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Records tumble for top female artists and the time-honoured fruits of attractively low estimates

By Colin Gleadell
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'Blueberry' by Joan Mitchell sold for a record \$16.6 million at Christie's New York. One of many record prices achieved for women artists in the modern and contemporary art sales.

Records tumble for top female artists

After the phenomenal number of record prices achieved for artists of African descent - 26 - at New York's recent contemporary art sales, the second most notable performance came for female artists.

At least 15 female artists' records were set, including \$6.6 million (£4.9 million) for *Suddenly Last Summer* a painting by Britain's Cecily Brown. It has risen significantly in value since it last sold in 2010 for \$1.1 million. However, the disparity in prices between male and female artists at auction has been a bone of contention for many in recent times - along with the disparity in wages in the main auction houses.

Six years ago, a leading art dealer, Iwan Wirth, said that "female artists are the bargains of our time", and still no woman has entered the top 50 list of auction sales. One knocking on the door is American abstract expressionist painter Joan Mitchell, who died in 1992, and has long been the most expensive female artist. At these sales her record price rose to \$16.1 million for her succulently coloured *Blueberry*. That is still a long way behind the leading male abstract expressionists, but there is a momentum.

Other records tumbled for the likes of Dorothea Tanning, Agnes Martin, Grace Hartigan, Helen Frankenthaler, Pat Steir, Sue Williams, Lorna Simpson, Xaviera Simmons and Katherine Bernhardt. A predominantly American cast; but then, the sales were held in New York.

The time-honoured fruits of attractively low estimate

The revival of interest in Old Master paintings took another small step forward last week.

While sales of 19th-century European art failed to live up to expectations on both sides of the Atlantic, a minor sale of Old Master paintings at Sotheby's in New York, expected to raise \$5.5 million (£4.1 million), raised an impressive \$9.8 million (£7.3 million). The key to the sale's success hinged on a combination of two things. First, it saw an unusual input of works deaccessioned by US Museums, including The Art Institute of Chicago, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The San Diego Museum of Art and, contentiously, The Berkshire Museum, whose sales were met with protests. Impressed by the museum provenance, buyers paid up to five times the estimated prices.



Panfilo Nuvoione's Still Life With A Raised Stand

The other was 23 still life paintings by artists influenced by Caravaggio. A big draw here was that each lot was to be sold without a reserve minimum price, so that something with a \$100,000 estimate could, in theory, be sold for \$10,000.

As a result, the bidders piled in. One of the longest bidding battles came for a still life of fruit by the early-17th-century Milanese artist Panfilo Nuvoione, which more than tripled estimates at a record \$447,000 (£333,235) - a fourfold increase on the price the seller paid in 2004.

Which all goes to show, high estimates keep the buyers away; low ones, especially if being sold by a museum, get them going.