

# Olsen finds new shapes in the vastness of the landscape



An artist's inspiration ... an aerial photograph of Lake Eyre.

## Louise Schwartzkoff

AT A table laden with paint-crusted crockery, John Olsen slides his brush into a dish of curdling watercolour. The paint is as thick and creamy as the salt deposits on the surface of Lake Eyre. It bleeds at the edges when Olsen strokes his brush across a freshly painted indigo background. "Look there," he says. "It's alive. And there's a sort of a running figure, you see? I'll just give it some arms."

This is how Olsen sees the Australian landscape. When he flew across Lake Eyre in May, the lake was filling with water from recent floods.

With two young artists, Guy Maestri and Luke Sciberras, he sang bushmen's songs and looked for shapes and stories in the landscape below. A squid made of vegetation, a fish of salt, a shadow shaped like a woman's leg.

Some of these images found their way into a series of paintings exhibited last week at the Hong Kong International Art Fair, the biggest art fair in Asia.

Five of Olsen's 10 paintings sold to Australian expatriates and Australian-educated Chinese collectors. The prices ranged between \$100,000 and \$110,000.

It was Olsen's first overseas exhibition in about 50 years, but the 83-year-old insists he has no real desire to expand his international profile. "I don't really concern myself with it," he says. "I would only say that I'd be very pleased, but it's definitely not the be-all. Sincerely, it isn't ... The Australian public's been very generous."

His son Tim takes a different view. He sells his father's work through his Woollahra gallery and says the invitation-only fair was a chance to attract a larger international audience.

"Why not?" he says. "It's never too late ... Most galleries don't go to the art fair to sell pictures. They go there to be seen. For John to be hung under the same roof as Picasso, de Kooning, Rauschenberg—some of the great modern masters of the past century."

The Hong Kong fair is riding on



John Olsen at home in his studio ... "That's the thing I've found about Australia – it's best viewed from the air." Photos: Brendan Esposito

the back of a booming Chinese market. Collectors in China, Malaysia and Indonesia have long been interested in Olsen's work. The paintings he sent to Hong Kong—watercolour, pastel and gouache on handmade paper—resemble oriental screens in shape and size.

Olsen believes his Australian landscapes may hold a special allure for audiences in Asia. "Because of the concentration of

the population in huge cities, somehow this open space, this kind of vastness might have an appeal," he says.

Since his first visit to Lake Eyre in the 1970s, he has been fascinated by its shifting colours and sheer size. One of his paintings shows crimson-tinted water flowing into blue, with Olsen's aircraft—on loan from a collector—a tiny speck in the upper right-hand corner. "Unless you fly over

it, you just don't get it," he says. "That's the thing I've found about Australia—it's best viewed from the air. That gives the proper scale to it."

Every time he visits, he notices something new. The lake fills, drawing fish, birds and animals, then seeps away to nothing. "There it is and there it isn't," he says. "It's a place of contradiction ... It's like witnessing a nervous system. It displaces itself. Because

there's a hill there, the water has to go around that way, and so on ... It's a magic thing, because you're looking at nature as a process. It's making itself. There is a life in the landscape."



**On the iPad**  
John Olsen's  
video journey  
over Lake Eyre.