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Portrait of the gallerist

Set above his Sydney gallery yet worlds away from a white cube, *Tim Olsen's private domain is an Aladdin's cave of art and objects that paints a revealing picture of his lifelong passions – much like his new memoir.*

Photography KRISTINA SOLJO



This page Tim Olsen stands beside a sculpture, *Muglair* by Mike Brown, in the space that adjoins his gallery in Woollahra. On the wall, from left *Bye, Bye Blackbird*, 2011 by David Band, *Rented Quarters*, 1990 by John Olsen and *I Will be your Mountain*, 2020 by Koren Black.



WHAT HAVE BEEN SOME OF YOUR ENDURING CREATIVE INFLUENCES? Growing up around some of the greatest artists in Australian history, and my education in painting and drawing. Writing a memoir was an unexpected talent and a creative outlet I didn't know was within me. I see now that running and curating a successful art gallery is a creative act in its own right.

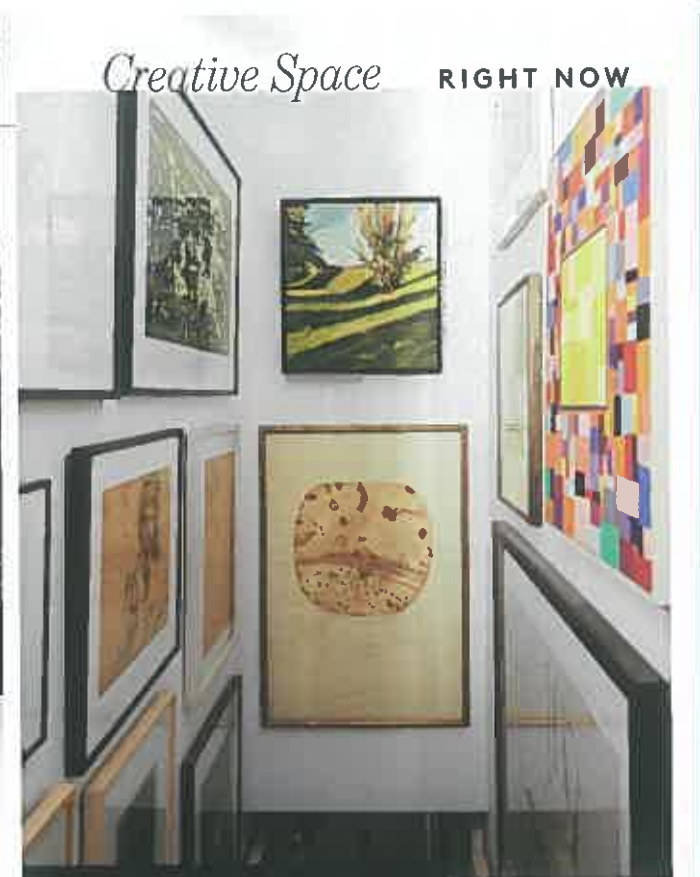
HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR ROLE AS THE DIRECTOR OF OLSEN GALLERY? My role as a gallerist is a constant gamble, not knowing how the public will respond to different artists. My relationship with my artists can look like a parent, a psychologist, a bank or a marriage. I also count some of these wonderful artists among my dear friends.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR OFFICE SPACE? I hope my office space reflects my eclectic and vast taste for things. My aesthetic is highly diverse, but it has a distinctive narrative that the discerning eye can recognise.

DID IT REQUIRE SIGNIFICANT ALTERATIONS? I basically bought it as a ramshackle warehouse, with many rooms and extremely run-down. By opening up the spaces, my objective was to keep the simplicity and to make the art sing. People love seeing the gallery in its simplicity and minimal aspects, then they see my office and what could be described as artistic squalor. To me it's perfection. I want everywhere to look like there is something interesting to see, in contrast to the sublime gallery space. I have plans to add a third floor with a harbour view to use as an entertaining space for artist lunches, a library and a viewing room for works to show private collectors.

