

Rover Thomas painting withdrawn from auction



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A painting ascribed to celebrated East Kimberley artist Rover Thomas has been withdrawn from auction after an expert on Thomas's work raised concerns about its origins. Titled *Bedford Downs*, and dated 1984, the painting was set to go under the hammer next Wednesday night at Smith & Singer in Sydney. But the work was pulled from sale after Dr Suzanne Spinner, who has written a doctoral thesis on Thomas, alerted company chairman Geoffrey Smith.

“I raised it with Geoffrey after I became aware of the painting and he responded immediately and took it very seriously,” Dr Spinner tells Saleroom.



Rover Thomas, *Bedford Downs*, was withdrawn from sale at the upcoming Smith & Singer sale after its provenance was questioned.

Dr Spinner says the painting is one of a large cluster of works purportedly painted by Thomas between 1983 and 1985 that appeared on the market a decade later. As

Dr Spinner writes in her thesis, “these works often come with the blanket provenance descriptor, ‘painted at Turkey Creek’ or ‘collected at Warmun’”.

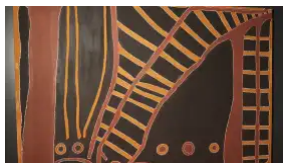
“The explanation of their origins is not convincing,” Dr Spinner says. “[Thomas’s primary dealer] Mary Macha called them out right at the beginning, in 1993, when two of them were offered by Sotheby’s Australia in the auction *Tribal Art* in Sydney.”

Smith removed *Bedford Downs*, from his online catalogue two weeks ago and ensured that it was also taken off the Australian and New Zealand Art Sales Digest, an online inventory of auctions from 1969 onwards. But it was too late to delete the painting from the printed catalogue which had already been published and mailed to clients.

Says Smith: “I am not 100 per cent assured by the painting’s lineage between the date of creation and 1994 ... I am not questioning its authenticity, but I am not 100 per cent comfortable with it.”

The painting’s withdrawal won’t make much of a dent in Smith’s sale, as it was one of the lower value works, estimated at \$20,000 to \$30,000 in a 67-lot auction worth a total of \$6.4 million to \$9 million. But the vendors can’t be all that pleased. What did Smith say to them?

“You need to go back to where you acquired the work from,” Smith says. “These are my concerns and you need to have those concerns addressed ... we have not tarnished the work, so if research or documentation comes forward that reveals something new, then it could be brought forward afresh.”



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The vendor acquired the painting from Sydney’s Utopia Gallery in 1994. Saleroom asked Utopia Gallery owner Chris Hodges about the origin of the painting and from whom he had acquired it. Hodges responded via email, “While Dr Spinner expresses her doubts, Rover Thomas had no difficulty identifying and discussing works of exactly the same vintage when he saw them 10 years later. So while it is perfectly reasonable for people to have ‘doubts’, so far they have only served to undermine the reputation of a great artist”.

Dr Spinner says that Thomas was shown these works towards the end of his life, “and at that point he was not capable of reliably recognising his works due to his ill health and damage to his cognitive abilities”.

In her 2012 thesis, completed at the University of Melbourne, Dr Spinner estimates that a third of the 750-plus works attributed to Thomas are “possibly problematic”.

In March this year Dr Spinner questioned a major Thomas painting *Jabanunga aka Goorialla (Rainbow Serpent)*, dated 1996, that was valued at \$1.2 million and donated to the National Museum of Australia by former lawyer Michael Blanche, in memory of his late wife Lauraine Diggins, a respected Melbourne art dealer whose gallery he now runs. Dr Spinner’s concerns prompted the NMA to launch an investigation into the painting [<https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p5a3tt>]. While the museum’s inquiries continue, the large, 180 cm by 270 cm, painting remains on display.

Gabriella Coslovich is an arts journalist with more than 20 years’ experience, including 15 at *The Age*, where she was a senior arts writer. Her book, *Whiteley on Trial*, on Australia’s most audacious of alleged art fraud, won a Walkley in 2018.