouache, or ink by the artist.

Works by name-brands such as Norman Rockwell, Andrew Wyeth, John La Farge, Will Barnett, and Mary Cassatt were among the sale's other highlights. But beating out the prices for all of them was Paul Cadmus's *Seated Male Nude (NM 96)*, a 1972 color pastel and charcoal that sold to a collector for \$37,500. This sensuous drawing by Jon F. Anderson served several other artworks by Cadmus from the collection of Jon F. Anderson, whom Weyman described as "Cadmus's muse and sometime lover," and Philip Raskind-Anderson of Connecticut.

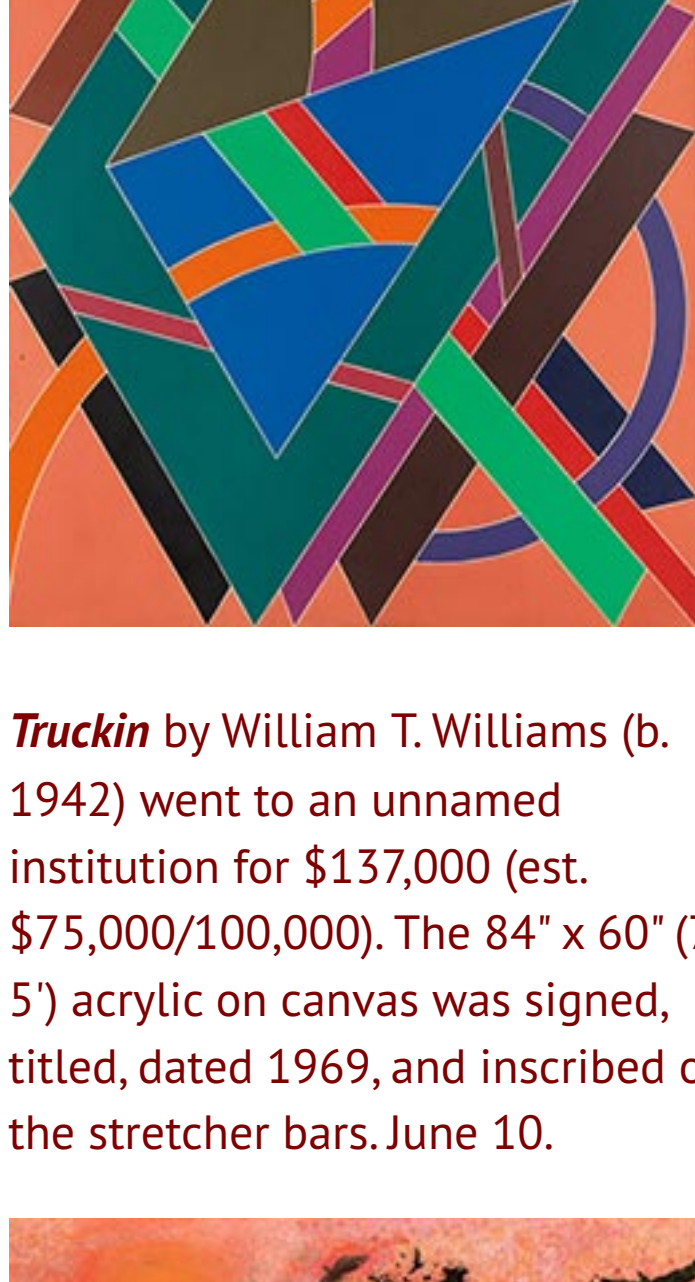
The one Cadmus work that didn't come from that source was a nude titled *Jared French, Reading*. A lone, anonymous consignment, the circa 1930 pen and ink sold to a collector for \$13,750 (est. \$6000/9000). Weyman's department has been selling examples from the estate of French himself for several seasons. "We have them from a Roman," said Weyman. "That's because French spent his last years in Italy." This time, an Italian scene in tempera on masonite, *Mediterranean Street Corner*, did the best, going to a dealer for \$22,500 (est. \$10,000/15,000).

