

WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 26, 2020 | WENTWORTHCOURIER.COM.AU

news local

# Wentworth Courier

Get closer with your local

## Going solo

Dinosaur Designs' Louise Olsen on how her father inspired her to paint again

**TOP  
PENTHOUSE**  
CITY DREAM  
ADDRESS

**KIND  
COFFEE**  
NEW CAFE TREND  
SWEEPS THE EAST





# My first great love

Dinosaurs Designs' Louise Olsen first love was painting and she's preparing for her first solo show, writes Tess Durack

**L**ouise Olsen has collaborated, co-designed, co-joined forces and partnered with other designers for more than three decades. This month, she goes solo. "I feel like I'm opening my heart up in a way I never have," she confesses, a hint of vulnerability in her voice.

Her exhibition of paintings, two years in the making and inspired by "pollination and the growth and beauty of the natural world", will soon be on show at the Olsen Gallery in Woollahra, owned by her brother Tim.

Co-founder and director of the iconic Australian jewellery and homewares company, Dinosaur Designs, which was founded in 1988, Olsen is best known for her work in the brand's signature resin. Her wrists at the interview clatter with the bold organic bangles Dinosaur Designs has made famous and which emphasise her delicate features and sleek, black-jointed physique.

But painting was her first great love. Indeed, Olsen says Dinosaur Designs was started so she and her co-founders, partner Stephen Ormandy and Liann Roseler, the latter of whom has since moved on, could support themselves while pursuing their work as painters. "My education was in painting and drawing. I didn't do a design

course," Olsen explains. "But being an artist is about being an explorer. It isn't a one-dimensional thing, if you look at artists through history, like Giacometti and Picasso, they all made jewellery, ceramics, sculpture ... you explore different materials and each material has its own voice."

With this show, Louise Olsen finds her voice through painting in a way she hasn't had the opportunity to do for many years. Why now? "I have an incredible team at Dinosaur Designs," says Olsen. "And we've had a lot more education around running the business — it's grown so much, and I love it and it still keeps us on our toes [but] having that really wonderful team in place has freed me up."

And then there's her famous father, acclaimed and beloved artist, John Olsen. "He has been so encouraging," says Olsen. "I've been painting in a quiet way and sort of skirting around the edges for a while, but dad was just like 'Come on. Get into it. You've got this ability and talent. This side of you must come out.'"

And so, Olsen has spent part of every week for the last few years at her studio in her father's home at Bowral. They would hold monthly life drawing classes — "he's a natural, wonderful teacher", converse together about different materials



and techniques, and read poetry — Yeats and Keats are favourites — before retreating to their own studios. "We work very separately," Olsen says. "Coming from a family with such a strong tradition of painting, I felt it was very important I find my own voice."

For many families, the prospect of a child choosing the life of an artist would have parents wringing their hands with anxiety. But for Louise, whose late mother Valerie Olsen was also a painter, creativity has always been celebrated and honoured. "Being an artist in my family wasn't treated like 'Oh my god, what will become of her, she'll be starving forever!'" she laughs. "Both my parents were so encouraging our life was always surrounded by art."

“

I've been painting in a quiet way and sort of skirting around the edges for a while, but dad was just like 'Come on! Get into it!'

And when she says "surrounded", she really means it. Her childhood home, "a little weatherboard house on Cliff Street in Watsons Bay, when it was like a sleepy fishing village and dad would get fresh fish from Black Jack down at Camp Cove and cook it for breakfast", was filled with the smell of paints and turpentine and the wax on the old wooden floorboards. Louise and Tim shared a room and their mother's studio was in the front bedroom, their father's in the living room. "It was right there, you know," she recalls. "Right there. From the moment I was born, I was really in art school."

Her parents even ran an art school called the Bakery in Paddington in the 70s where a young Louise would attend classes.

Later, in Dural, she went to a Steiner school which further nourished her creative energies.



"Everything was about being resourceful, learning how to create things off your own bat — music, paper, books, food. I think that really helped me later on with Dinosaur Designs."

Olsen remembers a homelife filled with music and books and of bold and delicate arrangements of objects. "Mum had a beautiful eye and loved putting objects and different elements together."

It's a skill her daughter inherited. Saskia Havekes, founder of renowned florist Grandiflora and childhood friend, says Olsen always had a natural ability to arrange objects and forms. "Drawings, clothes, flowers, books, food, anything she touched — with Louise, every nuance is important."

Is Havekes surprised by her old friend seemingly going out on a limb with a solo painting exhibition? "Not really. It's a natural progression. She's come full circle — she started with painting and her big love for John has reignited that talent. The embers have always been there and now the match has been lit and she can give it her absolute all. It was inevitable. Undeniable and inevitable."

