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**JOHN OLSEN**

**THE YOU BEAUT COUNTRY  
YEARS F-12 EDUCATION RESOURCE**



# JOHN OLSEN: THE YOU BEAUT COUNTRY

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(cover and background)

**John OLSEN**

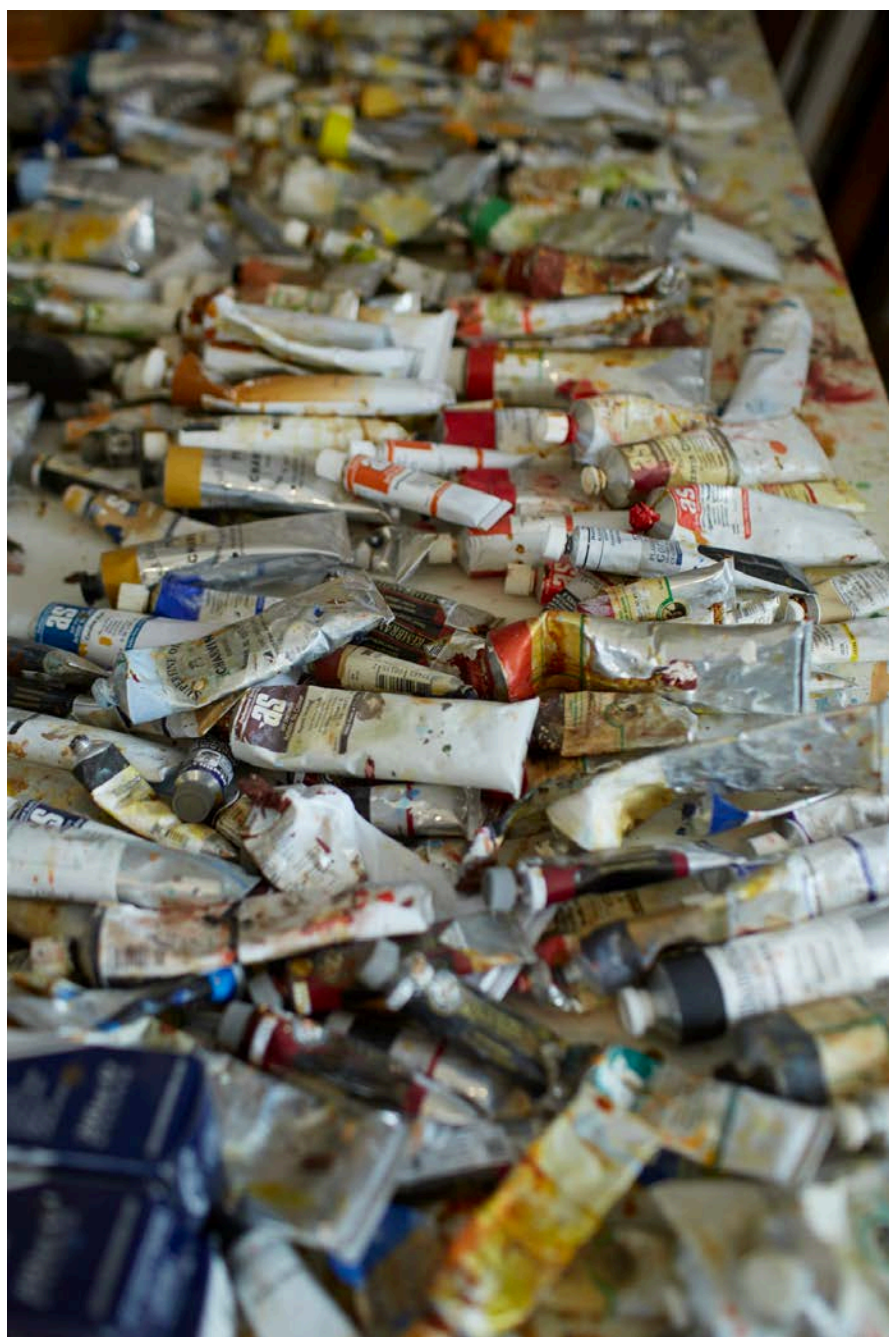
*Summer in the you beaut country* 1962 (detail)

oil on composition board (a-g) 393.4 x 431.0 cm (overall)

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented through The Art Foundation of Victoria by Mr Frank McDonald, Fellow, 1978 (A12.a-g-1978)





## JOHN OLSEN: THE YOU BEAUT COUNTRY

**NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA**  
16 Sep 16 – 12 Feb 2017

**ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES**  
10 Mar – 12 Jun 2017

John Olsen is one of Australia's most celebrated artists whose work has surprised and delighted audiences for decades. Throughout his long career, Olsen has provided audiences with new ways to see, experience and imagine Australia's unique land, animals and soul. Still working today,

Olsen continues to open our eyes to the colour and vitality of life.

## GUIDE FOR TEACHERS: RESOURCE STRUCTURE AND USE

This education resource explores the work of John Olsen through a series of themes.

Each theme includes an introduction, activities for exploring and making artworks, and related resources. While the broad focus of each theme has been aligned to particular year levels, teachers are encouraged to adapt the content and activities to suit the year level and interests of their students.

## CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT

- This resource has been designed to support teaching and learning in the Visual Arts including:
  - Achievement standards in the Visual arts in the Victorian Curriculum for Years F-10
  - Outcomes in the Visual Arts Syllabus, New South Wales for K-10
  - Selected outcomes in Art and Studio Arts (Victorian Certificate of Education) and Visual Arts Syllabus for Level 6, NSW



## SPRING FROGS

Imagine that you are in a rainforest, standing near a waterfall, and that you are holding a little wet frog in the palm of your hand. Imagine what the frog looks like. Picture strange webbed feet, big bulging eyes and powerful hind legs that will help the frog leap off your hand and hop or swim away.

When John Olsen was in a rainforest with a group of scientists in 1971, he held a frog in his hand and he noticed these things.

The scientists were making television programs about Australian wildlife.

They invited Olsen to go with them to create some artworks. Olsen made artworks about the animals he saw, including frogs. Ever since this trip, he has made artworks that have frogs in them.

The frogs in Olsen's art are lively. In some artwork they move slowly. In others, they are leaping or swimming. In *Laughing frog* 1977, a frog with long back legs is swimming in search of food. In *Spring frogs 2* 2008, many tiny frogs are swimming in all directions through water that is thick with water plants.

**John OLSEN**

*Spring frogs 2* 2008

watercolour and coloured pencil

91.0 x 64.5 cm



**IT BEGAN TO EXTEND IT'S  
LEGS AND THEN IT  
JUMPED... I WAS  
ENTRANCED.**

JOHN OLSEN





## FROG SWIMMING 1979

Look closely at *Frog swimming* 1979. Can you see the line painted across the middle of the artwork that shows the water level? A frog is swimming along with its eyes above the water and its body in the water. Look for the frothy frogs' eggs, which are sitting on top of the water. Can you see another smaller frog leaping into the water from above? Both frogs have big, bulging eyes and both frogs are clearly moving their long back legs. Try and move your arms or legs like these frogs.

John Olsen has used water and black ink to create different tones or shades of black and grey. Make a list of all of the things that are

painted in light tones. Then make a list of all the things that are painted in dark tones.

