

Stephen Friedman Gallery

ARTnews

Christie's Mounts Figuration-Focused Exhibition In Move to Expand Private Sales

Angelica Villa

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Image: Marc Chagall, *Le rappel*, 1968-1971. Courtesy Christie's.

In a move to further expand offerings through its private sales channel, Christie's has unveiled an exhibition titled "Framing the Figure." The private selling show features 35 works by the likes of Kehinde Wiley, Julie Curtiss, Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, Pablo Picasso, and Lucien Freud carrying values between \$85,000 and \$7 million. The exhibition will run online, with highlights on view at the house's New York headquarters until March 12.

The sale—the third initiative of its kind staged by Christie's since the start of the pandemic, following ones devoted to monumental sculpture and works by Monet and Richter—is meant to capitalize on the momentum of private sales seen in 2020. Put together by New York contemporary specialist Joanna Szymkowiak, the curated selection is focused on the market-favored mode of figuration.

Private sales have become beneficial as the pandemic has forced houses to think beyond traditional sales formats. In its 2020 financial report, Christie's said that, despite a 25 percent decline in overall sales, it made \$1.5 billion in private sales last year, surpassing the house's 2019 total by 84 percent and marking Christie's highest historic yearly private sale total to date. "The new environment created by the pandemic has favored private sales," said Adrien Meyer, Christie's global head of private sales, adding, "Buyers were still out there, keen to transact, and they didn't have many alternatives."

Some of the modern works in "Framing the Figure" have been held privately for long periods of time. Jacob Lawrence's painting *Moving Day* (1937), made when the artist was just 20 years old, was last on the market around 1950s, when it was acquired by New York literary agent Leah Salisbury, wife of publisher Philip Salisbury. Lucien Freud's ink drawing *Man and Town* (1940–1941) has been in a U.K. collection since the 1940s, where it passed by descent to the current sellers. Wayne Thiebaud's *Revue Girl* (1963), depicting a full-length figure of a show girl in costume, has been in the same collection since 2012, when it was acquired from the Claudia Stone, the artist's longtime dealer Allan Stone's daughter is another new-to-market work. It was included in the artist's 2000 retrospective, which traveled to the Whitney and Phillips collection.

Yet there are also works on sale at the high-end value that have come to auction fairly recently. The seller of Pablo Picasso's portrait of Dora Maar, *Tête de femme* (1940), purchased it at Christie's in May 2015 for \$3.7 million. It was previously in the Museum of Modern Art's collection, and had passed through the hands of German collectors Viktor and Marianne Langen. And Marc Chagall's dream-like painting of a circus scene titled *Le Rappel* (1968–71) last sold at the house in November 2013 for \$4.4 million.

Although these figures are well-established at auction, "Framing the Figure" also includes names such as Jonathan Lyndon Chase and Salman Toor, whose markets are ascending, thanks to surging salesroom interest. Toor's *Rooftop Party With Ghosts 2* (2015), for example, is one section of a triptych, the first part of which Christie's sold for \$822,000 against an estimate of \$100,000 during the house's day sale this past December. While Christie's has long been the auction venue known for holding the top market share, a shift in attention around emerging artists' market is imminent. According to Meyer, including works on loan in the exhibition is a strategy used to gauge buyer interest around select artists. "We want to diversify the private sales menu," said Meyer.

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The Toor work, as well as three others included in the exhibition, is on loan from a private collection—an unusual feature meant to help specialists draw out the significance of other pieces for sale. That doesn't mean the loaned artworks are impossible to buy, however. "You never know, with good offer you could shake them off the tree," Meyer said.

Christie's has said its private sales have seen massive transactions in the past year, another measure of the sector's widening impact on revenue. According to the house's annual figures released in December, the three most expensive works it sold in 2020 were sold privately, for an excess of \$100 million each, and 12 above \$25 million. (Christie's representatives declined to detail the specifics.)

"It's perhaps during troubled times that clients are more cautious than they usually are and welcome the idea of the security and sense of control that the private sale channel provides," Meyer said. "It says a lot about the depth and the magnitude with which this business has expanded within a year."