Her brother, Tim, was more surprised. "Never in a million years did I think she would pick up a brush to the extent that she has," he laughs. "But when dad was on

Left: Louise Olsen with her brother, Tim, at his gallery. Picture: John Appleford. Above: Louise with her mother Valerie and artist Clifton Pugh.

Turn to page 9





From page 7

his own and she could use the huge studio, she decided to just paint with no intention of ever thinking it would be exhibited. And I was overwhelmed by her work because it was selfless. She painted this show on the basis of loving painting. It really comes from her heart. This is the authentic Louise and I'm so proud of her."

But staging a solo exhibition does bring some confronting feelings. "I do feel more exposed than I ever have," says Olsen. "But, you know, you've got to have courage in life. And I think the beauty of

getting older is that you care less about what people think. People are going to love it and hate it. And you just have to wear that. I don't worry as much about that as I did when I was younger. You have to live your truth."

Are there drawbacks to being a member of a such high profile creative family? "I feel very positive about it," says Olsen. "I feel blessed and lucky to have been born into a family like this. It's been incredibly inspiring. And that's really what I take away with me."

"There's always going to be politics and accusations of nepotism," adds Tim, pragmatically. "But she

**The Olsen family in the studio: Stephen Ormandy, left, Camille Olsen-Ormandy, Louise Olsen and John Olsen. Picture: Nic Walker**

has her own language, her own vocabulary. She has this confidence in colour and the confidence of a draftsman. Louise can make those marks because she knows from her heart how to make them. And she cares about the legacy of growing up around painting."

Like much of her work for Dinosaur Designs, the collection is inspired by the natural world — "the way nature grows and the time it takes to evolve and the way bees pollinate and bring new life and spur on and fertilise and the whole process of it."

The works are a mix of oil and acrylic and Olsen details the chal-

lenging process of combining the two quite disparate types of paint and also the deep pleasure of working on Belgian linen.

"You get this beautiful gold translucency that sort of floats, the way pollen floats through the air with different shifts of colour and tone, a feeling of the paint pulsating on the canvas."

The works are remarkably timely given the destruction wreaked by the recent catastrophic bushfires. "There's so much resilience and hope in nature," Olsen says. "Already we're seeing green jump out of these burnt landscapes. I think nature has all the answers

Turn to page 11

Oliver Sofa & Johanna Chair by Kett



## Save on Kett Furniture Australian Excellence in Design

See in-store for details - Sale ends February 29th

Level 1, Suite 14  
69 O'Riordan Street  
Alexandria  
02 9317 3011

[www.coshliving.com.au](http://www.coshliving.com.au)

**coshliving**

Main picture: Louise Olsen at the Olsen Gallery where she will hold her first solo exhibition. Picture: John Applebyard. Right: Louise with her father, John Olsen, in South Africa in the 1980s. Picture: Jon Lewis



From page 9

really. We just need to tap in and listen to it, because that's the future."

Olsen's own future will see more travel — to Paris for an exhibition of partner Ormandy's work and also to their international stores — more Dinosaur Designs, more collaborations ("I can't say yet with whom, but it will be very interesting," reveals Louise) and yes, of course, more painting.

In the meantime, however, nature remains a constant source of comfort and creative energy for Olsen and she likes the idea that her paintings will help people connect with nature.

"My mum always said that paintings are like windows. I hope mine can be like that for people — windows to nature," she says.

Her home in Bronte, where she lives with Ormandy and daughter Camille, 21, is nestled into a native bush garden which she is thrilled to see "gleaming" from the recent rain. "And I love being by the sea. It brings me all those wonderful memories of Watson's Bay."

Like her childhood home, this

**“My Mum always said that paintings are like windows. I hope mine can be like that for people — windows to nature**

one, too, is full of books, music, art, food and artists. Ormandy is a painter and sculptor and Camille is a student at the National Art School and is carving out her own niche with portraiture. And you're not wringing your hands at her chosen path? The question causes Olsen to laugh. "No. I'm surprised in some ways. But then, it would have been even more surprising if she'd wanted to do anything else."

Pollination runs from March 4-28 at the OLSEN Gallery, Jersey Road, Woolahra



**Academic**  
QUALITY BUILT-IN WARDROBES  
SUCCESS THROUGH INNOVATION

- Hinged Or Sliding Doors
- Mirror, Timber, Painted Or Lacquer Finish
- Wide Range To Choose From
- Guaranteed Quality

**CALL NOW FOR A FREE QUOTE**

[www.academicwardrobes.com](http://www.academicwardrobes.com)

ACN 802 815 426 ABN 73 259 373 953 GOLD UIC NUMBER 89991

**Organised Interiors**

**Stylish Exteriors**

**LEICHHARDT SHOWROOM  
OPEN 7 DAYS**



**CHATSWOOD 9415 2133**  
Shop 171-73 Archer Street

**LEICHHARDT 9518 0180**  
479 Parramatta Road



**KINGS PARK 9622 9777**  
5 Turbo Road