APOLLO

COLLECTORS' FOCUS

American conceptualists and minimalists command staggering prices, but the work produced this side of the Atlantic has gone under the radar. Collectors may acquire pieces by the movements' British counterparts at a fraction of the cost.

Emma Crichton-Miller, Sunday, 1st January 2012

In 1972, the Tate Gallery bought Equivalent VIII (1966) by Carl Andre, a leading figure in the vigorous American minimalist movement. The work, an arrangement of 120 firebricks, was an unexceptionable contribution to Tate's ability to document a significant art movement, whose leading lights included Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Robert Morris and Frank Stella, and which had its own distinct British counterpart in the work of Peter Joseph, Bob Law, the early work of Barry Flanagan, Alan Charlton and the influential collective Art & Language. Then, in 1978, The Sunday Times published a photograph of what have become known as 'the bricks'. The press had a field day and outrage ensued, as both the work itself and the use of public funds to support such work was ridiculed.

Last autumn saw a small reprise of that furore. On 13 October last year, Bonhams offered Bob Law's Nothing to be Afraid of V 22.8.69, a large, unpainted canvas edged by a line in laundry marker and with the date written in the bottom-right corner. To the delight of the tabloids, this 1969 work had an estimate of £40,000–£60,000 ('£60,000 Blanksy', joked The Sun). The painting did not make its reserve at the auction, but soon afterwards a collector paid near the low estimate for the piece – a record price for the artist. Bonhams' head of contemporary art Anthony McNerney comments: 'The British counterparts to the American minimalists are seriously overlooked. A Barnett Newman can sell for $6 million. Even in relation to their European counterparts – the German Zero movement, Yves Klein in France, Fontana and Arte Povera artists in Italy – they are undervalued.'

McNerney suggests this is because those artists are better promoted in their own countries, but also admits that much minimalist work 'was not made for a market', is consequently physically fragile and a challenge to house or conserve. Philip Harley, head of 20th-century British art at Christie's London, comments: 'These names are known but remain fairly esoteric. They are not on the radar of most contemporary collectors.' He points to what he describes as a 'beautiful, important Richard Smith' painting (Fig. 3), which went under the hammer at Christie's on 15 December, after Apollo went to press. A massive 2.18m by 2m, Roberta was painted in 1972, and had an estimate of £6,000–£8,000 (a smaller piece sold for £5,000 in the summer).

For dealer Richard Saltoun, the price achieved by Law's Nothing to be Afraid of V 22.8.69 and, just four weeks prior to that, the sale at Christie's London of Law's Black Drawing 1.2.72 of 1972 for £23,750 (Fig. 2), were hopeful indications that 'this market has suddenly started.' He comments: 'There has never been a shortage of museum support for these artists. It is just that collectors have not yet latched on to important British art between modern British and the YBAs.' One of the greatest collectors of Law's work, and indeed of other British minimalists, was the Italian collector of American and European Minimalism, the late Count Giuseppe Panza di Biumo, who over the years sold and donated to the Museum of Contemporary Art in L.A. and the Guggenheim in New York.

A challenge for potential collectors of Barry Flanagan's early work, particularly the sculptural pieces in cloth, plaster, wood or rope is, Mr Saltoun remarks, that any example 'might demand part of your floor.' Flanagan's later bronze hare sculptures have fetched as much as £780,450 at auction, but his earlier work is virtually uncollected. 'You can buy a great early work for £10,000–£20,000,' states Mr Saltoun. Game of chess, conceived in 1970, for example, went under the hammer at Christie's London on 15 December after Apollo had gone to press, with an estimate of just £1,000–£1,500.

According to Nina Fellmann at Annely Juda Fine Art in London, the market for Alan Charlton, master of grey, is steadier. 'A lot of collectors have been following his work for many years, but we also find new collectors. This year he did an installation for us at Frieze.' Ms Fellmann comments that Charlton is highly regarded in Europe – citing recent shows in Milan, Amsterdam and the Swiss village of Zuoz. Currently, Düsseldorf's Konrad Fischer Galerie is staging an exhibition of Charlton's grid paintings (until 14 January). Dorothy Fischer confirms that while there was a lull in the 1980s, Charlton

has enjoyed greater currency in the last 10 years. In general, recent works on paper sell for around €4,000, with oil paintings selling for €30,000– €60,000. Mrs Fischer adds: 'It is the early works, from the 1960s and '70s, that people are most interested in.'

Lisson Gallery was set up by Nicholas Logsdail in 1967 to support the radical conceptual artwork then being produced in America, Britain and Europe. Today the gallery continues to represent, from that era, British artists Art & Language (the collaborative organisation whose leading figures are Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden), Peter Joseph and John Latham. Greg Hilty, curatorial director of the Lisson, admits: 'This group of artists represents a challenge to collectors. Art & Language are a really interesting case, not just because they have worked across many media, but also because they defy the cult of the name.' On the other hand, Mr Hilty argues that they 'have continued to evolve, so they have found a younger audience. They are always the object of real attention from knowing collectors.' He points to the sale at Christie's New York on 9 November, where Index: Incident In A Museum VI (1986) realised $110,500 (£69,207). The painting soared above its top estimate of $85,000, and broke the auction record for the collective of £58,850 – achieved by Portrait of V.I. Lenin by V. Charangovitch (1970) in the style of Jackson Pollock III (1980), at Phillips de Pury in London last February (Fig. 1).

Mr Hilty comments that the main collector base is in France, Belgium, Germany and the US, where collectors 'identified conceptual work as collectible earlier.' In March 2011 one collector, Philippe Meaille, loaned 800 works by Art & Language to the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), but Mr Harley believes the whole category of minimalist and conceptual art is often eclipsed in this country by Pop or Op Artists: 'It is very difficult to shape a market. There isn't a market until something sells well. You need that quantum leap.' Perhaps Bob Law's sales are just such a leap.