Notice the different sized lines Olsen has used to create *Frog swimming* 1979. See how he has used a very thin line to show the bottom of the pond and a thick pale line to show the top of the water.

Compare *Frog swimming* 1979 by Olsen with:

### **Ding YANYONG (Chinese 1902–1978)**

*Frogs and orchids* 1977

[www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/91079/](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/91079/)

### **Mok E-DEN (Chinese b. 1947)**

*Frogs swimming in a lotus pond* c. 1985

[www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/67472/](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/67472/)

What things are the same or similar in each of these paintings?

### **John OLSEN**

*Frog swimming* 1979

watercolour and brush and ink

91 x 64.5 cm

Private collection





## IMPROVISATION ON BASHO'S FROG 1995

John Olsen is interested in poetry. Sometimes poems give him ideas for his artworks. Hundreds of years ago, a famous Japanese poet, Matsuo Basho (1644–1694), wrote a short poem about a frog. There are many English translations of this poem. Here is one by the American poet Cid Corman (1924–2004).

*old pond  
frog leaping  
splash*

Think about Basho's frog poem when you are looking at Olsen's painting *Improvisation on Basho's frog 1995*.

Can you see a frog with big bulging eyes that has lots of thin blue squiggly lines around it? What do these lines show us? What things in the painting remind you of Basho's poem? Search online for more translations of Basho's poem. Share these with the class. Think about the art materials that Olsen may have used when he was making this artwork. Tell a classmate what you think these might be.

**John OLSEN**

*Improvisation on Basho's frog 1995*

watercolour and coloured pencil

100.0 x 93.0 cm





## LILY POND AT HUMPTY-DOO 2004

Watch the YouTube video:

### The Hidden Life in Pond Water

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIMJWWpOrjw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIMJWWpOrjw)

It features microscopic creatures that live in a pond. Try and find creatures in John Olsen's artwork, *Lily pond at Humpty-Doo* 2004, that are similar to the creatures featured in the pond.

**John OLSEN**

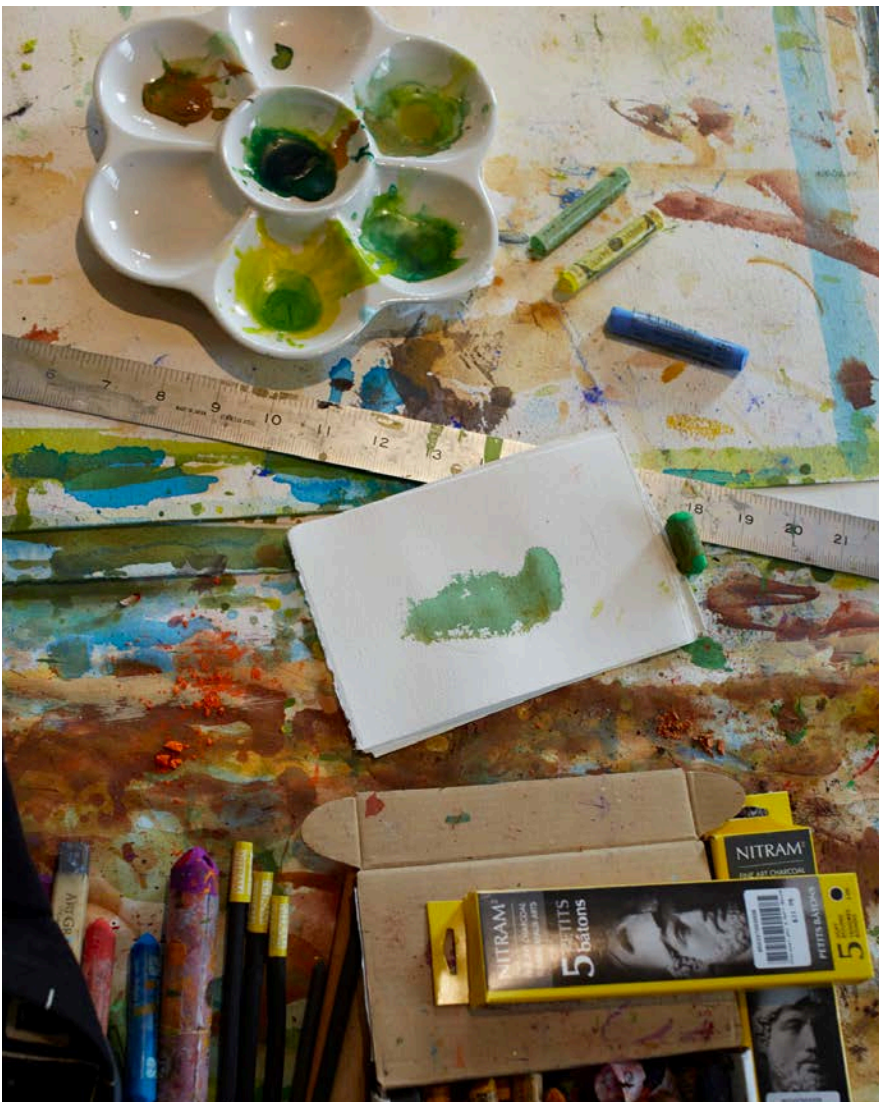
*Lily pond at Humpty-Doo* 2004

oil on canvas

200.0 x 182.0 cm

Collection of James and Jacqui Erskine, Sydney





your drawing. Notice that the crayon marks resist the food dye.

## POND LIFE

Find photographs online of frogs or other pond creatures, such as mosquitoes or dragonflies, which show the creatures moving. Using a pointy paintbrush, water and brown ink or black ink and the photographs for ideas, create a painting of a moving pond creature. Use thin lines and thick lines in your painting as well as light and dark tones of ink. Use a calligraphy brush, if your school has them.

## POETIC INTERPRETATION

Find a short poem that you like. Use this as inspiration to make an artwork.

## RELATED RESOURCES

**NGV Kids activity book: The cricket and the dragon: Animals in Asian Art**

[www.ngv.vic.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/11856/ngv\\_kids\\_activity\\_cricketanddragon.pdf](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/11856/ngv_kids_activity_cricketanddragon.pdf)

**Drawing activity created with John Olsen for the John Olsen: You Beaut Country exhibition.**

[www.ngv.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/OLSEN-ACTIVITY-SHEET\\_HORIZ\\_ART.pdf](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/OLSEN-ACTIVITY-SHEET_HORIZ_ART.pdf)

*John Olsen's studio 2016*

## BUBBLING FROG PONDS

Spoon some watery brown paint onto some paper. Using a straw, gently blow the paint to move it across the paper to create several interesting blobs and lines. Wait for the paint to dry. Then, using a black line marker and your imagination, turn these marks into frogs or other creatures. (Teachers please note, you could do the straw and ink process for your students and make multiple photocopies for them to use).

## LEAPS AND SPLASHES

Using a wax crayon or oil pastel, draw a frog in motion. Your frog might be leaping into a pond or swimming through water. Using different colours of green and blue food dye and a thick brush, make blobby marks over

**I'D LIKE PEOPLE TO  
REDISCOVER THE  
VALUABLE ART OF  
DAYDREAMING. JUST SIT  
AND LOOK AT SOMETHING  
LIKE AN APPLE OR A LAKE.  
THE MORE YOU LOOK AND  
ALLOW YOUR THOUGHTS  
TO ROLL, THE MORE A  
TRANSFORMATION TAKES  
PLACE. IT'S A MEDITATIVE  
PROCESS AND SO  
REWARDING**

JOHN OLSEN





Authors, filmmakers and artists have often created imaginative stories about people shrinking in size and finding themselves face to face with insects. When looking at John Olsen's paintings of gardens, it is as though he has shrunk his viewers. In these paintings, the microscopic world hidden in the garden is life-size. Bugs and flowers are the same size, and frightening gigantic creatures burst with life.

