

A tale of Five Bells: Olsen's seminal harbour scene comes into view



Harbour mythology: Clark with Olsen's painting Five Bells, inspired by Kenneth Slessor's poem of the same title

Picture: BRETT FAULKNER

BEN HOLGATE

IN 1963, George Clarke paid a matter of guineas for a John Olsen painting of Sydney Harbour that the artist's son Tim says is as important to the artist as Guernica was to Picasso.

Next month the work is expected to fetch a record price for an Olsen when it is presented to the public for the first time.

Five Bells, an oils on board inspired by Kenneth Slessor's great Australian poem of the same title, has been hanging at Mr Clarke's former home in Vaucluse since it was painted 36 years ago.

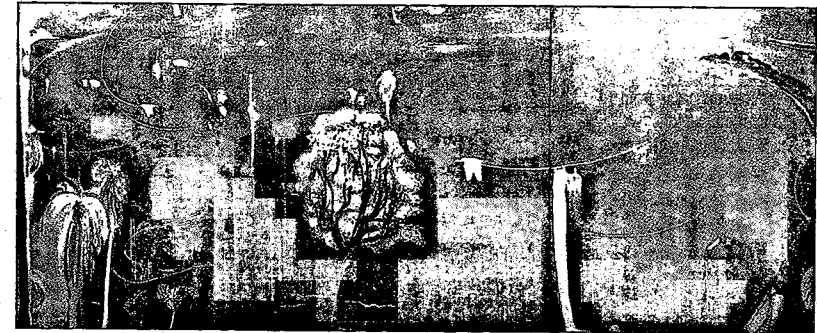
His ex-wife, Eva Clarke, still lives there, and they have decided to sell the painting because "we're all getting old", says Mr Clarke, 67.

The 2.7sq m work could better the record price for an Olsen, believed to be \$150,000 for the landscape Road to Clarendon (1983), which Tim Olsen, a dealer and gallery owner, sold three years ago.

"We've got no idea what it's going to bring," said auctioneer Tim Goodman, who will put Five Bells under the hammer on August 3 at the Australian Jockey Club in Sydney.

"Two or three hundred thousand dollars, possibly more."

Exactly two weeks later Christie's will auction a Brett



Also for sale: Brett Whiteley's The Jacaranda Tree (on Sydney Harbour)

Picture: GRAHAM CROUCH



Whiteley harbour painting, The Jacaranda Tree (on Sydney Harbour) (1977), that is hoped will attract \$1 million, a record for an Australian 20th-century artwork.

Mr Clarke, a former town planner, was already friends with Mr Olsen, who lived in neighbouring Watsons Bay, when he commissioned the painter for a work to match his harbour view at his then newly renovated home.

Mr Clarke wanted a mural, but the artist chose two boards in case he moved house.

Tim Olsen, who was a year old when it was created, said

Five Bells was one of his father's "most important works because it was the genesis of many other works", in particular, Tribute To Five Bells, which was completed nine years later and which hangs in the Sydney Opera House.

John Olsen, said his son, was looking for a mythology of the harbour, which Slessor's 1939 poem about his drowned friend Joe Lynch provided.

Another Olsen, The Spanish Kitchen, will also be up for sale at the auction, which will be conducted live on the Internet.

John Olsen was unavailable for comment yesterday.