

JOHN OLSEN

THE YOU BEAUT COUNTRY

ARTWORK LABELS

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John Olsen: The You Beaut Country

Born in Newcastle, New South Wales, in 1928, John Olsen is a major figure in the story of Australian art whose unique and sensual pictorial language, which embraces figuration, landscape and abstraction, presents his very personal view of the world.

Olsen's *You Beaut Country* series, which followed his return to Australia in 1960 after three years travelling in Europe, began a lifelong interest in representing the natural world and Australian identity. Through his evocative depictions of the landscape Olsen has, arguably more than any other non-Indigenous artist, captured the spirit and character of this country.

While Olsen is best known for his landscapes, his work reflects his many interests, from Spanish culture and cooking to portraiture. He also uses a variety of media and techniques, including tapestry, printmaking, ceramics and sculpture.

Throughout his life Olsen has been passionate about literature, poetry in particular, and references to it can be seen in many of his works. Olsen is also a writer and, in addition to penning poetry and prose, has maintained journals which include writings and sketches offering vivid insight into his thoughts, views, working methods and influences.

John Olsen: The You Beaut Country is a celebration of one of Australia's greatest living artists.

Self portrait: Janus faced

2005

oil on canvas

Collection of the artist

The emerging artist

After leaving school at sixteen years of age, John Olsen was employed as a clerk; a job, he says, that 'was not for him!' Before undertaking formal studies in art, Olsen used his natural talent for drawing as an illustrator and cartoonist, selling his drawings to newspapers and magazines to supplement his income. In 1947 he commenced studies at the Dattilo Rubbo Art School, Sydney, and in 1950, at twenty-two years of age, enrolled as a full-time student at the Julian Ashton School, where he was taught by artist John Passmore. Olsen also attended classes at East Sydney Technical College with Godfrey Miller in the early 1950s.

Olsen held his first exhibition in 1955 at Macquarie Galleries in Sydney. A year later he was invited to be part of the important touring exhibition *Contemporary Australian Paintings: Pacific Loan Exhibition*, and in December 1956 was included in the group exhibition *Direction 1*, held at Macquarie Galleries.

Olsen was represented in *Direction 1* by three works, including *Dry salvages*, 1956, and this early public exposure brought him to the attention of a wider audience. By the end of that year Olsen was recognised as an emerging force in the Sydney art scene.

Still life

1951

oil on composition board

Collection of the artist

Drawing for The bicycle boys rejoice

1954–55

pen and brush and black and brown ink,
watercolour and crayon

Collection of the Reverend Ian Brown, Melbourne

The bicycle boys rejoice

1955

oil on canvas

Collection of James Fairfax AC, Sydney

'The *Bicycle Boys* series, which has been called my first significant work, was sparked off by an exhibition of Italian painting that came to Sydney in 1954. It was so rare for anything like that to be shown in Australia in those days. The main influence on these pictures was Marini's equestrian sculpture. I was also impressed by Sironi and Guttuso. Perhaps, in my sudden enthusiasm for things Italian, I was also susceptible to the subject of De Sica's film *The Bicycle Thieves*.'

JOHN OLSEN

Boys and bicycle

1958

oil on canvas

Collection of James Fairfax AC, Sydney

People who live in Victoria Street

1960

oil on composition board

Private collection

'I tiddle down the stairway – it's morning in Victoria Street and even with my good intentions I stop when I arrive at the street. I stop, walk back two paces, for the sun is making the most gorgeous green through the plane trees and I find myself rolling with the sky. I am a little stunned by this and walk a little crooked on the footpath, a mongrel dog barks at me and my route becomes curved and quicker. I meet a friend – stop, pace backwards and forwards – and he gets excited and moves his hands a lot. Goodbye – shaking hands I must hurry, I want to cross the street.'

JOHN OLSEN

The procession

1960

synthetic polymer paint, ink and wash on
composition board

Private collection, Melbourne

'There was great excitement in all the village about the procession ... There was the slow clang! clang! of the bell, and as the priest and the altar boys and men [carried] heavily shrouded figures of Christ and the Virgin, bonfires were lit all around the hillsides ... Penitents with black peaked caps, and then came all the men and women each holding a candle ... walking in single file.'

JOHN OLSEN

Spanish encounter

In 1956 Olsen was offered a private scholarship to travel and study abroad. This was made possible through the support of Sydney art critic Paul Haefliger and the generosity of businessman Robert Shaw. Olsen departed Australia late in 1956 and travelled to Europe – first to London, then Paris and Spain.

‘Travelling to London and Paris to see the great pictures, to somehow be involved in the milieu of the time, it had such an effect. I went to Paris and worked at Hayter’s Etching Studio, and there were Americans there and there were French, of course; the envelope was opened. One of the things that had a huge effect was when I went down to Spain. It was very cheap at the time, it was still recovering from the civil war and there was the Mediterranean and I came to understand the wonderful bath known as the Mediterranean Sea where Western art, Western philosophy, had its origins. It had a profound effect; in fact, I still wear a beret to show my connection to the area’.

JOHN OLSEN

Spanish encounter

1960

oil on composition board

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
Purchased 1960

OA29.1960.a-c

Painted in only five hours at his Kings Cross studio, *Spanish encounter* condensed Olsen's experiences of living and working in Spain. The work's boldness and the attention it received when shown at the Terry Clune Galleries, Sydney, in October 1960 helped to firmly establish Olsen's career in Australia. For Olsen, *Spanish encounter* was an important homecoming gesture. The work was acquired by the Art Gallery of New South Wales from the exhibition.

