



artnet news

Artnet News Pro **pro**

Even Amid a Softer Market, Miriam Cahn's Auction Prices Are Spiking. How High Will They Go?

And does the Swiss painter's success indicate a broader trend in the market for women artists?

Vivienne Chow, October 19, 2023



Museum of Contemporary Art MGKSiegen. 2022 Rubens Prize winner Miriam Cahn in her exhibition "My Jews."
Photo: Philipp Ottendörfer

While the art market may have been sluggish since the beginning of this year, with the slowdown only intensifying in recent weeks, it's not all grim. In fact, it's been a good year to some, especially the followers of painter Miriam Cahn.

A quick survey of the Artnet Price Database data shows that both auction prices and the number of searches for the Swiss artist's works went up dramatically in the first six months of 2023, compared to the same period in 2022 and earlier. The total sales value of Cahn's work in the first half of 2023 was more than \$3.2 million, 5.6 times the total sales value in 2022 and 15 times the sum in 2021.

Indeed, almost all of Cahn's top 10 prices at auction were set in the first half of 2023, including the artist's record, for *Das Genaue Hinschauen (The Close Look)* (2018), which sold for £584,200 (\$703,093 including fees) at Sotheby's The Now evening sale in London in March, fetching nearly 20 times the presale estimate. For comparison, three out of the artist's top 20 sales at auction were set in 2022, and one in 2021. All of the works appeared at auction for the first time.

The second-highest price for her work at auction was just notched on October 6, when *o.t.* (2017) sold for HK\$2.29 million (\$291.894) at Phillips Hong Kong. That eclipsed the previous second-highest price set only the day before at the [Long Museum](#)

collection sale at Sotheby's Hong Kong, when the canvas work *Im weg liegen* (2013) sold for HK\$2 million (\$259,516) including fees. The hammer price of HK\$1.6 million was 2.7 times the presale low estimate.



A reporter stands in front of *ich als mensch (i as human)* by Miriam Cahn during a media preview of “Another Energy: Power to Continue Challenging – 16 Women Artists from around the World” at Mori Art Museum in Tokyo on April 21, 2021. (Photo by Philip Fong/AFP via Getty Images)

The market's recognition of Cahn is long overdue, noted London-based art advisor Olga Ovenden, whose clients have been buying the artist's works since 2018.

“For too long, her works have been priced on a lower point than they should be,” Ovenden said, adding that the pieces are worth collecting because of the importance of their subject matter and their striking, albeit disturbing, visuals. “She speaks of issues that are still rarely openly discussed in our society. There are issues of violence, real or imagined, especially violence against women, xenophobia, war, and migration. She creates a mirror in which the worst of our

