

When I was about twelve John was going on nineteen and he well and truly had the artistic flair ... he got into a really artistic group. In those days they were considered more bohemian and I was brought up in a protected environment, so I wasn't allowed to be exposed to any of that. So then John virtually did his own thing ... Every now and again, I think for monetary reasons, he would come back home. He would continually fill sketchbooks with drawings of whoever was around ... He used to always sketch ... I'd sit there very patiently and he'd be sizing me up and I'd think 'this is going to be fantastic'. Then, after all that time sitting there, I'd see it and we'd have a ding-dong fight because I'd say, 'I don't look like that'. Mum would have to be the mediator. [She] was always rousing because his room was always such a mess, lots and lots of paper. He used to like particular corduroy trousers which he would wear constantly and if mum would wash them, he'd feel the character had gone out of them.

Between February and May 1946 Olsen occasionally attended night classes at Julian Ashton Art School, primarily to improve his cartooning skills. By the following year he decided that he wanted 'to learn to draw properly', and a friend told him that he could attend life drawing classes at Darillo Rubbo Art School in the evenings. This he did three times a week and on Saturday afternoons. During the day he continued to work as a cartoonist, doing other 'odd jobs at odd times'. For Olsen this was a liberation from the mundane expectations of 'normal life' – he felt as though he had suddenly discovered the people and experiences he had been waiting for all his life. 'Suddenly I was free and flying like a bird.'<sup>8</sup>

The Italian-born Darillo Rubbo had founded his art school a year after his arrival in Sydney in 1898. By the time of Olsen's attendance there Rubbo was in his late seventies and paid only occasional visits to the school on Saturday afternoons. His teaching legacy was continued in the 1940s by Frances Ellis and Vincent Maestri. Olsen remembers Rubbo 'as quite old and very frail' and that there was a sensuality in his approach to Impressionism in the classes, with the major emphasis being on an Italian approach to figure painting.

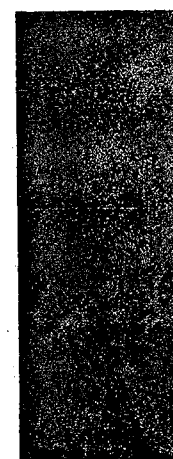
The artist Earle Backen, who was a student at Rubbo's at the same time as Olsen, recalls the balance between an academic approach and the allowing of a certain freedom: a tonal approach to the use of colour in a traditional manner, and the sense that one had to be direct in painting and express feeling. He describes Ellis as 'very strong and a good painter ... I notice that there have been several exhibitions of Australian women artists but her work is never represented. She thought a lot of John's drawings in the 1940s'.<sup>9</sup> Very few of Olsen's works from this period have survived. The drawings he did of Earle Backen at the time reveal, on the one hand, his precision as a cartoonist, and on the other, a softer, more flexible approach to the figure. He seldom drew with pencil in later years, preferring the fluidity of paint or ink and the malleability of wax crayons and pastels.

A small, accomplished student work, *Head of an Old Man* (plate 2), is a fine example of the tonal approach to the figure taught at Rubbo's, encompassing a surety with paint and a physical and psychological presence. Another former student, Fred Egan, who also attended the evening classes, recalls: 'We used to have models – Frank White, a big chesty bloke, and Pearly. Rubbo's was very academic. The building was important – there was a northern light in the roof and it really delineated heads beautifully. Rubbo's was known for the cadmium yellows in the paintings of the figure; whereas Ashton's was monochromes and light red. There were no shadows at Ashton's. The portraits at Rubbo's were more Rembrandtesque'.<sup>10</sup>

There were a number of cafes, clubs and coffee shops in the 1940s where artists and writers used to congregate. One of the favourites Olsen went to was the Lincoln, a rather dingy coffee shop brought to prominence by the people who frequented it. The shrewd managers of the place employed art and university students as waitresses, who in turn brought their friends. Egan recalls: 'There were people from Ashton's there ... a lot from Uni and about four from Rubbo's. Clem Millward went there, as did Reg Sher, Dick Appleton, Maurie Sales. There were articles about the place in the press headed "Bohemia in Rowe Street". Barry Kennedy was there. It was a crazy place, a bit unsettling'. An unattributed cover article on John Olsen in *Nation*, July 1963, takes this further:



Fig. 2 Earle Backen and wash, pencil collection



2 *Head of an Old Man* oil on board, 42 x 37 cm artist

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If you cared to listen you could get a free lecture on poetry from Lex Banning and on anarchism from Harry Hooton. One of the younger research scholars of the Lincoln academy was the philosopher David Armstrong ... [who] would inadvertently knock over a coffee cup while telling you that the table you sat at was perfectly real ...

