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Picture perfect

Given his line of work and his lineage, it's not surprising that the walls of Tim Olsen's family home are lined with an enviable collection of modern art

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Here is a fine instance of memories being made of art, and art of memories. Tim Olsen, contemporary art dealer, with his galleries not far from home in Sydney's Woollahra, has a personal collection that mixes the work of his stable, friends and contemporaries such as colourist Charlie Sheard and abstract painter Matthew Johnson, with that of his father, John Olsen. The iconic old man of Australian art, now perched, as it were, on top of the local celebrity heap, also

Tim Olsen and his wife, Dominique Ogilvy, at home, with Philip Hunter's *Grass Lake - Wind Squall*, 2004. Bangles by Dinosaur Designs.

shows in his son's gallery. Certain pieces in the collection will probably never change – although they do move about from one room, one wall to another – but are unlikely to slip out the door and over to a client's place.

"You walk into the house and it's always changing," says the interior designer Michael Love, whose partner, Mario Meneguzzi, helped decorate the house. "I love his eye. Tim puts the strident with the elegant, paintings with drawings, and I think there's magic in the hanging. You need to vary the rhythm, and he does."

Of course we all know that the dealer collects and the collector deals, it's the nature of the business. But if you are the son of an artist whose earlier work is part and parcel of your own history, you ▶



The courtyard with a Matthew Johnson abstract, realised in glass mosaics by Bisazza, above a pool designed by Tim Olsen. **Left:** a set of sketches John Olsen made of the young Olsen hangs above an occasional table.



Charlie Sheard's *Mountain Light* hangs next to a John Olsen watercolour of a frog, a gift to Ogilvy.

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In the comfortable living room three John Olsens hang above a Maxalto sofa.



A corner of the sitting room, with family photographs and drawings, a John Olsen and a charcoal sketch by old family friend Russell Drysdale.

might enjoy the connection. There are, for instance, sketches of a very young Olsen in learning mode, annotated by his father: "He will drink his milk, he will brush his teeth, he will play the piano ..." Not everything went according to instruction and Olsen remembers marching up and down the piano keys. And why not?

He lives with his wife, Dominique Ogilvy, an entrepreneurial fashion agent, and their almost-two-year-old son, James, in this newly and airily expanded terrace. Ogilvy says she loves everything in the house, "particularly anything by the Olsen boys".

Olsen started out to become a painter, certainly an artist of some kind, and spent five years at Sydney's National Art School, and had two sell-out shows in his 20s. Son of the brush though he is, by the time he realised this wasn't to be he had already spent years in and out of galleries, in and out of the art world here and in Europe.

Early on he had observed Rudy Komon, wily old Hungarian bird and his father's dealer, give lessons in client control. He worked in galleries, too, for Rex Irwin, for the doughty Anne Purves of Australian Galleries who, he says, "taught me most of the protocol of running a serious gallery". And so it was natural to go where his skills and experience lay, and his delight.

As a young boy he travelled with his father and mother, artist Valerie Strong, and sister, Louise, of Dinosaur Designs, living in London, Paris and a caravan in Spain, a lovely Bohemian existence. Back in Sydney they stayed for a while in Watson's Bay, which Olsen remembers as a Dylan Thomas moment, up early to catch the

"Tim puts the strident with the elegant, the paintings with the drawings, and I think there's magic in the hanging"

fishermen returning. The potency of the table has always been a lively element in Olsenland. And there is also Olsenspeak. Phrases such as "he really knows how to take a brush for a walk" can be heard as he talks of how landscape painter Philip Hunter, who grew up in Victoria's Wimmera district, studies the land intently and paints both day- and nightscapes. His painting here is woven with the light patterns tractors make during night farming. Sheard's *Mountain Light* is a transcendental blue canvas that can turn to green, a little granular at the edges and a beautiful instance of Sheard's grounded belief in the techniques of the Italian old masters. There is a

The Olsen family in front of the Charlie Sheard.





James Olsen in the kitchen with David Larwill's wildly impulsive self-portrait *In the Bag*, 1980.

Frank Auerbach lithograph (Olsen would love a deeply, thickly impasto painting by Auerbach but this is what he could afford).

The David Larwill is one of his more impulsive works, *In the Bag*, a 1980 self-portrait of how he felt (not good) about a possessive girlfriend. The mosaic behind the pool is a rather wonderful idea: a painting by Johnson – that other son of the brush with whom Olsen grew up – that has been translated into glass mosaic tiles of the buzziest blue. There are the John Olsen watercolours, a fluid frog, two giraffes, given to his daughter-in-law, Dominique, hanging over the deep, long beige L of a sofa which exemplifies the neutral simplicity of their modern furnishings chosen to be fairly childproof and to allow the art and the people to breathe and shine. The extra-long ottoman section is for father-and-son bonding, when the Olsen boys watch the footie and the cricket together.

The house begins and ends with art. If you start at the front door, your eye will slide along close to a big, 1984 John Olsen painting

hanging in the narrowish passage. Called *Broken Egg in Summer Landscape*, a watercolour, it is, says Olsen, what happens when the artist sees the sun spilling its yolk on the dry landscape. You could then segue into two smallish rooms – an office and sitting room – on the right where more art, John Olsens and a Russell Drysdale drawing, rests, and then move into the much larger space of the living area with kitchen to one side, and carry on into the courtyard, designed by Olsen with three surfaces: sandstone, timber and water – and the glass mosaic. This is the last piece of art, the Johnson interpretation on the back wall, a blistering blast and echo of blue. And that's the Olsen private gallery, most of it, start to finish. There are now three in the public eye. His original and central Paddington Street corner gallery, just a hop from the small annexe where works on paper might show, and another hop or so from Queen Street where, on the first floor at number 80, he has opened a new space to deal with the secondary market. Is Tim Olsen quietly taking over Woollahra? ■