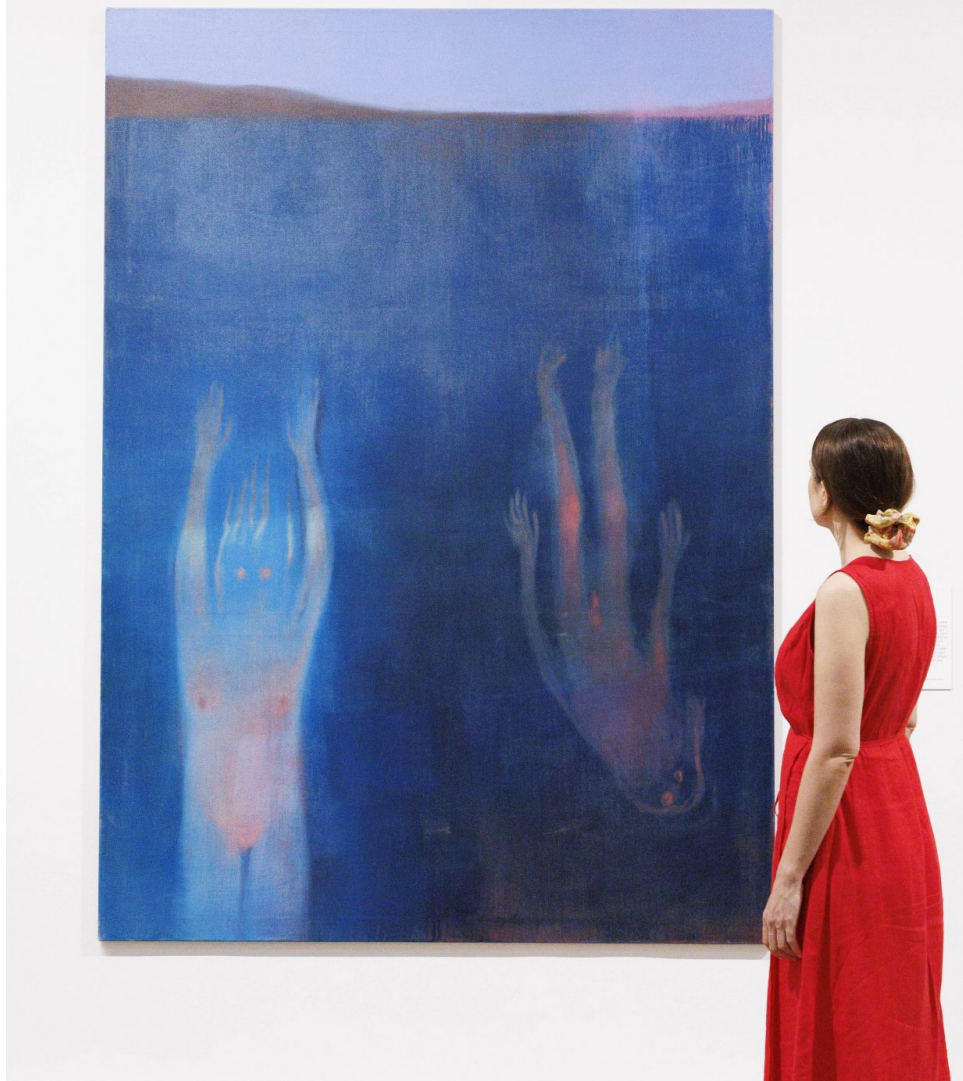
society is reflected.”

With more material on offer in the autumn auction season, prices of her work are expected to continue to go up, Ovenden said.

Dreamy Violence

Cahn was born in 1949 in Basel, Switzerland, to Jewish parents who fled the Nazi regime. She was trained at the Schule für Gestaltung Basel and held her first show in Stampa in 1977, and her museum solo debut at Kunsthalle Basel in 1983. She started with a drawing practice and did not come to painting until the mid-1990s, according to Sandrine Djerouet, director and partner of Galerie Jocelyn Wolff in Paris, which represents the artist. By now, Cahn has been featured in numerous major exhibitions around the world, including Documenta 14 in 2017, the 21st Sydney Biennale in 2018, and Venice Biennale’s “The Milk of Dreams” in 2022.

As a student, Cahn was actively involved in feminist and political activism, particularly during the 1960s and 70s, espousing causes ranging from women's suffrage in Switzerland to the campaigns against the construction of nuclear plants. Her response to contemporary issues including violence, war, and refugee crises forms an integral part of her semi-abstract work. Her poignant paintings, using a dreamy color palette, address these difficult subject matters head on and are often explicit.