The lines that Olsen paints are spontaneous and they bring this world to life so that plants, weeds and flowers move in all directions, and life forms seem to swarm, scuttle, wiggle, snake and crawl at random.

Olsen has always looked at life forms very closely, sometimes using a magnifying glass. His works capture the feeling and the unique quality of his subject matter – whether it is the joy of spring or the abundance of summer, or even the independent characteristics of cats which, along with dogs, have kept him company in his studio over the years. Cats have been the subject matter of many of his paintings and drawings.





## ME THE GARDENER 1964

John Olsen's painting *Me the gardener* 1964 won the Launceston Art Prize in 1964. Look closely. Can you see a gardener on the right-hand side of the painting holding a bowl of seeds? Perhaps he is getting ready to throw them onto the soil. He also holds a rake. He may be planning to use this rake to cover the seeds with soil.

The large flower in the centre of *Me the gardener* 1964 looks almost like a monster. Perhaps it is a carnivorous plant that traps animals and eats them. Creatures and plants

are entangled in this painting. Look carefully. What else can you find? What else can you see happening?

Olsen used oil paint to create this painting. Describe some of the different brushstrokes you can see, for example long thin strokes and long thick strokes.

List the colours you can see in this painting. Which colours are 'warm' and which colours are 'cool'

### John OLSEN

*Me the gardener* 1964

oil on canvas

121.7 x 183.2 cm

Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston  
Purchased with assistance from the Launceston Art  
Purchase Fund, 1964 (QVM:1964:FP:247)





## DARLINGHURST CATS 1962

Cats have fascinated John Olsen for a long time. He started painting them early in his artistic career. Darlinghurst is an inner-city suburb of Sydney where there isn't a lot of space for large animals so cats are the perfect sized pets for people living there.

Look at the painting *Darlinghurst cats* 1962. What do you think Olsen is trying to tell us about the cats that live there?

Look at the painting closely. Where might the

Darlinghurst cats wander as they go exploring?

Look for the whiskers on the cat. They are attached to muscles and act like radars. What might this cat's whiskers be sensing about the world around it?

### John OLSEN

*Darlinghurst cats* 1962  
oil on composition board  
250.0 x 312.0 cm

Collection of Rosie Williams and John Grill, Sydney





## POET'S GARDEN 2005

Explore the way John Olsen has painted *Poet's garden 2005*. Notice that the landscape is surrounded by sky. Also notice that there is no foreground, middle ground or background in this painting as we see in many traditional landscape paintings. This painting combines different viewpoints. What viewpoints can you see?

Observe the artwork:

**Tim Leura TJAPALTJARRI (1929–1984)**  
**Clifford Possum TJAPALTJARRI (c. 1932–2002)**

*Spirit Dreaming through Napperby country*  
1980

[www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/2313/](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/2313/)

Compare *Poet's garden 2005* with *Spirit Dreaming through Napperby country* 1980. What similarities can you find in the way the artists have depicted their landscapes?

In *Poet's garden 2005* Can you see a horse walking along a path? What other animals, plants and creatures can you see in this garden?

Look for the poet. Do you think that the poet enjoys being in his garden? Give reasons for your answer. Why do you think many poets are inspired by gardens?

Consider these lines of the poem 'Spring' by English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889):

*Nothing is so beautiful as Spring  
When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and  
lovely and lush ...  
What is all this juice and all this joy?  
A strain of the earth's sweet being in the  
beginning.*

How might the line *What is all this juice and all this joy?* connect to the painting *Poet's garden 2005*? Suggest reasons why this poem was one of Olsen's favourites.

**John OLSEN**

*Poet's garden 2005*

oil on canvas

242.0 x 184.0 cm

Private collection, Sydney





## WHERE THE BEE SUCKS, THERE SUCK I 1984-86

John Olsen was living in the countryside of South Australia when he painted *Where the bee sucks, there suck I* 1984–86. How do you think Olsen was feeling when he made this painting? What clues does he give in the painting?

Often writers use words such as energy, pulse and spontaneous when they discuss

the work of Olsen. Look at the painting *Where the bee sucks, there suck I* 1984–86. How might these words apply to this painting?

Olsen has been quoted as saying, 'I like to keep the open-eyed innocence of a child'. In what way might this statement relate to the painting *Where the bee sucks, there suck I* 1984–86?

### John OLSEN

*Where the bee sucks, there suck I* 1984–86  
oil on composition board 183.0 x 244.6 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Presented through The Art Foundation of Victoria by  
John Olsen, Governor, 1986 (AC3-1986)





## COLLAGE GARDEN

How does a garden grow? Imagine what a garden might look like after a long drought. With your classmates, make a list of the possible changes to that garden after a heavy rain has broken the drought. Think about the activity you would see, hear and feel, such as snails making long silvery trails while looking for food, birds tweeting and looking for insects, new green shoots appearing in the soil, flowers opening their petals, bees searching for nectar, pollen in the air and warm sunlight helping the flowers grow.

Tear random coloured pieces of paper into different shapes and sizes. Using a glue-stick, paste these onto a blue sheet of cover paper. Look at the pieces of paper you have glued. Imagine what might come to life in the garden after a long period of drought. For example, you might see flowers, trees, or insects such as caterpillars, butterflies, bees, ants and snails. Using a white paint pen (or a white crayon), make these shapes more obvious. For example, give your flowers petals, or your tree leaves, or your bees stripes and body parts. When you have outlined your garden with a white paint pen, use different coloured pastels or textas to



create patterns over the separate parts of your garden.

## INKY GARDEN LIFE

John Olsen thinks it is important to daydream. He also likes to sit and watch something closely. What's hidden in the garden? If you have a garden close by, take time to sit and watch it. What do you see? Do you notice any activity in the garden? If possible, dig up a lump of earth and examine it. If you have a magnifying glass, examine a small section of the soil more closely. Make a mental note of all of the things you see. Back in the art room, take a coloured sheet of cover paper and three or four different colours of ink.

Using a tool such as a spoon, carefully splash the ink onto the paper, one colour at a time. Don't worry if your ink colours bleed into each other; this will give your artwork an interesting effect. When the ink has dried, look closely at the images. Use your imagination to find shapes in the ink painting that remind you of things in a garden.

## FASCINATING FELINES

Use the following poem 'Cats sleep anywhere' by English author Eleanor Farjeon (1881–1965) as inspiration to create a painting about cats.

*Cats sleep, anywhere, any table, any chair.  
Top of piano, window ledge, in the middle, on  
the edge.*

*Open drawer, empty shoe, anybody's lap will  
do.*

*Fitted in a cardboard box, in the cupboard,  
with your frocks.*

*Anywhere! They don't care! Cats sleep  
anywhere.*

Play with viewpoints in your painting. Try painting some objects as though you are looking directly at them and others from an aerial perspective (bird's-eye view).

