

Swann Galleries, New York City

Hot Prices for Barkley Hendricks's Cool Portraits and Norman Lewis's Abstractions

by Jeanne Schinto
Photos courtesy Swann Galleries

Four paintings sold for six figures each at the latest African American fine art sale at Swann Galleries, held on April 2 in New York City. The works span nearly a century from 1881 to 1976. All were important examples of the artists' works, and each was market fresh. They included a 19th-century pastoral by Henry Ossawa Tanner; a Norman Lewis painting from the mid-20th century that showed the artist on the cusp of the nonobjective style he later embraced; an unequivocally abstract canvas by living artist Sam Gilliam; and an eye-grabbing portrait by another living artist, Barkley L. Hendricks, that is as much about shape and color as it is about the subject's character.

"I was particularly pleased that both Hendricks's *Steve* and Norman Lewis's *Cathedral* sold to institutions and that *Cathedral* brought the second-highest price for the artist at auction," department expert Nigel Freeman said. As for the price paid for *Steve*—\$365,000 (including buyer's premium)—it is slightly more than two and a half times the old auction price record set in 2009 by Swann for a work by Hendricks. That same year, *Steve* was featured on the April cover of *Artforum* when the magazine reviewed the artist's first career retrospective, *Birth of the Cool*—a title taken from jazz musician Miles Davis's 1957 compilation album.

A Philadelphian born in 1945, Hendricks is famed for his life-size likenesses of the young, hip models and friends he painted in the 1960s and 1970s. Mostly

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they were denizens of New Haven, where the artist earned both a B.F.A. and an M.F.A. at Yale, and of New London, where he taught from 1972 through 2010 at Connecticut College. *Steve* is a white-on-white depiction of an African American man whom Hendricks painted in 1976. The subject is standing in a long cream-colored trench coat posed against a background of a nearly identical shade. His mirrored sunglasses—aviators in the style of the period—reflect what has been identified as Hendricks's studio. Impeccable, imperious, and cooler than cool, he faces his portrayer and, ultimately, his viewers full on, hands clasped behind his back and a toothpick between his lips. Estimated at \$120,000/180,000, the 72" x 48" oil, acrylic, and Magna on canvas came to the sale from the Forbes collection.

The Lewis work, an evocation of soaring stained-glass windows, sold for \$317,000 on the same estimate as the Hendricks portrait. The 42" x 25" oil on canvas is a rediscovery. Exhibited at the Biennale in Venice in 1956, it was in a Vermont collection for more than 60 years. As Freeman explained in his catalog, when Lewis painted *Cathedral*, in 1950, he was a rising star in New York avant-garde art circles and being invited to events organized by Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning, where Abstract Expressionism was being discussed, defined, and defended. He was not, however, invited to be part of the famous *Irascibles* photo, published in *Life* magazine on January 15, 1951. Among others, the image by Nina Leen featured de Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Ad Reinhardt, Richard Pousette-Dart, Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko.

"Only in the last few years has Norman Lewis begun to find [his] rightful place back amongst his more celebrated peers," wrote Freeman, whose sale offered seven other Lewis works, six of which sold for a total of \$154,750 at prices ranging from \$4750 to \$57,500.

Before being consigned to Swann, Tanner's *Boy and Sheep under a Tree* had been handed down through four generations of a Philadelphia family whose patriarch was Edward Lawrence Scull (1846-1884). Tanner painted it while studying at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where he had enrolled in 1879. In the early years of his career, he specialized in animals, but the sheep, a potent Christian symbol, presage his later interest in depicting religious subjects. On the back of a less significant Tanner painting—retained by the family—Edward's wife, Sarah Elizabeth Marshall Scull (1845-1910), wrote:

"The first picture that dear Edward bought of the colored Artist Tanner in 1883. Tanner was then butler for Dr. Albert H. Smith" (the Sculls' physician) "but had begun to draw and paint and used to go to Papa's office to talk with him about art." Apparently Tanner was going to art school and working as a servant for the doctor at the same time. Mrs. Scull went on to say that by 1900 Tanner was living in Paris and "his paintings are in many of the finest private modern collections in the world."

Widely exhibited in the 1970s, 1990s, and again more recently, *Boy and Sheep under a Tree* had been on extended loan and exhibited at the Philadelphia Museum of Art until late 2014. Signed and dated 1881, the 17 3/8" x 27" oil on canvas sold to a collector for \$245,000 (est. \$200,000/300,000).

