



# OLSEN'S SHINING MOMENT

Art Works not seen in public for decades form part of a major new exhibition, writes Gabriella Coslovich.

It takes grit to document an artist's entire body of work, especially if the artist is boundlessly prolific. Pablo Picasso's catalogue raisonné (the official name given to the comprehensive list of an artist's work) is 33 volumes, contains 16,000 images, and took its author, Christian Zervos, four decades to finish. One has to wonder why anyone would embark on such a gargantuan and seemingly thankless task. But many do, settling for the reflected fame of their celebrated subjects.

Last year, Melbourne art historian Kathie Sutherland published her catalogue raisonné of the so-called rock star of Australian art, Brett Whiteley, in what was lauded as a feat of Australian publishing. The seven-volume catalogue featured more than 4600 artworks, cost \$1500 and weighed 25 kilograms, challenging the posties and couriers tasked with delivering it. But no sooner was Sutherland's catalogue raisonné printed than it was out of date. New information comes constantly to hand, and with it the need to revise.

None of this has put off Sydney designer, editor and researcher Kylie Norton, who is following in Sutherland's wake and compiling the catalogue raisonné of a man often tagged as "Australia's greatest living artist", 93-year-old John Olsen, famed for his radiant suns, trailing paellas, wetlands bursting with frogs, and joyously squiggly Australian landscapes and seascapes.

For three years, Norton has been scouring library and gallery archives, exhibition catalogues, previous texts on Olsen (Deborah Hart's 1991 biography, Virginia Spate's 1963 book), Olsen's own journals, and even the social pages of old newspapers to track down every work he created.

Although the closure of libraries and galleries amid a pandemic slowed Norton down, she has managed to record about 5000 of Olsen's works, among them paintings, watercolours, sculptures, ceramics, tapestries, prints, etchings and, of course, his ceiling paintings. Norton estimates the final figure will be well over 5000, especially as Olsen still draws and paints every day, and shows no sign of retiring.

"I did say to John, 'At least it's not Picasso'," Norton says with a laugh. "I've certainly beaten Kathie with Brett, but John does have the advantage, of course, of being 93, where we very sadly lost Brett at the time that we did," she says. Whiteley was 53 when he died in 1992.

Norton's most thrilling find to date is a ceiling painting that was last exhibited in Australia in 1965. She chanced upon a newspaper article with a photograph of a high-ranking Australian official, a flash of Olsen ceiling above him. Using ancestry.com, Norton tracked down the man's children



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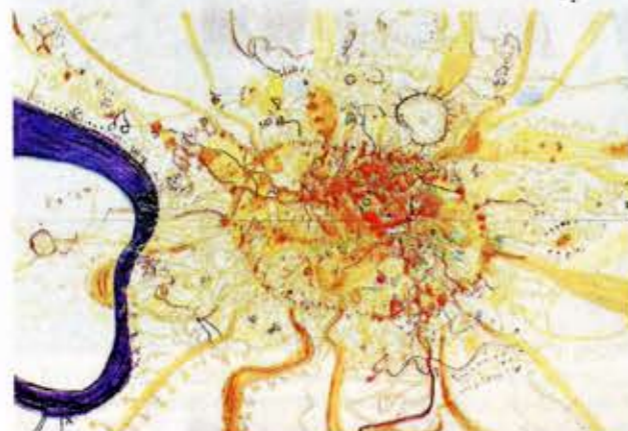
Kylie Norton, editor and researcher

and, through council records, managed to locate their house in Sydney.

The council records provided other clues: a letter from one of the man's children about a renovation next door, and a phone number. Norton texted the number, apologised for the intrusion, and asked whether the person at the other end might be the owner of the house with the Olsen ceiling and, if so, could she see it.

"I got a text back saying: 'Yes'. I rushed over to see it and walked in and was just blown away," Norton says. "It's absolutely stunning. It's by far my favourite Olsen."

Titled *Le Soleil*, the ceiling painting is a vast 233.7 centimetres by 307.3 centimetres, and was created when Olsen was still in his late 30s. It's a classic Olsen image of a golden sun blooming outwards from a central, mandala-like core of bubbling busyness. Writing in the *Herald-Sun* in 1965, fellow artist James Gleeson declared the painting Olsen's "finest work to date" and a sign that



Main: The team from the National Art School carefully removes *Le Soleil* from the ceiling of a private home in Sydney. Above: *The Bay and Tidal Pool*, 1979. Below left: *Le Soleil*, 1965. Below right: John Olsen, with son Tim. PHOTOS: PETER MORGAN, JAMES BRICKWOOD, COURTESY OF SOPHIE OLVER AND CHRISTINE JOHNSTON

the artist was "moving towards a new understanding of the nature and potentialities of his talent".

From Friday people will be able to judge for themselves when *Le Soleil* is shown in a major exhibition of Olsen's work at Sydney's National Art School, where Olsen was once a student. Late last month, *Le Soleil* was carefully removed and, on Tuesday last week, lifted by crane onto the second floor of the NAS Gallery.

"It's been in a room [with no] direct sunlight, there's no fireplace or anything else, so the colours are as vibrant as when it was painted," Norton says.

Before she traced the painting's whereabouts, she assumed the worst.

"I knew that the family had moved abroad for some time, that the house could have been sold, that somebody could have bought it and torn down the ceiling without realising its value; they are always on marine plywood, so they can be removed, and I had visions of them being thrown under a house or something like that. But



when you see this work in the flesh, no one could possibly disregard it – it's absolutely magnificent."