## RELATED RESOURCES:

### Label texts for Spirit Dreaming through Napperby country 1980

[www.ngv.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Wall-Labels-Moving-Backwards-into-the-Future-2-April-15.pdf](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Wall-Labels-Moving-Backwards-into-the-Future-2-April-15.pdf)

**WHEN THE SUN SHINES  
ONTO THE HARBOUR AND  
IS CRADLED BY THE  
LIGHTS IN THE HILLS THAT  
SURROUND IT, IT'S A  
BATH, A BEAUTIFUL BIG  
BATH. THE HARBOUR IS  
ABSOLUTELY A GIFT, AND  
WE ALL SHARE IN THIS  
GIFT.**

JOHN OLSEN





Many people believe there isn't a more beautiful or lively city in Australia than Sydney. Tourists love to visit Sydney's Opera House, walk over the Harbour Bridge, swim at Bondi Beach, take a ferry ride around the spectacular harbour, visit Luna Park, soak up Sydney's bright sunshine under blue skies, and watch the sailing boats on Sydney Harbour.

John Olsen knows Sydney very well and he loves it. He grew up in the Sydney suburb of Bondi, and Bondi Beach was his backyard.

As a child, he swam in the sea, played in the sand and was a junior member of the North

Bondi Surf Club.

In his adult life, with his young family, he lived for a time in Watson's Bay. Sydney is his hometown and it lives deep within his psyche, his soul. Sydney has been the inspiration and subject matter for many of his paintings throughout his artistic career. His paintings of Sydney are a joyous celebration of this energetic city whose harbour is just as lively as its city streets. The colours he uses and the marks he makes all represent the emotions he feels about Sydney, and they help him to express the wonder, the energy and the love he has for his hometown.





## FIVE BELLS 1963

*Five bells* 1963 is an aerial perspective of Sydney Harbour, but what do you think we are looking at? Notice the large circular shape and the life forms that seem to grow from it. Discuss with your classmates what you think John Olsen might be exploring in this painting.

Have you ever spent time looking through the water when you have been swimming in the sea? Did you notice how the light travels through the water and highlights tiny things you may not have seen before, such as creatures or seaweed, or sometimes fish?

In *Five bells* 1963 Olsen is showing us the variety of nature that is hidden under the surface of the water in Sydney Harbour. Look for the creatures and living things Olsen has featured. How do you think he feels about what he is painting? What is it about the

painting that suggests this?

The busy part of *Five bells* 1963 is the centre. Notice how Olsen painted lines and forms radiating from this centre. What do you think he is trying to communicate with these lines?

What do you notice about how Olsen has used warm and cool colours in *Five bells* 1963? What feelings or ideas does this colour scheme communicate?

When he was creating *Five bells* 1963 Olsen was thinking of a poem written by poet Kenneth Slessor (1901–1971) titled 'Five bells'. How might the following two lines from the poem relate to the concept of light shining through the sea?

*Deep and dissolving verticals of light  
Ferry the folds of moonshine down.*

### John OLSEN

*Five bells* 1963

oil on composition board

264.5 x 274.0 cm

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Purchased with funds provided by the Art Gallery Society of New South Wales 1999 (133.1999)





have influenced Olsen in his painting *Entrance to the seaport of desire* 1964?

Olsen communicates how he feels about the subjects he is painting in his work. How do you think he feels about Sydney and its harbour in this painting? How has he used colour, line and shape to tell you how he feels?

## ENTRANCE TO THE SEAPORT OF DESIRE 1964

Spend some time looking closely into the painting *Entrance to the seaport of desire* 1964. What can you see? What creatures begin to appear?

This painting is often described as jewel-like. Search online for images of Australian opals, especially black opals. Compare the opals with this painting. What similarities can you find?

John Olsen lived in Spain for three years and spent time in Barcelona where he saw many buildings designed by the Spanish architect Antoni Gaudi (1852–1926).

Search online to find images of buildings and mosaics designed by Gaudi. Compare Gaudi's buildings and mosaics with *Entrance to the seaport of desire* 1964. What similarities can you find? What do you think Olsen might have found interesting about the work of Gaudi?

How might Gaudi's buildings and mosaics

### **John OLSEN**

*Entrance to the seaport of desire* 1964

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

167.6 x 213.4 cm

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Gift of Mrs M.A. McGrath 1968 (OA23.1968)





## CHILDHOOD BY THE SEAPORT 1965

John Olsen grew up in Bondi and Bondi Beach was his backyard. He says it was a very happy, playful time for him, as he developed his senses in the natural world around him. He painted *Childhood by the seaport* 1965 to celebrate his childhood memories. Think about the senses you use when you are at the beach.

Make a list of the things you might hear and the things you might see at the beach. Think about the different things you might touch and how they feel, for example the smoothness of a seashell and gentle waves lapping at your feet. What smells do you associate with the sea? Can you taste anything when you are at the beach? After you have made your list of sensory things, look at Olsen's painting *Childhood by the seaport* 1965. Can you associate any of the things you sensed about the sea with the imagery in the painting?

### John OLSEN

*Childhood by the seaport* 1965

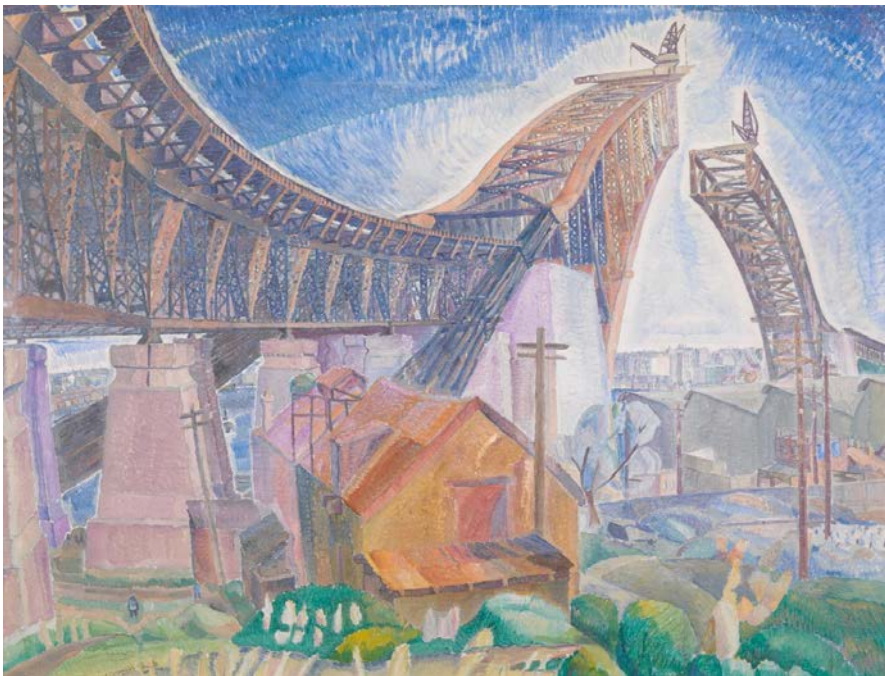
oil on composition board

213.5 x 150.6 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

The Alan Boxer Bequest 2014 (NGA 2014.2393)





## **Margaret PRESTON**

*Circular Quay* 1925

[www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/DA28.1964](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/DA28.1964)

## **Grace COSSINGTON SMITH**

*The Bridge in-curve* 1930

[www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/3007/](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/3007/)

## **Brett WHITELEY**

*The balcony 2* 1975

[www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/116.1981](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/116.1981)

## **Adrian FEINT**

*Elizabeth Bay, Sydney* 1942

[www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/5547/](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/5547/)

## **Jan SENBERGS**

*Sydney* 1998

[www.ngv.vic.gov.au/media\\_release/jan-senbergs-observation-imagination-2/](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/media_release/jan-senbergs-observation-imagination-2/)

## **OTHER PAINTINGS OF SYDNEY**

Unlike many other artists who paint landscapes, John Olsen isn't interested in the traditional way of painting a landscape, with a foreground, middle ground or background. Look at the following paintings of Sydney. Explore how these artists have chosen to depict Sydney. Have they used an aerial (bird's-eye view) or a linear perspective (artworks that feature horizon lines, vanishing points and lines that create an illusion of distance)? What similarities and differences can you find with these artworks and the art of Olsen?