An untitled painting by Sam Gilliam was consigned by the estate of Rockne Krebs (1938-2011), an artist-colleague of Gilliam in Washington, D.C. Born in Mississippi in 1933, Gilliam moved in 1962 to the nation's capital, where he became a member of the so-called Washington Color School, founded by Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and others in the early 1960s. Krebs, who was known for his laser-light sculptures and installations, was part of it too. The work by Gilliam, who still lives in D.C., is a 1969 example of his experimentation with the "soak-stain" technique that he perfected in the early 1970s. The acrylic on canvas is huge at 88 1/2" x 46 1/2". One would think an institution would be the likely buyer, but it went instead to a collector for another record-breaking price, \$197,000 (est. \$40,000/60,000).

Other new artist records were made at this sale by prices for works by Lois Mailou Jones and David C. Driskell. The Jones work, which sold for \$62,500 (est. \$30,000/40,000), had a Martha's Vineyard subject. At 26" x 32", it is in fact the largest Martha's Vineyard landscape by the artist that Swann has located. Titled *Lobsterville Beach*, the 1945 oil on canvas from a private Maryland collection sold to a collector.

Of the Jones price, which nearly doubled her previous record, Freeman said: "I knew it would do well because it had a number of things going for it. It was an early painting. Her work from the 1940s is quite scarce. It was a large canvas for her at that time. And it was a great scene from Martha's Vineyard. That has great cachet among collectors who know she lived there. A lot of people who collect her work live there too."

The Driskell record-breaker, *Two Pines (Two Trees)*, came from a Washington, D.C., collection and sold to another collector for \$47,500 (est. \$35,000/50,000). It is part of the artist's 1960s series of abstract explorations of pine trees—a subject that first attracted his interest a decade earlier, while he was a student at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Skowhegan, Maine. Large at 48" x 40", the 1961 oil on canvas was cataloged by Swann as the artist's "largest and most significant" painting to come to auction.

"This is the first time we have had a really good, large painting by Driskell," Freeman said. "What we've had in the past were small works on paper. This is his first large oil on canvas to come on the market, as far as I know."

As a nice bonus for the auction house, Driskell, who is recognized as one of the world's leading authorities on African American fine art, came to the sale and was in the room when the painting sold. "He apparently hadn't seen it in quite a while," Freeman said with a laugh.

All told, the sale realized \$2,337,717, not too many dollars shy of the sale's high estimate, \$2,471,000. The sell-through rate on the 178 lots that were offered was 70%.

Asked to describe what his general takeaway from this auction was, Freeman said: "We saw some really high prices for significant artists whose secondary markets we have helped to establish, but now we're seeing a lot of activity on works by contemporary artists. And in that very competitive market of today, for Swann to have set two auction records, for Hendricks and Gilliam, is significant. And the prices were real jumps—almost three-fold for Hendricks and more than three-fold for Gilliam."

Yet Freeman was just as pleased by a \$6500 result. That was the price paid for *View of a Valley*, a turn-of-the-20th-century oil on canvas landscape by Thomas W. Hunster. Born in Cincinnati in 1851, Hunster spent almost 50 years teaching art in the public schools of the nation's capital.

"It's fascinating that he was an artist and art educator in Washington, D.C., so early," said Freeman, who was unfamiliar with the artist and dug deep to find information about him. One such source, African-American Historic and Cultural Resources in Prince George's County, Maryland (<http://issuu.com/mncppc/docs/aapgc/98>), gives a commentary about his life and shows a picture of his former residence in Prince George's County.

"Even though we've been doing this since 2007"—i.e., having African American fine art sales—"we're still finding things that are new," Freeman observed. "Just because it's an unfamiliar name or an artist who doesn't have an auction record doesn't mean it's not an artist of merit or significance. The Hunster painting was actually a nice piece to put next to Tanner's Impressionistic *Venice*," an 1897 work that fetched \$22,500. "He and Tanner looked good together. He fit right in."

For more information, contact Swann by phone at (212) 254-4710 or via its website (www.swannalleries.com).



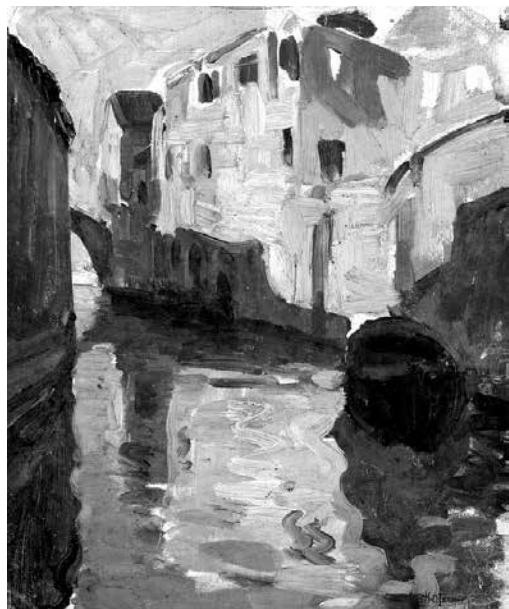
Barkley L. Hendricks (b. 1945), *Steve*, 72" x 48" oil, acrylic, and Magna on canvas, 1976, \$365,000.