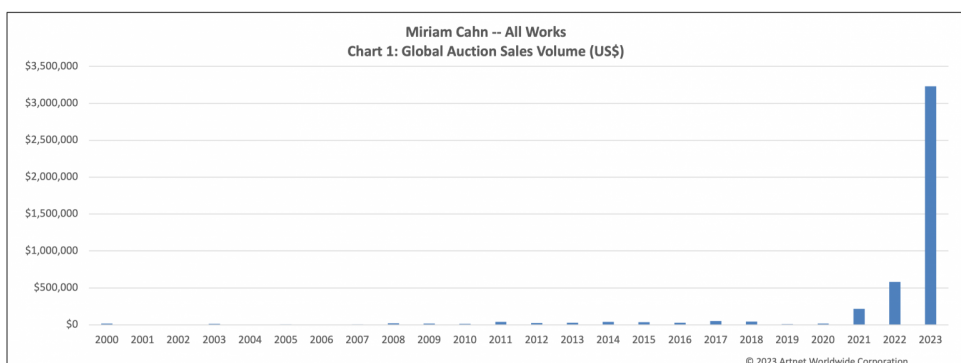
A person looks at Miriam Cahn's, *The Beautiful Blue*, during a photo call for London's Tate Modern's new *Capturing the Moment* exhibition, which includes works by Andy Warhol, Picasso and Francis Bacon. Picture date: Monday June 12, 2023. (Photo by Belinda Jiao/PA Images via Getty Images)

“Elements such as the lowest instincts of human nature, our worst fears and fantasies, can be found on her canvases and drawings,” Ovenden said. “People in her works are those who have been forsaken by governments, societies and communities.”

She also praised Cahn's painting

techniques, as she “masterfully seduces her viewer by juxtaposing beauty and violence on one canvas.” That juxtaposition can be jarring, but “that adds to the horror of the viewer—we feel attracted, almost charmed by the color palette, beautiful bodies and erotic compositions, while realizing that by doing so we are taking the side of the aggressor,” the advisor said. “And I think this is the main moral dilemma of our time. She captures it and unwaveringly makes us face it whether we want to or not.”

Claudia Schurch, Christie’s senior specialist and head of Evening Sale, Post War and Contemporary Art, noted that Cahn is a very politically committed artist and an artist who has been very true to her practice. But those admirable attributes could have contributed to the delay in market recognition. “Her paintings are direct and sometimes even tough to look at, and I think it’s exactly because of that—that it takes time for an artist who shows the rawest element of human condition to enter the mainstream market,” Schurch said.



Total sales value of works by Miriam Cahn.

Source: Artnet Price Database.

Going Viral

Cahn is a late bloomer as far as the art market is concerned. Monthly searches of Cahn's works on the Artnet Price Database ran as low as just three in August 2022 (although the summer timing surely didn't help). But the number of monthly searches spiked this spring, to 151 queries in March, three times the 50 queries logged in February, and has been at a similar level through the rest of the first half of 2023.

The timing followed February's opening of "Ma Pensée Sérielle" ("My Serial Thought") at Palais de Tokyo in Paris, the first large-scale survey of Cahn's oeuvre in a French institution. More than 200 works from 1980 through to the present day were presented.

One of the paintings on show, titled *fuck abstraction!*, which depicts a scene of forced fellatio, was accused of being pedophilic when it was in fact the artist's denunciation of sexual war crimes. The painting went viral because of the controversy, and France's political far-right factions brought a case to court in a bid to censor the work. The initial legal petition was rejected and then the appeal was shot down by France's State Council, which ruled

that the work did not violate safety for children or human dignity, as suggested by those opposing the work.



Miriam Cahn, *fuck abstraction!* (2007-2022). 3009 CAH/P 3029. Courtesy the artist, Galerie Jocelyn Wolff and Meyer Riegger Berlin/Karlsruhe. Photo by François Doury.

