

Art Agency, Partners

Art Agency, Partners is a bespoke art advisory firm founded in 2014, and built upon decades of combined experience, to provide counsel to many of the world's leading art collectors and institutions on collection assessment and development, estate planning, and innovative approaches to museum giving and growth.

What the May Season Tells Us About the Art Market

The hits, misses and key trends



Robert Motherwell, *Elegy to the Spanish Republic No. 134* (1974). Courtesy Sotheby's

By  Charlotte Burns

executive editor of In Other Words

and  Allan Schwartzman

co-founder of AAP & chairman of Sotheby's Global Fine Arts

Published 24 May 2019 in [Analysis](#)

The recent wave of New York auctions was a steady sweep, with more than \$2.1bn spent on Impressionist, Modern and

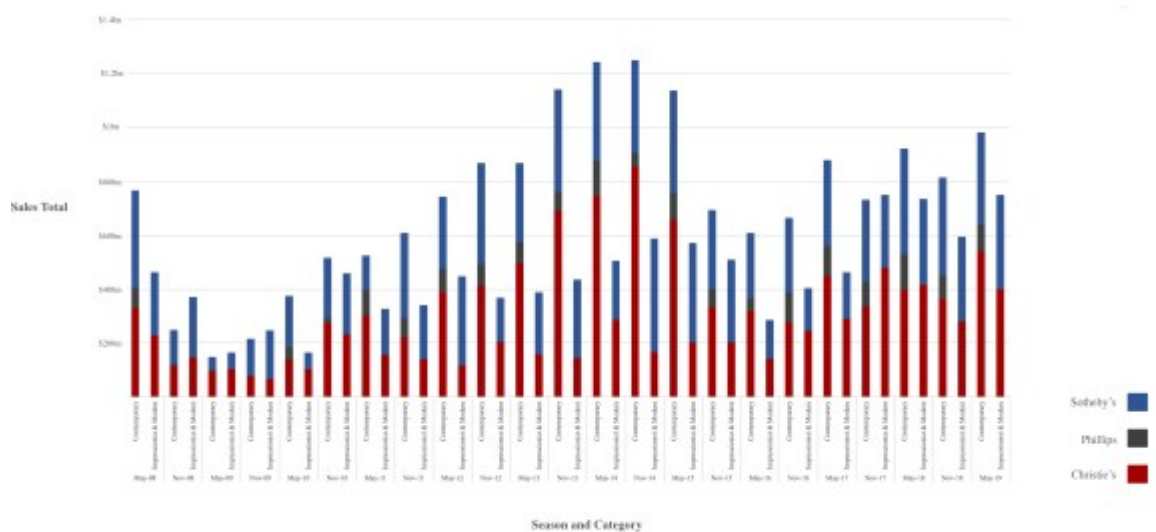
contemporary art at Sotheby's, Christie's and Phillips in one week. The results were roughly in line with the past several sales seasons, suggesting that this is neither a frothy up-market or a messy down-one but a steady settling in.

Amidst a US trade war with China and alongside fluctuating financial markets, the auction market showed clarity. Specialists are strategizing their sales well, understanding where the art market is healthy and where it is challenged. There is a degree of sobriety and caution to the spending—buyers are mostly not about to get carried away, unless for works they perceive to be truly exceptional. There is also a predictability: most works of art sold as market insiders expected them to. At the same time, there are some smaller unexpected moments of rapid reawakening in artists' markets that have felt sleepy for a long time.

There are some signs of the continued expansion of taste in the contemporary realm for more institutionally established artists in mid-career and for artists who have historically been overlooked—though this was perhaps slightly less the case last week than in recent seasons. There is also the phenomenon [around KAWS](#), which is a market in its own orbit and with its own apparent logic. Predominantly, though, focus and money are more than ever concentrated on the classics, from Cézanne to Monet, Rauschenberg to Bacon.

