

“I Either Wanted It, or I Wanted That Guy to Pay”: Inside the Wild West Auction for *The Sugar Shack*

The record-setting sale for the painting by Black artist Ernie Barnes, featured in the credits of *Good Times*, was anything but normal, as poker pro and energy trader Bill Perkins faced off in single combat against a mystery buyer —who might have been Mellody Hobson, wife of George Lucas.

BY NATE FREEMAN

MAY 20, 2022



The dirty secret of even the most high-profile auctions at Christie’s and Sotheby’s is that even if something is selling into the deep eight figures, the proceedings are usually pretty

straightforward. It's rare to see extensive fireworks or something truly shocking. Honestly, auctions, kinda dull.

One lot at Christie's last week was, however, anything but.

For most of Thursday evening, Houston-based professional poker player turned energy trader **Bill Perkins** stewed in a seat at the very back of the room. It was the first auction he had ever been to. "I've never felt poorer in my life, and I've been busted," he tweeted midway through the sale.

Around 8:30 p.m. **Adrien Meyer** opened bidding on *The Sugar Shack*, by Ernie Barnes, the Black artist born in the 1930s in segregated Durham, North Carolina, who became a professional football player before turning to painting. Barnes earned a broad audience across the country for his works depicting dancers, basketball players, and jocks on the gridiron before passing away in 2009. He had never before appeared in an evening sale.

The auctioneer had 22 bidders at the ready to spend who were dialing in on the phone to their reps among a platoon of Christie's specialists. Meyer cracked open the action, and after a flurry of bidding from the phones, the high estimate had been doubled. Within seconds, Perkins offered his first bid, for

\$500,000, barking it out over the rest of the room. The room responded, and a bespectacled Los Angeles-based art adviser named **Dane Jensen** quietly lifted a paddle to signal that he too would be bidding, on behalf of the client whispering at him through his cell phone.

"Two million dollars!" Perkins bellowed back, unfazed.

"I had this idea of: Let's have our poker faces on; you can't act like you want it. But all that kind of went out the window with 22 bidders and people shouting like crazy," Perkins said afterward. "During the previous lots it was very calm, very orderly, and when the bids started it reminded me of my time at the New York Mercantile Exchange, so instinctually, I yelled out like a trader on the pit floor."

But Jensen, sitting just a few rows in front of Perkins, beat back bid by bid, funded by the deep pockets of the person on the other end of the cell connection.

"*The Sugar Shack* is like—this is the holy grail," Jensen told me after the sale. "What I do is I chase treasures. I chase the best stuff out there, and this is a very, very rare thing. It's very rare for something like this to come to auction—the very best of one artist's practice. That's so important to people."

But Jensen hadn't expected that someone like Perkins would come ready to outspend the rest of the world on *The Sugar Shack*, which served as the cover for the Marvin Gaye album *I Want You* and featured prominently in the credits of the show *Good Times*. They went back and forth, the number rising to unheard-of figures. Right before the bidding reached \$7 million, Jensen broke the unspoken protocols of in-room bidding and turned around to Perkins, to address him directly.

"I'm not gonna stop," Jensen said to Perkins, a scare tactic loud enough for the whole salesroom to hear.

Without missing a beat, Perkins snapped back, “Well, then I’m going to make you *pay*.”

They kept fighting back and forth until Perkins shouted out lucky number 13. Jensen backed down, and Perkins won the piece, with the final price with fees landing at \$15.3 million. Applause washed over the room. The remarkable price, nearly 80 times the high estimate, was more than that of a Monet that sold a few lots earlier that night.

And now, the forces within the art market are betting big on an artist who once struggled to break out of sales at auction houses such as Swann’s, which focuses on African American artists. On Thursday, New York galleries Ortuzar Projects and Andrew Kreps, along with the talent-agency-associated art venture UTA Fine Art, announced that they would all be jointly representing the Barnes estate going forward.

