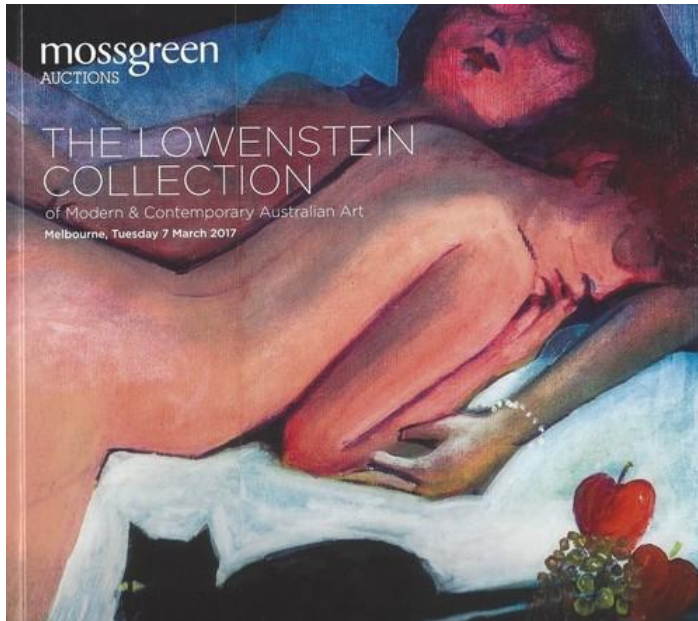


## Sex, Censorship and Social Media



Mossgreen catalogue cover for the Lowenstein Art Auction

One of the more inglorious episodes in the short life of the Rudd government was the so-called [Bill Henson](#) affair in 2007, where a knee-jerk response saw one of Australia's leading artists accused of making images which were branded anything from pornographic to being sexually exploitative of underage adolescents.

Although it was not primarily a federal issue, few politicians could resist the temptation of getting their snouts on the screen and none of them covered themselves with glory. Of course, a [judicial review](#) dismissed the case and Henson's photographs were reinstated to gallery walls.

Apologies to Henson for the insults and damage to his reputation were, however, thin on the ground. It demonstrated, once again, the ignorance of our politicians, the general low level of public cultural awareness and abuse of talkback radio. It was, nevertheless, a case of localised provincialism that was sparked into life on a slow news day.



L-R: Jack Thompson, Tom Lowenstein and Sasha Grishin at the book launch at Mossgreen Gallery, Melbourne in 2013

A couple of days ago I was invited to speak or, more accurately, to speak and to chair an informal discussion panel, at the Mossgreen Auction house in Melbourne on the occasion of a preview of the [Lowenstein Collection of Modern and Contemporary Australian Art](#).

I have known the Lowensteins for many decades and have authored a book on their collection, and this panel was a chance to discuss how the various works, by some of Australia's most famous artists, had entered their collection and to hear the Lowensteins' ideas on collecting Australian art.

Upon arrival, I was greeted by a well-meaning old acquaintance with the question, "Are you going to talk about the pornographic work?" Upstairs, the CEO of Mossgreen, Paul Sumner, related to me a tale stranger than fiction.



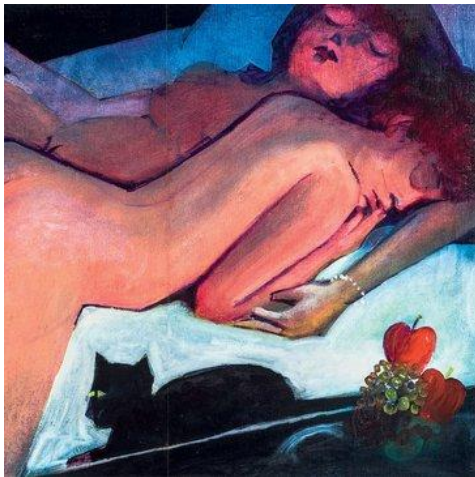
Charles Blackman, 2013, photo S. Grishin

Mossgreen, like most auction houses and commercial art galleries, communicate with their potential clients through Facebook. Their modus operandi is to feature on Facebook the cover of their auction catalogue, which is usually one of the more spectacular items in the sale, and then, a few days before the auction, 'boost' the image on Facebook, as a paid advertisement.