Consistent patterns of spending

New York Sales Trends Across Auction Houses—Impressionist & Modern and Contemporary Art



The Impressionist and Modern evening sale totals are increasingly on par with contemporary evening sales. Click to expand. Graph by Julia Vennitti and Madeline Barnabee

Right now, the art market is becoming more consistent across categories, not only in terms of the sums of money (the market share split between contemporary and Impressionist and Modern is more even than it was several years ago—see chart above) but in terms of patterns of buying, collectors are hyper-specific. Yes, bidding ricocheted for masterworks by banner-name artists but, by and large, name brand by itself is no longer enough on its own. Now, focus has further narrowed to coalesce around specific works, or bodies of works by those key names (this is equally the case on the private market, too).

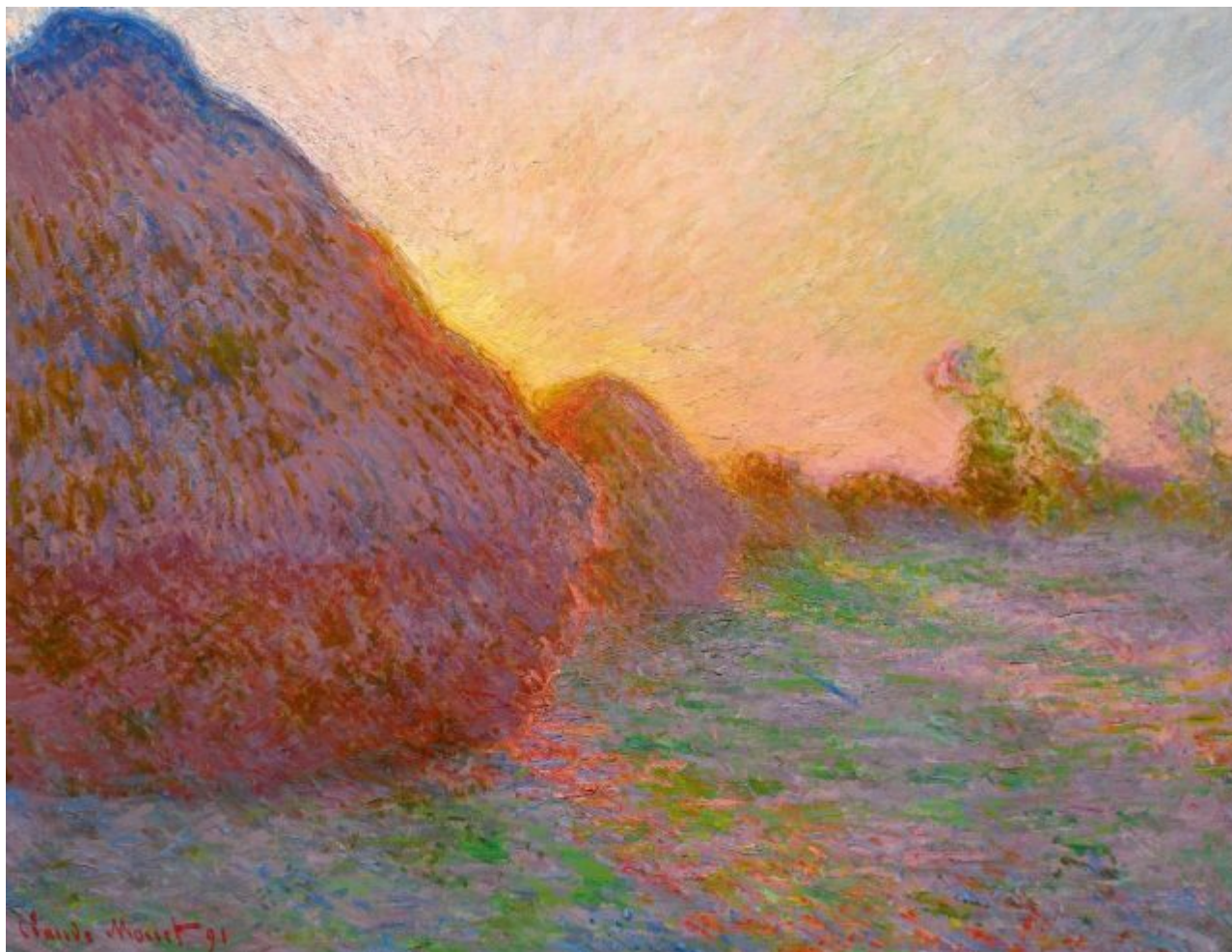
Uneasy feelings

Despite the evident strength of the sales, there is nonetheless a diffuse sense of unease. While this angsty mood mirrors the broad sense of uncertainty in the wider world, it is also specific to the art world: we are in the midst of a fundamental reshaping of the business, from who sells art (and how) to who buys it (and how); from who shows art, to who writes about it. The media, primary market galleries, secondary market dealers and auction houses are all veering away from decades-old models (more on that in a later issue). Change is not necessarily bad, but it does tend to make people anxious. Nonetheless, these sales showed a resilient, somewhat sensible, market.

Brand appeal, for the right work

More than ever the art market is split into a number of mini-markets, each operating according to its own logic and, within which, buying behavior shifts drastically depending on the work and its desirability, condition and provenance, among other factors. Tastes are also changing. For example, early Impressionist works that look fussy to modern eyes are generally less

appealing that later, often more abstract ones. Unless the painting is a hard-to-get masterpiece.