On the Lincoln walls Olsen first showed his work – cartoons he had been drawing. He was even then the least diffident and most sociable of persons. With the budding poet Richard Appleton, he collected a set of his own around him. Appleton and he, it seems, were the authors of the Lincoln anthem:

*When I was young, I used to go drinking;  
'Twas first to the Long Bar and then to the Lincoln.  
I gave a big party for folks who were arty.  
At five in the morning it was going right strong.  
The very next day I got dispossessed ...*

For Olsen, cartooning was initially a way of earning a living and a practical way to continue his interest in drawing. Like other of his contemporaries, his upbringing had not exposed him to art exhibitions, and when he started at Rubbo's he had seen very few art works, even in reproduction. In the late 1940s he first saw prints by Van Gogh and Cézanne, clearly no substitute for the originals, but a start at least. These could be found at Carl Plate's Notanda bookshop in Rowe Street, and it was here that many young Sydney artists gained some access to international contemporary art through reproductions, magazines and books. At a time when there was antagonism towards contemporary art by a large proportion of the general public, not to mention the rear-guard action of the trustees of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Plate's initiatives played a valuable role.

It was at Plate's that Olsen confirmed his passion for literature. 'I went to Carl Plate's bookshop when I was sixteen. He had a very good selection and to begin with I bought summaries and Plato's *Republic*. It was just an impulse and I found that I could read it and enjoy it. I mean if I could understand Plato's *Republic* I had the potential to develop, and I did. After that it was an avalanche of things. I felt that I had arrived at the fountain.' Olsen's deep attachment during the years that followed to a wide range of poetry, prose and philosophy was based on a genuine enjoyment and intellectual curiosity. It provided him with a rich ballast of ideas and emotional connections which he often drew upon in his art, his writing and his way of life.

By the end of the decade John Olsen knew that above all else he wanted to become a serious artist. The classes at Rubbo's were discontinued and he decided to enrol at the Julian Ashton Art School. His sister Pamela recalls that he received no support from his family. 'He never had any encouragement at all and I think it was considered a very useless career to follow. His father in particular was disappointed in him. It was just sheer determination and tenacity regardless of what anyone else thought. He believed in himself where many didn't – it is not an easy thing to do.'

# IMAGES OF JOHN OLSEN

## *The painter in a free decade*

JOHN Olsen's painting history coincides neatly with a period of freedom unprecedented in Australian art. On every previous occasion when a local painter began to use his brush and knife in a manner still unknown to gallery directors and private patrons, he was crushed, exiled or induced to accommodate himself to their preconceptions. Tom Roberts retreated. Roy de Maistre cleared out after a virulent campaign led by Julian Ashton and his son, Howard. Dobell spent some of his best years doing commissioned portraits of V.I.P.s, and even now his New Guinea landscapes remain virtually unknown. But over the ten or eleven years just past, patrons and dealers began to follow artists rather than to lead them. With one swoop, they lifted the lid off the seething art kettle, and hot air and strange fragrances are still coming out of it.

The painter and would-be painter of this time has an almost limitless choice of style, subject and philosophy. His sole guides in art have been the several thousand years of precedents in the museums of the world. For some men and women whose work came to fruition recently, this freedom has been too much. They developed one or two gimmicks, or cottoned on to the manner of a Parisian still unseen and repeated themselves until they saturated the market. To-day they are sad and not yet middle-aged. Olsen, however, has shown an unrivalled resilience. Since his return to Sydney three years ago he has staked out a claim to being the boldest and most self-assured of his generation. The young look to him more than to anyone for a lead and for a share of his assurance. When they ask him how one becomes a painter, he merely tells them to keep going on and on.