***Boy and Sheep under a Tree* by Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937) sold within estimates to a collector for \$245,000. The 17 3/8" x 27" oil on canvas is signed and dated ("1881").**



***Cathedral*, Norman Lewis (1909-1979), 42" x 25" oil on canvas, 1950, \$317,000.**



Henry Ossawa Tanner's *Venice* fetched \$22,500 (est. \$15,000/25,000). The 10 7/8" x 9" oil on canvas is laid down on plywood mounted to cardstock. Signed by the artist and also by the artist's son on its back, the circa 1897 work was in the artist's estate. It came to the sale from another estate, that of Richard A. Long. (For more information about him, see "African-American Art Sale Features Richard A. Long's Collection," *M.A.D.*, January 2015, p. 26-B.)



Brooklyn Bridge and Dockworkers by Palmer Hayden (1890-1973) sold to a collector for \$30,000, its high estimate. The 22" x 28" oil on canvas dates from 1940-50.



Lobsterville Beach, Lois Mailou Jones (1905-1998), 26" x 32", oil on canvas, 1945, \$62,500.

Glory by Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2012) sold to a collector for \$57,500 (est. \$25,000/35,000). The 14" x 9 1/2" x 10" cast bronze dates from 1981. It is from the first part of an edition of nine; the last ones were completed by 2006. The sitter was Glory Van Scott (b. 1947). A principal dancer with the Katherine Dunham, Agnes DeMille, and Talley Beatty dance companies, Scott appeared on Broadway in *House of Flowers* (1954), *Kwamina* (1961), and *The Great White Hope* (1968), off Broadway in *Billy Noname* (1970), and, in the film *Rhythm of the Saints* (2003). She also played the "Rolls Royce Lady" in the 1974 film *The Wiz*.



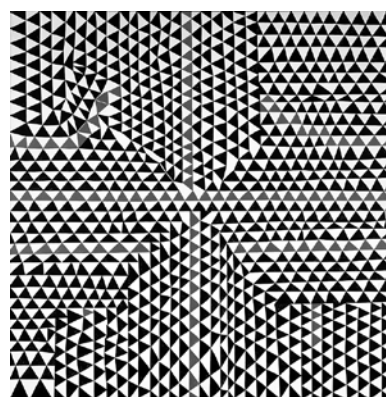
Figure by the Seashore II by Hughie Lee-Smith fetched \$45,000 (est. \$40,000/60,000). The 18" x 24" oil on masonite board dates from 1957. It had been in a private collection since 1986.



David C. Driskell (b. 1931), *Two Pines (Two Trees)*, 48" x 40", oil on canvas, 1961, \$47,500.



Untitled (*Abstraction in Green*) by Beauford Delaney (1901-1979) sold to a collector for \$35,000 (est. \$30,000/40,000). The 16" x 10 7/8" oil on canvas is actually a yellow-green—yellow being the color associated with the artist. Dated 1961 and inscribed "Clamart, Seine," it came to the sale from a private collection in Paris, where Delaney moved in the 1950s and had a significant career.



An untitled painting by graphic designer Marion Sampler (1920-1998) sold to a collector for a new record price for works by the artist, \$20,000 (est. \$8000/12,000). The oil on canvas is 48" square and came from a private California collection. The painting went to an institution.



Untitled (*The Hook Shot*) by Ernie Barnes (1938-2009) came from a private California collection and sold to an institution for yet another record, \$30,000, double its high estimate. The 16" x 20" acrylic on canvas dates from circa 1971.



This untitled 88 1/2" x 46 1/2" acrylic on canvas by Sam Gilliam (b. 1933), done in 1969, realized \$197,000.



Dark Corner by living artist James C. McMillan (b. 1925) sold to a collector for a new record price for works by the artist, \$35,000 (est. \$12,000/18,000). McMillan became the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture's first African American fellow in 1947. He was also a student of Lois Mailou Jones at Howard University in Washington, D.C. This 1960 oil on canvas is 36" x 28" and came from a New York collection.



This 31" x 21 1/2" oil on canvas is *View of a Valley* by Thomas W. Hunster (1851-1929). Dating from 1900-10, the painting fetched \$6500 (est. \$3000/5000)—the first auction price recorded for the artist.



The Emancipation Approximation (Scene 18) by Kara Walker (b. 1969) went to a collector for \$23,750 (est. \$6000/9000). The 1999-2000 color screenprint is 44" x 34".