

This is the most expensive sculpture ever sold at auction in Australia

Elizabeth Fortescue

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The tide rushed in for Bronwyn Oliver on Wednesday night, when a work by the late Sydney artist that for years had greeted patrons at fine diner Quay set a price record for Australian sculpture at auction.

Oliver's sinuous copper sculpture, *Tide*, sold for \$1.25 million at [Smith & Singer's Important Australian Art auction in Sydney's Woollahra](#).



Geoffrey Smith of auctioneers Smith and Singer with *Tide*, by the late Sydney-based sculptor Bronwyn Oliver. *Tide* sold on Wednesday night for \$1.25 million including buyer's premium, setting a new auction record for Australian sculpture.

The price reflected the winning bid of \$1 million, plus the 25 per cent buyer's premium levied by the auctioneer.

The new owner of the work is a private client and *Tide* will remain in Australia, Smith & Singer's Geoffrey Smith said.

At more than four metres long, the gently twisting and undulating sculpture evokes a sea creature or the movements of the ocean itself.

The prominent Fink family [commissioned *Tide* in 2000](#) to hang at the entrance to Fink Group's celebrated Quay restaurant in Sydney, where chef Peter Gilmore has driven a multi award-winning dining experience on Sydney Harbour.

The restaurant also adapted *Tide* to become its corporate logo.



Sculptor Bronwyn Oliver at work in her studio, in 2006. "Whenever she was happy and content, which was usually when she was working," says Oliver's former partner Huon Hooke, "she would say, 'It feels like there's order in the universe'." **Sonia Payes**

Oliver was born in 1959 in the remote NSW location of Gum Flat, near Inverell. As an adult, she moved to Sydney and eventually set up a studio at her home in suburban Haberfield.

It was in the studio that Oliver died by suicide in 2006, aged just 47. The art world at the time was deeply shocked by her loss.

Oliver was well known during her lifetime, but in recent years her works have been highly prized for their rarity and the high level of skill and detail that she lavished on their creation.

Smith said after the sale that *Tide* was an extraordinary piece of sculpture.

"It's got such personality and character," he said.

The work had carried a pre-sale estimate of \$1 million to \$1.5 million. While *Tide* was an especially large work, the high price reflects a rapid increase in what buyers have been willing to pay for Oliver's sculptures.



Detail of *Tide* (2000).

“To have an Australian sculpture with an estimate of \$1 million selling for \$1.25 million with premium, it has set a new benchmark for Australian sculpture and it’s just a great boost for Australian art,” Smith said.

The auction price record broken by *Tide* was \$1,156,250 (including premium) paid for Joel Elenberg’s *Mask I*, 1978.

Mask I was sold through Smith and Singer in August 2023 and carried a pre-sale estimate of \$350,000 to \$450,000.

Smith said the ability to apply a low estimate of \$1 million to Oliver’s sculpture was a great demonstration of “confidence” in this highly valued and much missed Australian artist.