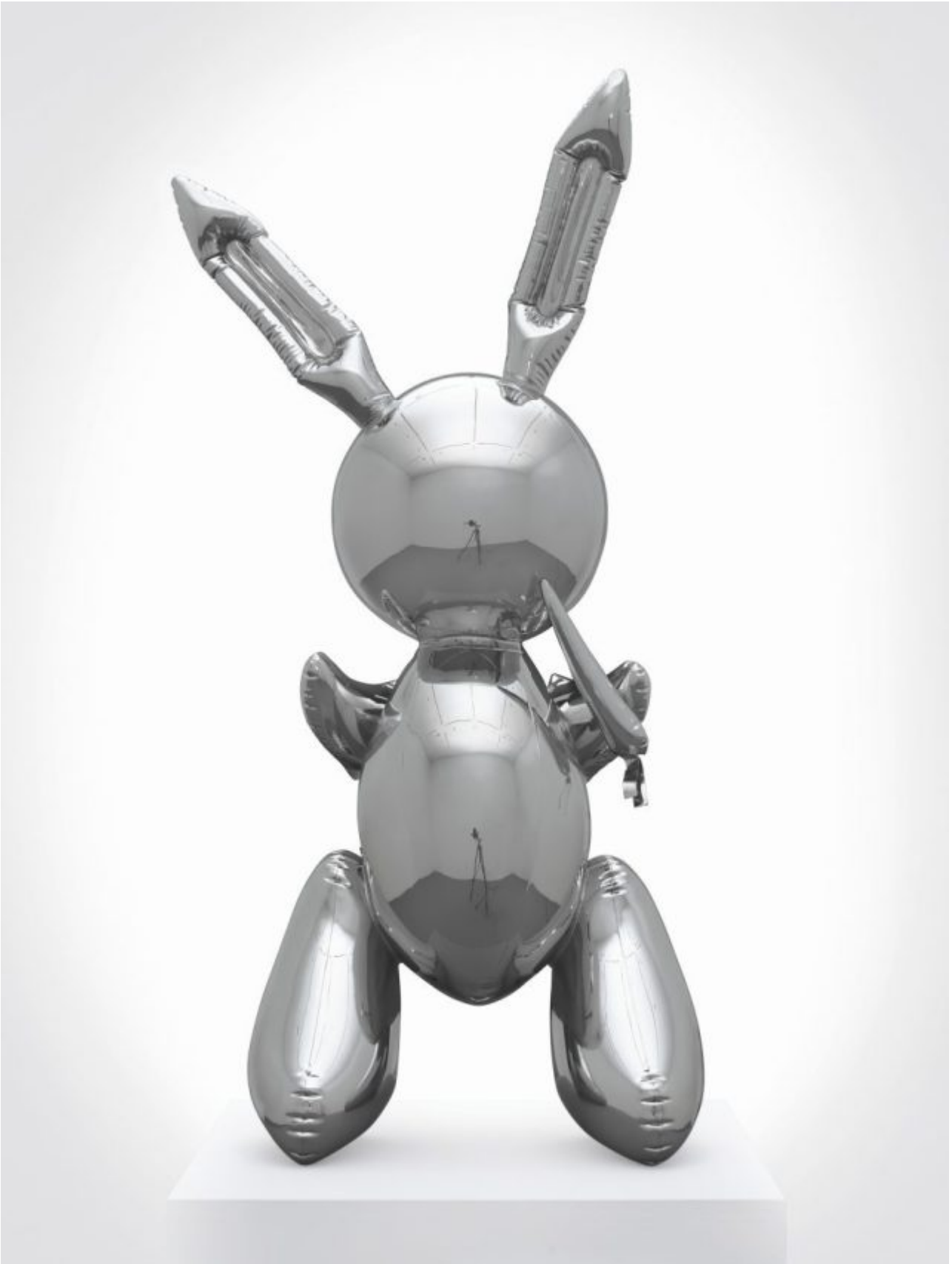


The most expensive Impressionist work ever auctioned: Claude Monet *Meules* (1890) sold for \$110m at Sotheby's. Courtesy Sotheby's

The most expensive work of the week was Monet's *Meules* (1890), which hammered at \$97m (\$110.7m with fees, estimate in excess of \$55m) at Sotheby's, making this shimmering landscape of haystacks at sunset the most expensive Impressionist work ever sold at auction (and the ninth most expensive work overall). The work is one of the best in the much sought-after and historically significant "Haystack" series. Works of this quality and importance rarely surface at auction, so the painting was expected to do well, and it did.

Overall, there were nine works by Monet at auction of various quality and time periods, ranging from a frilly 1885 poppy pastoral at Sotheby's (*La Prairie Fleurie*, est. \$4m-\$6m; hammer \$4.1m, price with fees \$4.9m) to a blurry Giverny at Christie's from 1922-24 (*La Maison Vue du Jardin aux Roses*, est. \$4m-\$6m; bought in at \$2.4m). The works were offered in the evening sales at Sotheby's and Christie's: one went above estimate, two below, four within, and one failed to sell. Excluding the record-setting haystack painting, the other eight Monets came in just above their combined \$48.2m low estimate, hammering at \$49m (\$57.3m with fees). Buyers were not dumbstruck by name brand but recognized—and chased—quality when they saw it, though refrained from spending staggering sums on works that were rather more fine than great. It helped that the auction houses priced works within the realm of reason.

Record-breaking bunny



Jeff Koons, *Rabbit* (1986), the most expensive work by a living artist, sold at Christie's from the Collection of S.I Newhouse for \$91.1m with fees. Christie's Images Ltd. 2019

In the contemporary sales, the highest price was for *Rabbit* (1986). This work is Jeff Koons at his best: dangerous, uncanny and unprecedented. It set a new record for a work by a living artist when it hammered for \$80m at Christie's after a ten-

minute bidding war (\$91.1m with fees, est. \$50m-\$70m), reclaiming the crown from David Hockney, whose 1972 *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)* had hammered at \$80m at Christie's in November (\$90.3m with fees—but the house has increased its premium since then, so *Rabbit* pipped it at the post).