View of the Western World no. 1

1956

oil on composition board

Collection of the Estate of Robert Shaw

Dry salvages

1956

oil on composition board

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Gift of Mrs EM Gardiner in memory of her daughter

Marie Gardiner 1972

68.1972

This is one of three works by Olsen that were included in *Direction 1*, an historically important Sydney exhibition of abstract art.

'*Direction 1*, which was held in 1956 at Macquarie Galleries, was dominated by a group of artists whose thrust was really towards abstraction. Drysdale was in it, William Rose, Eric Smith, Passmore (my teacher), Klippel and me. It also had the support of Paul Haefliger from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which was important. At the time it attracted a great deal of attention ... I suppose what really happened was that it created a bit of a stampede – the dam had opened.'

JOHN OLSEN

An all-at-once world

In 1962 Olsen was commissioned by Sydney art dealer Frank McDonald to paint the ceiling of his Woollahra residence. The resulting work, *Summer in the you beaut country*, is a vibrant sunburst; its variety of creatures, grinning faces and meandering lines celebrate the totality of the environment and our integration with the natural world.

Summer in the you beaut country was the first of a small group of ceiling and wall commissions, most of which Olsen painted in situ on removable composition board panels. His largest wall work, *Salute to Five Bells*, 1972–73, is located in the Sydney Opera House vestibule and is a massive twenty-one metres long.

Many of Olsen's ceilings have found their way into collections where they are most often re-displayed on the wall due to practical issues. Olsen's intention with these works was that they create an all-at-once world in which near and far, and large and small, occupy the same space. The works' overhead aspect aims to create an immersive experience.

Summer in the you beaut country

1962

oil on composition board

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented through The Art Foundation of Victoria by

Mr Frank McDonald, Fellow, 1978

A12.a-g-1978

Sydney Sun (or King sun)

1965

oil on composition board

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased with funds from the Nerissa Johnson Bequest 2000

2000.342.A-C

NGA

Darlinghurst cats

1962

oil on composition board

Collection of Rosie Williams and John Grill, Sydney

Where the bee sucks, there suck I

1984–86

oil on composition board

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented through The Art Foundation of Victoria by John Olsen, Governor,
1986

AC3-1986

Olsen first exhibited this work as a ceiling painting at Tynte Gallery in Adelaide in 1984. At that time it was titled *The force that through the green fuse drives the flower* after Dylan Thomas's poem. Following the exhibition, Olsen continued to work on the painting and changed the title to *Where the bee sucks, there suck I*, borrowed from William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

Where the bee sucks, there suck I.

In a cowslip's bell I lie;

There I couch when owls do cry.

On the bat's back I do fly

After summer merrily;

Merrily, merrily shall I live now

Under the blossom that hangs on the bough.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *THE TEMPEST* (1610–11)

David Moore

Australia 1927–2003

John Olsen painting ‘Summer in the You Beaut Country’

1962

John Olsen painting ‘Summer in the You Beaut Country’ ceiling for Frank McDonald

1962

John Olsen painting ‘Summer in the You Beaut Country’ ceiling for Frank McDonald

1962

John Olsen painting ‘Summer in the You Beaut Country’ ceiling

1962

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Gift of David Moore 1983

© Lisa, Michael, Matthew and Joshua Moore

Untitled (John Olsen with painting)

1962

Untitled (John Olsen with painting)

1962

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

© Estate of David Moore

The You Beaut Country

During his three years in Europe the Australian landscape had not been far from Olsen's mind, and on his return in 1960 he commenced work on what has become his best known series of works. In his *You Beaut Country* paintings Olsen distils what he sees as the contradictory beauty latent in Australia. In these works he captures the cultural vernacular and brusqueness of Australia, linking the land, light, people and attitudes together as a total visual experience.

Olsen refers to Sydney as the 'blue bitch goddess' and it has remained a persistent subject in his work, from his earliest *Seaport* series of the mid 1950s to the present day. On his return to Australia in 1960 he developed a new vision of the city and its environment. Between 1963 and 1965 this vision expanded and saw Olsen produce a distinct group of paintings, including *Entrance to the seaport of desire*, 1964, and *Childhood by the seaport*, 1965.

In 1963 Olsen purchased a house at Watsons Bay, close to the entrance of Sydney Harbour, which reminded him of Bondi and Newcastle where he grew up. The series he created from late 1963 has been described as 'some of his most extraordinary city-harbour paintings'.

T.S. Eliot, *The Dry Salvages* (1941)

Olsen was introduced to the writing of T.S. Eliot through his teacher John Passmore. *The Dry Salvages*, which was written and published in 1941, is the third poem of Eliot's *Four Quartets*. The title comes from the name of a rock formation off the coast of Cape Ann, Massachusetts, United States, a place where Eliot spent time as a child. Olsen identified strongly with this work and in particular with Eliot's references to his own childhood.

I

*I do not know much about gods; but I think that
the river*

*Is a strong brown god - sullen, untamed and intractable,
Patient to some degree, at first recognised as a frontier;
Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyor of commerce;
Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.
The problem once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten
By the dwellers in cities - ever, however, implacable.
Keeping his seasons, and rages, destroyer, reminder
Of what men choose to forget. Unhonoured, unpropitiated
By worshippers of the machine, but waiting, watching and
waiting.*

*His rhythm was present in the nursery bedroom,
In the rank ailanthus of the April dooryard,
In the smell of grapes on the autumn table,
And the evening circle in the winter gaslight.*

