

# SON OF THE BRUSH

John Olsen is one of Australia's greatest living artists. Here, his son, gallerist *Tim Olsen*, who helped curate a new retrospective, reflects on his bohemian childhood and gives a rare insight into his father's powerful ability and influence.

My earliest memories are of the studio in Sydney's Watsons Bay. It was here that I spent my first years, dwarfed by canvases that loomed like vast apostles, and 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, a smock hanging in the corner and the unfinished paintings leaning in on each other. Above the fireplace, a glass of red at half-mast, a salute to the night before. To anyone else it might have been clutter or a riotous mess. To me it was home, a place where things were made and invented in the raw rather than bought new. A kitchen where there was always a fish straight from the sea wrapped in newspaper. A dining table surrounded by loud, opinionated thinkers. Ideas uttered like prophecies, advice thrown around like sea salt, music, laughter and sometimes tears. And that's what it's like to be the child of an artist. No single day was ever the same. In my case two artists, *both* Mum and Dad. But my father was dominant like the sun, a heliocentric force, who always returned to the circle whether it was his famous paella pan surrounded by a swarm of drop-ins or the burning ball of cadmium yellow he so often placed in the belly of his paintings.

John Olsen. A throwaway line by many — that he is Australia's answer to Picasso or hailed sentimentally as a national living ▶

*Entrance to the Seaport of Desire (1964).*





IMAGES COURTESY  
OF JOHN OLSEN  
AND NGV

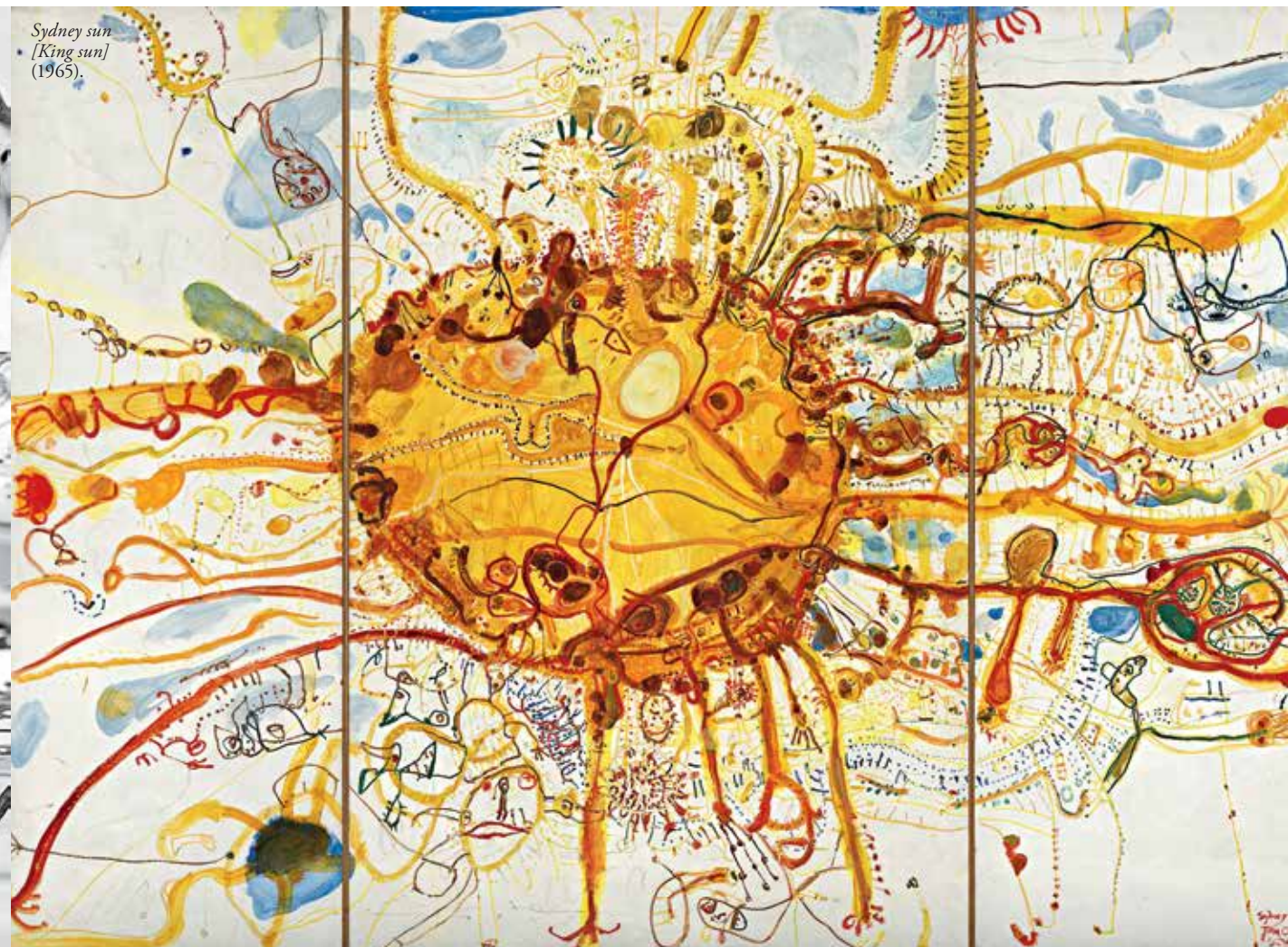
*Spanish Encounter* (1960).



Self portrait Janus Faced (2005).



John Olsen painting Summer in the You Beaut Country (1962).