The would-be censors' attack backfired, coincidentally. New auction records of Cahn's paintings have been set since the

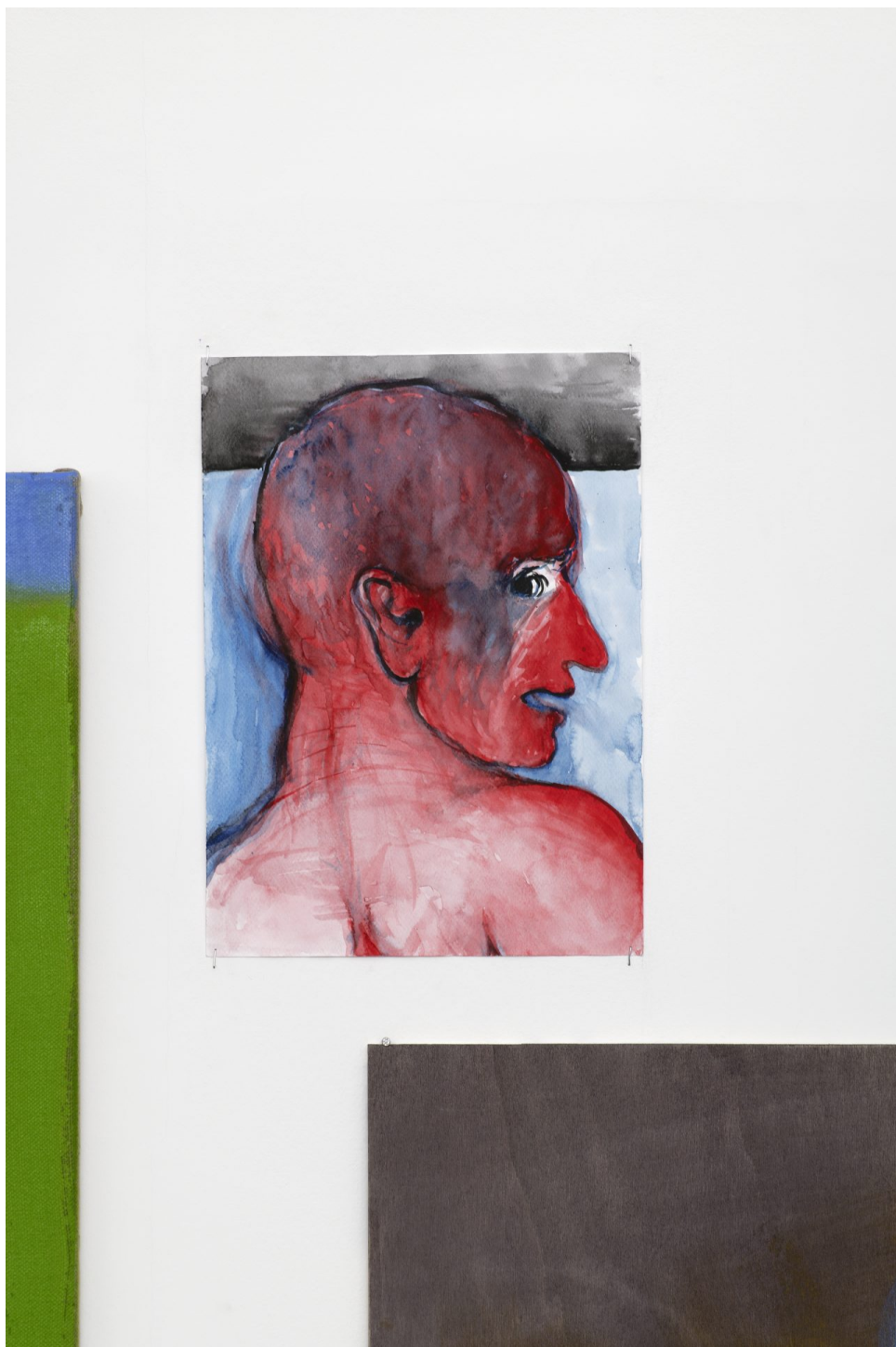
outbreak of the controversy, with hammer prices doubling or even tripling the presale expectations. Besides the artist record set in March, Christie's sold two paintings at its June London sales, including *herumstehen, 9. + 29.1. + 13.4.17 (standing around, , 9. + 29.1. + 13.4.17)*, which went under hammer at £160,000 (\$194,815), nearly three times the lower end of presale expectations. The work sold for £201,600 (\$254,706) including fees, the fourth most expensive work by Cahn sold at auction. Meanwhile, Bonhams sold the small canvas work *sportler, 28.7.96* (1996) for £108,350 (\$136,684) including fees in the spring season. The work had a hammer price that was almost three times the low presale estimate.