*The river is within us, the sea is all about us;
The sea is the land's edge also, the granite,
Into which it reaches, the beaches where it tosses
Its hints of earlier and other creation:
The starfish, the horseshoe crab, the whale's backbone;
The pools where it offers to our curiosity
The more delicate algae and the sea anemone.
It tosses up our losses, the torn seine,
The shattered lobsterpot, the broken oar
And the gear of foreign dead men. The sea has many voices,
Many gods and many voices.
The salt is on the briar rose,
The fog is in the fir trees.*

...continued overleaf

*The sea howl
And the sea yelp, are different voices
Often together heard: the whine in the rigging,
The menace and caress of wave that breaks on water,
The distant roar in the granite teeth,
And the wailing warning from the approaching headland
Are all sea voices, and the heaving groaner
Rounded homewards, and the seagull:
And under the oppression of the silent fog
The tolling bell
Measures time not our time, rung by the unhurried
Ground swell, a time
Older than the time of chronometers, older
Than time counted by anxious worried women
Lying awake, calculating the future,
Trying to unweave, unwind, unravel
And piece together the past and the future,
Between midnight and dawn, when the past is all deception,
The future futureless, before the morning watch
When time stops and time is never ending;
And the ground swell, that is and was from the beginning,
Clangs
The bell.*

...continued overleaf

II

*Where is there an end of it, the soundless wailing,
The silent withering of autumn flowers
Dropping their petals and remaining motionless;
Where is there an end to the drifting wreckage,
The prayer of the bone on the beach, the unprayerable
Prayer at the calamitous annunciation?*

*There is no end, but addition: the trailing
Consequence of further days and hours,
While emotion takes to itself the emotionless
Years of living among the breakage
Of what was believed in as the most reliable-
And therefore the fittest for renunciation.*

*There is the final addition, the failing
Pride or resentment at failing powers,
The unattached devotion which might pass for devotionless,
In a drifting boat with a slow leakage,
The silent listening to the undeniable
Clamour of the bell of the last annunciation.*

*Where is the end of them, the fishermen
sailing
Into the wind's tail, where the fog covers?
We cannot think of a time that is oceanless
Or of an ocean not littered with wastage
Or of a future that is not liable
Like the past, to have no destination.*

*We have to think of them as forever bailing,
Setting and hauling, while the North East lowers
Over shallow banks unchanging and erosionless
Or drawing their money, drying sails at dockage;
Not as making a trip that will be unpayable
For a haul that will not bear examination.*

*There is no end of it, the voiceless wailing,
No end to the withering of withered flowers,
To the movement of pain that is painless and motionless,
To the drift of the sea and the drifting wreckage,
The bone's prayer to Death its God. Only the hardly, barely
prayable
Prayer of the one Annunciation.*

*It seems, as one becomes older,
That the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere
sequence-
Or even development: the latter a partial fallacy
Encouraged by superficial notions of evolution,
Which becomes, in the popular mind, a means of disowning
the past.*

*The moments of happiness - not the sense of well-being,
Fruition, fulfilment, security or affection,
Or even a very good dinner, but the sudden illumination—
We had the experience but missed the meaning,
And approach to the meaning restores the experience
In a different form, beyond any meaning
We can assign to happiness. I have said before
That the past experience revived in the meaning
Is not the experience of one life only
But of many generations - not forgetting
Something that is probably quite ineffable:
The backward look behind the assurance*

*Of recorded history, the backward half-look
Over the shoulder, towards the primitive terror.
Now, we come to discover that the moments of agony
(Whether, or not, due to misunderstanding,
Having hoped for the wrong things or dreaded the wrong
things,
Is not in question) are likewise permanent
With such permanence as time has. We appreciate this better
In the agony of others, nearly experienced,
Involving ourselves, than in our own.
For our own past is covered by the currents of action,
But the torment of others remains an experience
Unqualified, unworn by subsequent attrition.
People change, and smile: but the agony abides.
Time the destroyer is time the preserver,
Like the river with its cargo of dead negroes, cows and chicken
coops,
The bitter apple, and the bite in the apple.
And the ragged rock in the restless waters,
Waves wash over it, fogs conceal it;
On a halcyon day it is merely a monument,
In navigable weather it is always a seamark
To lay a course by, but in the sombre season
Or the sudden fury, is what it always was.*

...continued overleaf

III

*I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant-
Among other things - or one way of putting the same thing:
That the future is a faded song, a Royal Rose or a lavender
spray*

*Of wistful regret for those who are not yet here to regret,
Pressed between yellow leaves of a book that has never been
opened.*

*And the way up is the way down, the way forward is the way
back.*

*You cannot face it steadily, but this thing is sure,
That time is no healer: the patient is no longer here.
When the train starts, and the passengers are settled
To fruit, periodicals and business letters
(And those who saw them off have left the platform)
Their faces relax from grief into relief,
To the sleepy rhythm of a hundred hours.
Fare forward, travellers! not escaping from the past
Into different lives, or into any future;
You are not the same people who left that station
Or who will arrive at any terminus,
While the narrowing rails slide together behind you;
Watching the furrow that widens behind you,
You shall not think "the past is finished"
Or "the future is before us".
At nightfall, in the rigging and the aerial,
Is a voice descanting (though not to the ear,
The murmuring shell of time, and not in any language)
"Fare forward, you who think that you are voyaging;
You are not those who saw the harbour*

...continued overleaf

*Receding, or those who will disembark.
Here between the hither and the farther shore
While time is withdrawn, consider the future
And the past with an equal mind.
At the moment which is not of action or inaction
You can receive this: 'on whatever sphere of being
The mind of a man may be intent
At the time of death' - that is the one action
(And the time of death is every moment)
Which shall fructify in the lives of others:
And do not think of the fruit of action.
Fare forward.*

