

Phillips's Robust \$135 Million New York Auction Sets Records for a Half-Dozen Black Artists, Rising Stars and Midcareer Figures Alike

Records were shattered for Amy Sherald, Vaughn Spann, Mickalene Thomas, and others.

Eileen Kinsella, December 7, 2020



Henry Highly at Phillips evening sale. Credit Thomas De Cruz Media Haydon Perrior

Phillips's evening sale of 20th Century and contemporary art in New York tonight pulled in \$135 million, squarely within its expectations of \$110 million to \$160 million. Of the 35 lots on offer (three were withdrawn before the sale), 31 sold and 14 were guaranteed.

Just a few days after the house set records for younger artists like Lucas Arruda, Bernard Frize, and Salman Toor at its Hong Kong sale—its first joint venture with China’s Poly Auction—Phillips again saw extraordinary demand for contemporary stars and specifically Black artists, for whom all of tonight’s auction records were set. These included Amy Sherald, Vaughn Spann, Jadé Fadojutimi, Kehinde Wiley, and Mickalene Thomas.

Works by Ghanaian painter Amoako Bofo and the late Canadian artist Matthew Wong were also among the most sought-after talents at the evening’s sale (and both saw new record prices set for their work at auction last week).

In keeping with the expanded sale category it introduced several years ago (and which the other major houses have followed), Phillips mixed its contemporary offerings with blue-chip postwar art, such as that of Helen Frankenthaler and Joan Mitchell, as well as works by Henri Magritte, Pablo Picasso, and even Norman Rockwell.



Amy Sherald, *The Bathers* (2015). Image courtesy Phillips.

Sherald's painting *Bathers* (2015) kicked things off to a strong start. Bidding opened at just \$100,000 and quickly took off as at least four Phillips specialists on the phone chased the work, mostly in \$100,000 increments until it landed at a hammer price of \$3.5 million (or \$4.3 million with premium). This marked a record for the artist that far surpassed the only previous Sherald work to come to auction, *Innocent You, Innocent Me* (2016), which sold for \$350,000 in May 2019. Phillips experts estimated that there were at least 20 bidders registered for the work.

The momentum continued over the next several lots, including for Jadé Fadojutimi's lushly painted *Lotus Land* (2017), which immediately sparked heated competition. Estimated at \$40,000 to \$60,000, the price quickly shot into six figures until it was finally hammered down for \$300,000 (or \$378,000 with premium). The previous high for the artist's work was \$52,260, achieved during a Christie's online sale in October.

This year of hybrid auctions, the result of ongoing travel restrictions, has led auctioneers to specify the sources of online bidding far more than in the past. At one point, Phillips auctioneer Henry Highley noted that online bids for the Fadojutimi work were coming from locations as far flung as Samoa and Palm Beach, Florida. At other times throughout the evening he mentioned bids from Michigan, Arizona, Singapore, and Hong Kong.

Bidding also proved robust for a work by Vaughn Spann, a recent Yale graduate who was prominently featured at the Rubell Collection during last year's Art Basel Miami Beach and had a sold-out show at Almine Rech Gallery earlier this year. *Big Black Rainbow (Deep Dive)* (2019), featuring the artist's signature rainbow imagery, sold for \$239,400 to a New York-based Phillips specialist.



David Hockney, *Nichols Canyon* (1980). Image courtesy of Phillips.

The top lot of the night was David Hockney's *Nichols Canyon* (1980), which had a third-party guarantee. Bidding opened at \$24 million, against an unpublished estimate of around \$35 million, to seemingly measured demand, but gradually gained momentum and climbed to a final hammer price of \$35.5 million, selling to Phillips global chairwoman Cheyenne Westphal on the phone. With premium, the final price was \$41 million, which the auction house noted was a record for a Hockney landscape. (The artist's overall record is more than \$90 million, for a pool scene sold at Christie's in fall 2018.)



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Portrait of A-One A.K.A. King* (1982). Image courtesy Phillips.

Bidding was significantly more subdued for some of the evening's other star lots, including Jean-Michel Basquiat's *Portrait of A-One A.K.A. King* (1982), which also had a third-party guarantee. The work was estimated at \$10 million to \$15 million. Bidding opened at \$7.5 million and it just barely reached the minimum sale price before being hammered down to another client bidding through Westphal for \$11.5 million (with premium).

A Clyfford Still painting, *PH-407* (1964), wound up with the second-highest price of the night, a premium-inclusive \$18.4 million, but felt like a measured event compared to the fevered bidding for other lower-priced lots. The work's estimate was in the region of \$17 million, with a third-party guarantee.



Clyfford Still, *PH-407* (1964). Image courtesy Phillips.

It was a mixed night for Norman Rockwell. The first lot offered, *The Peephole* (1958), sold for \$2.1 million against an estimate of \$1 million to \$1.5 million. Then, several lots later, *An Audience of One* (1938) was offered on an estimate of \$2.5 million to \$3.5 million. Bidding opened at \$1.3 million but got no higher than \$1.7 million before it was passed. The last time this same Rockwell painting appeared at auction, in May 1999, it sold for \$640,500.

Coincidentally, it was Kehinde Wiley's painting of another of the night's stars, *Portrait of Mickalene Thomas, the Coyote*, (2017), which set a new record for the artist when it sold for \$378,000 (on an estimate of \$100,000 to \$150,000).

Thomas, too, saw a new record with the sale of *I've Been Good To Me* (2013), which went for \$901,200, surpassing her previous high of \$567,000, set in 2019.



Amoako Bofo, *Purple on Red* (2019). Image courtesy Phillips.

In a press conference following the sale, Phillips CEO Edward Dolman noted there was intense demand from Asia, partly due to the fact that the region is well ahead of the West in returning to public-health normalcy, as well as due to the house's robust sale last week in Hong Kong, which may have encouraged buyers.

Finally, though records were not broken yet again, results were still strong for two of the stars at the Hong Kong sale last week. Tonight, Amoako Bofo's signature, finger-

painted portrait *Purple on Red* (2019) sold for \$756,000, well above the high expectation of \$300,000. And Matthew Wong's *Before Night Falls* (2018) sold for \$1.3 million, shattering its \$500,000 high estimate.