John Olsen at his home in the Southern Highlands of NSW with son Tim and daughter Louise.

Australian artist John Olsen

A larrikin legend still breaking all the rules

Living the artistic life sounds romantic, but there have been some dark and difficult moments in the life of the irrepressible artist John Olsen and his family. **Susan Chenery** meets a living legend and his talented offspring.

PHOTOGRAPHY ● **SCOTT HAWKINS** STYLING ● **MATTIE CRONAN**

The narrow road winds through rolling green hills. Behind high conifer hedges, among carefully planted oak and cyprus trees, the impressive houses of the country estates of NSW's Southern Highlands can be glimpsed.

Down on a pastoral plain is the low, rambling, multi-winged abode of Australia's greatest living artist. We find him sitting jovially in an armchair in a corner of his studio, jaunty red socks, gracious, hands folded on his walking stick, feet tapping.

If an octogenarian can be described as twinkling, then John Olsen most definitely is. There is something almost childlike about John's delight in nature, his gusto.

On a day of sun and rain the light plays across the lake that laps outside the door. "We get swans, pelicans, herons, swamp hens. Lovely, lovely, lovely, it is a gift." Here, as he paints, he contemplates his long, complicated life. The memories rush in, fragments, unbidden. At 89, there is a big, full life, in those brush strokes.

"There's gap between what I see and what I put down. And the gap is very important."

Especially with four marriages and many affairs behind him, and a great appetite for what his daughter Louise calls "really kind of squeezing the juices out of life".

When asked about all the marriages, he smiles wryly, "I am an optimist." »

HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY ALLISON BOYLE. LOUISE WEARS BALENCIAGA SHIRT AT PARLOUR X AND DINOSAUR DESIGNS JEWELLERY.

The Weekly photographed John Olsen last month in his studio, where he still paints every day.

ABOVE: The mural *My Salute To Five Bells* is over 21 metres wide and three metres tall and, like the Opera House, was controversial.

ABOVE: John's second wife Valerie in the 1970s. RIGHT: Louise and Tim with John and friends singing; and playing with Dad in the 1960s.

John Olsen changed how Australia looks at itself, with his aerial views of the landscape, lyrical explorations into the centre, exuberant bursts of colour, his intensity in seeing the world differently. But, essentially a humble man, he is wary of being called great. "It is quite charming but I don't look at it that way. It is like what the poet Keats wrote. 'Genius does not know itself.' Once you get the idea that you are a genius you can forget yourself because you have got it all wrong."

Nevertheless, where there's fame there are nearly always casualties; a dark side. The Olsen children grew up knowing art came first. "Anything that interferes with it, he turns the page on it," says his biographer, Darleen Bungey.

John's children would learn as his reputation grew that fame can attract people with dubious motives. "He's always been prey for energy vampires," says son Tim, now 54, who is also his art dealer.

"Everyone is always trying to get at Dad, all these sycophants who want something," he says. "And because John's so generous I have constantly seen people take advantage of him."

Tim was a small boy when he found out how famous his father was. "I was watching television and there he was walking the Queen along his Opera House mural [*My Salute To Five Bells*] on the opening day. I thought 'gee, what is dad doing with the Queen?' I went to school the next week and suddenly my nickname was 'Prince Tim' because everyone saw my dad with the Queen."

John met Valerie, his second wife, in the early '60s, not long after he returned from three years in Spain, where colours and food made a deep impression. He sailed into Sydney Harbour and rediscovered his own country, beginning his best known series of works, *You Beaut Country*. There wasn't much money and for years John taught art. He was Valerie's teacher.

"They had this magnetism towards each other," says Tim. "They married two weeks before I was born."

The children grew up almost inside the monumental works being painted at their fisherman's cottage at Watson's Bay.

"I can still smell the gum turpentine, feel the spent tubes beneath my bare feet, see the scraped palettes, the oil-stained rags, the uncorked bottle," says Tim.