*O voyagers, O seamen,
You who came to port, and you whose bodies
Will suffer the trial and judgement of the sea,
Or whatever event, this is your real destination."
So Krishna, as when he admonished Arjuna
On the field of battle.
Not fare well,
But fare forward, voyagers.*

IV

*Lady, whose shrine stands on the
promontory,
Pray for all those who are in ships, those
Whose business has to do with fish, and
Those concerned with every lawful traffic
And those who conduct them.*

*Repeat a prayer also on behalf of
Women who have seen their sons or husbands
Setting forth, and not returning:
Figlia del tuo figlio,
Queen of Heaven.*

*Also pray for those who were in ships, and
Ended their voyage on the sand, in the sea's lips
Or in the dark throat which will not reject them
Or wherever cannot reach them the sound of the sea bell's
Perpetual angelus.*

*To communicate with Mars, converse with spirits,
 To report the behaviour of the sea monster,
 Describe the horoscope, haruspicate or scry,
 Observe disease in signatures, evoke
 Biography from the wrinkles of the palm
 And tragedy from fingers; release omens
 By sortilege, or tea leaves, riddle the inevitable
 With playing cards, fiddle with pentagrams
 Or barbituric acids, or dissect*

*The recurrent image into pre-conscious terrors-
 To explore the womb, or tomb, or dreams; all these are usual
 Pastimes and drugs, and features of the press:
 And always will be, some of them especially
 Whether on the shores of Asia, or in the Edgware Road,
 Men's curiosity searches past and future
 And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend
 The point of intersection of the timeless
 With time, is an occupation for the saint—
 No occupation either, but something given
 And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,
 Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.
 For most of us, there is only the unattended
 Moment, the moment in and out of time,
 The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
 The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
 Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
 That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
 While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,
 Hints followed by guesses; and the rest*

*Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.*

*Here the impossible union
Of spheres of evidence is actual,
Here the past and future
Are conquered, and reconciled,
Where action were otherwise movement
Of that which is only moved
And has in it no source of movement—
Driven by daemonic, chthonic
Powers. And right action is freedom
From past and future also.
For most of us, this is the aim
Never here to be realised;
Who are only undefeated
Because we have gone on trying;
We, content at the last
If our temporal reversion nourish
(Not too far from the yew-tree)
The life of significant soil.*

Spring

1960

oil on composition board

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Gift of Professor A. G. L. Shaw in memory of Peggy Shaw through

the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2010

2010.138

Journey into the you beaut country

no. 1

1961

oil on composition board

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, 1961

918-5

‘With the [*You Beaut Country*] series I wanted to really come to terms with the experience of a total landscape. Not like there is the foreground, there is the middle distance and there is the horizon. I wanted that overall feeling of travelling over the landscape. There you can see the dry creek beds, the nervous system ... which when you are just on the ground you don’t witness at all. Then you begin to somehow see the wholeness, the essential untidiness – the rivers that don’t go anywhere. It gives you more of a collective feeling of what is happening.’

JOHN OLSEN

Journey into the you beaut country no. 2

1961

oil on composition board

Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane

Acquired 1961. H.C. Richards Memorial Prize (winning entry)

1:0867

Up and down the seaport

1961

oil on composition board

State Art Collection, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
Purchased 1961

1961/0P15

Spring in the you beaut country

1961

oil on composition board

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Gift of Rudy and Ruth Komon 1984

NGA 84.1545

Diana's world

1961

oil on canvas on composition board

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented in memory of Nancy Perrins (née Yuille) by her daughters

Nancy Kimpton, Elizabeth Perrins, Neil Perrins, Peggy Shaw

and Margery Sammons, 1961

820-5

Dappled country

1963

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1971

NGA 71.38

Me the gardener

1964

oil on canvas

Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston

Purchased with assistance from the

Launceston Art Purchase Fund, 1964

QVM:1964:FP:247

Blue Orpheus

1961

oil on composition board

Private collection, Sydney

Entrance to the seaport of desire

1964

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
Gift of Mrs M.A. McGrath 1968

OA23.1968

'I've always thought of the formation of Sydney's landforms as a bitch goddess, and frankly at times it frightens me. The breasty contours of its hills ... When you're sailing through the heads you feel as though you're sailing through her arms – and when you are coming into her you feel you are going deeper and you are caught in her spidery net.'

JOHN OLSEN

Childhood by the seaport

1965

oil on composition board

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
The Alan Boxer Bequest 2014

NGA 2014.2393

Half past six at the Fitzroy

1963

oil on canvas

Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide

Gift of Mr Daniel Thomas 1979

796P11

John Olsen designer

born Australia 1928, lived in Europe 1956–60,
1965–67

Tapecarias Portalegre Workshops, Portugal manufacturer

est. 1946

Joie de vivre

1964–65

wool, edition of 6

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, 1965

1344-D5

'I made the trip via New York, and then went to France and Portugal, meeting Frank McDonald, from Clune Galleries, to look at the tapestry weaving that's being done there. The work produced in Portalegre, in Portugal, seemed to us outstanding, particularly in its adaptable response to the artist's palette. This is where my tapestry *Joie de Vivre* was woven, the designs sent from Australia – a fortunate, intuitive choice. I hope to work further with such craftsmen. Arthur Boyd came down while we were there, and he is also interested in the medium and much impressed by this workshop.'

JOHN OLSEN

McElhone steps

1963

oil on composition board

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
The Alan Boxer Bequest 2014

NGA 2014.2392

'The McElhone steps is a stairway that joins Woolloomooloo to Kings Cross where I lived at the time. It was a boisterous place where sailors, soldiers and drunks made their way for the bright lights of the Cross.'

