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## Olsen felt 'rush of blood'

Not even an oil slick on his beloved harbour could dampen John Olsen's delight over the record auction price paid for *Five Bells*.

The Art Gallery Society bid \$255,000 for the 2.7 square metre view of Sydney Harbour — which Art Gallery director Edmund Capon hailed as "one of Olsen's genuinely exciting paintings" — at a Goodmans auction on Tuesday night.

Painted in 1963 as a private commission, for the Vacluse residence of George and Eva Clarke, *Five Bells* will shortly go on display at the Art Gallery.

Olsen, contacted in Broome yesterday, admitted to "a rush of blood to the head" when he heard the result. "Suppose you were a horse and you've just won the Melbourne Cup. It really is the same bag of oats."

Thirty-six years separated Olsen's viewings of the work. "I hadn't seen *Five Bells* since the day I finished it... then recently I was invited back to Vacluse for a TV interview. The thing that really surprised and delighted me was that it had maintained the kind of freshness



Delighted at price ... John Olsen in his Broome studio.

it had on the very first day."

What weren't there on day one are the "very endearing" tiny fingerprints of the Clarkes' children on the right-hand bottom corner of the picture. "I said to Eva Clarke, 'you must never clean those off.'"

*Five Bells* has weathered far better than *A Salute to Five Bells*, the huge mural painted 10 years later, which adorns the northern foyer of the Opera House.

Alas, Olsen is now physically unable to realise his plan of replacing that sun-bleached

work with a ceramic version.

As he puts it, continuing the horse racing analogy, "the horse has gone in the fetlocks".

"While I am in a good state of general health I am now forced to walk with the aid of a stick." The pain can be "shocking".

Olsen continues to paint, but must take regular breaks in the studio. "I am not having the total knee replacement yet — it's so major that it would wipe me out for nearly two years... But, look, it'll be all right..."

Peter Cochrane