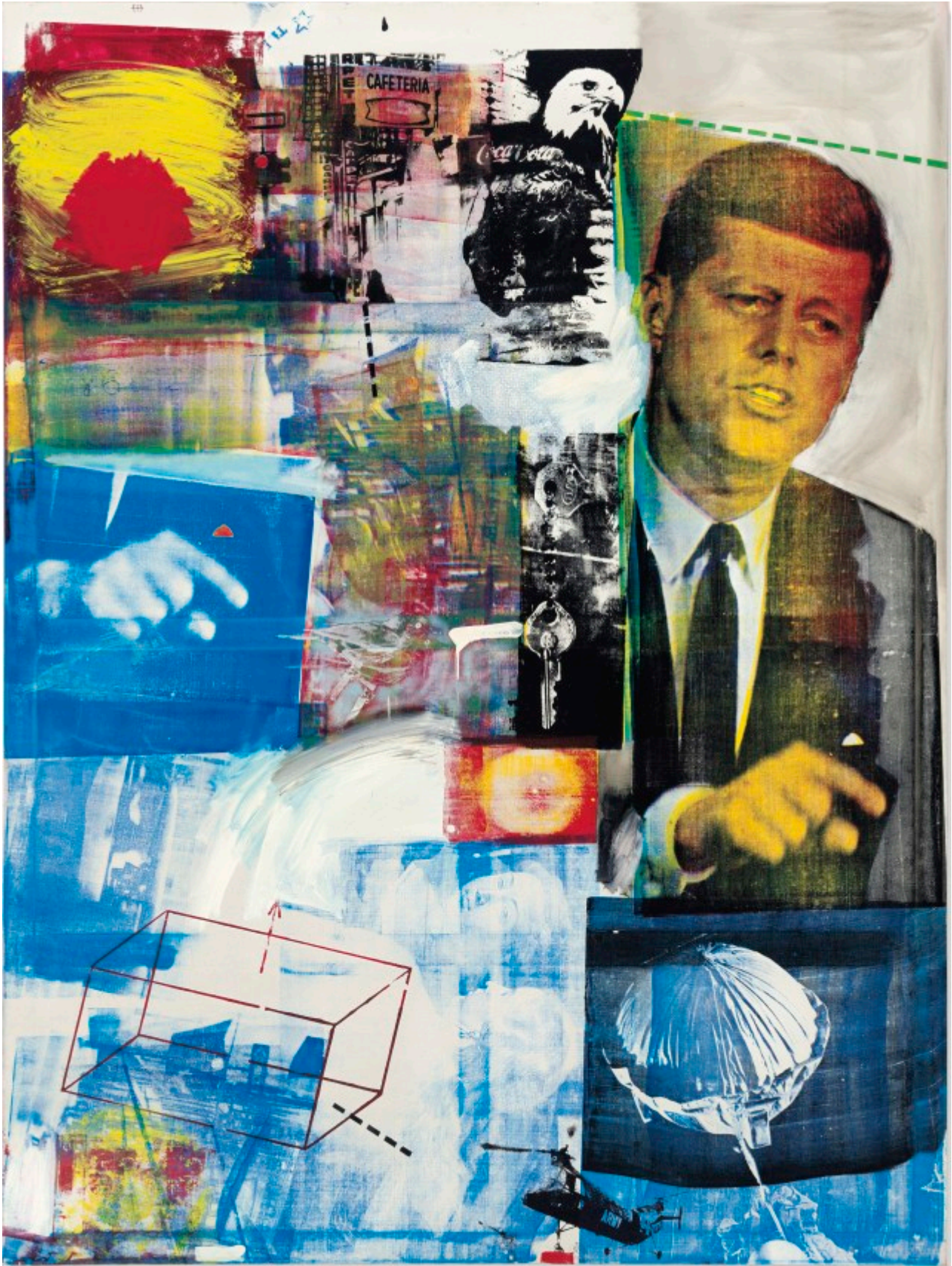
Not all Koonses are desired equally but *Rabbit* is one of the works collectors are most partial to (Dakis Joannou wrote for *In Other Words* in 2017 of his regret at not buying the sculpture in 1986). It is one of an edition of three (plus artist's proof): another is owned by the Broad Foundation in Los Angeles, and another is a promised gift to the MCA Chicago—which is to say, its quality was assured by the company it keeps and the edition size is small enough for the work to be considered rare: the market tends to be encouraged by works in series or editions with sibling works unlikely to be sold again.

The record-breaking result does less to recalibrate the market's predilections than reinforce them: certain bodies of work by Koons, notably the shiny-surfaced sculptures and particularly those made of polished stainless steel, are far more in demand than others. This has long been the case and is increasingly so—along with the rest of the market, demand is concentrating locally on specific bodies of work.