JOHN OLSEN

Entrance to the siren city of the rat race

1963

oil on canvas

Collection of Mark Macallister

Salute to Cerberus

1965

oil on plywood

TarraWarra Museum and Art Gallery, Healesville
Gift of Eva Besen AO and Marc Besen AO 2001

2002.062

Pied beauty

1969

oil on composition board

Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
South Australian Government Grant 1969

6911P39

*Glory be to God for dappled things –
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
For rose-moles all in a stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plow;
And áll trades, their gear and tackle and trim.
All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.*

—GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS, *PIED BEAUTY* (1877)

Wattle and moon

1969

oil on canvas

Collection of Joanne Lagerburg and Graham Swift, Perth

Man absorbed in landscape

1966

oil on composition board

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

The Joseph Brown Collection.

Presented through the NGV Foundation by

Dr Joseph Brown AO OBE, Honorary Life Benefactor, 2004

2004.200

Chasing bird landscape

1969

oil on canvas

The Westpac Corporate Art Collection, Sydney

Kitchen by the sea

1971

synthetic polymer paint on plywood

Institute of Early Childhood Education Art Collection,
Macquarie University, Sydney

Love in the kitchen

1969

oil on canvas

Private collection, Melbourne

'We have moved to Dunmoochin, the painter Clifton Pugh's bush property, about thirty kilometres north of Melbourne ... Much of the life of Dunmoochin centres on Clif Pugh's house, where he lives with his wife Marlene and their two boys. The atmosphere there fluctuates between great warmth and all-out domestic uproar: Clif can be a bit of a crazy man. Neither he nor Marlene cares who can hear them making their cases against each other.'

JOHN OLSEN

Wild Australia

Olsen's close contact with Australia's natural world was taken to a new level in 1971 when he was invited to join a film crew developing the *Wild Australia* series of documentaries focusing on Australia's wildlife and habitats. It was from this point onwards that depictions of wildlife, such as pelicans, brolgas and frogs became more of a feature in his work. While this approach, which looked more closely into the landscape, was a new way of working, it was really an extension of Olsen's *You Beaut Country* paintings and a validation of what he had been doing instinctively.

'I was up in North Queensland, just north of Townsville, with [filmmaker] Ken Taylor who was a poet and a friend of mine. He had asked me to go there and perhaps do some graphics [for the ABC's Wild Australia series]. Townsville is where I saw tree frogs for the first time, where I saw brolgas, ibis and so on. There was one particular place, a swamp, where the brolgas were going through their dancing, and this really had an influence on me – nature and movement. The drawings and paintings I did were an expansion of the You Beaut Country pictures but more connected to the environment.'

JOHN OLSEN

Improvisation on Basho's frog

1995

watercolour and coloured pencil

Collection of Andrew and Louise Greville

Leaping frog

1976

watercolour and coloured pencil on Japanese paper

Collection of Richard and Lynne Crookes

Spring frogs 2

2008

watercolour and coloured pencil

Private collection, Hobart

Laughing frog

1977

sugarlift aquatint printed in dark brown ink, ed.

13/90

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Gift of the artist 1978

378.2005

Diving frog

1986

colour lithograph, artist's proof

Private collection

Frog swimming

1979

watercolour and brush and ink

Private collection

Spoonbill and swamp frogs

from the *Down Under* portfolio

1979

colour lithograph

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Gift of Mr Fred Genis, 1985

P21.1-1985

Birds on the Darling

from the *Down Under* portfolio
1979
colour lithograph

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Gift of Mr Fred Genis, 1985

P21.5-1985

Back o'Bourke

from the *Down Under* portfolio

1979

colour lithograph

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Gift of Mr Fred Genis, 1985

P21.2-1985

Bird and kangaroo

from the *Down Under* portfolio

1979

lithograph

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Gift of Mr Fred Genis, 1985

P21.3-1985

Bird and frog

from the *Down Under* portfolio
1979

colour lithograph

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Gift of Mr Fred Genis, 1985

P21.6-1985

Pelican and kangaroo landscape

from the *Down Under* portfolio

1979

colour lithograph

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Gift of Mr Fred Genis, 1985

P21.4-1985

Flounder

1994

charcoal and pastel

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
Gift of the artist 1996

30.1996

Monkfish

c. 1998

charcoal and pastel

Private collection

Bird, fish and river

1980

etching and aquatint

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
Gift of the artist, accessioned 2015

426.2015

Honeyeaters and Grevilleas

1999

soft-ground etching

Collection of Ken McGregor

Afternoon

2004

colour etching and aquatint (*à la poupée*)

Collection of Ken McGregor

A detailed self-portrait: John Olsen's journals

For more than five decades Olsen has maintained journals assembled from his writings, sketches, photographs and ephemera, including tickets, postcards and birds' feathers. The diaries move freely in time: an image of his first childhood home surfaces in a volume from the early 1990s; the journal for 2003 contains photographs from an influential period in Spain more than four decades earlier. Details recorded in the journals span the use of a town crier to announce his exhibition in the Portuguese village of Castelo de Vide in 1967 to email addresses and mobile phone numbers in the new century.

...continued overleaf

Olsen's fine calligraphic writing and sketches impart a sensibility akin to illuminated medieval manuscripts and share with this tradition the capacity to encompass knowledge ranging from the sacred and arcane to the earthy and practical. They accommodate quotations from philosophers and poets – T. S. Eliot, Seamus Heaney, Gerard Manley Hopkins and W. B. Yeats, among others – and record Olsen's anxieties and testing of artistic ideas. His journals include vivid accounts of his travels and visits to restaurants, and abound with recipes in the way earlier artists might have documented their formulas for pigments.

