

# Thom Ross, Jack Johnson, Halley's Comet.

Folk heroes have remained a popular subject for American and international painters alike. The short history of the United States means it's not entirely rare to have a folk hero whose exploits are within living memory. Such is the case of Jack Johnson, a man born to formerly enslaved parents who became the world's first Black heavyweight boxing champion and one of the early 20th century's most famous American athletes. Michaan's Auctions is proud to offer **Thom Ross, Jack Johnson, Halley's Comet, acrylic** (\$4/5,000), in our February Gallery Auction, held on Friday, February 16th.

The painting consists of a large, well-built man standing cross-armed



against a night sky full of stars. His eyes look downwards, towards the viewer, with a quiet confidence typical of fighting men. He is shirtless, wearing brown working pants with large belt loops. Around his waist is an American flag, tied into a belt with tails that extend towards the bottom right of the frame. Above his head is a depiction of Halley's Comet, with its short trail

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distinguishing it from the collection of stars that make up the rest of the sky.

This work places Jack Johnson, the world's first Black heavyweight boxing champion, in the heroic light which was often denied to him during his life. Fighting during the Jim Crow era, he became a symbol of race relations in the United States and was often fighting in boxing matches advertised under racial terms. Halley's Comet, which was visible in 1910, marked the biggest fight of Johnson's career, where he defeated the former (white) boxing world champion, a win which sparking race riots across the United States. Johnson was one of the most written about Black men in the American media for over a decade, partially due to his boxing career but also his relationships and later marriage to three different white women, one of which resulted in a federal prison

sentence. In this painting, Ross aims to restore Johnson to his rightful position as athlete, activist, and one of America's most acclaimed citizens.

This painting is well situated within Thom Ross's body of work, which is focused on American folk stories, heroes, and history. This work does diverge from Ross's typical preference for Western subjects and scenes, but he maintains his appreciation for the underdog as quintessential of the American identity amongst both its heroes and everyday people. This work also features a softer touch, particularly surrounding the use of rounded forms rather than the hard edges and lights which are common to his Western works. In doing so, he presents Jack Johnson in an especially human light.

Thom Ross was born in San Francisco in 1952 and had an early childhood fascination with the American

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Old West, garnered through watching Westerns, and John Wayne films in particular. He studied at California State University, Chico, graduating in 1974. It was two years later that he had a self-described epiphany on the 100-year anniversary of Custard's Last Stand. While observing protesters from the American Indian Movement, he decided to take his works past the recreation of historical myth and adopt a more critical perspective. Since, he has continued to paint and exhibit widely, living in Jackson Hole, Wyoming amongst other locations, before settling outside of Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he operates the Due West Gallery.

**Thom Ross, Jack Johnson, Halley's Comet, acrylic (\$4/5,000)** will be offered at Michaan's Auctions

February Gallery Auction on Friday, February 16th, which features fine diamonds in excellent condition in addition to notable examples from the Fine Art and Asian Art departments. The auction is led by the jewelry department, which will be offering an unmounted pear-cut 2.45 carats colorless diamond and an unmounted pear-cut 2.96 carats colorless diamond. Also included in the sale is a lithograph by Grant Wood, an Arnaldo Pomodoro hanging sculpture, and a jade insert table screen.

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