Compare and contrast other art elements and principles featured in these artworks with the works of Olsen:

## **Tom ROBERTS**

*An autumn morning, Milson's Point, Sydney*

1888

[www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/27.1983/](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/27.1983/)

## **Grace COSSINGTON-SMITH**

*The Bridge in-curve* 1930

tempera on cardboard

83.6 × 111.8 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented by the National Gallery Society of Victoria, 1967





## FIREWORKS IN THE NIGHT SKY

The New Year's Eve fireworks display in Sydney is an exciting way to start the new year. Imagine you are there when the harbour comes alive with spectacular fireworks. These displays last for 12 minutes. Fireworks are fired from seven barges around the harbour, and also from the Opera House and the Harbour Bridge. Imagine that you can see the reflections on the water, the sky light up, and all of the colours and remarkable patterns. Using several brightly coloured oil pastels and A3 cartridge paper, create marks that capture what you can see in your

imagination. Think about the patterns you would observe if you were there. Use a dark ink wash, such as blue or purple, and brush the ink wash around your pastel drawing. Don't worry if you go too close to the drawing, as the pastels will resist the ink wash

## DANCING LINES

Gather together a range of art materials that you could use to draw lines with. These might include: blue, red and black biro pens; fine and thick black line marker pens, wax



crayons, oil pastels, coloured pencils, coloured textas, and coloured paint pens.

Practise making as many different lines as you can think of. Next, on a coloured A3 sheet of cover paper, place a torn circular shape (this can be any colour you choose). Now, using the same coloured paper as the central shape, tear some long, thin shapes. Paste these so they radiate out from the middle shape. Using a range of mediums, start to doodle around the pasted shapes. Let your mind wander and allow your subconscious thoughts, your daydreaming thoughts, to direct your mark making. To quote John Olsen, 'Stay with your dream and learn to play'.

## **JOURNEY THROUGH YOUR COUNTRY**

Search online for a city road map and road maps of Victoria or New South Wales. Compare the maps and notice the difference between the geometric lines on the city map and the meandering, organic lines of the state road maps. Many of the lines in Olsen's work meander and wander like the country roads. Using an A3 sheet of cartridge paper, a small piece of thick cardboard and two primary coloured paints, such as red and yellow or blue and yellow, randomly scrape a thin layer of paint onto the paper. It doesn't matter if in some areas the colours mix as this will make the painting more interesting. Make sure there is no white paper left. Once the paint is dry (this will happen quite quickly) carefully spoon ink onto the paper and then carefully move the ink around by tilting the paper. The aim is to create rambling lines. Once the ink is dry, take time

to look at the shapes that are there. Let your mind wander until you start to see images of organic things in the shapes and lines. Using white paint and a thin paintbrush, trace around the images you have found.

## **RELATED RESOURCES:**

### **Reading of Kenneth Slessor's poem 'Five bells'**

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=2F6RUGVmhAw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2F6RUGVmhAw)

### **John Olsen and others talking about his love of Sydney**

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=pW3IIP2RjyM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pW3IIP2RjyM)

### **ABC interview with John Olsen, 2013**

[www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2013/s3813701.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2013/s3813701.htm)

### **Video of David Hurlston, NGV Senior Curator of Australia discussing the work of John Olsen**

[www.ngv.vic.gov.au/multimedia/ngv-extra-john-olsen-the-artist/](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/multimedia/ngv-extra-john-olsen-the-artist/)



**...PERHAPS NOWHERE IN  
AUSTRALIA DOES ONE  
HAVE THE FEELING OF  
SUCH COMPLETE  
EMPTINESS - COVERED BY  
A BOWL OF ENDLESS SKY  
WITH INVITING SILENCES,  
THERE IS, AS YOU STAND  
ON THE EDGE OF THE  
LAKE, A FEELING YOU ARE  
STANDING ON THE EDGE  
OF THE VOID**

JOHN OLSEN





At the end of 1974, John Olsen became interested in some very unusual events occurring in the centre of Australia at Lake Eyre. The huge, salt-encrusted desert landscape flooded for only the second time since settlement. A place that had once been described as the harsh, inhospitable 'Dead Heart' of Australia was suddenly teeming with life. Birds, fish, mammals, reptiles and wildflowers thrived within and around this abundant new landscape.

Olsen felt that the best way to make sense of this vast landscape was to fly over it. He was inspired by another great Australian artist, Sidney Nolan, who painted Lake Eyre from an aerial perspective in 1948.

Since ancient times, Indigenous Australian artists have also portrayed the Australian landscape from an aerial perspective. Olsen first visited Lake Eyre in 1974 during the flood, then revisited it many times over the course of the next few years, observing the lake as it slowly receded and dried back to its salty desert state. He made many drawings, paintings and prints based on his observations of this unique Australian landscape.





## LAKE EYRE 1975

In 1975, John Olsen was inspired by the 1974 filling of Lake Eyre to paint the lake from above. List 10 adjectives in response to Olsen's painting *Lake Eyre 1975*.

Do you think Olsen's painting of Lake Eyre would have the same effect if it were painted from a different perspective? How might it be different?

Think about the art elements (line, shape, colour, form, texture, space, value) and principles (balance, proportion, harmony, pattern, rhythm, contrast, emphasis). Which elements and principles do you think are most important in Olsen's *Lake Eyre 1975*? Explain why.

View:

**Jakayu BILJABU, Yikartu BUMBA, May CHAPMAN, Nyanjilpayi Nancy CHAPMAN, Doreen CHAPMAN, Linda JAMES, Donna LOXTON, Mulyatingki MARNEY, Reena ROGERS, Beatrice SIMPSON, Ronelle SIMPSON, Muntararr Rosie WILLIAMS**  
*Ngayarta Kujarra 2009*

[www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/95020/](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/95020/)

A huge canvas painted by twelve Martu women artists from Punmu community who belong to Martumili Artists, a Martu governed art centre in the East Pilbara of Western Australia. *Ngayarta Kujarra* (Lake Dora) is a huge salt lake at Punmu community which has profound spiritual associations for Martu people who were taken away from Punmu to Jigalong Mission, worked on pastoral stations during the 1960s and have relished the return to their homeland. Compare the Martumili artists' *Ngayarta Kujarra 2009* to Olsen's painting *Lake Eyre 1975*. What similarities can you find? How have all of these artists captured the feeling of these vast, awe-inspiring environments?

