

# Australian artist John Olsen (1928–2023)—an appreciation

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Australian artist John Olsen, who died early this year aged 95, was honoured with a state-sponsored event at the Art Gallery of New South Wales acknowledging his more than seventy-year contribution to the visual arts.

Olsen, who continued working in his studio until three days before his death, was acclaimed for his dynamic, semi-abstract and intuitive approach to Australian landscape painting that challenged the previously dominant formal style of the genre.

Olsen's large-scale paintings and murals captured the rich diversity of the vast continent—its desert interiors, coastal and tropical regions, along with its animals, birds and insects. His free-flowing approach, which he applied to printmaking, ceramics and tapestries, inspired a new generation of artists to reinterpret the country's rich natural beauty.

Olsen was born in the regional working-class city of Newcastle in NSW. Although there were no artistic works in the family home when he was growing up, he had a burning ambition to be an artist. His first memories, at the age of four, were of drawing in his mother's cookery books, much to her despair.

The Great Depression and World War II directly impacted on the young boy's life. The family moved to Sydney in 1935, and when war broke out his father joined the army, serving in the Middle East and Papua New Guinea, leaving his wife to bring up the family.

Olsen left school at 15, got a job as a clerk, then as a freelance cartoonist, and began attending classes at the Datillo-Rubbo Art School in the late 1940s. Soon after he enrolled as a full-time student at Sydney's Julian Ashton School, the country's oldest fine art school, where he was taught by John Passmore (1904–84) who became a major influence on the 22-year-old.

Passmore began teaching at the school in 1951, after spending 17 years in Europe. Deeply involved in the geometrical structure and spatial theories of Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), Passmore brought new ideas to his students while encouraging a certain spontaneity and experimentation.

In January 1953, Olsen and other young artists decided to protest over William Dargie receiving the annual Archibald Prize, Australia's most prestigious portraiture award. It was the seventh time that the conservative trustees of the Art Gallery of NSW had given Dargie the prize.

Furious over this decision, about 20 students entered the gallery, standing in front the portrait holding placards—"Archibald decisions death to Art"—and shouting, "Three cheers to Picasso!"

Years later Olsen, the most outspoken of the group, said, "It was not only the sense of predictability that infuriated these vocal artists, but

also the academic nature of the portrait [itself] which represented a total lack of vision and support for contemporary ideas."

In 1953 and 1954, two European art exhibitions toured Australia. These shows, which included works by Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and Marc Chagall, had a major impact on the local art scene.

"We had seen nothing like it in Australia... we were so appallingly isolated. I clearly remember the colours of Chagall [and] the general feeling of freedom it gave of new avenues," Olsen recalled.

Olsen's work was animated by his passion for literature—T.S. Eliot, Shakespeare, Gerard Manley Hopkins, W. H. Auden, William Butler Yeats, Dylan Thomas and Australian poet Kenneth Slessor—as well as oriental art and philosophy, including Zen Buddhism.

Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* (1954), which depicted a day in the life of a Welsh fishing village, left a lasting impression. Olsen was infatuated by Thomas's ability to simultaneously draw together the play's different personalities and voices into a unified whole. He decided to apply this to his paintings of Sydney Harbour and then, much later, to his journeys in the Australian interior.

In 1956, some of Olsen's paintings were included in *Direction I*, a group exhibition of abstract expressionist work by Robert Klippel, John Passmore, William Rose and Eric Smith.

Later that year, Olsen was offered a scholarship to travel and study abroad. Seizing the opportunity for new sources of artistic inspiration, he sailed to Europe where he remained for the next four years, living in London, Paris and in Deià, Spain. Leaving Sydney, he said, was like "cutting the umbilical cord."

Olsen attended classes at Atelier 17, a celebrated print-making studio in Paris. The classes were led by S.W. Hayter who fostered collaboration and incorporated Surrealist techniques and so-called unconscious creativity. In Spain, which included an extended period in Majorca, he studied Diego Velázquez (1599–1660) and Francisco Goya (1746–1828), and the latest styles and techniques.

Returning to Australia in 1960, he painted *Spanish Encounter*, a two-metre by four-metre three-panel abstract work distilling these experiences. Spanish artistic and cultural life were lasting influences, and he revisited the country in 1967, and once again in 1985 to see Picasso's *Guernica* in situ.

While many Australian artists travelled for inspiration to Europe in the first two decades after World War II, others started exploring the country's vast arid centre. The better known of these were Sidney Nolan (1917–1992), Albert Tucker (1914–1999) and Russell Drysdale (1912–1981). Nolan's exploration of Central Australia in 1949 and the striking paintings from that trip stunned local and international critics.

Olsen was asked in 2021 where he should be placed within the history of Australian art and its landscape tradition. He replied: “The Australia that we now know began to reveal itself after World War II. There were great artists like Sidney Nolan, [Russell] Drysdale and Ian Fairweather.

