

# Smith&Singer

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PENSIVE, PRE-WAR MASTERPIECE BY YOSL BERGNER TO BE OFFERED FOR  
AUCTION IN JUNE AT SMITH & SINGER

*Presented for Public Sale for the First Time Since its creation in 1939,  
'Self-Portrait' was Acquired Directly from the Artist and Thence by Descent to the  
Present Owner*

*Painted on the Precipice of World War II, the Work Captures the Stoic Resolve  
and Emotional Intensity of Bergner as a Young Refugee in Australia*



YOSL BERGNER 1920-2017

**Self-Portrait** (1939)

oil on canvas on composition board,

56 x 46 cm

Estimate \$40,000–50,000

**MELBOURNE, 20 May 2020** – Not seen in public since its last exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1991 – and being offered for public sale for the first time since its creation in 1939 – *Self-Portrait* (1939) is a powerful and poignant depiction of Yosl Bergner as a young man. Smith & Singer is honoured to have been entrusted with its sale and is excited to present this exceptional work within the forthcoming *Important Australian & International Art* auction. Painted just two years after Bergner fled Warsaw with his young sister to join their father in Australia, the deeply-luminous palette and direct gaze of Bergner capture the resolve of the young artist as a refugee in his recently adopted country.

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YOSLI BERGNER 1920-2017

**Carlton Slum** (circa 1938, dated 1944)

oil on canvas on composition board,  
45 x 41.5 cm

Private Collection, courtesy of Smith & Singer  
Fine Art

## A WINDOW INTO REFUGEE LIFE IN MID-CENTURY AUSTRALIA

Born into a family of artists and writers, Yosli Bergner grew up in Warsaw. In 1934, his father travelled to Australia, searching for a new country for the Jewish people, free of the anti-Semitism and Fascism that was sweeping Europe.

Yosli followed in 1937, arriving in Melbourne, where he lived for ten years, working in factories and studying briefly at the National Gallery School. Soon after his arrival, Yosli's father departed Australia, leaving him with his sister, Ruth, in a tenement in Royal Parade, Parkville. They subsequently lived in the then inner-city slums of Richmond, Fitzroy and Carlton where Bergner found inspiration in the strangeness of Melbourne urban life: 'He saw it through the eyes of a boy who had grown up in the slums of Warsaw. He began to paint derelicts and "metho" drinkers, little city lanes, rat catchers, the Salvation Army, the Victoria Market people and the refugees, identifiable by

long coats and briefcases. He painted Aborigines.' (June Helmer, *Yosli Bergner: A Retrospective Exhibition*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1985, p. 20)

Bergner was one of the first artists to paint Indigenous Australians in a contemporary context and later recalled:

'One day standing near the Melbourne Town Hall, I saw an Aborigine. I didn't know what an Aborigine was. He didn't look to me like a Negro, but more like a Jew, wearing a hat. He was playing songs from an American musical on a eucalyptus leaf. I painted these people with a faraway look in their eyes from generations before. They were displaced and I felt identified with them. I painted them in a "bleached" pink colour – a "bleached" colour I had seen only on the poorest prostitutes in Warsaw.' (Yosli Bergner, quoted in Helmer, *ibid.*, 1985, pp. 20-21)

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## BERGNER'S ENDURING LEGACY ON AUSTRALIAN ART

Bergner's first-hand knowledge of modern and contemporary European art earned him respect among the artists of Australia, and he became close friends with Arthur Boyd, Noel Counihan, Vic O'Connor, Albert Tucker, and James Wigley, with whom he exhibited at the fledgling Contemporary Art Society. Bergner was a major contributor to the *Anti-Fascist Exhibition* held in Melbourne in December 1942, where moving depictions of his homeland, refugees and the plight of Indigenous Australians entered the vernacular of Australian Modernism.

While Bergner left Australia and settled in Israel in 1948, the paintings created in Australia are few in number with the majority held in public collections, particularly the National Gallery of Victoria. *Self-Portrait* (1939) is one of Bergner's most significant compositions from his Australian years, revealing his precocious talent and interest in the School of Paris artists and German Expressionism.



YOSL BERGNER 1920-2017

**House Backs, Parkville** (circa 1938)

oil on canvas, 51.6 x 43.4 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne,  
The Joseph Brown Collection. Presented  
through the NGV Foundation by  
Dr Joseph Brown AO OBE,  
Honorary Life Benefactor, 2004

*Geoffrey Smith, Chairman of Smith & Singer commented: 'Yosl Bergner had a profound immediate and subsequent influence on Australian Modernism and we are honoured to be entrusted with the sale of this masterful composition from the collection of the original owners. Self-Portrait's carefully modelled forms tinged with strident dark-green tones, present the artist as a young Jewish migrant to Australia, escaping the persecution that resulted in the murder of millions of his people. It remains a piercing and unforgettable self-portrait within the history and development of Australian art.'*

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## AT A GLANCE

Lot 21

YOSL BERGNER 1920-2017

*Self-Portrait* (1939)

oil on canvas on composition board, 56 x 46 cm

Estimate \$40,000–50,000

Important Australian & International Art

Estimate: \$5,962,000–8,310,000, 59 lots

Virtual Auction, 24 June 2020, 6.30 pm

The health of our clients, employees and community is of paramount importance. We have implemented stringent protocols within our premises, including social distancing, frequent hand and area disinfecting, and a maximum number of clients in each exhibition at any time. Full details are available upon request.

**Viewings in Melbourne** 8-14 June, 10 am to 5 pm

14-16 Collins Street, Melbourne

**Viewings in Sydney** 17-24 June 2020, 10 am to 5 pm

30 & 34 Queen Street, Woollahra

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