

The Telegraph

£200,000 for a cartoon tiger? How a self-taught artist became a billionaire must-have

Jordy Kerwick is one of the hottest-selling painters in the art world - and a statement symbol for those in the know

by Colin Gleadell
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Detail from Jordy Kerwick's *Untitled* (2022) CREDIT: Jordy Kerwick

Australian artist Jordy Kerwick, 39, is one of the fastest rising stars in the contemporary art market. Having sold his first paintings on Instagram back in 2015/16 for £100 each, his work can now command over £200,000 at auction. Like most of his gallery exhibitions, his latest, in the English Heritage setting of Wellington Arch, the grade 1-listed monument on Hyde Park Corner built to celebrate the Duke of Wellington's victory over Napoleon at Waterloo, sold out before it opened. It closes on May 29.

Kerwick's story began when he gave up his normal workaday life in Melbourne realising he was "the world's worst businessman", and took up painting "to cope with the stress." Using cheap Chinese canvasses and his kitchen as a studio where he worked to the strains of Led Zeppelin and Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, he threw 90 per cent of his early paintings away and gave the rest to friends.

Entirely self-taught, Kerwick then developed a distinctive, simple yet seductive style of painting. Inspired by "the bold colours and simplicity" of Matisse, and the fantastical elements of children's storybooks populated by exotic

animals (he and his wife have two young children), his first sales, he says, were to interior designers.

Now he counts numerous influential collectors among his buyers. Among them are the billionaire hedge funder, Steven A Cohen (who famously bought Damien Hirst's shark in a formaldehyde filled tank for the Museum of Modern Art in New York), French luxury goods kingpin, Bernard Arnault, Yusaku Maezawa (the Japanese online retailer who paid a record \$110.5 million for a painting by Jean-Michel Basquiat in 2017), and Korean rap star, T.O.P. High flying artists who have supported him are the Americans Marc Grotjahn and Richard Prince.

Kerwick's first break came in 2017 when he was given a show by the Anna Zorina gallery in New York, and in 2018, he became a full-time artist. His rise, though, is most visible in the auction rooms. In the last six months, after Richard Prince went public on Instagram that Kerwick was top of his list for works to acquire, seventeen of his paintings have powered through auctions in London, New York and Seoul peaking this March at Sotheby's New York

JORDY KERWICK

when a 2020 painting of a double headed tiger estimated at \$25,000 sold for \$277,200 (£218,000).

That month in London, more than 40 people from all corners of the globe registered to bid on a still life of a potted plant - one of the highest figures on record - and the tempo shows no signs of abating. Last week, five of his paintings were sold across three locations in one day - all surpassing estimates by factors from 3 to 8.



Inspired by child's stories: *Untitled* (2022) by Jordy Kerwick CREDIT: Jordy Kerwick

Prices in the galleries, however, remain relatively subdued. "Auction prices are about four times what we sell them for," said Toby Clarke, of London's Vigo gallery who set up the current show in Wellington Arch. Here, the paintings, which form a playful reference to a fictitious meeting between Wellington and Napoleon dressed as mythical beasts, double headed wolves and snakes, were priced from \$14,000 for small works up to \$75,000. The sell-out was not unexpected. "We have hundreds if not thousands of people who want to buy something by Jordy," says Clarke.

When asked about the Wellington Arch location Kerwick came up with an unexpected historical reference. Yves Klein, a mischievous 20th century French artist who once staged an exhibition in a completely empty gallery and proposed bathing the Place de la Concorde in his trademark 'Yves Klein Blue' light as a work of art, was one of his heroes, he said. Like Klein, and like Wellington, the military tactician, Kerwick has added an element of surprise in his choice of location.

Kerwick's next show will be with Vito Schnabel, the dealer son of artist Julian Schnabel, in Los Angeles, while the Frieze Art Fair in London is planning to place one of his sculptures, carved from Portland stone, in its Regent's Park sculpture exhibition in September.

Clarke, meanwhile, has further plans for Wellington Arch. One is for the Sudanese artist, Ibrahim El-Salahi, a star of the current Venice Biennale, and another for Marcus Harvey, who achieved notoriety with his portrait of mass murderer, Myra Hindley, painted using children's handprints in the Saatchi collection's 'Sensation' exhibition at The Royal Academy. Once again, there will be a surprise in store for English Heritage tourists.