AT sixteen, John Olsen had never been to an art gallery. At thirty-five, the country's public patrons have bought ten of his works. Like some of the generation before him, Olsen was something of a slow and delayed starter. "Art was something up there in the temple," he recalls. He had no encouragement from home. His father, who worked for Coeee Clothing, had come from Newcastle to Sydney on behalf of the company when John was seven. The son went first to Paddington Junior Technical, and then to St Joseph's College, which Father picked out as the best football school in the State. At school, John was the best draftsman in the year, but this didn't lead to art by any known route. After his Leaving Certificate, he worked for a short time as a clerk, and then discovering he could sell cartoons, he started out as a freelancer before he was twenty, keeping himself with odd jobs at odd times. His buyers were "Man" magazine, and "Fashion Digest," an independ-

ent venture which kept going for about a year.

In the late forties, the meeting-place of the young was the Lincoln café, which two shrewd young businessmen had started in a basement in Rowe Street. They employed art and university students as waitresses, and as these brought their friends, the basement turned into a small goldmine. The pubs then used to close at six, but the Lincoln was open till twelve. If you cared to listen, you could get a free lecture on poetry from Lex Banning and on anarchism from Harry Hooton. One of the younger research scholars of the Lincoln academy was the philosopher David Armstrong, who even then would inadvertently knock over a coffee cup while telling you that the table you sat at was perfectly real: he has since written four books to prove his point. Another scholar, Michael Baume, now Melbourne representative of the "Australian Financial Review," did not yet dispense investment comment, but he was already ghosting commentaries on current affairs for Uncle Eric. On the Lincoln's walls Olsen first showed his work — cartoons he had been drawing. He was even then the least diffident and most sociable of persons. With the budding poet Richard Appleton, he collected a set of his own around him. Appleton and he, it seems, were the authors of the Lincoln anthem:

When I was young, I used to go drinking;

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It was Olsen solo who wrote a song about Vincent van Gogh, which has since passed into folklore, beginning, "Down in Arles, Vincent and I. Heads pointed up towards the sky . . ." and proceeding to recount Vincent's visit to the brothel and his cutting off one of his ears.

Swimming like a fish among "the folks who were arty," Olsen decided to go to art school in spite of some apprehensiveness on the part of his family. There were then two practical alternatives, East Sydney Tech. and Julian Ashton's. Olsen chose Ashton's, the less populous establishment at George Street North, where Henry Gibbons was principal and took life classes and Jean Appleton taught design and composition. When Olsen of an evening took his way through this part of old Sydney, it was by no means to absorb the contemporary spirit. At Ashton's, you learnt traditional painting.

In 1952, John Passmore showed up from England and joined the school where he had been a pupil twenty years

before. Passmore had kept himself for part of his long exile overseas as a commercial artist for Lintas, the advertising agency. If anything, this contact with the commercial work had deepened his dedication to serious painting. Passmore began to conjure up an atmosphere in which art assumed importance in its own right. The artist had to dedicate himself to something bigger than himself. He had an ethical obligation to its standards, Passmore would emphasise, telling his students how he had watched Picasso squeezing the white out of a tube, on the verge of the creative act. "There is something more," Passmore would say again and again. Above all, he would not show any of his own paintings, to avoid influencing his pupils' styles.

At Julian Ashton's, Passmore had a studio of his own, locked up and separated off from the students' classrooms by a high, wooden partition. Week by week, the pupils at the school, convinced that they were in touch with one of the mysteries of artistic creation, became more intrigued with Passmore's own style, then still unshown in Sydney. One day, a bunch of them gathered around the wooden partition and began to lift young Olsen up and up till he could look into the modernist master's studio. "What's it like? What can you see?" the voices came from below. Olsen peered about. "It's just a boat," he communicated downward. "What sort of a boat? What's it like?" "Just a ferry on the harbour," came the advice from on top. Olsen tells this story without a comment.