HOW HAS THE GALLERY EVOLVED? Buying the house next door and extending the space across two properties has allowed more flexibility, adding installation art to exist within the space. I love to have exhibitions that complement and simultaneously contrast each other. I want it to be a maze of experiences. I like to mix mediums and genre, and put a great deal of imagination into achieving this variety.

WHAT ARE SOME OF YOUR FAVOURITE ART AND DESIGN OBJECTS IN THE SPACE? I love my Italian furniture, my floating bookcase and my foldable dining table that can be long or can turn into a square for different entertaining experiences. I love my sculptures by Mike Brown and Clement Meadmore, and my dark painting, *Bye, Bye Blackbird* by David Band, which I bought from his last exhibition before he died. There are far too many artworks to mention, and there are many that I could never part with, no matter what price people offer.



This page, clockwise from top left: On Tim's desk, *Remnant 7* by Luke Storrier, a plate by Carlos Barrios, Tim's memoir, *Son of the Brush*, and a kookaburra purchased at an antique shop. Artworks line the stairwell, including *Landscape with Tree* by Robert Malherbe (top) and *Echidna and Wildflowers* by John Olsen (centre). *Dappled Country at Dusk* and *Zen Flower Study* by John Olsen. A portrait of Donald Friend by John Olsen, two paintings of *Watsons Bay* by Valerie Strong and a portrait by an unknown artist purchased at Palmer Art Projects all hang above Mike Brown's sculpture, *Muglair*.



HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR APPROACH TO COLLECTING? I collect with my heart as much as my eyes. I look towards art that expresses that authentic moment when the artist is in the studio and they only think about the love of what they are doing. I can sense when an artist is working from the soul and not to the audience. COULD YOU DESCRIBE A TYPICAL WORKDAY? It starts with a walk around Centennial Park, or four laps of the sand at Bondi Beach, a swim and then time enjoying a coffee and a read. My day consists of many things, like visiting artist studios, visiting a client's house for art advice, lunch with someone interesting – or just being around the gallery, not knowing who will pop in. I love the spontaneity. IS THERE AN ARCHITECTURAL ERA OR STYLE THAT RESONATES WITH YOU? I love architects Frank Lloyd Wright, Glenn Murcutt and Alec Tzannes. I always dreamt of owning a Palladian villa in Italy and filling it with contemporary art. I have always liked the concept of great space and light that allows art to sing.

WHICH OTHER ARTISTS, DESIGNERS, MUSICIANS AND WRITERS DO YOU ADMIRE? I love the work of Ian Fairweather, Cy Twombly, Anselm Kiefer, Agnes Martin and Helen Frankenthaler. I like Sarah Blasko, Brahms, Philip Glass, flamenco guitar and deep house music. When it comes to designers, apart from my sister Louise Olsen, I like Charles and Ray Eames and Marc Newson. I also love the poetry of Philip Larkin and Charles Baudelaire, as well as the writing of Martin Amis, Milan Kundera and Susan Sontag.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE EXPERIENCE OF WRITING YOUR MEMOIR, *SON OF THE BRUSH*? Extremely cathartic. It was a process by which I was able to project my life in a way that I could see it all more clearly. It helped minimise things I worried too much about in the past and heightened things I should be more grateful for.

WHAT PROJECTS ARE YOU LOOKING FORWARD TO? I am writing a book on my late mother, Valerie Strong. She was a very talented artist who gave her life to my sister and I, and the environment for my father to be able to work at his painting. She was selfless and deserves the recognition as the artist she was all that time. I look forward to travelling, and to do more to enhance the reputation of young Australian artists. olsengallery.com

This page, from top The stockroom at Olsen Gallery, including *College (St Lucy)* by Peter Gardiner (centre). A portrait of Tim and son James Olsen by Yvonne East titled *Father and Son (After Janus)*. Tim stands beside his desk, which is surrounded by shelves teeming with art books. On the desk, *Remnant 7* by Luke Storrier, a plate by Carlos Barrios and copies of Tim's book, *Son of the Brush*. *Composition Palm Springs* by George Byrne.



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