

TWO MASTERPIECES BY BRETT WHITELEY LEAD SOTHEBY'S AUSTRALIA'S NOVEMBER *IMPORTANT AUSTRALIAN ART* AUCTION

The Orange Table 1977-1978 Leads Auction with \$1.4 Million High Estimate

The Blue Bathroom 1963 Repatriated to Australia from a Distinguished British Collection and Offered at Auction for the First Time Since it was Created 56 Years Ago



BRETT WHITELEY 1939-1992

The Orange Table 1977-1978

synthetic polymer paint, oil, tempera, charcoal and
oyster shells on plywood, 124 x 205 cm

Estimate \$1,000,000–1,400,000

© Wendy Whiteley

MELBOURNE, 12 November 2019 – In eight days, Sotheby's Australia will have the honour of offering two of the most significant Brett Whiteley works seen in recent years at auction. The pair will be presented with a combined high estimate of \$2.2 million and are shining examples from the *œuvre* of one of Australia's greatest artists. *The Blue Bathroom* 1963 (lot 39, estimate \$600,000–800,000) which was recently rediscovered in the United Kingdom and repatriated by Sotheby's Australia, will be offered for public auction for the first time since it was created fifty-six years ago. *The Orange Table* 1977-1978 (lot 30, estimate \$1,000,000–1,400,000) – which will be offered immediately following *The Blue Bathroom* – is considered one of Whiteley's grandest still life subjects and dates from the period when

the artist first turned to the genre – marking a change not only in his artistic output but also for contemporary Australian art at the time, which until that point had largely eschewed the genre.

Geoffrey Smith, Chairman of Sotheby's Australia commented: 'Brett Whiteley is widely and appropriately celebrated as one of Australia's great cultural identities: both a charismatic artist pop star and a phenomenally gifted draughtsman and painter. Versatile and expansive, his career encompassed a wide range of media and subjects. In testament to his profound achievements, in 1978 – the year *The Orange Table* was painted – he became the first and only artist ever to win all three of the Art Gallery of New South Wales' prestigious painting prizes; the Archibald (portraiture), the Wynne (landscape) and the Sulman (subject/genre). (1) Sotheby's Australia is delighted to offer these works at auction, and we are especially honoured to have been entrusted with the repatriation to Australia of one of our greatest artist's most significant early works.'

BRETT WHITELEY, *THE ORANGE TABLE* 1977-1978 (ILLUSTRATED ABOVE)

Within the history and development of still life painting in Australia, the supremely elegant and lyrical compositions produced by Brett Whiteley between 1976 and 1978 occupy a singular position. Painted with an extraordinary sense of refinement and discipline, these reductive canvases offer a peaceful and contemplative antidote to the occasionally chaotic, sprawling and rhetorical visions created by one of our most gifted practitioners. This eloquence of composition and refinement of form is, perhaps, no more clearly demonstrated than in *The Orange Table*.

The Orange Table epitomises Whiteley's exploration of the technical and psychological complexities presented by the arrangement and re-arrangement of everyday objects. The apparent simplicity of this close-up view of the Whiteleys' home at Lavender Bay – devoid of the distracting references to the external views of Sydney Harbour and to the artist at work in his studio – is subtly disarming. Indeed, as a series, the still life subjects found their origins in and were an extension of the interior of the Whiteley household and studio at Lavender Bay, and for those who were intimate with the Whiteley household, it was, at this time, one fraught with its own unique tensions, of love, deceit, jealousy, insecurity and drug dependency. As Wendy Whiteley later articulated, 'The Lavender Bay period was also about the whole concept of beauty, with sumptuous, glorious pictures celebrating the harbour and the birds, and the table tops too. Sometimes the table tops were coded, in the sense that there were other things going on. The beads were mine, a special present he had given me, a symbol of my presence in Lavender Bay. There are certain things that were codes between us that people wouldn't necessarily see, except that it was repeated in different circumstances.' (2)

The Orange Table remains one of the artist's most definitive examples of the still life genre remaining in private ownership.

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BRETT WHITELEY, *THE BLUE BATHROOM* 1963 (ILLUSTRATED BELOW)

It is remarkable to think that this expansive, confident painting was created by the hand of a 24-year-old. It is an early testament to the profound talent and influence that Whiteley would bring to Australian and international art during his career. The scene depicts the eponymous bathroom of the Whiteleys' London flat in Pembridge Terrace, where Brett and his wife and muse Wendy lived and is, perhaps, the crowning work of his celebrated *Bathroom* series – having been selected as the catalogue cover illustration for Whiteley's major solo exhibition at the Marlborough New Gallery in London in 1964 and featured as catalogue number one.



BRETT WHITELEY 1939-1992

The Blue Bathroom 1963

oil, tempera and collage on board, 188 x 183 cm

Estimate \$600,000–800,000

© Wendy Whiteley

the composition. Formally, the smooth curve of Wendy's spine echoes that of the rounded and elongated forms of the claw-foot bath and the adjacent soap dish. As Norbert Lynton put it in his review of the Marlborough exhibition: 'it is the girl's distorting, necessary gestures that hold [Whiteley's] attention, and the conflict between the hard fact of taps and geyser and her slippery, slumping back.' (4)

The series represents an anthology of unique explorations of time – the moment or moments of tender graphic observation through the bathroom door, and the slower time of self-referential pictorial facture in the studio – and of space – the cramped little bathroom, the body compressed within the tub, the multiple glimpse-horizons of partial perception. Collectively, the *Bathroom* paintings are some of the artist's most highly-regarded early works; as his biographer Sandra McGrath has observed, 'in all Whiteley's best work one finds this quality of wonder and revelation, euphoria, joy in the thing he is painting. This is nowhere more evident than in the *Bathroom* series.' (3)

Here, within a dramatically abstracted interior, Whiteley traces the sensuous curvature of the naked arms, breasts and back of his muse and wife Wendy in dark outlines in the lower right-hand corner of

- (1) Brett Whiteley, *Art, Life and the Other Thing* (1978, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney); *Summer at Carcoar* (1977, Newcastle Region Art Gallery, Newcastle) and *Yellow Nude* (1978, Private Collection)
- (2) Wendy Whiteley, quoted in Barry Pearce with contributions from Bryan Robertson and Wendy Whiteley, *Brett Whiteley: Art & Life*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1995, p. 48
- (3) Sandra McGrath, *Brett Whiteley* (rev. ed.), Bay Books, Sydney, 1988, p. 40
- (4) Norbert Lynton, 'Voyeurs', *The New Statesman*, London, Vol. LXVII, No. 1730, 8 May 1964, p. 739

AT A GLANCE

Lot 29

BRETT WHITELEY 1939-1992

The Blue Bathroom 1963

oil, tempera and collage on board

188 x 183 cm

Estimate \$600,000–800,000

© Wendy Whiteley

Lot 30

BRETT WHITELEY 1939-1992

The Orange Table 1977-1978

synthetic polymer paint, oil, tempera, charcoal and oyster shells on plywood

124 x 205 cm

Estimate \$1,000,000–1,400,000

© Wendy Whiteley

Important Australian Art

Estimate: \$10,061,000–13,733,000, 79 lots

Auction in Sydney, 20 November 2019, 6.30 pm

InterContinental Sydney, 117 Macquarie Street, Sydney

Exhibition in Sydney, 14-20 November 2019, 10 am to 5 pm, 30 & 34 Queen Street, Woollahra

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