



PRINTMAKER GALLERY

John Olsen

Robert Berlind writing for 'Art In America' magazine, on the John Olsen Retrospective at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1993:

John Olsen at the Art Gallery of New South Wales

During an early sojourn in Europe between 1957 and 1960, Australian painter John Olsen absorbed the influences of among others, Hayter, Dubuffet, COBRA artists Lucebert, Jorn and Alechinski and Tapiés. His work also shows affinities with Far Eastern art and demonstrates an interest in literature, particularly such Anglo-Celtic writers as Yeats, Thomas, Joyce and Beckett. But this retrospective of his of his paintings revealed an oeuvre that could only have been produced within the Australian context. He has taken as his chief subject the Australian landscape, and he has given expression to aspirations that permeate much of Australian culture. His acute evocations of local wildlife, Aussie larrikins (roguish outlaw types) and the immense, intractable landmass itself constitute an art that is regional but in no sense provincial.

A typical Olsen painting combines an implied aerial view with an ambiguous and seemingly unpremeditated figuration. His characteristically quizzical line and irregular squiggles and dots deftly render countless organisms, large and minute. Their environment is conjured through loosely brushed and stained expanses of colour (on canvas or hardboard) That are keyed to natural light. Even when he is referring to the outback landscape, usually noted for its austerity and inhospitality, Olsen's imagery teems with life. Yet the same lines sometimes read as geological mappings. In Olsen's work there is no foreground/ middle ground/ background schema, nor any sign of European landscape's concern with "human scale." Instead he employs simultaneously the contrary vantages of naturalist and geographer or, to put it another way, the viewpoints of frog and eagle.

Olsen is a master watercolourist - witness a series of large works (often around 8 feet high) on Japanese torinoko paper with titles such as The Rookery, Dying Creek Bed and Owls at Cooper's Creek. These exquisite and humorous paintings bear comparison with the best of Zen sumi tradition without ever striking a false note. Another group of paintings, begun in 1987 and dominated by tar blacks and heavy umbers, adumbrates themes of Spanish village life, literary references and autobiographical probings, all in a tragicomic mode. A purely Olsen touch appears in the darkness that is animated by scrawly images in *Donde Voy?* Self-Portraits in Moments of Doubt: a squidgy little fried egg, hovering in space where one of the figure's genitals would be in a fuller rendering, refers playfully to Velazquez, a symbol of redemption and a particular not- quite- cooked bit of breakfast. Olsen's work has not yet been seen in the U.S., yet this retrospective would more than hold its own at any of our major venues".

1928 Born in Newcastle, NSW
1935 Family moves to Bondi Beach
1943 Leaves school to work as a clerk, then becomes a freelance cartoonist for publications such as Man and Fashion Design
1947 Attends Datillo Rubbo Art School
1950 Attends Julian Ashton Art School where he studies under John Passmore, and later Godfrey Miller at East Sydney Technical College
1952-55 Exhibits with the Society of Artists
1955 First major exhibition, at Macquarie Galleries, Sydney
1956 Participates in important abstract and abstract expressionist exhibition, 'Direction 1'
1957-60 Travels to Europe
1965-67 Lives in London and Portugal
1968 Establishes the Bakery Art School, Sydney
1969-71 Lives at Dunmoochin, Victoria, in the artist community started by Clifton Pugh, where he worked with artists such as Fred Williams and Albert Tucker; wins Wynne Prize
1973 Completes Sydney Opera House mural 'Salute to Five Bells', based on Kenneth Slessor's poem
1970s-1980s Tours through Central Australia, and later Egypt, Kenya and South Africa
1985 Wins the Wynne Prize
1988 Paints mural for Darling Harbour Project, Sydney
1991 Retrospective at National Gallery of Victoria, tours Australia
1997 Publishes his autobiography, 'Drawn from Life'

Selected Solo Exhibitions

1955 John Olsen, Macquarie Galleries, Sydney
1958 John Olsen, Macquarie Galleries, Sydney
1960 Olsen, Galerie Lambert, Paris
1960 John Olsen, Terry Clune Galleries, Sydney
1963 An Exhibition of Recent Paintings, Gouaches & Drawings by John Olsen, Clune Galleries, Sydney
1963 John Olsen: Recent Paintings, Australian Galleries, Melbourne
1965 John Olsen, Clune Galleries, Sydney
1965 John Olsen, South Yarra Gallery, Melbourne
1967 Entrance to the Castle of Life: John Olsen 66-67, Clune Galleries, Sydney
1967 Entrance to the Castle of Life: John Olsen 66-67, South Yarra Gallery, Melbourne
1969 The Dunmoochin Summer: John Olsen '69, Rudy Komon Gallery, Sydney
1969 John Olsen '69- Exhibition of Gouaches and Oil Paintings, White Studio, Adelaide
1970 John Olsen, Reid Gallery, Brisbane
1971 John Olsen, Rudy Komon Gallery, Sydney
1972 John Olsen, Australian Galleries, Melbourne
1973 John Olsen, Rudy Komon Gallery, Sydney
1974 John Olsen, Atelier 72 Gallery, Adelaide
1975 John Olsen: Edge of the Void, Rudy Komon Gallery, Sydney
1975 John Olsen 74-75: Edge of the Void and Opera House Mural Studies, Australian Galleries, Melbourne
1975 Edge of the Void: Paintings, Drawings, Etchings and Lithographs by John Olsen, Greenhill Galleries, Adelaide
1975 John Olsen: Etchings, Gallery Huntly, Canberra
1976 John Olsen: Recent oil paintings, gouches, drawings and etchings, Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane
1976 The Child in us All, St John's Anglican Cathedral, Brisbane
1977 John Olsen: Recent Paintings, Australian Galleries, Melbourne
1978 John Olsen: Paintings and Drawings 77-78, Barry Stern Galleries, Sydney