The \$15 million price was clearly well beyond even the most ambitious estimates, but there are signs that the market will only get stronger. No one is more bullish than the man who just dropped a sum of money on a painting 80 times what the auction house thought it would sell for.

“Imagine if some guy got to own the *Mona Lisa*, or Monet’s *Water Lilies*—if someone was like, ‘Yeah, I bought it for one thousand dollars, and it’s on my living room wall,’” Perkins said. “That would be an amazing story, right? Well, that’s me.”

Barnes’s meteoric resurgence can be traced back to 2018, when the California African American Museum started planning the artist’s first museum show in decades.

“African American people who were familiar with *Good Times*, they think back to how important that painting was to their psyche,” said **Bridget R. Cooks**, the curator of the show and a professor at the University of California, Irvine. “And the centerpiece of the show was *The Sugar Shack*.”

The show piqued the interest of **Arthur Lewis**, the head of UTA Fine Art, the visual-art arm of the venerable Los Angeles talent agency. He eventually got to chatting with **Luz Rodriguez**, Barnes’s longtime assistant trustee of the estate, and they hacked out a deal to stage a show at the Beverly Hills outpost in 2019. After a brief pandemic delay, it opened in late 2020, and one of the fans was **Andrew Kreps**, who found his way to the work even though he conceded that Barnes’s work “wasn’t normally what I show” and that he was “a little bit outside of the art world.”

“I stumbled on it during the pandemic after UTA’s show and I was like, Oh, right, *Good Times*,” he said. “But I just really, really loved it. So I reached out to the estate, and we put together a show.”

One day, Kreps’s fellow Tribeca dealer, **Ales Ortuzar**, walked in to see some of the work the estate had sent over. While Kreps represents mostly living artists, and some of them are quite young, Ortuzar has, since he left David Zwirner to open his own gallery in 2018, focused on underappreciated artists who have yet to get their due in New York. They agreed to present the show together, at the shared space at 55 Walker Street.

To their surprise, sales were strong. Kreps said that he sold one work to a very serious collector who installed it in his home next to an important painting by Jacob Lawrence, the Black artist whose work has sold for as much as \$6 million. And *The Sugar Shack* also exchanged hands while it hung in the Kreps show. While the painting wasn't technically for sale, when the show opened September 24, it was owned by the California couple **Jeannie and Jim Epstein**, who purchased it in 1986. But many sources indicated that the Epsteins were not the consignors of the \$15.3 million Ernie Barnes. When speaking to Kreps, he explained that, while the Epsteins did indeed own the work when they loaned it to the show, and that it wasn't for sale, when the show closed October 30, it was owned by another entity. And that entity consigned it to Christie's a few months later.

After the hammer came down on *The Sugar Shack*, Perkins was immediately besieged. **Coodie**, the filmmaker whose decades-in-the-making **Kanye West** documentary, *Jean-Yuhs*, was a surprise Netflix hit, wheeled his camera over to track Perkins as he came through the room. (Before Barnes died, Kanye commissioned him to make a painting that commemorated the fact that he survived a near-fatal car crash, and the finished work features a winged, angel-like figure that looks a lot like Kanye West.) After fighting through a pack of journalists, Perkins made his way to a series of art dealers and advisers, many of whom speculated that Jensen had been on the phone with **Melody Hobson**, the wife of **George Lucas**—the two are longtime Ernie Barnes collectors, and they've been on a buying spree ahead of opening his Lucas Museum of Narrative Art in L.A. next year. At a certain point, Christie's CEO **Guillaume Cerutti** came up to offer his congratulations in person—a rare honor to bestow upon any bidder, winning or otherwise.

"I'm the CEO of Christie's," the CEO of Christie's told Perkins.

"I'm, um, really emotional right now," Perkins said. "I either wanted it, or I wanted that guy to pay."

Despite the sky-high price, when I spoke with Perkins a few days after the sale, with some time to reflect, he still thought that not only did he pay a fair price for the work, but that he got it way cheaper than what it's worth.

