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African-American Art Sale Features Richard A. Long's Collection

by Jeanne Schinto

Swann Galleries, New York City

Photos courtesy Swann Galleries

A large audience assembled for Swann Galleries' annual fall auction of African-American fine art on October 9, 2014, in New York City. Many were there to honor Richard A. Long (1927-2013), from whose estate came the first 47 lots of the sale. Born in Philadelphia, Long had lived since 1968 in Atlanta, where he was essentially dean of the African-American arts community. Founder of the African-American Studies program at Atlanta University, he was at his death a retired professor of interdisciplinary studies at Emory University's Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts.

A scholar, linguist, and author of books on the Harlem Renaissance, African-American prose and poetry, African-American dance, and numerous other topics, Long was also a member, leader, or founder of numerous cultural organizations.

His most recent activities included serving on the boards of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art; the High Museum of Art in Atlanta; and the Society of Dance History Scholars.

Perhaps the best way to describe him would be to say he was a chronicler and champion of African-American arts and life.

Among his close associates were some of the artists represented in his collection, including Beauford Delaney and Romare Bearden. He was an art collector who was "really a true friend to artists," artist and art historian Amalia K. Amaki told an on-line interviewer before the sale. "A lot of artists are being affected by the auction in ways that the public may never know," she said. For them, especially those who had not been able to attend any of the memorial services, the auction is "sort of the funeral." "I don't think that's obvious to people who aren't artists," said Amaki, who wrote a biographical note on Long for the Swann catalog. "But I think the artists are definitely feeling some degree of that. That he's really gone."

Famously, Long drove a 1974 yellow B210 Datsun well past its customary expiration date, even to events at which others arrived in limos. After his death, a fantasy coffin in the form of that car was created in Ghana and unveiled at the Clark Atlanta University Art Galleries on what would have been his 86th birthday, February 9, 2014. It is said that he often wore shades of yellow and gold, especially scarves, and several pages of the separate Swann catalog devoted to his collection were printed in a yellow hue.

One of those pages described a sculpture by William E. Artis that was among the top lots of both sessions of the sale. Dating from 1946-50, it was a boy's head in terra cotta, titled *Vernon*. Estimated at \$20,000/30,000, it went to an unnamed institution bidding by phone for \$57,500 (including buyer's premium). Swann's department specialist Nigel Freeman did not have permission to name this institution or any other that bought at the sale, and there were several. News may be forthcoming later. In any event, the price was a new auction record for Artis works, which are rare. Freeman estimated that this was only the fifth work at auction.

Another of the yellow catalog pages described an untitled abstract work by Long's friend Beauford Delaney. It was signed, dated "1964," and inscribed "Paris." The City of Light was the place where the artist and the collector had met several years earlier, while Long was studying at the University of Paris on a Fulbright scholarship. Many bidders competed for the oil on canvas whose background was itself a shade of yellow. Estimated at \$20,000/30,000, it sold for \$75,000 to an institution bidding by phone.

Long is credited with organizing exhibitions of Delaney's abstract work, the yellow paintings of which are most in demand. These exhibitions took place in 1967 at Morgan State College (now Morgan State University) in Baltimore and in 1978 at the Studio Museum in Harlem. In 1965, Delaney painted an oil portrait of Long. It is now in the collection of the High Museum. A second portrait from the same period, in pastels, was part of this sale. It sold for the below-estimate price of \$10,000 to a phone bidder.

Of the 11 lots of Bearden works consigned by the Long estate, the artist's *Blues Singer* was the stand-out. The 1975 oil monotype with watercolor and graphite on Arches paper went to a collector in the room for a well above-estimate \$37,500. Another blues-related work, the monumental (32" x 45") color screen print *Baptism* (Bearden's largest print) sold on the phone for \$16,250 (est. \$15,000/25,000). It is based on the artist's 1974 collage *Of the Blues: Carolina Shout*.