**John OLSEN**

*Lake Eyre 1975*

oil on canvas

214.0 x 200.0 cm

Private collection



## LAKE HINDMARSH THE WIMMERA 1970

Search online to explore the natural features of Victoria's largest fresh water lake, Lake Hindmarsh.

How have these natural features informed

Olsen in his painting *Lake Hindmarsh, the Wimmera* 1970? What colours are most important in Olsen's painting and why might Olsen have painted the lake and the surrounding landscape in these colours?

**John OLSEN**

*Lake Hindmarsh, the Wimmera* 1970

oil on canvas

171.0 x 186.0 cm

Collection of the Olsen family, Sydney





## THE MURRAY RUNNING INTO LAKE ALEXANDRIA 1975

The poetry of T.S. Eliot has often informed Olsen in his art making.

How might the following lines from Eliot's poem 'The dry salvages' from the Four Quartets connect with Olsen's painting *The Murray running into Lake Alexandrina* 1975?

*I do not know much about gods, but I think  
that the river  
Is a dark brown god – sullen, untamed and  
intractable.*

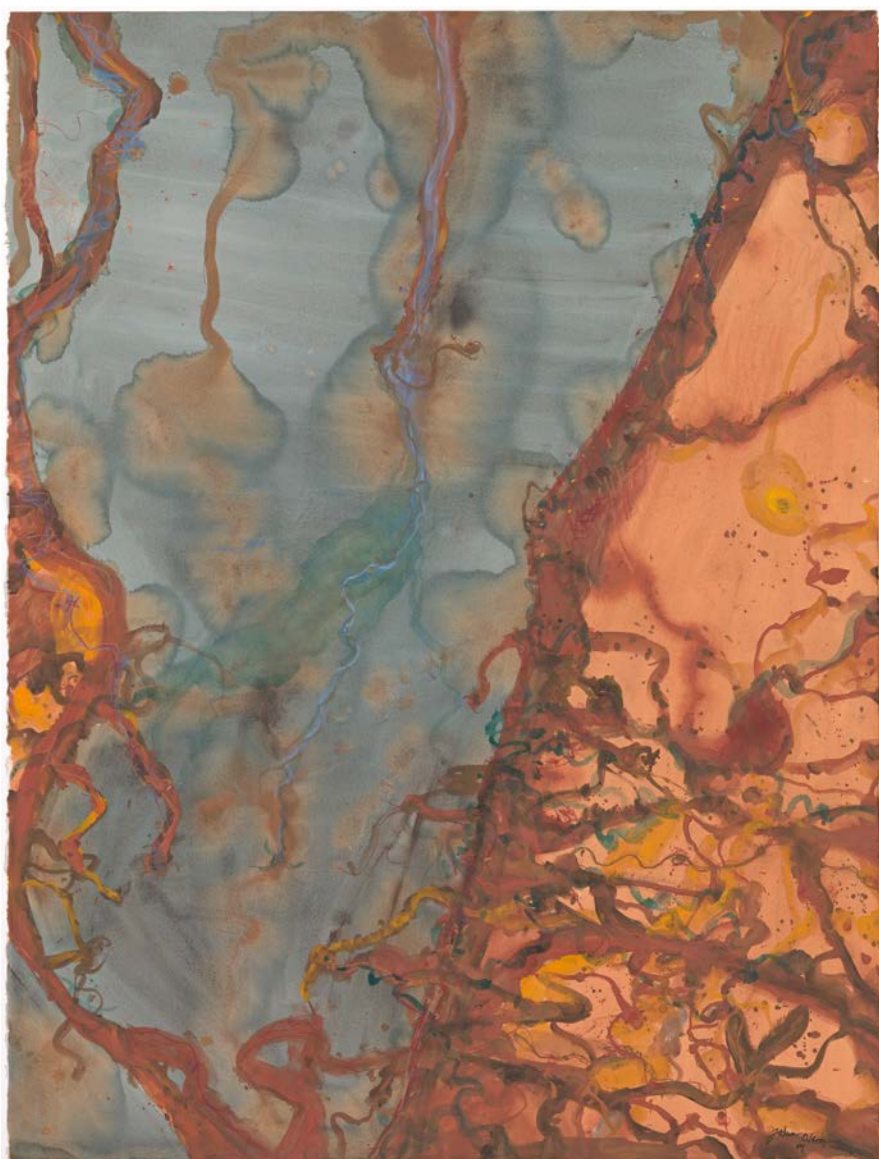
### John OLSEN

*The Murray running into Lake Alexandrina* 1975

oil on canvas

120.0 x 101.0 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Gift of James and Jacqui Erskine 2009 (NGA 2009.548)



## LAKE EYRE CHANNEL COUNTRY 2011

Look closely at *Lake Eyre, channel country* 2011.

What features of this environment is Olsen describing?

How has he used paint to describe these features?

**John OLSEN**

*Lake Eyre, channel country* 2011  
watercolour and coloured chalk  
161.0 x 120.0 cm





## LOOKING DOWN ON MY PLACE

Look up a landscape that inspires you on Google Earth. It might be somewhere near where you live, where you have been on holiday, or the place you call home. Create an artwork inspired by this aerial perspective of your chosen landscape. Think about the visual qualities you notice in this view of the landscape, and how you can use art elements and principles to communicate these qualities.

## SOMETHING IN THE WATER

Study the different ways that Olsen portrays expanses of water in his work. Experiment with wet media, such as ink and dye on watercolour paper, to capture a sense of a chosen water environment, for example crashing ocean waves, a bubbling creek, a stagnant billabong, a deep placid lake or a rushing river. Carefully select and combine different colours and techniques to describe the qualities of your chosen water environment.

## WEATHERING THE ELEMENTS

Investigate a natural event, such as a drought, flood, bushfire or cyclone. What colours, shapes, lines and images come to mind when you learn about your chosen event? Cover the blank white of a sheet of watercolour paper with abstract shapes in your chosen colours, using ink or paint. Once these are dry, work back over your colours and shapes with a pastel, adding lines and images to describe the feeling of your natural event.

## UPSCALING

Create a small A4-drawing of an Australian landscape of your choice from an aerial perspective. Now create the same drawing on a sheet of A1 paper. Pin both artworks to the wall and step back. How does changing the scale of your artwork change the dramatic impact of the artwork?

**I RECALL COMING INTO  
THE HARBOUR IN THE  
EARLY MORNING AFTER  
BEING IN EUROPE  
SEVERAL YEARS, THE  
SURROUNDING HILLS  
SEEMED TO CRADLE THE  
SUN'S LIGHT, LIKE A  
BENEVOLENT BATH,  
BUBBLING AND  
EFFERVESCENT. THERE  
WAS THE IMAGE OF  
THINGS GROWING,  
PULSATING FROM THE  
SUN'S SOURCE**

JOHN OLSEN





In December 1956, John Olsen left Sydney to travel to Europe for the first time. He felt nervous leaving his homeland, but excited to discover the world beyond Australia. He was captivated by the vibrancy and colour of the Mediterranean: the blood red tomatoes, the deep blue sea, the sunny disposition of people with a different approach to life. He was inspired by the history and architecture of Spain and its passionate culture. He remained in the Mediterranean for three years. On his return, he painted memories of his journey in *Spanish encounter* 1960.