"I can't pillage this piece as cheaply as I used to, but I still plundered," Perkins said. "When people are biased, that's how they undervalue things. But I can take the metrics that they use to value art and easily show that this is a \$100 million painting."

The Rundown

Your crib sheet for comings and goings in the art world this week and beyond...

...For the first time ever, MoMA PS1 held its annual gala on site at the former schoolhouse the museum operates in Long Island City, a raucous upgrade on the usual shindig in the lobby of its big sister, MoMA, in Midtown. "This is Queens, and when you're here you hear the subway," director **Kate Fowle** said during a speech, after being temporarily drowned out by the 7 train overhead. But on this day Queens had a distinct masters-of-the-universe Manhattan energy, as tables were bought by the Sorosés, the Lauders, the Speyers, the Kravises, the Fulds, the Aaronsons, and the Dubins. Artists in attendance included honorees **Rashid Johnson**, **Deana Lawson**, and **Djali Brown-Cepeda**, plus **Taryn Simon**, **Julie Mehretu**, **Chase Hall**, **Kayode Ojo**, **Odili Donald Odita**, **Hugh Hayden**, **Marie Karlberg**, **Fred Eversley**, and so, so many more.

...A seasoned Frieze New York attendee would have certainly clocked the two large paintings by super in-demand artist **Issy Wood** in the booth of Carlos/Ishikawa, her longtime London gallery. But the more eagle-eyed fairgoers also saw one hanging on the walls of the Michael Werner booth, and a director confirmed that Wood will be working with the gallery going forward. A stellar choice for all involved!

...On Monday Sotheby's sold the rest of the works from the Macklowe collection, which had been court-ordered to be auctioned off as a result of their society-rocking divorce in 2016. Though it didn't quite become the world's first collection to reach the magical billion-dollar number, it came pretty close—\$922.2 million, to be precise, making it the most valuable collection ever sold, beating out the Rockefeller Collection that sold at Christie's in 2018. It must have been bittersweet for **Harry Macklowe**, who was spotted in the skybox at Sotheby's, cheering on the proceedings as his net worth got higher and higher.

...Manhattan's favorite publicist, **Kaitlin Phillips**, is leaving her job with big tent shop Cultural Counsel to start her own firm, called simply Kaitlin Phillips, to rep clients from the art world and beyond. Her business card just says, "Talk to Me." It doesn't get any better than that, people.

...For his new show at Greene Naftali, the master **Alex Israel** made one gigantic single sculptural work that acts as a fictional Los Angeles street with all his favorite buildings from all over the city, all obsessively and exquisitely recreated as to-scale models. Among the very real buildings on the very fictional Sunset Coast Drive are Craig's, the Beverly Hills eatery the artist patronizes nearly daily; his studio; the wacky three-part building at 1212 Abbot Kinney Boulevard in Venice once occupied by the gallery Various Small Fires; the Beverly Hills outpost of the Gagolian gallery; and of course, Mr. Chow.

...Spotted at the Whitney studio party Tuesday: **Karlie Kloss**, last seen at the Formula 1 Miami Grand Prix 2022 supporting her good pal **Lewis Hamilton**, who finished sixth.

...A new bar has been set for a seminal Basquiat work—the 16-foot-long, untitled 1982 painting last sold at auction for \$57.3 million has now been sold for \$85 million, with the deal going down at the Phillips contemporary sale Wednesday night. The winning bidder was on the phone with a representative from Taipei, in another display of strength from the Taiwanese collecting community during this epic two-week run of auctions. The work was consigned by the Zozotown billionaire **Yusaku Maezawa**, who bought it at auction in 2016 from the communications billionaire **Adam Lindemann**, who bought it through Sotheby's London in 2004 for just \$4.5 million.