Two works by abstract artist Alma W. Thomas from the Long collection generated excitement. An untitled watercolor on cotton batting from 1969-72 (from her "Space Series") went to a collector on a phone bid of \$32,500 (est. \$15,000/25,000). Estimated at the same level as the "Space Series" piece, a circa 1971 untitled work in watercolor and pencil on paper (*Striped Composition*) sold for \$28,600 to a dealer bidding via the Internet.

Amalia Amaki said Thomas's art was one of the topics that she and Long would talk about for hours. In Thomas's lifetime (1891-1978), she herself spoke about how the "Space Series" had been inspired by NASA space flights and the televised Apollo missions and moon landings. For the catalog of a retrospective exhibition of that series and a corresponding "Earth Series" at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City in 1972—when Thomas was 80 years old—she noted how strident the changes of the 20th century "machine and space age" struck someone like herself, born during the 19th century's "horse and buggy days."

A third work, in the various-owners part of the sale, brought the strongest Thomas price of all, \$35,000. The untitled work (from the "Atmospheric Effects Series") came from a Washington, D.C., collection and went to a dealer in the room. "In terms of people eyeballing it, talking about it, asking questions, the Alma Thomas works got a lot of attention," said Freeman.

The second session, 124 lots ranging from two, 19th-century landscapes by Edward Bannister to prints by Kara Walker and other contemporary artists, was strong overall. Within the first few minutes, a painted plaster sculpture by Augusta Savage from a private South Carolina collection sold on the phone for \$68,750, another new artist's record. The buyer was yet again an institution. The 1931-35 *Nude Torso* is a 16 1/4" tall female form bending at the waist, as if in a bow. The left hand is over the heart. According to the catalog, the sculpture was given by the artist to the young model who posed for it and had remained in her family for more than 80 years.

Another sculpture, *Head of a Dancer* (Harald Kreutzberg) by Richmond Barthé, went to a collector on the phone for \$17,500. The 12 1/4" tall, cast-bronze work with a brown patina dates from 1937. Barthé, who trained as a dancer himself, befriended Kreutzberg (1902-1968) when the Czech-born German dancer performed in New York City in the 1930s. Barthé made several sculptures of him, busts and figures.

It was indeed a good day for sculpture. Elizabeth Catlett's *Singing Head*, carved from tropical wood, sold to a collector on the phone for a within-estimate \$125,000, making it the top lot of the day. Commissioned from the artist in 1975, the 16 1/4" tall sculpture dates from circa 1977 and came to the sale from a private California collection. A second *Singing Head*, much smaller at 6" tall and made in cast bronze, came from a different source and sold to a room bidder for \$11,875 (est. \$8000/12,000).

Works by Abstract Expressionist Norman Lewis, on canvas and on paper, went well, selling to collectors in the room and to phone bidders, one of whom bought three. The top-priced example was an oil. Going at \$75,000, it was the largest (39" x 47") and a somewhat unusual work for the artist. Painted in 1953, it has an application of oil heavier than normal and a palette that included an atypical color for Lewis—magenta.

"Norman Lewis is very much in the moment," said Freeman. "A lot of publicity has been generated by the exhibition at the Jewish Museum," i.e., *From the Margins: Lee Krasner and Norman Lewis, 1945-1952*, an ingenious pairing of complementary artists, on view through February 1. "In the past his works in oil on canvas have been highly desirable, and now his works on paper are in demand too," Freeman observed.

An oil on canvas work by Hughie Lee-Smith went for the same price as the top Lewis oil, \$75,000. The artist painted it in Detroit in the mid-1950s. Characteristically enigmatic, it shows an urban lake at the edge of a city, a concrete pier, and isolated African-American figures. Two, one onshore, the other on the pier, are fishing; the third, closest to the viewer, is playing a game of car's cradle. The string game is meant to be played by two or more. So where are the other players? That's for Lee-Smith to have known and for us only to speculate about, forever. From a private collection in Chicago, the painting went to a collector bidding on the Internet.

Some of the on-line bids came in via eBay. To get full stories with all their photos and captions, plus all the features and news, **Subscribe!** Click to go to our subscriptions page.