Olsen's travels shifted the way he viewed Australia, its land and culture. Upon resettling in Australia he began work on *The You Beaut Country* series, a body of work that captures a sense of Australian identity, with boundless vitality and energy. Olsen explored subjects such as the sprawling streets of Sydney and the brilliance of the New South Wales coastline, the stark contrasts within the varied landscapes of Australia, the changeability of its seasons and the energy of its people.





## SUMMER IN THE YOU BEAUT COUNTRY 1962

Study Olsen's representation of the Australian summer in *Summer in the you beaut country* 1962.

What aspects of this time and place do you feel Olsen is trying to describe to the viewer? What is it about the painting that suggests this to you?

### John OLSEN

*Summer in the you beaut country* 1962  
oil on composition board (a-g) 393.4 x 431.0 cm  
(overall)

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Presented through The Art Foundation of Victoria by Mr  
Frank McDonald, Fellow, 1978 (A12.a-g-1978)





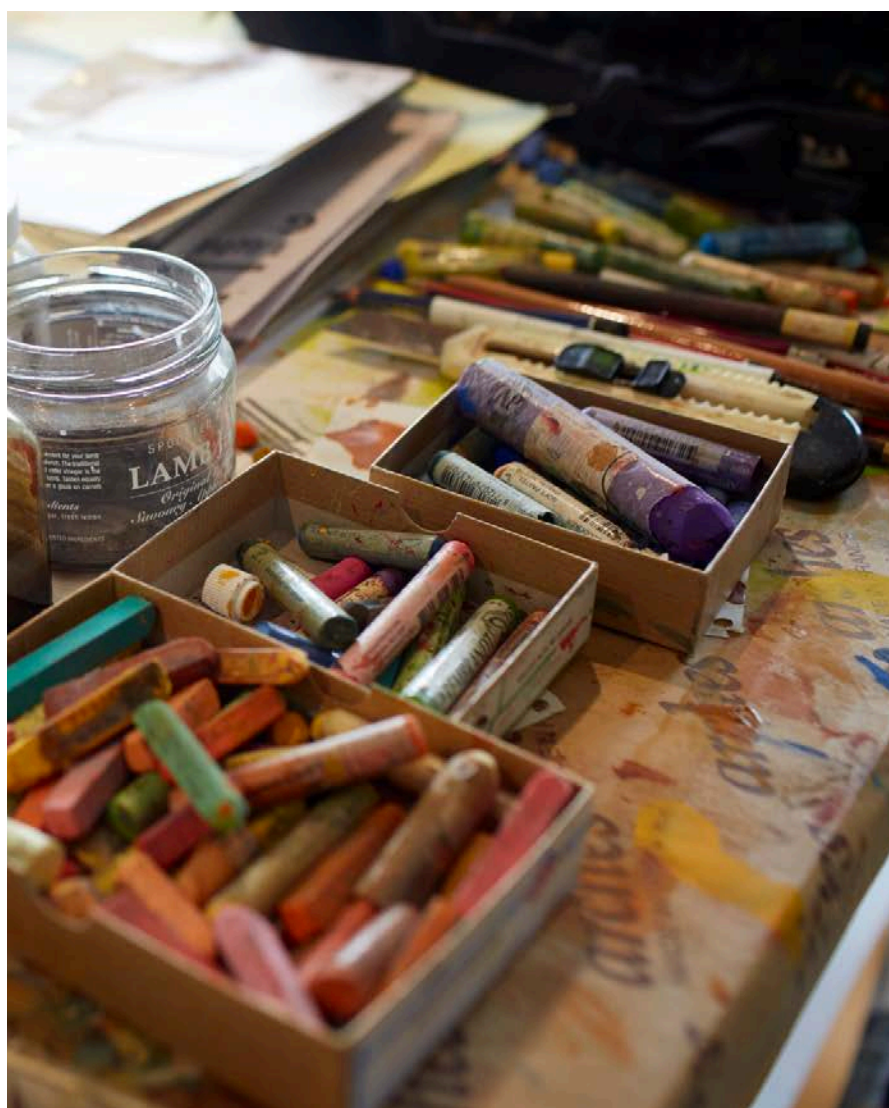
## JOURNEY INTO THE YOU BEAUT COUNTRY NO. 1 1961

Consider what John Olsen means by 'you beaut country'. Find out where the title of this series of works originated.

What is 'Australian identity'? Compare *Journey into the you beaut country no. 1* 1961, *Spring in the you beaut country* 1961 and *Summer in the you beaut country* 1962. What do you think Olsen is trying to convey about Australian identity with his You beaut country series?

### John OLSEN

*Journey into the you beaut country no. 1* 1961  
oil on composition board 152.2 x 121.4 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Purchased, 1961 (918-5)



## MEMORY JOURNEY

Reminisce on a personal summer memory. Write a short reflection of this memory, describing the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and feelings of your summer memory. Translate this reflection into a series of gestural drawings using line and shape. How do you describe a feeling, taste or sound visually through drawing? Experiment with a range of different media, such as charcoal, ink, crayon and paint.

## COLOUR AND MOOD

Explore John Olsen's use of colour. How does Olsen evoke a mood using colour in artworks such as *Summer in the you beaut country* 1962? Choose one of your experimental gestural drawings to develop

into a larger scale resolved work.

Carefully select and combine colours to describe mood.

## CONTINUOUS LINE LANDSCAPE

Olsen often describes his artworks as 'journeys'. Select a landscape you know well. Create a drawing that uses one continuous line to lead the viewer's eyes on a journey through that landscape. Focus on describing the emotional qualities of that landscape rather than depicting it in a literal way.

## EXPLORING AUSTRALIAN IDENTITY

Brainstorm words or ideas that come to mind when you consider the concept of Australian identity. Use one of these ideas as a starting point for an artwork. Use only colour, line and shape to create an abstract representation of your idea. Layer wet media, such as ink, and dry media, such as conté, to build up your work. Focus on your emotional response to the idea rather than depicting the idea literally.

## RELATED RESOURCES:

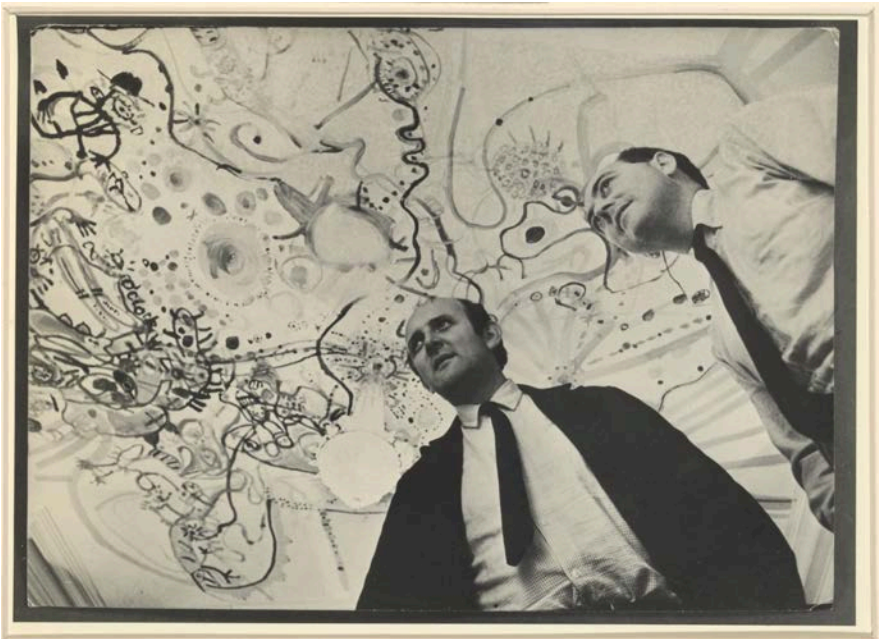
**Activities and ideas for teachers exploring the concept of identity.**