Journals

Above, left to right

Lake Eyre sketchbook (no. 4B) 1975

Egypt, France and Mallorca (no. 5B) 1978

Dural 1980

India and Thailand (no. 7) 1980

India and Thailand sketchbook (no. 7B) 1981

Venice 1992

Notebook: July 1994–January 1997

1994–97

1966–2006

oil, watercolour and fibre-tipped pen on paper,
newsclippings, polaroid photographs,
various covers and bindings

National Library of Australia, Canberra
Gift of John Olsen, 2015

MA Acc 15.022

Journals

Below, left to right

France, England and Portugal (no. 2) 1966

**North Queensland, Kangaroo Island
and Clarendon (no. 14) 1986**

Clarendon and Western Australia 1981

Lakefield and Clarendon 1984

Newcastle and Clarendon 1981–2

**Land Beyond Time journal 3
(Kangaroo Island) 1982**

Land Beyond Time journal 1 (Kimberley) 1982

Clarendon, South Australia 1984

America and England 1987

1966–2006

oil, watercolour and fibre-tipped pen on paper,
newsclippings, polaroid photographs,
various covers and bindings

National Library of Australia, Canberra
Gift of John Olsen, 2015

MA Acc 15.022

The Terry Whelan suite

Olsen was first introduced to the medium of decorated ceramics in the late 1960s. While not a potter himself, his use of the medium follows in the tradition of painters collaborating with potters that includes artists such as Russian art theorist and abstract artist Wassily Kandinsky and Pablo Picasso.

In 1969 Olsen moved from Sydney to Dunmoochin, a communal property at Cottles Bridge, about forty kilometres north-east of Melbourne. Artist Clifton Pugh had established Dunmoochin more than a decade earlier. While Olsen was living there he met Robert Mair, a young New Zealand potter who spent time at the Sturt Pottery in Mittagong, working under Les Blakebrough, before setting up a kiln at Dunmoochin. Olsen and Mair worked together for two years, in 1969–71, with Mair throwing and Olsen hand-decorating the ceramic vessels.

The most significant creation to arise out of Olsen's collaboration with Mair is this stoneware dinner suite made for Melbourne art collector Terry Whelan in 1970–71. Inspired by a large painted stoneware paella bowl he had acquired on a visit to Dunmoochin in 1970, Whelan commissioned Olsen to produce a full dinner service for him, with settings for sixteen diners.

John Olsen decorator

born Australia 1928, lived in Europe 1956–60,
1965–67

Robert Mair potter

born New Zealand 1943,
arrived Australia 1960s

The Terry Whelan suite

Tea and coffee service

Dinner service

1970–71

stoneware, bamboo, brass

Collection of Terry Whelan

John Olsen designer

born Australia 1928, lived in Europe 1956–60,
1965–67

Australian Tapestry Workshop, Melbourne workshop

est. 1976

The paella

1981

wool, cotton, silk, viscose and linen

woven by Alan Holland, Ilona Fornalski and Pam
Joyce

Private collection, Melbourne

'I see tapestry as a special discipline in itself. If I'm doing tapestries I design for tapestries. We go into what the structure will be and the thickness of the weave. That's the way to get the best results. I've done nine tapestries altogether. I might add that probably the best workshop in the world is the Australian Tapestry Workshop. I'd love to go to Portugal, I'd love to go to France with designs but they are so good here I prefer to work with them.'

JOHN OLSEN

From a crow's nest

In July 1981 Olsen moved from Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, where he had been living since early 1980, to the town of Clarendon in South Australia, about thirty minutes' drive south from Adelaide. He spent seven years there and the environment had a great influence on his painting. The work Olsen produced during this time also shows a renewed confidence in his techniques – similar to his assured style of the early 1960s – as seen in *Golden summer, Clarendon*, 1983, and *A road to Clarendon: Autumn*, 1985. While there, in addition to painting locally, he travelled and painted in north-west Australia, in the Pilbara and Broome. He also made a return trip to Spain in 1985.

'I called it "Aix en Clarendon". The house was right on top of a hill and there were folding hills surrounding it. And Clarendon really was down in the valley. It had this lovely ... Look, it was like viewing a landscape from a crow's nest; it was wonderful. From there, you could go down to the Murray and the village of Strathalbyn, a most interesting area.'

JOHN OLSEN

Golden summer, Clarendon

1983

oil on canvas

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Purchased with the assistance of Salomon Brothers 1985

167.1985

'Noela and I arrive at Clarendon in South Australia. This will mark a new period in my life and work. Our house, an old rectory, is ... perched over the village. Looking across, we see the breasty hills, in withdrawing ranks. The one opposite is particularly steep, and has sheep climbing on it, and clusters of crows flying up and down. Cockatoos, white and splendid, soar past, the clouds seem at eye level, and sheep tracks make a fascinating meandering over the hills' surfaces. The hills are like old earth-coloured parchment with tiny creatures flying and climbing over them.'

JOHN OLSEN

Pilbara train (or Hammersley ore train)

1982

oil on composition board

Private collection, Melbourne

In August 1982 Olsen participated in a major expedition to North-West Australia, departing from Geraldton, travelling through the Pilbara and up to the Prince Regent River before returning to the Bungle Bungle Ranges. On his return to the studio, Olsen produced a group of oil paintings that interpreted the timeless quality and enormity of the landscape and revealed his fascination with patterns on the earth.