"Allegedly, you will have 145 million people competing with you," Swann president and principal auctioneer Nicholas D. Lowry told the live bidders just prior to the sale's opening. "That's the upside. The downside remains to be seen." In the end, the Internet wasn't a big factor one way or the other this time. By my reckoning, fewer than a handful of successful bids on major items and only two handfuls on minor ones came from cyberspace—or "outer space," as Swann chairman George S. Lowry likes to call it.

Freeman, for his part, said it was "fun and exciting to see the banner on the eBay site that announced the sale and to know that we've got that visibility now, exposing a whole new audience to works by these artists."

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

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Elizabeth Catlett's *Singing Head* of circa 1977 is carved tropical wood with painted details. It is 16 1/4" x 8" x 7 1/2" and sold for \$125,000 (est. \$120,000/180,000).



An institution paid \$57,500 for *Vernon* by William E. Artis (1914-1977). The 1946-50 terra-cotta sculpture is 22" tall, including its base. It is signed in the turtleneck collar. The price is the new auction record for Artis, whose work is scarce. Long collection.



Blues Singer by Romare Bearden (1911-1988) achieved \$37,500 (est. \$12,000/18,000). The 1975 oil monotype with watercolor and graphite on Arches paper is 23 3/4" x 17 5/8". Long collection.



Nude Torso by Augusta Savage (1892-1962) sold to an institution for \$68,750 (est. \$35,000/50,000)—a new record price for Savage. The 16 1/4" x 9" x 9" painted plaster sculpture, 1931-35, is mounted on a wooden base.



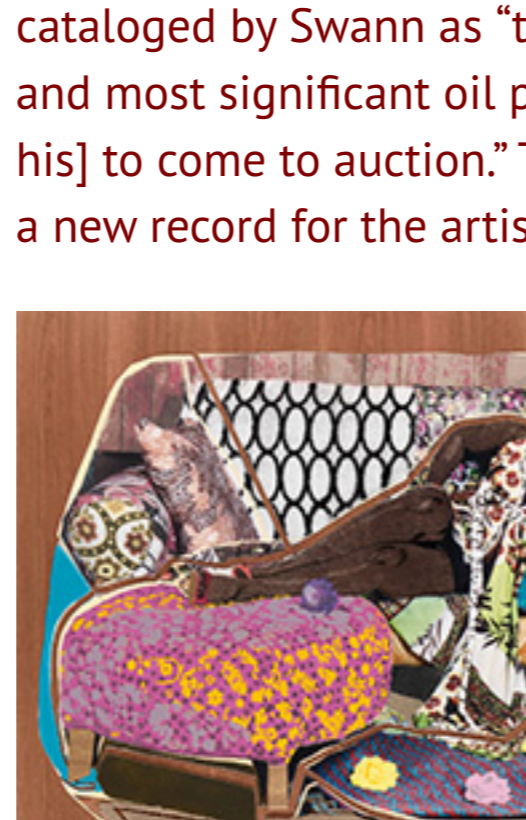
Untitled (*Fall Landscape*) by Edward Bannister (1828-1901) sold to a collector on the phone for \$21,250 (est. \$4000/6000). The 1895 oil on canvas is 10" x 14".



Untitled (*Gloucester Coast*) by Allan Freeleon (1895-1960) went to a collector on the phone for the low estimate, \$20,000. The 24" x 30" oil on canvas dates from 1925. It came to the sale from a private Pennsylvania collection and was cataloged by Swann as "the earliest and most significant oil painting [of his] to come to auction." The price is a new record for the artist.



You're Gonna Give Me the Love I Need by Mickalene Thomas (b. 1971) sold for \$16,250 (est. \$6000/9000) to an institution. The 23 3/4" x 29 3/4" mixed-media collage with pochoir is numbered 15/40 and dates from 2010.



This is *African/American* by Kara Walker (b. 1969). Numbered 3/40, the 1998 print is a rarity. The linoleum cut on cream wove paper is also huge, measuring 46 1/4" x 60 1/2", and Swann used it as the centerpiece of the preview exhibition. It sold to an institution for \$23,750 (est. \$7000/10,000), a new record for this work.

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