The New York Times



The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

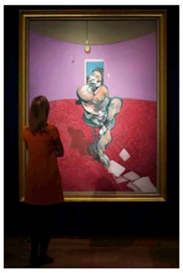
# Francis Bacon Work Sells for $70 Million at Christie's Auction

By CAROL VOGEL FEB. 13, 2014

LONDON — Trophy hunters fought over trophy paintings by Gerhard Richter and Francis Bacon, as well as a pink stainless-steel "Cracked Egg" by Jeff Koons, at Christie's sale of postwar and contemporary art here on Thursday night. But of the three artists, it was Bacon who once again stole the spotlight when an unnamed American collector paid $70 million for "Portrait of George Dyer Talking," a 1966 canvas depicting the artist's lover perched on a stool, his twisted body positioned under a naked light bulb as though he were being interrogated.

The painting, which is being sold by David Martinez, the Mexican financier, had last been at auction in 2000, when it fetched $6.6 million. Before the sale, Christie's experts had estimated it would bring about $50 million.

It was a huge price for a single canvas. But it lacked the drama of a triptych by the Irish-born Bacon — "Three Studies of Lucian Freud" — which became the most expensive painting ever sold at auction when it made $142.4 million at Christie's in New York in November. (The buyer was Elaine Wynn, the Las Vegas casino owner.)



"Portrait of George Dyer Talking," by the artist Francis Bacon, on view at Christie's in London.
Andrew Cowie/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

"I don't think we would have seen the high price tonight had it not been for the triptych," Pilar Ordovas, a London dealer, said after the sale. "Some of the results tonight were incredible, but it was a very hard act to follow after November."

The evening topped Christie's estimates, with a total of $206.1 million in sales. It had been expected to fetch $142.9 million to $176.6 million. Only eight of 48 works offered failed to sell.

The auction also eclipsed Sotheby's sale on Tuesday night, which totaled $144.5 million, against an estimate of $112.5 million to $153.1 million.

Another painting by Bacon, "Study for a Portrait" (1978), was also on the auction block Thursday night. It had last been up at auction at Sotheby's in May 2012, when Donald L. Bryant, the New York collector, purchased it for $4.2 million. Now Mr. Bryant was the seller, hoping to get $3.8 million to $4.9 million. A telephone bidder paid $4.4 million.

This has been a big week for Mr. Richter — two works by the 82-year-old German artist brought high prices at Sotheby's on Wednesday, with a 1994 abstract work fetching $28.6 million. That looked like a bargain on Thursday when a large canvas from 1989 that was estimated to sell for nearly $25 million ended up bringing $32.4 million.

Monumental sculptures by Mr. Koons are always good attention-grabbers, and "Cracked Egg (Magenta)," a nearly six-foot-tall sculpture executed from 1994 to 2006, one of five versions, was up for sale, bringing £14 million, the equivalent of $23.3 million, against an estimate of $17 million to $25 million. More surprising than the price, however, was the seller — Mr. Koons's friend, colleague and fan Damien Hirst. While it may not have topped its estimate, it was a high price compared to the $3.5 million that the Los Angeles philanthropist and financier Eli Broad is said to have paid for a "Cracked Egg (Blue)" from the Gagosian Gallery in 2006.

(Final prices include the buyer's premium: 25 percent of the first $100,000; 20 percent of the next $100,000 up to $2 million; and 12 percent of the rest. Estimates do not reflect commissions.)

Besides being a seller, several of Mr. Hirst's own works were on the block, one with not very good results. "Adam and Eve (Breaking Open the Head)" (1994-2003), a bull's head submerged in formaldehyde, was estimated to bring $820,000 to $1.1 million but failed to sell at all. "Where Will It End?" Hirst's 1993 wall cabinet featuring fish in formaldehyde, was expected to sell for $1.4 million to $2 million and made $1.5 million.

On Wednesday night at Sotheby's, a 1964 painting by Cy Twombly made $20 million, and two more paintings by him were for sale on Thursday. The artist's paintings performed well at Christie's too. An abstract canvas from 1960, a riot of scrawls, splashes, smears and drips that was expected to sell for $2 million to $2.6 million, sold for $4.4 million.

"The trophies justified their value," Brett Gorvy, worldwide chairman of postwar and contemporary art at Christie's, said after the sale, explaining that the big-ticket purchases were bought by seasoned bidders.