Entrance to the Seaport of Desire (pictured right, bottom), which hangs in the Art Gallery of New South Wales, still has little Tim's hand print on it, something which caused a roar from the studio when it happened.

> "There are lots of ways of saying a prayer."

The stables outside are empty now. His wife of 27 years, Katherine, a horsewoman, died of secondary melanoma last December. During her illness he found sanctuary in this studio with its pitched roof and beams, its paints and brushes laid out in rows, its waiting canvases. "We had palliative care in the house. But the thing that really kept me going was here. This space we are sitting in now was like a chapel. There are lots of ways of saying a prayer. When you paint you reinterpret your confidence in continuity, the cycle of life."

You can still feel Katherine's presence in these airy rooms with their solid furniture and windows onto the lake. "Memories of her are absolutely everywhere," he admits. "And I am not prepared to really let it go either. I don't want it to go. I don't want to recover. But I'm not morose about it, I'm just ignited with the memory."

Says daughter Louise, "During the most tragic times in his life he ends up doing the most incredible paintings. That's the strange thing about him. He's resilient."

These were the days John would take Tim for a swim every morning, to meet the fishing boats coming in to pick up a bream for dinner. "The silence between a parent and child, not so much the conversation," says Tim, "the intimacy." These were the days of wine and the poetry that frames John's life; the great pans of paella that are John's rustic, passionate cooking.

"Dad always was cooking in the house," recalls Tim. "To me that was quite normal. The way he drizzled olive oil and sprinkled turmeric, there was so much dexterity in how he cooked, it was as if he treated each meal like a painting. The colour and the texture of things, although one day he put the Scotch-Brite in the spinach lasagne because it was the same colour. That wasn't a great meal."

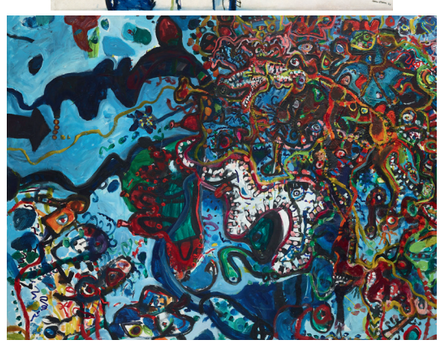
Life was all about the children listening to the soaring conversations of visiting friends, Russell Drysdale, Donald Friend, Barry Humphries, Sidney Nolan.

"Our aesthetics were honed," says Tim. "I don't remember the conversations but I just got a feeling for people with that kind of depth and what they felt like."

Agrees Louise, now 52, "Just driving with him he would say 'oh, kids, look at that'. He was such a natural teacher but he also had this incredible effervescence. He really installed in us that you are lucky to be alive and life is what you make it, just get into it."

Tim saw too the paralysing moments of self-doubt and silence. "There are two sides of Dad. A lot of people only see the dancing man with the beret. But there is an introspective side that at times I thought maybe even bordered on mild depression. I know how difficult it is to do what he does."

Family life, says Louise, was "just all consuming. We were totally absorbed. We would come home from school and they would have the music turned up and there is Mum and Dad dancing to Santana. When Mum had him he was wild. He has mellowed and settled in older age."



Today John's paintings are worth millions but back then he and Valerie started the Bakery Art School to put his children through private school. "Sometimes he didn't know how he was going to pay the school fees," says Louise. "But he would sell a painting just in the nick of time."

When they were small, they would sit in the classes he taught. "He would tell his students 'Whatever you do, get to the crux of it, get right into the juice of it. Get right underneath it. And really close your eyes, feel it then see it, smell it, the whole kind of sensuality.' That was a core lesson for Tim and I," says Louise.

Tim remembers his father being called a "poofter" when he arrived for a school rugby game.

"He would drive his bush four-wheel drive onto the field and jump out wearing jumbo cords, a red scarf and a big thick Spanish jacket and beret. But by the end of the game all the fathers were at one end of the field in their tweed jackets and Akubra hats and there was Dad with all the mothers eating out of his hand reciting poetry. He does love beauty in all forms, including women."