...Lehmann Maupin was clearly looking to scoop up the auction crowd when it finalized its Frieze Week plans. In lieu of doing something near the big Chelsea gallery, the global empire run by **David Maupin** and **Rachel Lehmann** teamed up with Matches Fashion to throw a Monday-evening bash at the Adele Kneeland mansion at 154 East 71st Street on the Upper East Side—just a short walk from Sotheby's, where the last of the Macklowe trove was being unloaded to the tune of \$246 million on the evening. The gallery was celebrating **Nari Ward**, who has a show up with Lehmann Maupin right now, and the acclaimed catering service Ghetto Gastro was on hand to distribute jerk chicken and shaved-ice concoctions. And conveniently, if an unsuccessful underbidder happened to sulk over from the auction to the dinner in search of a place to park their money as the markets collapse, the mansion is currently on sale for just under \$15 million, a steal compared to the Rothko that sold for \$48 million at the auction house.

...The evening sales that totaled \$2.5 billion in two weeks across Christie's, Phillips, and Sotheby's finally concluded with two auctions Thursday night at the latter house. First up was a sale that the house called *The Now*, as it consisted of young, in-demand artists selling for astonishingly high prices. In 2018 it seemed insane that **Larry Gagosian** would show up at Sotheby's and spend \$735,000 on an **Avery Singer** painting that originally sold in 2013 for just \$20,000. Thursday night, four years later, an Avery Singer first sold in 2014 for a similar price sold for \$5.25 million. In their auction debuts, **Jennifer Packer**'s painting sold for \$2.35 million and **Lucy Bull**'s sold for \$907,200, more than 10 times its high estimate. After leading off two other sales earlier in the week, **Anna Weyant** rebroke her auction record when *Falling Woman* sold for \$1.62 million. But the lot that shocked and awed the most was **Christina Quarles**'s *Night Fell Upon Us (up on Us)*, seen recently displayed in a show of works owned by a deeply respected Texas collector. It sold for \$4.5 million, not three years after selling out of the Regen Projects booth at Art Basel Miami Beach for much, much less.

Scene Report: Frieze New York Opening

Upon entering the first floor of Frieze New York, taking place for the second time at The Shed in Hudson Yards, it was immediately clear that something was off about the booth for Gagosian, the world's biggest gallery. Sure, there were large, expensive paintings on the wall, and many nattily attired men and women gawking at them. But there was also a large vending machine plopped down in the center of everything, and vending machines usually go in the corners of office buildings, not in posh art fairs imported from England.

It turns out the machine was dispensing bottles of a beverage called Cofftea, and it was part of a grand plan by the German artist **Albert Oehlen**, who also made the paintings on sale at the booth. The dispenser was not for sale, though it was emblazoned with an Oehlen drawing, as were the bottles, which were free. To obtain one, you got a nifty Gagosian-branded gold coin and shoved it in the slot, and out came a Cofftea, which a gallery director said has the equivalent of three shots of espresso. "*Nie mehr schlafen*," proclaimed the text on the machine—as a non-German speaker, I was told that that means “never sleep again.”

Undeterred, I took it down the hatch, consuming the tea-flavored coffee beverage in a few gulps. Suddenly, the stimulant kicked in like crazy. Oehlen had turned me into a speed-addled rat in the art fair maze, scrambling to focus on the collectors and dealers darting in and out of booths. Was that **Katie Couric** at Michael Werner? The collectors **Pamela Joyner** and **Beth Rudin DeWoody** having a confab at François Ghebaly? **Don Lemon** scurrying into Karma? At a certain point in the Frame section, the **Cajsa von Zeipel** sculpture in the Company booth seemed to be coming alive, and the cyborg-y model-y boys in **Kye Christensen-Knowles**'s paintings at Lomex seemed to be jumping out of their gold frames. As the hour crept closer to five, a friend similarly jumpy on the Oehlen concoction suggested that there was only one solution. Upstairs on the eighth floor was a Maestro Dobel popup, and they had plenty of tequila.