FROM John Passmore Olsen first heard the expression "spatial relationships." Olsen says that it was symptomatic of the backwardness of Sydney teaching at that time that no teacher had used the term before Passmore. But the early Olsens that have been preserved quite clearly show that the concern that Cézanne bequeathed to the last sixty years and to Passmore was very much with Olsen then. Painting a view from Victoria Street, Sydney, he saw the problems very much as Cézanne and his followers would have done. He caught his first whiff of a different set of preoccupations when Robert Klippel came back from overseas. Together with Bill Rose, the other well-known Sydney painter to have emerged from Ashton's during those years, he began to listen to Klippel and to study some of Klippel's newer fancies. Klippel thought highest of Riopelle among the modern French. Olsen found himself struck by reproductions of the work of Pierre Soulages. Soulages is a pure abstract painter who uses thick lines and surfaces to set up a picture. In a very broad sense, his work continues Mondriaan's attempts at painting unsupported by any outside reference. But where Mondriaan had aimed at still-

ness and devised new symmetries, Soulages and some of his fellow-Parisians set up emotional tensions and disturbances on the canvases. In this sense, they are "abstract expressionist." Some of Olsen's pictures painted seven or eight years ago aim at the same target.

Even in the mid-fifties it was not easy for a young painter to start showing in the private galleries. At that stage, there was virtually only one outlet, Lucy Swanton's Macquarie Galleries. Olsen had gone to see Miss Swanton about a show he and his friends wanted to put on, but rather cautiously, she advised him first to exhibit a few pictures at the Contemporary Art Society and elsewhere. This he did, and Miss Swanton gave him a show in February, 1955, shared with Eugene Baranyi. After a stay in Melbourne during that year and the following, Olsen came back to Sydney with new vigour to plan the "Direction I" show, perhaps the first to be totally "abstract expressionist."

OLSEN'S talent was spotted by Robert Shaw, a Sydney hotel owner and art patron. With a daring still to be emulated by others, Shaw offered to pay for Olsen's overseas trip and to give him a living allowance for some years to come, in return for some of Olsen's paintings. Though this is a scheme commonly offered to young painters by galleries in Britain and France, Shaw was the first to make such an offer in Australia. After some thought, Olsen, who wanted to go abroad, accepted. He spent a few weeks in London, which he didn't like, and set off for Paris, to see the paintings he and Klippel had been talking about. The charm of Soulages did not outlast a close view. In the original, Soulages' use of colours and surfaces looked crude. Though Soulages had liberated Olsen from the strict representational duties of the post-impressionists, he had little more to offer. As he walked around the streets of Paris, Olsen found that there was no road back to representationalism — in Paris less so than elsewhere. He saw an corner that reminded him of Utrecht, an illuminated boulevard at night that Pissarro might have done. Yes, but they had done them: Paris had been painted out . . .

The first studio space Olsen found was on top of the American Club, where Americans of the "action" school of painting had set up. Olsen still liked to paint on an easel or at least on an upright plane. The Americans laid themselves out on the floor. This difference of approach did not disturb him in itself. But every now and again, one of the activists would give forth with "Go, man, go!" as he watched another activist slush the enamel across the floor. This form of mutual encouragement was not in Olsen's line. Before long he took his palette to the studio of Stanley Hayter, the American engraver.

Hayter did not affect Olsen's paintings. The difference between the media was too great, and for that reason Olsen liked it at Hayter's. Socially Hayter was at the artistic centre of things. His visi-

tors included the Portuguese-French painter, Vieira da Silva. Since the War, Vieira da Silva had revived the double-image effects which some of the surrealists had explored, but she integrated them into a style completely divorced from surrealism. Her famous picture, "Etoile" (Star), for example, was at once silvery and shining like a star and also a stylised treatment of the central Paris crossways called Etoile. While Soulages and Georges Mathieu, for instance, took up the thread of Mondrian, painters like da Silva went back to a playful exchange with the real world which Paul Klee had begun. Through the contacts of Hayter's, Olsen found what seems today the dominant spirit speaking through his paintings. He came back to the use of images drawn from the world about him, but drawn from it in a very loose way. The way they are arranged is dictated, on the one hand, by the requirements of composition and, on the other hand, by his taste for ambiguity and pictorial metaphor.