It all broke apart when John and Valerie decided to escape the politics of the art world and build a house in a remote valley in the Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park. The building took so long, John was forced to paint in the car. He was hemmed in. Says Tim, "I think Dad felt claustrophobic, it got too much. You can tell by his work he's a man of horizons, »

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JOHN OLSEN *FIVE BELLS* 1963 OIL ON HARDBOARD 264.5 X 274 CM BOARD. PURCHASED WITH FUNDS PROVIDED BY THE ART GALLERY SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES 1999. © JOHN OLSEN. JOHN OLSEN *ENTRANCE TO THE SEAPORT OF DESIRE* 1964. SYNTHETIC POLYMER PAINT ON CANVAS 167.6 X 213.4 CM STRETCHER: 171.7 X 219 X 5.5 CM FRAME. ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES. GIFT OF MRS M.A. MCGRATH 1968. © JOHN OLSEN.

not valleys. And I think the valley pushed him out in a way, as much as he loved his family."

They were heartbroken when he left for a doomed marriage to artist Noela Hjorth and Clarendon, South Australia. His family had adored him.

Tim was working in the city but Louise, then 16, and her distraught mother, "kind of soldiered on. We lived in a mud brick house in the bush with no electricity and had to chop wood for fires. He just disappeared on us. The phone stopped ringing. People we thought were great friends didn't want to know us anymore."

John, says Bungey, is the kind of man who gives himself completely to his woman, will do anything to keep her happy. "When he married Noela he tried desperately. He would do all the cooking, he would be on her side."

Louise says his shocked children were "banned from going to South Australia. We were banned from going in the gates. He allowed that to happen." There were tensions, too, with Katherine, who became John's gatekeeper.

John says both his children are good painters. "One thing he made very clear," says Tim, "was that you are either bloody good or forget it. And we were good but not bloody good. I had two sellout shows of my work but found painting too lonely. I just didn't have the temperament to be an artist."

Louse Olsen has found international acclaim with Dinosaur Designs, while Tim owns galleries in New York and Sydney.

Louise, who has inherited John's sunny optimism, would go on to found the internationally successful design company Dinosaur Designs with her partner, Stephen Ormandy.

"I didn't want to be dependent on my father whatsoever. I saw so many people hovering around him for what they could get from him and I didn't want to be one of those people. I had that burning in me."

Tim, a sensitive child, suffered in his father's giant shadow with his own dark days. But he came through it all to be a successful art dealer, an ocean swimmer who recently opened another gallery in Soho, New York. "Everyone has always thought that everything Louise and I have has been handed to us. They have very little idea of how hard we have had to work for what we have."

When he started out, his father refused to show with him until he had established a stable of artists John could fit into "without the whole thing looking nepotistic. He prevented me from behaving like an entitled person. I am glad that I had to jump through those hoops. But being his dealer also meant trying to keep anyone with cash getting hold of his work and cutting out the middle man. Dealing with family can be more emotional and it has been a big juggling act representing my father for 20 years. I have been able to hang in there mostly by knowing when to shut up."

At 89 John is pushing against time. "I still feel young," he says, evidently somewhat surprised that he isn't. "But I'm so happy just living with memory, reading, writing and painting. It's a complete world, I love it. I'm never bored. Never. It's just a wonderful life."

And he has his children. "We love him," says Louise simply. "Our time with him is precious. We feel lucky to have him at this point in his life."

Adds Tim: "It hasn't always been easy, but unconditional love is also another word for forgiveness."

As I'm leaving, I tell him I'm going to make Niçoise Salad from his cookbook *John Olsen, A Recipe for Art*. If possible he twinkles even more.

"Ah, the amalgamation of the anchovies and the tuna. It is just too sexy really, be very careful." **AWW**

John Olsen: The You Beaut Country is at the Art Gallery of NSW until June 12.

RACHEL KARA. FAIRFAX MEDIA.