Two watercolors by Charles Burchfield did extremely well, too. A collector bought the artist's 1916 *Lacy Trees and Sunlit Clouds* for \$25,000 (est. \$6000/9000), while his 1915 *Morning Glories* sold to a dealer for \$21,250 (est. \$5000/8000). "The colors on them were just beautiful, bright and fresh, so well preserved, and that helped drive the prices," remarked Weyman. Readers who own watercolors note well: Condition was, in the specialist's word, "key."

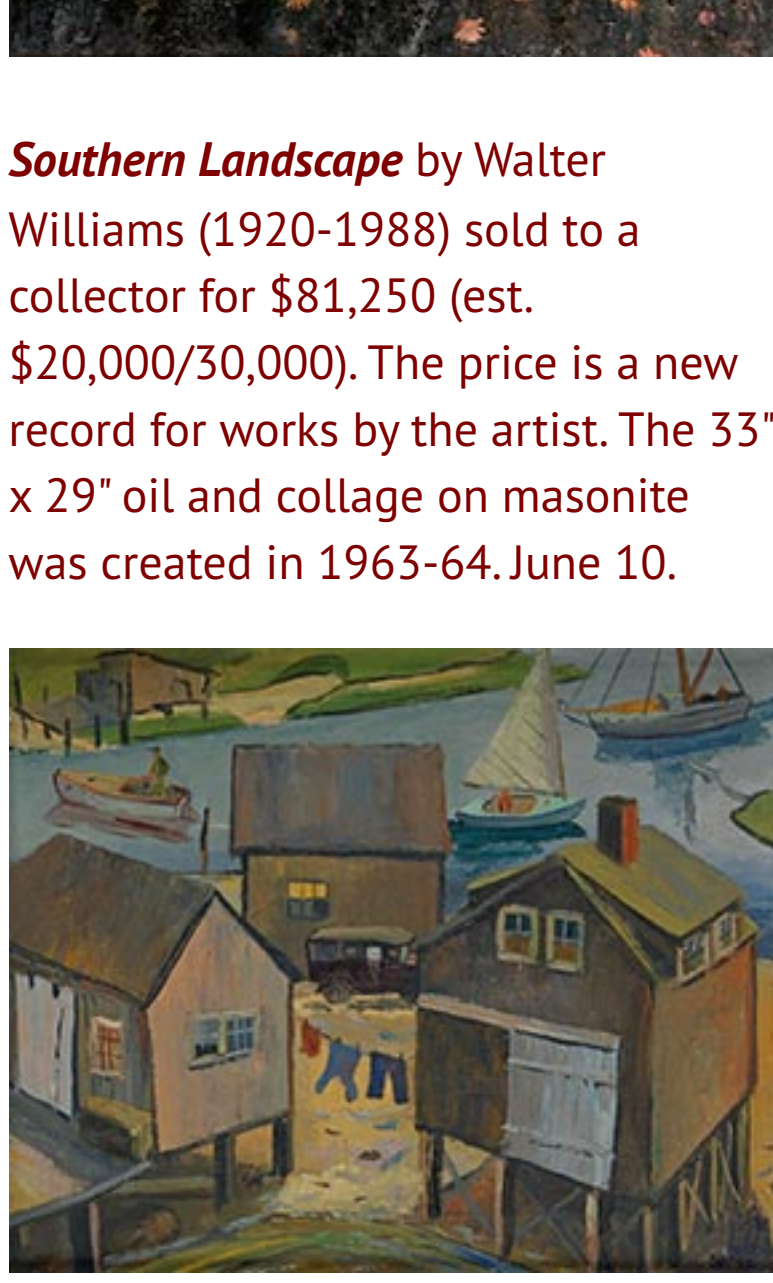
Weyman's sale, offering 241 lots, was 80% sold. Unsold was a cover lot, an oil on canvas by Guy C. Wiggins, *New York Skyline, from a Staten Island Ferry Boat*, estimated at \$100,000/150,000. Weyman's next American art sale will be next spring. His prints and drawings department has eight sales a year overall. "We are the department with the largest staff" [besides Erin Bennett, he has two other assistants]; "we handle the most volume; and we are roughly half of Swann's gross every year," said Weyman.

For more information, phone the auction house at (212) 254-4710 or see the Web site (www.swanngalleries.com).

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