As [Facebook business](#) explains, "boosted posts appear higher in News Feed and on Instagram, so there's a better chance your audience will see them."

A sensuous Charles Blackman oil painting of medium easel dimensions (72.5 x 96.5 cm) graces the cover of the Lowenstein catalogue; it is undated and is simply titled on the verso by the artist as 'Women lovers'. A [Manet-like cat](#) on white sheets is depicted in the foreground, accompanied with a floating still life consisting of fruit, while on the bed behind the cat are two sleeping naked young girls.

Possibly not one of Blackman's greatest paintings, it hung in the Lowensteins' bedroom for over thirty years and now they felt it was time for a change. The auction house estimate for the painting is \$45-55,000 (AUD).



Charles Blackman, Women lovers, ca. 1980, oil on paper on board, 72.5 x 96.5 cm, lot 62

The mood of the painting is of sensuous tranquillity rather than sexual eroticism, which was also the feature of some of Blackman's work. The women are generic [Blackman types](#), which he employed from the early 1950s, rather than specific models, and the painting, one of Blackman's images of innocence and love, may date from the early 1980s.

It was business as usual with the Lowenstein auction until Mossgreen decided to boost the image on 28 February (in time for the 7 March auction) and were stunned by the decision of Facebook:

*"This advert wasn't boosted because it violates ad guidelines by advertising adult products or services including toys, videos or sexualising enhancement products ... this decision is final."*

Immediately, Michaela Boland broke the story in [The Australian](#) and within days it was on the BBC, [The Guardian](#) and news outlets from London to Kathmandu. Rarely has an Australian art auction received such blanket international publicity.

Within a few days it became apparent that Facebook had blundered – and blundered in a big way – making of itself an international laughing stock, while its rivals celebrated. By March 3, the decision which was final and irreversible, was reversed and a [Facebook spokeswoman](#) announced:

*"We have reviewed the ad again and we have approved it."*

This incident is alarming for a number of reasons.

Unlike the Henson incident which, was the creation of some local parochial and poorly informed individuals with vested interests, the Blackman decision was made by an American for-profit corporation based in Menlo Park in California.

Facebook is an organisation that is not answerable to anyone, but, as circumstances suggest, as a publicly listed company, it is sensitive to criticism and Paul Sumner, sensing that he was on a publicity bonanza, has spoken to the international media branding the ethics of Facebook as ["going back to the 1950s"](#).

On reflection, he made an even more serious accusation and noted in an interview:

*"I thought this was Facebook censoring a painting of naked women but now I think it was a [homophobic reaction](#)."*

This indeed is a very worrying observation. Is Facebook asserting that some forms of human sexuality are 'normal', while others are deviant and should not be depicted or publicised?

Whatever their reasoning, they of course are very wide of the mark and an image of two girls asleep in one another's arms can only with a huge stretch of the imagination be seen as a celebration of lesbian love. Thank heavens that Mossgreen are not auctioning something like [Courbet's Sleepers](#) (1866)!

It is worrying when a foreign-owned social media outlet starts to dictate ethics to Australian audiences. While we can all smile at the misguided and shambolic behaviour of Facebook, and other art dealers may be envious of all of the free publicity generated, for many in the art community the actions of Facebook have set off alarm bells ringing.



Tom Lowenstein, 2012, photo S. Grishin

For the Lowenstein Collection auction, of the 255 lots on offer, the Blackman painting is not my pick of the bunch; there are great pieces by Robert Jacks, Graeme Drendel, Freddie Timms, Ann Thomson, Paul Boston, Yvonne Audette, Geoffrey Barlett, Aida Tomescu, Kristin Headlam, Michael Taylor and George Baldessin, some with inexplicably low estimates.

In passing, one may note that Tom Lowenstein, who turned 80 last year, (and 80 is the new 60) is downsizing his collection as the business changes premises and, following the cull, like any addicted collector, he promises to keep on collecting to eliminate any vacated spaces on the walls.

<http://www.sashagrishin.com/blog>