The unequal, top-heavy nature of the Koons market is represented by the sales last week during which just one work of the eight on offer across the day and evening sales at Sotheby's, Christie's and Phillips (*Rabbit*, of course) made \$80m of the \$83.8m hammer total (or \$91.1m of the \$95.7m, if you prefer looking at results with fees). Nevertheless, of the seven other Koons works, three went within estimate, two above, one below and one didn't sell: the supply was priced well and was mostly met by, or exceeded, demand.

Fresh to market

Part of the strength of these sales was driven by single-owner collections, more often than not estates of great quality. There has been a long established tradition that, when high quality work from a good estate or collection comes to market, there is a halo effect that carries the work to higher values than might have been otherwise been the case. This season, while the estates brought a jolt of energy to the sales, the demand was more about the freshness of the material (much of the work had either never been sold at auction or had been off the market for decades) than the halo effect of the consignor, which speaks again to the increasingly measured approach of today's auction buyers.



This masterwork by Robert Rauschenberg, *Buffalo II* (1925-2008) led one major curator to ask, via an Instagram post, for it to be donated to their museum. Fresh to market from the Robert B. and Beatrice C. Mayer Family Collection, it sold for \$88.8m at Christie's. Christie's Images Ltd. 2019

A silk screen by Robert Rauschenberg that had been off the market since 1965 was so good that it had a major museum curator posting begging requests on Instagram. The previous owners of *Buffalo II* (1964), Robert and Beatrice Mayer, had acquired the work from [Leo Castelli](#) a year after it was made. One of the most important works by the artist, it hammered at \$78m to make a new record (\$88.8m with fees, est. around \$50m) at Christie's .

Is this success likely to trickle over into the rest of the Rauschenberg market? Not necessarily: there were eight works by Rauschenberg across the sales: exclude *Buffalo II* and the rest failed to meet their combined \$1.2m to \$1.8m estimate, making instead \$650,000 on the hammer, with half going unsold. Big banner sales do not necessarily lift entire markets, especially in the case of an artist who was experimental and prolific (which makes it harder for an often attention-deficit market to focus on what is really valuable) and whose supply has been somewhat mishandled in the past. Should another obvious masterwork surface, however, and the market will likely respond accordingly to it. Equally, the market is ripe to rediscover and reevaluate moments in Rauschenberg's oeuvre.



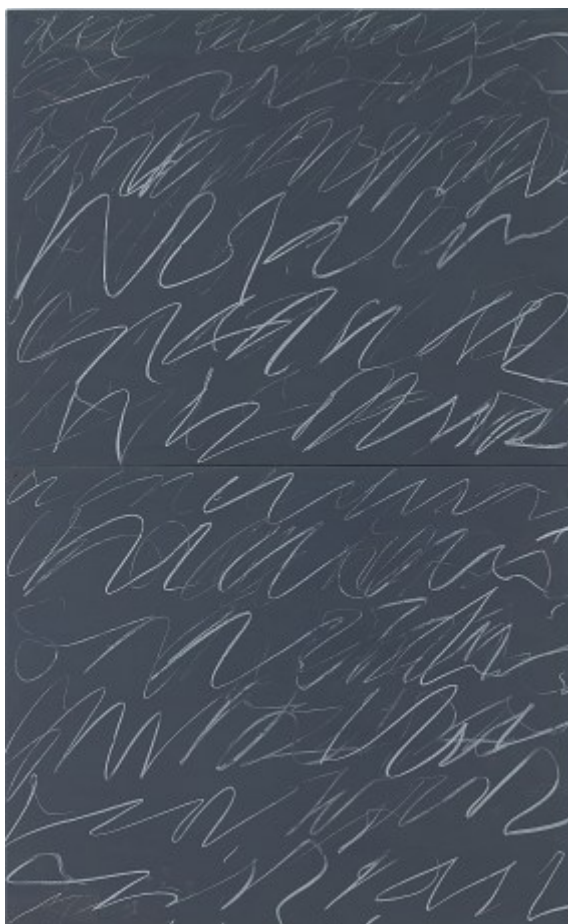
The pain of the postwar world: Francis Bacon's *Study for a Head* (1952), which sold for \$50.4m to dealer Christopher Eykyn at Sotheby's came from the collection of Richard E. Lang and Jane Lang Davis. Courtesy Sotheby's