Sydney sun [King sun] (1965).

treasure – to my sister Louise and I he was a teacher before we knew we were being taught anything. For John, the line between art and life was rarely broken. For my mother, Valerie, painting was a sacred sanctuary, a place to quietly return to the soul. It's funny to think of how our parents fretted about our futures. "What will become of them with such a bohemian upbringing?" was the familiar refrain. And perhaps we were eventually sent to private schools as a bit of last-minute insurance, a compensation for the years living as vagabonds, crisscrossing Spain, Portugal and France, or the odd moments sitting on the pub steps, either waiting for the fisherman to sell their morning haul or at closing time waiting for the party to end.

It was a childhood that mixed earthy pleasures with worldly company as it seemed that everyone who came to our kitchen table – Margaret Olley, Germaine Greer, Russell Drysdale, Donald Friend, Barry Humphries, Sidney Nolan – made my sister and I unknowing witnesses to a dynamic culture unfolding. The value of painting was a crucible undisputed in our house, making my childhood rich in two assets: art and memory. Money might be inherited but I think creativity is bred and with it comes an even greater sense of responsibility. Unknowingly, us kids got an unlikely work ethic from watching our parents sticking at the art through feast and famine and I think that contributed greatly to Louise's independence and success as a designer (for her company Dinosaur Designs) and my eventual tenacity as a dealer. The unspoken credo in our house was that anything was allowed except mediocrity. You can't throw in the brush!

According to my parents I was conceived at the National Art School in Darlinghurst in Sydney, and I showed a flair for

painting early. At the age of three, I crept into my father's studio unseen one morning and "contributed" to a large painting he was working on at the time. At breakfast there was an uproar: "He's bugged the painting!" John thundered to my mother. Then, later in the day at a pre-dusk moment he christened "chardonnay time", a second glass of wine was consumed. This time he called out: "The kid's a bloody genius!" The painting, *Entrance to the Seaport of Desire*, now hangs in the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and my hand is still in there somewhere. As a young man I had the temerity to study to be an artist and the wisdom to not become one. Seven years of art school taught me something, but watching Dad and living through every artwork on a highly personal level taught me more. Seeing *Spanish Encounter* hanging in a museum is like looking at an old photo album, but the memories are coded in paint.

It is a rare privilege to grow from infancy to maturity within a vast body of work. In many ways, John's paintings have the ability to distort and play with time. The joyful immediacy of his mark conceals the gravitas that forms the bedrock of six decades of painting. As his famously dark self-portrait, *Self portrait Janus Faced*, attests, my father has two very distinct personas. The first is the public identity: the gregarious host, the *bon vivant* flinging saffron, bon mots and rare pigment into the void, the Zen calligrapher inventing his own frenetic lexicon of line. Less known is the introvert. The man working in complete cloistered silence. Deep in doubt before an unfinished painting. Reflecting the day in his rambling art journal. Alone in the bush or a private thought. Sealed by a closed studio door. There is no doubt as to the hierarchy held by an obsessive and prolific painter. First came

art, then your woman and then your children. We were taught from an early age that it was the things that could not be seen that manifested most powerfully: "If you haven't got the feeling right," John admonished, "just forget it."

And it's probably that deceptively direct approach that has seen Dad simplified in some critical and art historic circles. His lineage as a painter shoots an arrow through half a century of Modernism, his compositional experimentation literally turned Australian landscape upside down and he mastered many mediums within a vast body of work: etching, ceramics, calligraphy (his own!), watercolour and oil. I like to think he challenged himself *despite* his success and not because of it. And that was another critical gift of living so closely within the orbit of an art star: good artists always leave room for doubt. The fallow moment. The dark night. "The billabong period" as he called it many times. God knows he has had his detractors; many times within my father's career his work passed in and out of fashion. With honour and acknowledgement came the changing and fickle tastes of new generations. I am baffled by the conceptual or "post-post modern" artists who are not generous to him. There is more raw experiment in his process than in entire museum wings and his work has a strong (if little known) performative streak. These are intensely physical paintings full of unmapped gestures and unplanned outbursts. Intensity is something he has sustained over time. Simply staying a painter in the stream of contemporary

whims and honing his language outside of trends, to my eye, is rare in itself. He carved the path but he also stayed the course.

This morning Dad sent me a photo. Beret on head, hand on brush, frenetic energised lines leaping onto the canvas. It was probably taken while the world was still sleeping, long before breakfast. They say Cézanne died painting but he probably didn't see it like that. He *lived* painting and the line between art and life wasn't drawn. The gifts an artist leaves his children are always measured in gold frames. I suppose people look at the heirs to Henri Matisse or Lucian Freud as living with priceless artefacts. As a gallerist I have the strange duality of knowing the market value of a work of art and the spiritual value of living with something rare and original. What I tell young collectors every day is to look at their motivation in investing in a work of art. It has to be emotional: art for me is not real estate. I walk past John's major work *Lake Hindmarsh* every day, breathing in the dormant majesty and emotional solemnity of this big moody brown canvas. I see its place in art

history as a major work, possibly a misunderstood work, but more strongly this painting glowers with memory. Just as some tribes live with ancestral talismans, I am surrounded by the power of family. John always said: "In life, there are lovers and there are others, and you know what you can do with the others!" Long live the lovers. ■ John Olsen: *The You Beaut Country opens September 16 at the National Gallery of Victoria before opening at the Art Gallery of New South Wales next March. Go to [www.ngv.vic.gov.au](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au).*

IN MANY  
WAYS,  
JOHN'S  
PAINTINGS  
HAVE THE  
ABILITY TO  
DISTORT  
AND PLAY  
WITH TIME

IMAGES COURTESY OF JOHN OLSEN AND NGV