“When Nolan did the pictures of the McDonnell Ranges outside Alice Springs, he got a lift in the mail plane. He could see this vast landscape and discovered something very valuable... He [Nolan] discovered these reddish landscapes and when he showed them in London the critics said he was painting the moon.”

Olsen continued to experiment during 1960s and 1970s, combining aerial and spontaneous linear perspectives with brilliant splashes of color in paintings such as *Five Bells* (1963), *Le Soleil* (1965) and his giant triptych *Sydney Sun* (or *King Sun*) (1965).

In 1972, Olsen was commissioned to paint a mural for the Sydney Opera House. It was called *Salute to Slessor's 5 Bells* and designed to be viewed at night. Dominated by the brilliant blues of Sydney Harbour, and interspersed with colourful sea creatures, it has a dream-like and almost whimsical character reminiscent of the works of Paul Klee (1879–1940) and Joan Miró (1883–1983).

Two years later, Olsen made his first visit to South Australia's Lake Eyre, a 144-kilometre long, 77-kilometre wide salt lake situated near the Simpson Desert. The lake and its surrounding flora and fauna had burst into life following record floods in 1973.

Olsen's aerial viewpoints of the lake with its scores of vein-like tributaries, abundant bird life and delicate tracks of tiny creatures inhabiting the area were recorded in a series of brilliant sketches and giant paintings. Although many of these images were done with oil paint, some have the lightness of water colours, with pale blue translucent brushstrokes with the sandy colors of the desert edging onto the lake.

Olsen later described the Lake Eyre series and his artistic modus operandi as “writing the landscape... My own theory is that European landscape is more geometrical—the essential thing about the Australian landscape is its untidiness. It's like a dog's hind leg, it doesn't conform to those kinds of ordered patterns, the kind of balance is not the same, it sprawls.

“I have no interest in paintings that have a foreground, middle distance and background... The feeling I like to get in my pictures is the unexpected, things that you encounter in life, that moment that will not be completed again. It is like what the philosopher Heraclitus said, ‘You can't put your foot in the same river twice,’” he said.

While it is not possible here to provide a detailed analysis of the evolution of Olsen's art, three significant and well-attended retrospective exhibitions were held in the last decades of his life and contain important examples of his best work.

The first of these was in 1991–92. The second retrospective, at the National Gallery of Victoria and the Art Gallery of NSW in 2016, had the quirky, celebratory title, “The You Beaut Country.” It featured 108 paintings—from 1955 to 2016—and lesser-known works, such as ceiling paintings, ceramics and tapestries and his sketchpads and journals.

Five years later at the National Art School in Sydney, Olsen staged his final retrospective—*John Olsen: Goya's Dog*—with 60 works. In contrast to the previous retrospective and his gregarious and generally optimistic persona, it revealed another side.

Although the exhibition included some of his buoyant earlier works, such as *Le Soleil* (1965) and *Bay and Tidal Pool* (1979), it also

contained darker, more introspective paintings, and indications of artistic doubt (see: “Exhibition Walkthrough”).

Olsen's 2021 show includes *Goya's Dog—Life escaping void* (1985), and *Donde Voy? Self-portraits in moments of doubt* (1989) and other *Reflections on Goya's Dog, I, II, III* (2021).

*Goya's Dog* refers to a painting by Goya, one of many images Olsen saw at the Museo del Prado in Madrid. The museum also contains Goya's *Disaster of Wars* and *Black Paintings*. Never intended for the public, the *Black Paintings* were painted directly onto the walls of Goya's home at a time when he was virtually deaf and living alone.

Goya's dog painting, sometimes known as the drowning dog, depicts a black dog looking upward with only its head showing. It is struggling, perhaps sinking, and anxiously appealing to the side for help in a sea of empty space. Regarded by many as one of Goya's many masterpieces, the image exudes loneliness, hopelessness and despair.

Reflecting on his *Goya's Dog* exhibition Olsen explained how he related to Spanish painting and its more introspective character.

“Rather than thinking outwards,” he said, Spanish art and its history “made you think inwards. Still in Australia today, they like the sunny side of the world, whereas the Spanish like the shadow side of the world. I found that very intriguing.”

Olsen, who received numerous government honours and art awards during his lifetime, leaves behind a rich artistic legacy.

In 2005, Olsen won the Archibald Prize for his *Self-portrait, Janus-Faced* (2004). Like Janus, the Roman god, the 77-year-old Olsen is symbolically looking backwards and forwards and fading into the stark Australian outback.

While often described as an abstract artist, Olsen rejected this label. “I have never painted an abstract painting in my life,” he said, describing his work as “an exploration of the totality of landscape.”

Paraphrasing T.S. Eliot, Olsen often remarked—“I am in the landscape and the landscape is in me.” It was a dictum that animated his lifetime of creative work.



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