

# Olsen sees the light shining from a dead heart

Wendy Frew

NOWHERE else in Australia conjures up the overwhelming sense of emptiness you feel when you stand on the edge of Lake Eyre, John Olsen says.

The painter and master water-colourist, now in his 80s, has visited the lake many times since his first trip in 1974, and the "feeling that you are standing on the edge of a void" has inspired many of his paintings.

Olsen talks about the great inland explorers – Sturt, Burke and Wills, Eyre himself – and the national sense of disappointment that followed when no inland sea or great pasture lands were found. Australians have never quite shaken the idea that the essence of our landscape is a dead heart.

But in Olsen's latest series of paintings, *Lake Eyre: The Desert Sea*, there is a sense not of emptiness and desolation but of space



Lively ... John Olsen with his Lake Eyre series. Photo: Brendan Esposito

and light and movement, as the water from recent floods seeps into the parched land, staining it, changing its shape and bringing life to the salt bowl.

Olsen hopes to have 10 of the one-metre high paintings ready

next month for Art HK, the biggest art fair in Asia and the fourth biggest art fair in the world. It will be the first time Olsen has exhibited outside in any major way since his work was shown at Galerie Lambert in Paris in 1960.

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booming  
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The Hong Kong fair is riding on the back of a booming contemporary Chinese market, and offers artists and galleries a chance to show their work to wealthy Chinese who are spending millions on Western and Chinese contemporary art.

Olsen last visited Lake Eyre in September to find the rains had transformed it from silvery salt dust to a giant green and blue pool. He plans to fly over the lake again this week to take more photos and drawings for the series.

The paintings, a mixture of watercolour, pastel and gouache, on hand-made Japanese torinoko paper, will cost between \$110,000 and \$120,000.