A road to Clarendon: Autumn

1985

oil on canvas

Private collection, Sydney

Seafood paella

2007

oil on plywood

Private collection

Goyder channel

1975

watercolour and gouache on Japanese paper

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Purchased 1980

15.1980

Arrival at the void

1975

watercolour on Japanese paper

Collection of Candida Raymond

John Olsen designer

born Australia 1928, lived in Europe 1956–60,
1965–67

Australian Tapestry Workshop, Melbourne workshop

est. 1976

Light playing with evolution

1989

cotton, seine, twine and wool

woven by Andrea May and Peter Churcher

The University of Melbourne Art Collection

Commissioned by the Works of Art Committee of

the University of Melbourne for the School of Zoology, 1989 1989.0041

The void

Olsen first visited Lake Eyre with field naturalist Vincent Serventy in October 1974, when the lake was filling for only the second time since European settlement. When Olsen arrived it was teeming with wildlife, and in the months following Olsen recorded and visually recounted his experience. He has referred to Lake Eyre as 'the void', due to its overwhelming expanse when full and the contradictory nature of it being a lake that is more often waterless.

'Lake Eyre – there it is, below sea level, a kind of basin, an inland sea but most of the time it's a very heavily encrusted saltpan, upon which Malcolm Campbell broke the land speed record. Then it's all systems go – they have rain in western Queensland, rain in Alice Springs through the Finke River, rain in the Flinders Ranges and it all filters into this basin and it's so big and so extraordinary. It has fish, it even has sea birds, pelicans in the hundreds and thousands, and fish; it's totally viable and then it begins to dry up. There it is and there it isn't ... I mean, the opportunity to discover these things in the twentieth century, it's crazy.'

JOHN OLSEN

Nightfall, when wattle stains the doubting heart

1980

oil on canvas

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
Purchased 1981

45.1981

*Voyage within you, on the fabled ocean,
And you will find the Southern Continent,
Quiros' vision – the hidalgo heart
And mythical Australia, where reside
All things in the imagined counterpart.
It is your land of similes: the wattle
Scatters the pollen on the doubting heart;
The flowers are wide-awake;
the air gives ease.
There you come home; the magpies call you Jack
And whistle like larrikins at you from the trees...*

—JAMES MCAULEY, *TERRA AUSTRALIS* (1946)

Lake Hindmarsh, the Wimmera

1970

oil on canvas

Collection of the Olsen family, Sydney

This painting, which depicts a bird's-eye view of Lake Hindmarsh in Victoria's Wimmera region, is a precursor to Olsen's paintings of Lake Eyre which he began in 1974. In this work the lake, which when full is Victoria's largest natural freshwater lake, is painted as a dry pan. Similar to Lake Eyre, Lake Hindmarsh is part of a terminal lake system which only fills occasionally.

Lake Eyre

1975

oil on canvas

Private collection

'The present floods are the heaviest in 500 years, the scientists say, and they've filled Lake Eyre for a distance of 175 kilometres, or three times the size of Sydney Harbour. Life is burgeoning everywhere within and around this. The Void has put forth. I feel there are great possibilities for my work there.'

JOHN OLSEN

The Murray running into Lake Alexandrina

1975

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Gift of James and Jacqui Erskine 2009

NGA 2009.548

Olsen made a number of trips to the coastal regions of South Australia where he produced sketches both from the air and the ground. These were later transformed into paintings back in his studio. In particular, Olsen made regular visits to the Fleurieu Peninsula, Goolwa and Lake Alexandrina. Lake Alexandrina is a large lake located south-east of Adelaide and is the meeting point for Australia's longest river, the Murray River, and the sea.

Dark void

1976

oil on canvas

National Australia Bank Art Collection, Melbourne

When full, Lake Eyre is Australia's largest freshwater lake and teems with bird, fish and animal life. As the waters evaporate and it begins to recede it becomes progressively saltier, eventually returning to a dry saltpan where most forms of life are unable to survive.

'At a certain point the lake turns all crimson coloured. It becomes too salty. There's millions of fish just lying on the edge, dead pelicans ... There it is and there it isn't.'

JOHN OLSEN

The Simpson Desert approaching the void

1976

oil on canvas

Queensland University of Technology Art Collection, Brisbane

Purchased 1976

1976.038

In this painting Olsen captures the transformation of the arid Simpson Desert into what he refers to as the 'nervous system' of the land following rain. He depicts the complex crawling system of rivers that channel the water into Lake Eyre and bring life to the otherwise dry Australian interior.

'Because of the way it explains itself, Australia is best seen from the air, and the curious thing is when you do that you see it in its proper detail.'

JOHN OLSEN

Bathurst butter

1999

oil on canvas

Private collection

Cooper's Creek in flood

1975–76, dated 1981

oil on canvas

State Art Collection, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

Gift of the Christensen Fund Collection, 1996

(1996/0247)

'Vin [Vincent Serventy] told me of a journey he'd just made down the flooded Cooper's Creek, into the Lake. The estuary of what was really a great river was so wide, and had so many deltas, that it took hours to find his way into the lake proper. It was nightfall, but he and Rex Ellis wanted to reach the southern shore, and so decided to press on. During the night a wind-squall struck them, and the lake, being shallow, whipped up in minutes, and their boat was swamped. Imagine, I thought, being shipwrecked in Lake Eyre, the "dead heart" of Australia.'

JOHN OLSEN

River passing through a plain

1982

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased, 1982

AC11-1982

The Darling River, Australia's fourth longest river, begins its journey in northern New South Wales and winds its way through the western plains in search of the Murray River. Olsen flew over parts of western New South Wales in 1982 and in this work has captured the meandering path of the river as it makes its way towards the Murray and eventually to the sea.