1979 John Olsen: Earth Hold etchings, Cintra House, Brisbane
1980 John Olsen: Exhibition of Recent Paintings, Australian Galleries, Melbourne
1980 John Olsen: Paintings and Drawings 77-80 Lister Gallery, Festival of Perth, Perth
1980 John Olsen: My Complete Graphics, David Reid Gallery, Sydney
1981 John Olsen: A Sliver of Time, Barry Stern Galleries, Sydney
1982 John Olsen 81-82 and Noela Hjorth, Bortignon's Kalamunda Gallery of Man, Festival of Perth, Perth
1982 John Olsen, Australian Galleries, Melbourne
1983 John Olsen: Selected Graphics, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
1983 John Olsen - The Land Beyond Time, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
(touring exhibition - travelling throughout Australia 1984 - 1990)
1984 John Olsen, Tynte Gallery, Adelaide Festival 1984, Adelaide
1985 John Olsen, Tynte Gallery, Adelaide
1986 Paintings and Drawings by John Olsen from the permanent collection,
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin
1986 John Olsen - In Search of the Open Country 1961 - 1986, Heide, Melbourne
1986 John Olsen: Gold, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
1986 John Olsen, Australian Galleries, Melbourne
1987-88 John Olsen - Encounters with Drawing, Wollongong City Gallery, Wollongong
1988 John Olsen - Encounters with Drawing, Australian Galleries, Melbourne
1989 John Olsen, Greenhill Gallery, Perth
1990 John Olsen, Australian Galleries, Sydney
1991 John Olsen, Australian Galleries, Melbourne
1991-92 John Olsen Retrospective, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
1992 John Olsen Retrospective, Art Gallery of New South Wales
1993 John Olsen: Recent Works, Sherman Galleries Goodhope, Sydney
1993 John Olsen: Recent Etchings, Olsen Carr Art Dealers, Sydney
1994 John Olsen: Recent Work 1992 - 1994, Deutscher Fine Art, Melbourne
1995 John Olsen: Recent Works, Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane
1998 John Olsen: Recent Paintings 1995 - 1998, Olsen Carr Art Dealers, Sydney
1998 'New York Nowhere', recent paintings and works on paper, Olsen Carr Art Dealers, Sydney
2000 John Olsen: Past & Present, Tim Olsen Gallery, Sydney

Selected Group Exhibitions

1956 Direction 1, Macquarie Galleries, Sydney; Pacific Loans Exhibition, Auckland and San Francisco
1961 Sydney 9, Gallery A, Melbourne; Recent Australian Art, Whitechapel Gallery, London; H.C. Richards Memorial Prize, Queensland Art Gallery
1963 Georges Invitation Prize, Melbourne
1967 Australian Painters 1964-66, Corcoran Gallery, Washington USA
1969 Wynne Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales
1976 The Child in Us All, John Olsen: Tapestries and oils on hardboard, Queensland Festival of Art, St. Johns Anglican Cathedral, Brisbane
1977 Australian Contemporary Printmakers, Stadia Graphics Gallery, Sydney
1978 Australian Etching, National Gallery of Victoria
1979 Focus '79 R.M.I.T., Melbourne
1982 John Olsen 1981-82 & Noela Hjorth; Paintings, lithographs & drawings, Festival of Perth Exhibition, Bortignon's Gallery of Man, Perth; Aspects of the Landscape, Powell Street Gallery, Melbourne
1986 Wynne Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales
1987 Jack Manton Art Prize, Queensland
1998-1999 Southern Reflections: Ten Contemporary Artists, toured Northern Europe
1998 Private Collections, Orange Regional Gallery
1998-1999 Escape Artists: Modernists in the Tropics, touring regional galleries in Queensland and New South Wales

Awards

1960 Rockdale Prize
1961 H.C. Richards Memorial Prize (Queensland Art Gallery), Perth Prize
1962 Royal Sydney Show Prize
1963 Georges Art Prize, Melbourne
1964 Launceston Prize, Tasmania
1969 Wynne Prize (Art Gallery of New South Wales)
1977 Order of the British Empire (O.B.E.) for services to the Arts
1985 Wynne Prize (Art Gallery of New South Wales)
1993 Australian Creative Fellowship
2001 Order of Australia (O.A.)
2005 Archibald Portrait Prize

Collections

John Olsen's work is represented in all Australian state gallery collections, the National Gallery of Australia and regional galleries Australia-wide. He is also represented in institutional, corporate and private collections in Australia, Asia, the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States of America

Selected Bibliography

Virginia Spate, John Olsen, Georgian House, Melbourne, 1973
John Olsen, Salute to Five Bells: John Olsen's Opera House Journal, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1973
John Olsen, My Complete Graphics, 1957-79, Gryphon Books, Melbourne, 1980
Sandra McGrath and John Olsen, The Artist and the Desert, Bay Books, Sydney and London, 1981
John Olsen: Gold, exhibition catalogue, introduction by Edmund Capon, essay by John Olsen, AGNSW, Sydney, 1986
Deborah Hart, John Olsen, Craftsman House, 1991
John Olsen, Drawn from Life, D&S, Sydney, 1997
Sandra McGrath, Lake Eyre - the Desert Sea, Lansdowne, Melbourne, 1979
John Olsen: My Complete Graphics 57-79, Gryphon Books and Australian Galleries, Melbourne, 1980
Deborah Hart, John Olsen, Craftsman House, 1992