

PROPERTY FROM A PRIVATE COLLECTION, SYDNEY

**JOHN KELLY**

born 1965

**Cow Up a Tree 2020**

oil on canvas

signed and dated 'Killy 2020' lower right; signed,  
dated and inscribed 'Killy 2020 / Reen / Farm /  
Cow Up A Tree' verso  
150 x 114 cm

**PROVENANCE**

John Kelly, Ireland  
Smith & Singer  
Private Collection, Sydney, acquired from the above

**EXHIBITED**

*John Kelly: Painting & Sculpture*, Smith & Singer,  
Melbourne, 15 February – 12 March 2021, no. 4,  
illustrated

**LITERATURE**

Geoffrey Smith, *John Kelly: Painting & Sculpture*,  
Smith & Singer, Melbourne, 2021, pp. 10, 11  
(illustrated)

**\$120,000–160,000**

John Kelly is one of Australia's leading contemporary artists who during the past three decades has established an international reputation with exhibitions in Australia and overseas. Kelly's most famous sculpture is *Cow Up a Tree*, a large-scale version of which was initially installed on the Avenue des Champs-Élysées in Paris in 1999. The image of a cow caught and suspended in the branches of a dead tree caused a sensation as local Parisians and visitors were pleasantly perplexed by the somewhat surreal and uniquely Australian origins of its iconography. In 1952 Sidney Nolan had been commissioned by Brisbane's *The Courier-Mail* to travel to remote areas of Queensland to document the harrowing and devastating effects of the worst drought on record. Nolan took numerous photographs, including a dead beast caught in a tree, and ultimately in *Ram Caught in Flood* (1955, Private Collection) created one of the most compelling and enduring paintings of mid-twentieth century Australian art. Nolan's composition gained international attention and acclaim when shown in his solo exhibition at The Redfern Gallery, London, in May 1955, and again in the prestigious *50 Years*

*of Modern Art*, Heysel, Brussels, in 1958, and *II Documenta '59*, Kassel, in 1959, where it was installed in proximity to Pablo Picasso's *Night Fishing at Antibes* (1939, The Museum of Modern Art, New York). John Kelly's re-interpretation and re-imagination of the image in a three-dimensional format and its continued references to drought and flood – events so acutely relevant to the Australian environment – continues to command attention, perplex and inspire. Monumental versions exist in prominent locations in Docklands, Melbourne, and Kelly's home in South Reen, County Cork, Ireland, perched on a promontory overlooking the Irish Sea.

The historical and contemporary references evident in the present painting, *Cow up a Tree 2020* are no less fascinating and even more personal to John Kelly and his family. The subject depicts the monumental sculpture *Cow up a Tree* which Kelly had positioned on his property Reen Farm in West Cork where he lives and works. The sculpture is shown where it is nestled in the landscape on top of a slight rise above the dramatic coastline which forms the border of his property.

John is one of seven children from an Irish-Catholic working-class family who settled in Melbourne in the mid-1960s. John's father was a digger driver who worked for the Barro Group in their quarry in Sunshine and John can only ever remember his father wearing overalls. The male figure that often appears in Kelly's compositions represents John's father, battling against all odds and doing the impossible, at times lifting a cow with both hands. The cow, however, has its own complex and endearing lineage in John's iconography.

As a schoolboy, John dreamed of becoming an artist and undertaking formal training, however, his family could not afford to send him to art school. As soon as he finished sixth form he had a blazing row with his Mum who, although wanting her son to realise his ambition, did not have the means to support him. Unbeknownst to John, his Mum had entered a 'Win a Wish' competition advertised on the side of a milk carton organised by the Melbourne radio station 3KZ.

A few days after the family altercation, a telegram arrived requesting Mrs Kelly to telephone the radio station. The Kellys did not have a telephone, so Mrs Kelly crossed the road and was told that she had won the competition with her wish to send her son to art





JOHN KELLY born 1965  
*Man Lifting Cow (1)* 1994  
 oil on canvas  
 180.5 x 150 cm  
 Private Collection  
 Sold Smith & Singer, 24 August 2022 for \$362,500  
 WORLD AUCTION RECORD FOR THE ARTIST

school. The milk company paid for Kelly's tuition at the RMIT Art School.

Following his studies John found an obscure reference to William Dobell whilst working part time at the RMIT library, who, as a war artist, was instructed to make large-scale papier-mâché cows and paint them so that when placed on airfields they would disarm the Japanese pilots into thinking that they were paddocks and not air strips. Dobell drily commented: 'I think the authorities underestimated the eyesight of Japanese airmen.' The reason the cows in Kelly's iconography are cylindrical is also important as it references a milk carton that gave him his start in life as an artist.

Kelly has always been very civic-minded and he wanted to give back to the community that he had grown up in and that had been so welcoming to his family when they settled in Australia, having arrived as 'ten-pound poms' in 1965, the year of Kelly's birth. The monumental *Man Lifting Cow* sculpture in Sunshine's commercial area was funded and installed as a collaboration between the artist, Smith & Singer, and the City of Brimbank, together with the support of a number of corporate donors.

It is a constant reminder and inspiration of the working-class boy from Sunshine 'making good' and fulfilling his dreams of becoming an artist against many obstacles.

Gary Singer



JOHN MINIHAN born 1946  
*John Kelly*