Return to Spain

Olsen's time in Spain in the late 1950s had been both formative and inspiring. In 1985 he returned there in order, he has said, to revisit Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, 1937, in the context of the Spanish environment. Olsen had seen the painting some years earlier in the United States where it had been on loan to the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Although his stay in Spain was short, it energised him and once back in Australia Olsen painted a number of new works, including *Calle estrecha (The narrow street)*, 1986, and *El Amoladar (The tinker)*, 1986, which were inspired by Francisco de Goya's black mural paintings.

'I went back to Spain in the 1980s. I have joked that it was because I needed to get a new beret, but I really wanted to see Picasso's Guernica ... And there it was in the Reina Sofia, at the end of a room entirely by itself, with some sketches and protected by bullet-proof glass ... It was an important thing for me to see it back in Spain, quite an incredible thing. It is largely black with graduations of grey. I also saw Goya's black pictures at the Prado – Witches' Sabbath, a very moving picture, and Saturn devouring his son – these served inspiration for paintings when I returned. There was another picture, Goya's The dog, in which the dog is pointing its head up to the sky – a remarkable picture.'

JOHN OLSEN

Butcher's cart, Deià de Mallorca

2010

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Acquired with the Founding Donors' Fund 2010

NGA 2010.561

Calle estrecha (The narrow street)

1986

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with
the assistance of Mr Marc Besen, Governor, 1986

AC8-1986

'How wonderful it is to be back in Spain! I wrote to an old student of mine that I am coming back to Spain to see Picasso's *Guernica* in its proper context, in Spain, with its proper parents, Goya's last black pictures, and Zurbarán.'

JOHN OLSEN

Donde voy? Self-portraits in moments of doubt

1989

oil on canvas

The Gene and Brian Sherman Collection, Sydney

Olsen was selected for the 1990 Archibald Prize with this self-portrait.

‘Wonderful to get out of Sydney after the Archibald. Though I managed to win the Sulman, I can’t help agreeing with numerous people that my *Donde Voy* in the Archibald is the better picture ... Bryan Westwood, Jack Lynn very gracious about their wins, in the Archibald and Wynne prizes, respectively. I know where I stand, and I privately think *Donde Voy* is in a class of its own.’

JOHN OLSEN

Fish head and baptism spoon

1990

oil on canvas

Collection of the artist

El Amoladar (The tinker)

1986

oil on canvas

Private collection

‘Frankly, I have always been fascinated with narrative – I’ve sometimes considered myself the best storyteller in town. I never start a picture without a theme. *El Amoladar* (The Tinker) is an example. He was an unshaven, isolated man who arrived in Deya each market day with his cart on bicycle wheels. Each day he would buy two bottles of cheap red wine and by the end of the afternoon he would be asleep under his cart. This is a mere outline of the story; what I have to find is the other actors, the supporting cast – they come by association, each thing breeds the other.’

JOHN OLSEN

The circus animals' desertion

1994

oil on canvas

Deakin University Art Collection, Melbourne
Purchased, 1994

1994.37

*Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of the street,
Old kettles, old bottles and a broken can.
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone,
I must lie down where all the ladder's start,
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.*

—WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS, *THE CIRCUS ANIMALS' DESERTION* (1933)

Stay with your dream

Olsen lives by a lake on a small farm in idyllic surroundings in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales. He shares this place with his fourth wife, Katharine, an assortment of wild waterbirds, an enormous but friendly Great Dane and a herd of beautifully groomed dressage horses. He has a large and airy 'en-suite' studio opening from his bedroom where he paints most days. At night he often wakes and paints then, too.

In a career spanning almost seven decades, Olsen's creative output has been immense. He still exhibits regularly, and at eighty-eight years of age retains a remarkable energy and extraordinary passion for his art and for life. The tangled sensuous lines, tonal nuances and abstracted forms of his paintings reflect the vitality and richness of the Australian continent. His is an epic vision distilled from experiences and mixed with emotion and enthusiasm; a vision that is at once candid, penetrating and rhapsodic. John Olsen presents us with a unique and special view of a country that is boundless, diverse and pulsing with life.

The bath

1996

oil on canvas

Collection of James and Jacqui Erskine, Sydney

The bushman's bed

2015

oil on canvas

Collection of the artist

In some of his recent works Olsen has been inspired by his childhood encounters with life during the Depression. His feelings for itinerant workers and swagmen of the times down on their luck and 'making do' have stayed with him and surfaced in these works. The beds are also fulfilling metaphorical roles as places of rest within the landscape.

The shearer's mattress

2015

oil on canvas

Collection of the artist

Road to Bathurst

1997

oil on canvas

Private collection

Lake Eyre

1991

oil on canvas

The Laverty Collection, Sydney

Since his first visit to Lake Eyre in 1974 Olsen has made a number of return trips. He has continued to be inspired by the experiences and the lake and surrounding desert region has been an enduring subject of his attention up to the present day.

Poet's garden

2005

oil on canvas

Private collection, Sydney

Lily pond at Humpty-Doo

2004

oil on canvas

Collection of James and Jacqui Erskine, Sydney

Squid in its own ink

2015

oil on canvas

Collection of Jon Adgemis

Sydney Harbour

2016

oil on canvas

Collection of the artist

You beaut country: Landscape crawling

2016

oil on canvas

Collection of the artist

Olsen completed this painting in July 2016. Along with the adjacent painting *Sydney Harbour*, he has recently revisited subjects he first explored in the 1960s. They are a reinterpretation of his concept of the *You Beaut Country* but without the frenetic energy of his earlier works in the series.

Popping bluebottles

2007

oil on canvas

Private collection

Lake Eyre channel country

2011

watercolour and coloured pencil

Private collection

Lake Eyre, the desert sea X

2011

watercolour and blue pencil

Private collection