Another huge Olsen painting that has never been exhibited in Sydney, *The Bay and Tidal Pool*, 1979, which is more than 5 metres long, is also coming to the NAS, on loan from a private collection in Victoria.

The NAS exhibition, titled *John Olsen: Goya's Dog*, features 51 artworks, including paintings and drawings, and a multimedia display of Olsen's sketchbooks. Covering the 1950s to the present, the exhibition focuses on the influence of Spain on Olsen's sensibility and palette. With the support of his private benefactor, Sydney businessman Robert Shaw, Olsen travelled to Europe in 1956 and spent some formative years in Spain, embracing the country's culture, music, poetry, architecture, food and sensuality.

Spain's hold on the artist continues. Olsen has made five new paintings for the exhibition: three of them, *Reflections on Goya's Dog I, II and III*, are inspired by one of his favourite works, *The Drowning Dog*, a mysterious, minimal, heart-wrenching painting completed by the Spanish painter Francisco Goya (1746-1828) towards the end of his life during his "Black Paintings" phase. Originally a mural that Goya had painted at his farmhouse outside Madrid, the image was transferred to canvas after his death and now hangs in Madrid's Prado museum.

"It's always been one of his favourite pictures," says Olsen's son, gallerist Tim Olsen. "John has a tremendous knowledge, he's extremely well-read, but he hates art that over-intellectualises."

The idea of an artist as brilliant as Goya creating such a devastatingly simple image of a dog drowning in a mire of mud resonated deeply. The image is rich with metaphor.

Olsen's response to Goya's dog is a series of dark-toned self-portraits with his own furry best friend, a fat and elderly dachshund named Skipper. The shadowy self-portraits are meditations on mortality, the bond between human and animal, and the creative doubts that even a 93-year-old painter confronts.

"People normally see him as a bon vivant, raconteur, man for all seasons, the Mediterranean jolly Olsen, but there's another side to him which is very introspective which a lot of people don't get to see," Tim Olsen says. "Within these paintings there is the melancholy and the introspection of finding yourself in later life, still working your way through ideas and how to articulate them through art."

The psychological power of Olsen's darker paintings is noted in a 2009 letter to Olsen from his friend, the late William

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## John Olsen's shining moment

Wright, a fellow NAS student and teacher, who is listed as a posthumous curator of the exhibition. Wright laments that Olsen's *Dónde Voy? Self-portraits in Moments of Doubt* failed to win the 1989 Archibald Prize, and blames certain board members who "lacked the sensibility and the knowledge to notice the work's extraordinary quality". Wright is consoled that Olsen's "disturbing dark painting, *Self-portrait Janus-faced*, deservedly went on to win the 2005 Archibald Prize".

*Dónde Voy? Self-portraits in Moments of Doubt* will be shown in the NAS exhibition, on loan from a Sydney private collection. *Self-portrait Janus-faced*, however, has gone to the *Archie 100: A Century of the Archibald Prize* exhibition, which opened on Friday at the Art Gallery of NSW.

The two other new works in the exhibition – *Velázquez's Eggs and Semana Santa (Holy Week)* – are also homages to Spanish culture.

"It was in Spain that Olsen learnt the importance of not just painting what you see, but painting what you feel," exhibition curator Steven Alderton, who is also NAS director and chief executive, says.

In a quote reproduced in the exhibition catalogue, Olsen puts it like this: "My discoveries [in Europe] have remained in the most immediate way the guiding values of my life ... I came from a society that was far gone in its Anglo-Celtic depreciation of the senses, and I found a richness of life that had been accreting since classical times, laid open before me."

Labels such as "greatest living artist" and "national treasure" have the ring of cliché, but Olsen's centrality to the story of Australian art is beyond doubt.

"You can't tell the narrative [of Australian art history] without John Olsen, he is just a given," says associate professor David Hansen, from the Centre for Art History and Art Theory at the Australian National University. "Olsen is one of the great draughtsmen," Hansen says.

"People commonly talk about his younger contemporary, Brett Whiteley, as a great draughtsman, but Whiteley doesn't bend it like Beckham" in the way that Olsen does. Olsen really, to use Paul Klee's famous phrase, 'takes a line for a walk', and it's along the top of a cliff, balancing between earth, air and water, between abstraction and representation."

Like Whiteley, Olsen's fame and collectability makes him prey to forgers. Olsen's works regularly sell for six figures at auction, and in 2006, his 1969 painting, *Love in the Kitchen*, set the record at the time for the highest price paid at auction for a work by an Australian living artist, selling for \$1.07 million (including buyer's premium).

An artist's catalogue raisonné is also an arbiter of authenticity – and here, too, Norton has an advantage.

"The difference between Brett and John, of course, is that John's still here and he can look at a work immediately," Norton says. "His memory is astounding."

Unlike Sutherland's catalogue raisonné of Brett Whiteley, which doesn't include works of dubious authenticity, Norton will include a list of works that have been destroyed, lost, or have come up for auction as works by Olsen, but that Olsen has said are not his.

Norton hopes to have an online version of Olsen's catalogue raisonné completed by the end of this year or early next year.

"The challenge with John is that there are so many works that weren't recorded photographically and that's how it's been a very slow process, virtually of elimination as works come onto the secondary market, or I find works shown in the back of photographs in the social pages."

As for a printed version of the catalogue raisonné, Norton is in no hurry – not while Olsen continues to paint. She considers herself lucky to be documenting the work of an artist whose appetite for creativity knows no bounds. ☐

John Olsen: *Goya's Dog* is on at the National Art School, Forbes and Burton streets, Darlinghurst, Sydney from June 11-August 7.