

Annette Larkin: The Business of Art

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No plan, no limits: Annette Larkin turned casual opportunities into a career defining collectors, artists and auctions, proving passion and courage can outpace strategy in the art world.

It was early 1985, and after three years as a student Annette Larkin wanted a job—in the art world. She consulted Sydney’s Yellow Pages, the old commercial telephone directory, looking for galleries with advertising printed in bold. Her thinking? Only galleries with big budgets could afford expensive ads; they were more likely to employ young hopefuls. That did not happen right away. But Eileen Chanin at Macquarie Galleries gave her an interview, and three months later a job that lasted eight years. Larkin had launched. And she began as she continued: in a business-like fashion.

Forty years later, Larkin received the University of New South Wales’s 2025 Alumni Award for Art and Culture. At first Larkin thought the email was spam but is completely thrilled that her knowledge and dedication have been recognised. “It is great for everyone in the field,” she says. In November 2025, I asked how she had planned her career. Her reply, “There’s never been a plan. I never planned anything.” So how did she become an expert in the field, a leader in the secondary market for modern and contemporary Australian art? Larkin’s best subject at school was maths, but she remembers sculptor Jan King showing slides of New York art in the darkened art room at SCEGGS Darlinghurst. Larkin’s degree at the University of Sydney included French, psychology, biology, and art history: that last led to her encounter with the Yellow Pages. Her peer group was influential. Susan Borham and Michael Hutak (both with long

careers in the arts) were studying art history, and Larkin found the subject opened her mind to culture and philosophy.

In 1993 Macquarie Galleries closed after nearly seventy years. Larkin’s training there served her in good stead: cataloguing, investigating files, working with artists—and getting to know curators. Crucially, Larkin managed the three-weekly exhibition cycle and invitation lists: making contacts, always. After Macquarie, Larkin began an extensive practice—writing, curating, project management, valuing, advising collectors—that continues to this day. She was immediately employed at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) on a variety of projects: by curators Victoria Lynn and Jackie Menzies OAM on exhibitions; assisting Ewen McDonald with a collection book; cataloguing documentation photographs.

A master’s degree in art administration at the University of New South Wales in 1993–94, with the late Nick Waterlow and lawyer Shane Simpson, was crucial. Like many others, Larkin not only studied there, but acquired a professional cohort. In 1993 she was a founding member, and between 1996–98 chair, of the Contemporary Collection Benefactors program at the AGNSW. In early 1994 Larkin was the Australian curator and commissioner for the VIII Indian Triennale, presenting artist Peter Atkins, and in 1994–5 she did a stint as a curator at Newcastle Art Gallery. So, in just over two years, a breathless whirl of experiences.

All that changed in August 1995 when Roger McIlroy

invited Larkin to join the team at Christie’s. Importantly, she was employed as a contemporary art specialist. Although her years at Macquarie Galleries had given her a solid grounding in twentieth century art, Christie’s was keen to develop the field. This was spectacularly successful. Larkin had eleven wonderful years at Christie’s, which included several months in London and New York in 1999, where Brett Gorvy and Graham Southern were launching Contemporary Art as a separate international department at Christie’s. With the sale of works from Charles Saatchi’s collection, Larkin learned the ins and outs of the secondary market in contemporary art from the experts. On her return to Sydney, Larkin was promoted to senior specialist and head of Contemporary Art; and after the huge success of her first sale at the Museum of Contemporary Art in August 2000—which achieved over one million dollars—she was made an associate director. “Roger McIlroy was always a strong supporter,” says Larkin. Her last sale, in 2005, was also a triumph. The Christie’s sales completely changed the Australian auction market, bringing in contemporary art collectors.

In March 2006 Larkin was about to leave Christie’s when the Australian branch closed. All workers were retrenched. So, Larkin started her own business: Annette Larkin Fine Arts (ALFA). She began cautiously, working from home, with invaluable advice from colleagues. Chris Hodges, at Utopia Art Sydney, counselled waiting to see what the business told

her, where it took her; Jan Minchin, from Melbourne’s Tolarno Galleries, cautioned “Watch your overheads.” Two years later, the late Leo Christie offered Larkin a space at Danks Street, which was a nest for a gaggle of art galleries; and from 2016 she has been based at Paddington, downstairs from Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery. Annette has enormous respect for Roslyn and Tony Oxley. She says, “they are wonderful colleagues, whose passion for working with artists is a touchstone.”

Larkin loves having her own business and rarely takes a day off. “Every day is different,” she says. For Larkin, it’s always been learning on the job, “constantly developing a deeper knowledge of art, processes and the ethics needed to stay in the business.” Alongside her Paddington gallery, she looks after major corporate collections and advises and values for private clients. She says, “Valuing is a practise-based skill, you can’t do a course. It is about being obsessively involved in an artist’s oeuvre inside out. . . valuing is very precise work.” For years she cold called collectors, who eventually turned into clients and friends.

Among many absorbing appointments Larkin names cataloguing and valuing the entire CBUS collection, put together by Joseph Brown, valuing the Mordant Family Collection, among many other great private collections, and also the Newcastle Art Gallery’s collection. Larkin says she works with other people’s needs; there is an enormous



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amount of fun and stimulation in what she does. For example, she loves making exhibitions for favourite artists, like Michael Johnson, and working with estates like that of painter Carl Plate, sculptor Robert Klippel, and the multimedia works of Hossein Valamanesh AM. “Artists get forgotten,” says Larkin. Someone needs to “have their back,” to keep their work alive, introduce them to younger people.

What changes has Larkin seen over the last twenty years? She believes that once people bought art just because they loved it; now, she says, it’s hard to find collectors like that. She doesn’t see the same need to own the work; she doesn’t see the same passion. Today, Larkin values collectors who take time to look long and lovingly; these are people she wants to work with. What is crucial, says Larkin, is to realise that art is much more than a commodity. “Art does not always appreciate,” she says, “that is why you have to love it.”

Looking back, Annette Larkin says her entire career has been a series of responses to opportunities, and, crucially, never being intimidated. So, what advice would she give to anyone wanting to work in the arts? “Don’t be scared. Embrace team playing. Look at art, look beyond the name of the artist, don’t be scared to be challenged, have confidence in your opinions. There are no right or wrong answers in the art world—and you never know, your opinion may be the one that makes a big change.” ▼

Exhibitions

Michael Johnson
7 March – 14 April 2026

Tony Clark + Joanne Ritson: Double
2 May – 13 June 2026

21C Prints Commissioned by Leo Christie
20 June – 8 August 2026

Annette Larkin Fine Art, Sydney

01 Annette Larkin at the VIII Indian Triennale accepting the Gold Award on behalf of Australian artist Peter Atkins from the Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, 1994, digital image. Annette Larkin Fine Art.

02 Annette Larkin at Christie’s second contemporary art auction in London, 1999, digital image. Annette Larkin Fine Art.

03 Annette Larkin at her second contemporary art auction in Sydney, 2001, digital image. Annette Larkin Fine Art.

04 Annette Larkin with Gil Perez, the influential doorman at Christie’s Park Avenue offices New York, 1997, digital image. Annette Larkin Fine Art.

05 Installation view, Annette Larkin Fine Art, Danks Street, Waterloo, Sydney, 2015, digital image. Annette Larkin Fine Art.

06 Annette Larkin at the selling of Frederick McCubbin’s *Bush Idyll*, 1893. At the time it was the most expensive painting sold at auction in Australia at \$2,312,500 AUD, August 1998, digital image. Annette Larkin Fine Art.

Images courtesy of Annette Larkin Fine Art, Sydney.