At Hayter's, Olsen also met Corneille, who was more his own age. Corneille made Olsen come with him to Spain; the low cost of living made him stay. His first headquarters were on the island of Ibiza, one of the Balearic group. Apart from art, Ibiza was the least calm of places: probably Olsen would not have liked it if it reminded him too much of Hunter's Hill, where he had gone to school. The best-known local performer, for a while, was Brendan Behan, then making a living as a contributor to an Irish paper. For three months, Behan insulted all all English speakers in Ibiza, then bought them drinks, then held forth, then got drunk himself, then began to break up the furniture in some small bar. Olsen recalls those outcomes of Behan's bouts without admiration. At the end of three months, the Spanish police felt pretty much as the foreigners on Ibiza. They read Behan a long catalogue of his misbehaviours, fined him five hundred pesetas (five pounds) and asked him to leave.

With trips to Paris and around Spain, Olsen stayed on the Balearics for nearly three years, until his money nearly ran out. During this period, he moved from Ibiza to the village of Deyà on the main island of Mallorca. Deyà is known to a great many American visitors who come to seek out its oldest foreign inhabitant, Robert Graves. Olsen liked the orderly Don Roberto rather better than he liked Brendan Behan, but found he had little in common with him. "Robert doesn't understand painting," he says. "He hates Picasso." Graves also liked Sidney Nolan.

Robert Shaw had exhibited Olsen's paintings in 1958 and successfully sold some of them. Olsen came back to Sydney in February, 1960, and arranged for a one-man show at Terry Clune's late that year. It was one of the most successful exhibitions Terry Clune had held. The best of the pictures Olsen now showed were in his mature style. They were full of what he calls "images"—

superimposed, but recognisable objects arranged along large curves that sweep over the canvases. The largest of them, six foot by twelve, "Spanish Encounter," was a reminiscence, and in the next year he painted another large canvas on the same theme. But Australian images began to crowd in on him. Some were urban—"People Who Live In Victoria Street." Others were taken from his trips around the bush. One well-known painting, chosen by Georgian House for the cover of the monograph which Virginia Spate recently wrote about him (Georgian House, 42s.), called "Blue Orpheus," is a sea anthology. In a short time, he began to feel very much at home in Australia. He recorded his joy at finding himself in a long series which bears his name, "You Beaut Country."

WITH the success of the 1960 exhibition and his subsequent sales, Olsen began to be looked to as something of a Guru by the apprentice Yogis, not only in art but in their personal problems. One young colleague, it is reported, has asked him to be best man at his wedding on three separate occasions so far. Still the most personable of men, Olsen found that his house at Paddington became too much like Central Station. Two months ago, with his wife Valerie and his son, he moved out to the farthest limits of Watson's Bay. Since his arrival in Sydney, he has developed a new aesthetic interest—carvings from New Guinea, and he happily points to the manner in which the Sepik River Melanesians use ambiguous images. On an upright wooden figure in his hallway, he will show you that the belly of the main figure is at the same time a picture of another man and that the head is perhaps also the head of a bird. This interest in primitive art goes beyond a satisfaction with its anticipation of his own devices. In this preoccupation, he sees himself as tapping an important primal source of artistic imagination.

The Australian market is a little too small to hold Olsen. In spite of his successes, he just manages to make a living, after teaching one day a week in his own studio and lecturing half a day to architecture students at the University of New South Wales. At the moment, he is designing a tapestry which the mills at Gobelin in France will be weaving. His own fee for this, two hundred pounds, will be less than fifteen per cent. of the sales price of one of the six tapestries that Gobelin will make. In the next fifteen months he will have his time cut out: Marlborough Galleries in London have arranged a show for him late in 1964 and he is intending to have thirty canvases ready for them. The year after, he is booked at Elsie Parsons' in New York. In between, he will probably be painting in Spain.

