

## The Sydney Morning Herald

### Former wife confirms artworks fake

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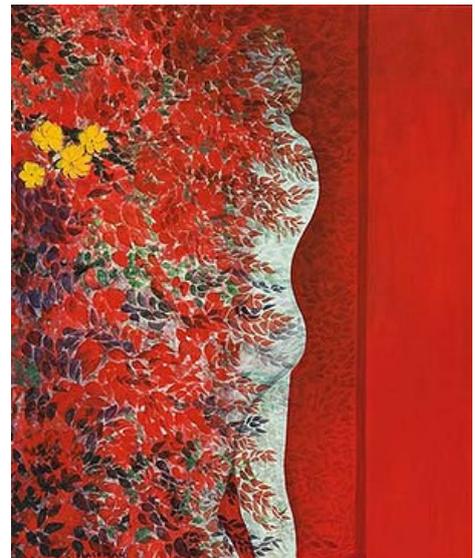
A FORMER wife of the artist Charles Blackman says she witnessed a close friend painting two works sold under Blackman's name for almost \$120,000 - so she can confirm they are not his.

"I would put my life on the line," says Genevieve de Couvreur, reacting to Fairfax Media's weekend report that the Brisbane artist Franki Birrell painted the works and that the Blackman family has called in police to investigate.

"I saw Franki painting them," Ms de Couvreur said. "I saw those works in progress."

Worlds apart ... Girl with a Starry Dress and Bouquet is "painted in naive brushstrokes".

Indeed, Ms de Couvreur is the subject of one of the pictures, Girl Behind a Shower Screen. She did not pose. Birrell, who had then been painting for only a few years, says she created it from a vivid memory of a young Ms de Couvreur dashing from the bathroom with a towel wrapped around her.



A Birrell not a Blackman ... elements of Girl Behind a Shower Screen suggest an inexperienced artist.

That was in the early 1980s, when Blackman and his new bride were living in Queensland and saw Birrell and her husband "almost daily".

Ms de Couvreur accepts that her now 84-year-old former husband may have declared "I painted that" during one of his two excursions to sign the paintings at the Deutscher and Hackett gallery in Sydney last year, as recounted by the auction house's executive director, Damian Hackett.

"But look," she said, "Charles is sick. He doesn't have his mental faculties, sadly."

Blackman's daughter, the art conservator Christabel Blackman, reiterated the same point on Sunday: "It is common knowledge that my father suffers from Korsakoff's syndrome and dementia and is in no fit state to determine whether the paintings are his or not."

The buyers of Girl Behind a Shower Screen (\$40,800) and Girl With a Starry Dress Bouquet (\$78,000) only discovered they may have bought Birrells, not Blackmans, when Mr Hackett contacted them on Friday - after Fairfax Media called him.

Blackman's children, Birrell and Ms de Couvreur say they raised the alarm in May and have expected action since from the expert who authenticated the works for the Blackman family trust, Walter Granek, the trustee Tom Lowenstein and Deutscher and Hackett. Mr Hackett said the anonymous buyers had found the news alarming - as he had.

"You know, [they said] 'keep us in the loop'," he said.

He had assured them they would be recompensed "if" the works were found not to be Blackmans. But he still had to rely on the official word of the family trust.

"As soon as you tell me you made a mistake," he had told them, "I'm going to jump through hoops. I'm on the side of truth."

Mr Granek has not returned repeated calls. Mr Lowenstein said on Sunday: "Unfortunately, Walter has disappeared overseas ... Walter is the one who is the curator and [the one] who knows and we've never held out that we ourselves, the trustees, were knowledgeable enough to make these judgments."



Christabel Blackman's judgment of Birrell's paintings is quite tough, though she is comparing a (then) relative beginner to her famous father.

Ms Blackman, who studied under maestros of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, has worked on European masterpieces and conserved works by Goya and Picasso. Explaining why Birrell's work should never have been mistaken for her father's, she lists the "immaturity in anatomical references", colours that defy "the Blackman palette", "naive brush strokes" and a "shallow, shy and coy" sentiment.

On Friday, Mr Lowenstein suggested scientific tests might be needed to sort it out.

"If they can do the right test and get the right answer, then terrific," Mr Hackett said.

Bring it on, says Christabel Blackman, but she thinks it hardly necessary.