A small, "Screaming Pope" by Francis Bacon, *Study for a Head* (1952), more than doubled its low estimate at Sotheby's when it hammered to Christopher Eykyn of the dealership [Eykyn Maclean](#) at \$44m (\$50.4m with fees, est. \$20m-\$30m). Fresh to market, the work had been owned since 1975 by the Seattle philanthropists Richard E. Lang and Jane Lang Davis. The "Screaming Popes"—a series based on Velázquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1650) which Bacon painted to represent

the pain of the traumatized postwar world—is one of the valuable and desirable series he made; the market reacted with hunger when this previously unavailable work came to market.

(A point about pricing: even when a work is desirable, estimates matters in this discerning market. When Bacon's *Study of Red Pope, 1962, 2nd Version* (1971) was aggressively estimated as the most expensive work ever offered in Europe (est. £60m-£80m/\$80.4m-\$107.1m), it failed to sell at Christie's London in 2017. The auction houses have seemingly wised up to overly punchy estimates and are pricing work more appealingly.)

Consistency



Consistent or flat? Cy Twombly, *Untitled* (1970) which sold for \$4.7m at Phillips last week had previously sold at Sotheby's for \$5m in 2015. Courtesy Phillips

Works that had been on the market somewhat recently sold for roughly what they made last time on the block. For example, an untitled 1970 Twombly chalkboard that sold in 2015 at Sotheby's for \$5m made \$4.7m at Phillips this time (est. \$4m-\$6m). A large untitled [Christopher Wool painting](#) of the word FOOL (*Untitled*, 1990) which sold last week at Sotheby's for \$14m (est. \$12m-\$18m) had previously sold at Christie's New York in November 2014 for \$14.2m (est. \$12m-\$18m) and, before that, at Christie's London in February 2012 for £4.9m (\$7.8m) (£2.5m-£3.5m), as well as being the subject of private deals, too.

The Wool market began motoring in around 2012 after the announcement of a mid-career survey at the Guggenheim in New York led to anticipation on the market about the potential for the increased value of the work, which caused more activity. According to research by our colleague Bernie Lagrange for *In Other Words* last summer: "Average auction prices almost doubled from \$1.2m in 2011 to \$2.3m in 2012. In November 2013, a new record was set with the \$26.5m sale at Christie's of the 1988 work *Apocalypse Now* (the painting had been pegged as the centerpiece of the Guggenheim show, but was pulled from the exhibition when news of the sale broke). By 2014, the year the Guggenheim show opened, the average price for a Wool at auction was \$4.3m. By 2016, the market was peaking with an average price of \$5.7m."

This is a supply and demand issue: there has been a lot of very expensive work by Wool to come to the market and many of

the collectors who were seeking to own a work now do. This is a market beginning to steady: Wool remains one of the most important painters alive and the FOOL work held its value, despite being so known to the market and the relatively quick flip. Having said that, buyers are increasingly discerning.

Next generation



KAWS, *The Walk Home* (2012), which sold for \$5m (est. \$600,000-\$800,000) was one of 16 works that sold last week including *In the Woods* (2002) which sold for \$3.85 at Christie's (est. \$1.5m-\$2m).
Courtesy Phillips

There is limited investment currently in the development of the untested: the market is not especially interested in experimenting on the next generation of artists, barring micro-markets like that of KAWS. There were nonetheless records set for artists whose work has been overlooked, notably women artists, but in many cases it felt like prices would have gone higher a season or two ago. There is still heat around figurative painting by African American artists, a section of the market that is starting to look frothy.

This tallies with word from curators about how some collectors and board members are starting to suggest they are “over” this art. The idea that African American artists, women artists, Eastern European artists—or any other kind of artist that has been overlooked by the historical mainstream narrative—are trends rather than of canonical importance is cynical and ultimately misguided. Nevertheless, with increasing institutional commitment to “mining the margins”, the loss of a few market speculators may ultimately lead to a healthier and more sustainable growth.