How does a young Australian who had never heard of art become a painter, you ask Olsen before you know his story as well as after. "You just keep going on and on," Olsen says each time. At the end of thirty-five years, he has found himself, and he disregards what matters to others, the things in between.

many of the post-war generation he greatly admired T.S. Eliot, and essential reading for all students was Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', which concludes

The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives not merely in the present, but in the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but what is already living.<sup>20</sup>

The idea of bringing the past into the present corresponded with Olsen's interest in the writings of the philosopher Henri Bergson. While the idea of impersonality at face value appears to be remote from Olsen's romantic temperament and much of his mature work, it implied for him a freedom from artistic isolation, of belonging to a rich tradition bigger than the individual self: 'You are not simply expressing yourself, you are enjoying the tradition of art... and it is a very good thing for a student to know because from that point on you become a real student'. On another level, it also corresponded with his desire, a little later in the decade, to transcend immediate reality in the *View of the Western World* series, 1956, and his growing interest in mysticism and Eastern philosophy; ideas which were stimulated by his discussions with Robert Klippel.

Klippel first remembers hearing of Olsen in 1952 from Mary Flower at the Lincoln coffee shop. 'She said that she had married this artist bloke, John Olsen.' Olsen married Mary Flower (now McNish), the niece of the artist Cedric Flower, in April 1951; a year later, in September, their daughter Jane was born. Olsen later did a small, affectionate study, *Mary Bathing Jane*, 1953 (plate 5), an example of his student work 'after Degas' while under Passmore's tuition. In his own estimation he was, temperamentally, young and not ready for marriage; factors compounded by his high regard for Passmore in those years, who believed that marriage and Australian suburban life were incompatible with the idea of becoming a great artist.<sup>21</sup>

Robert Klippel recalls that in the early stages of their acquaintance, he found Olsen quite serious and meditative. 'I remember driving across the bridge with him ... he seemed like a very quiet, unassuming bloke; a totally different personality to the way most people later thought of him.'<sup>22</sup> Olsen's devotion to Passmore and his belief in an ethical commitment to standards in art often engendered in him feelings of anxiety and doubt that he rarely exposed to others. The other aspects of his personality becoming evident to fellow students at this time were his infectious humour, vitality and sense of fun.

Klippel, a gifted, nonfigurative sculptor, had returned to Sydney after seven years in Europe. During 1953 he met frequently with Olsen, Bill Rose, Eric Smith and occasionally John Passmore to work together and discuss art, literature and philosophy. He was one of the few at that time to have had direct contact with European art after the Second World War. He had met André Breton and members of the Surrealist group in Paris and was also well acquainted with the work of Jean Riopelle, even bringing a few of his works back to Australia. 'I had two Riopelle paintings and a whole lot of his drawings and watercolours. There was no reaction.'<sup>23</sup> For Olsen they were 'too formless' and he far preferred the works he saw in the 'French Painting Today' exhibition later in the year.<sup>24</sup> More significant were their general discussions about art and philosophy; in particular, their shared interest in comparative religion, especially in Krishnamurti, and in T.S. Eliot. The idea of *Zeitgeist*, of attempting to attain a spiritual dimension in their art, would play a significant role in Olsen's subsequent development.

Klippel recalls that the move towards abstraction in Sydney was only very gradual in the early 1950s. Of all the artists to feel the weight of parochial attitudes in Sydney at this time, his experience was among the most despondent. 'It was absolutely unbelievable... I had a show with Ralph Balson at Macquarie Galleries in 1952. Nothing sold. It was just hopeless ... You had to work full-time at all kinds of jobs ... Everything felt closed for nonfigurative art and my work suffered.'

At the Art Gallery of New South Wales (then known as the National Art Gallery), there was a forceful rear-guard action among the trustees endeavouring to protect the place from the onslaught of 'dangerous modernism'. In the mid to late 1940s the Director, Hal Missingham, had purchased works by Drysdale and Nolan considered to be too avant-garde by the trustees. One of these paintings was Nolan's lyrical and irrational *Pretty Polly Mine*, 1948 (the period of his work which would be important for artists like Olsen and Colin Lanceley in the early 1960s). The trustees were shocked by the purchase and, after a vote of censure, Missingham was relieved of his power of purchase.<sup>25</sup>



5 *Mary Bathing Jane* 1953, pastel on paper on board, 19.5 x 21.5 cm. Private collection

D. H. - John Olsen