“The current strong prices and interest in Miriam Cahn is a culmination of the heightened exposure Cahn had in the last years,” said Leonie Grainger, Bonhams’ head of post-War and contemporary.

Is the best yet to come?

Market experts believe that this is just the beginning, expecting Cahn’s prices will continue to grow. “As there is so much demand naturally some collectors will be tempted to sell works, so we expect for more works to appear in the secondary market,” Grainger said. “The artist has

created many stunning works and I don't believe the strongest works have yet come to the secondary market."



Installation view, "Miriam Cahn: Ma pensée sérieelle" at the Palais de Tokyo. Photo by Aurélien Mole.

Those who are in the queue for new works in the primary market will have to be patient. Djerouet of Galerie Jocelyn Wolff said that the gallery has been receiving a steady flow of requests for nearly two years.

But Cahn also distances herself from the art market.

“She works along with no assistant in the studio, which creates a different rhythm for production and thus for exhibitions,”

Djerouet said, adding that the primary prices for Cahn’s work haven’t gone up this year but the gallery has decided to be less flexible on discounts. “There are two sole exhibitions planned for next year, which means that some of the works produced in 2022, 2023 and 2024 will be accessible, but not all.”

Cahn’s work appeals to a wide range of global collectors, particularly seasoned collectors who are interested in works by women artists, experts said.

The growing market for the Swiss artist also sends a very encouraging signal to women artists overall.

“In general women artists have been undervalued,” Grainger said. “But this market segment and the prices have risen

exponentially in the last ten years, cemented further by the highly acclaimed Venice Biennale 'Milk of Dreams' exhibition, which had a long overdue focus on female artists. Cahn's success is just one example of many."

More Trending Stories:

[The Second Paris+ Started With a Bang. Could Art Basel's New Venture Unseat Its Flagship Fair One Day?](#)

[Is There a UFO in That Renaissance Painting? See 7 Historical Artworks That \(Possibly\) Depict Close Encounters With the Third Kind](#)

[A Glasgow Museum Reveals a \\$3.7 Million Rodin Sculpture Has Been Missing From Its Collection for Nearly 75 Years](#)

[What I Buy and Why: Art Entrepreneur H  l  ne Nguyen-Ban on Her Original 'Art Crush' and Owning a Half-Ton Book by Anselm Kiefer](#)

[Christie's 20th/21st Century Evening Sale Notches Steady Results, a Feat in the Current Tepid Art Market](#)

[Four 'Excellently Preserved' Ancient Roman Swords Have Been Found in the Judean Desert](#)

An Early Edition of an ‘Unhinged’ Christopher Columbus Letter Outlining What He Discovered in America Could Fetch \$1.5 Million at Auction

An Elderly Couple Sold a ‘Worthless’ African Mask for \$157. Now They Are Suing the Buyer Who Auctioned It for \$4.4 Million

An English Woman Paid \$100 for a Sculpture at a Trunk Sale That Turned Out to Be an Elisabeth Frink Work Worth \$72,000

Follow Artnet News on Facebook:



Want to stay ahead of the art world? Subscribe to our newsletter to get the breaking news, eye-opening interviews, and incisive critical takes that drive the conversation forward.

[Artnet](#)

[Artnet Auctions](#)

[Advertise](#)

[Press Releases](#)

[Terms](#)

[artnet Magazine Archive:](#)
[Privacy](#)

[English \(US\)](#)
[Cookies](#)

[Deutsch](#)
[About](#)

[Français](#)



©2023 Artnet Worldwide Corporation. All Rights Reserved.