[www.ngv.vic.gov.au/school\\_resource/collection-stories/identify-activities/](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/school_resource/collection-stories/identify-activities/)



**DON'T THINK OF FORM,  
THINK OF FORMING.  
FORMING IS A GROWING,  
DEVELOPING PROCESS.  
LIKE A PLANT OR LIVING  
ORGANISM**

JOHN OLSEN



Nature, poetry, travel, and the Australian landscape have been important sources of ideas and inspiration for John Olsen's art-making. Olsen has used journaling to explore and develop these concepts throughout his career. Olsen's journaling includes diverse sources of inspiration including lines of famous poetry, endless descriptions of research and ideas, sketches, photographs and creative prose.

Through exploring the documentation of Olsen's developmental process, the viewer can understand the wealth of research, planning and reflection that underpins the practice of one of Australia's artistic heroes. Olsen's artistic practice is rich and varied, comprising of work exploring diverse themes and a wide array of mediums and techniques. Though he originally fell in love with art through drawing and painting, he has also employed mediums such as printmaking, tapestry, and ceramics in his search for exciting new ways to explore his subjects. He has also employed non-conventional methods of presenting his work, including creating ceiling paintings designed to immerse the viewer in the world of his artwork.

## **David MOORE**

*No title (John Olsen with Frank McDonald standing under Summer in the you beaut country) 1962*

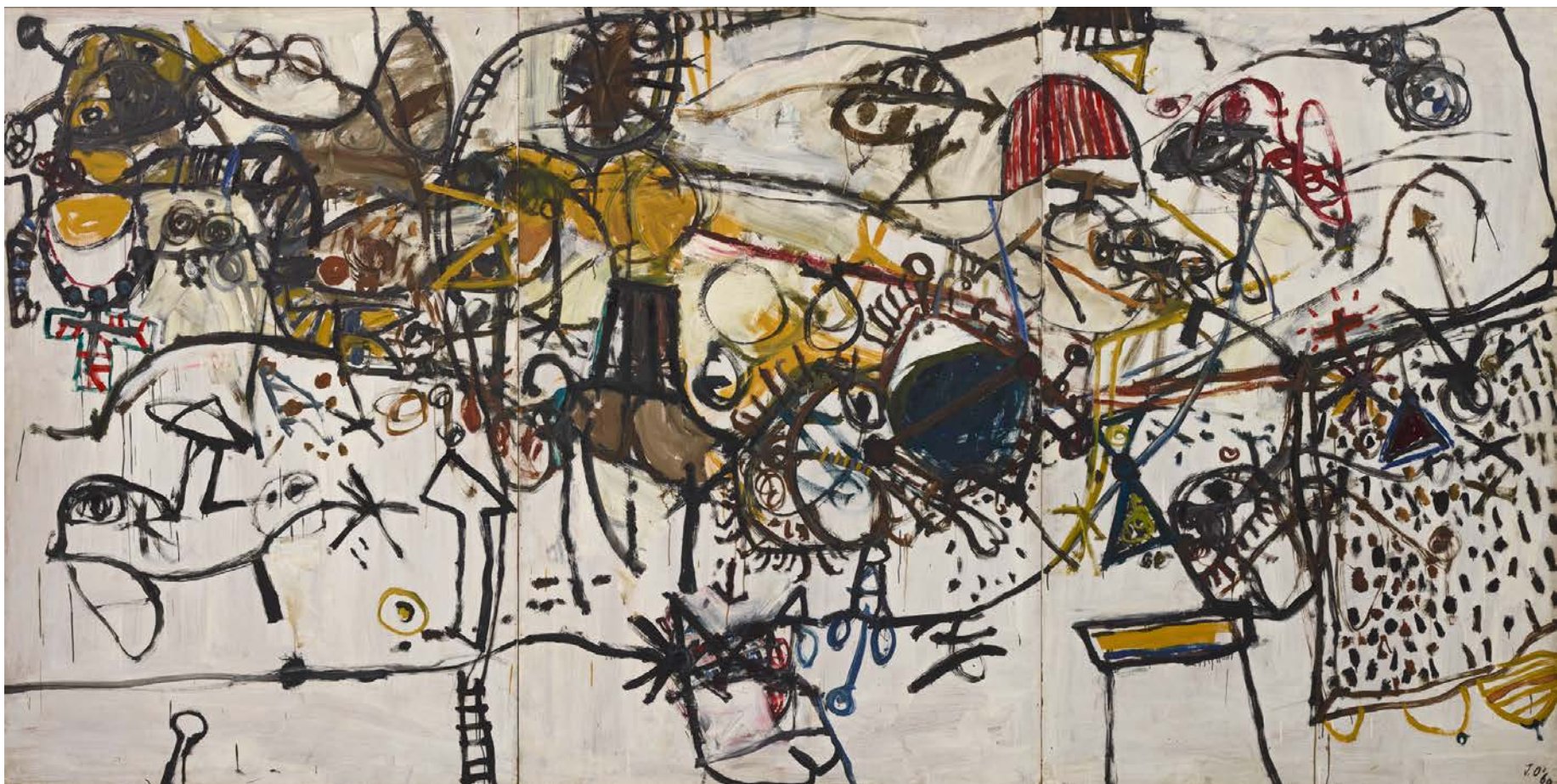
type C photograph

18.5 x 28.9 cm (image) (top)

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

© Estate of David Moore





## SPANISH ENCOUNTER 1960

During his travels through Europe, Olsen encountered the art movements of Surrealism and Expressionism, in particular the work of artists such as Joan Miró (Spanish 1893-1983), Wassily Kandinsky (Russian 1866 – 1944) and Antoni Gaudí (Spanish 1852- 1926).

Select a work of art by one of these artists to compare and contrast with Olsen's work *Spanish Encounter* 1960.

### John OLSEN

*Spanish encounter* 1960  
oil on composition board  
183.0 x 366.0 cm

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney  
Purchased 1960 (OA29.1960.a-c)





## JOIE DE VIVRE 1964-65

Olsen was inspired by examples of tapestry that he saw in galleries such as the Gobelins in France.

### Unknown

Reproduction of Gobelins tapestry

[www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/51548/](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/51548/)

Study examples of historic tapestries held in this collection. Focus on the texture, colours, mood and intended context for these works of art. What do you feel may have appealed to Olsen about this medium?

### John OLSEN

(designer)

Tapecarias Portalegre Workshops, Portugal  
(manufacturer)

est. 1946

*Joie de vivre* 1964–65

wool, edition of 6





## THE TERRY WHELAN SUITE (DINNER SERVICE) 1970-71

Olsen has acknowledged that Japanese art traditions and philosophies have inspired his arts practice. Research Japanese Raku ware ceramics and their uses, what evidence of Olsen's interest in Japanese art traditions and philosophies can you see in Olsen's *The Terry Whelan suite (dinner service)* 1970-71?

**John OLSEN**

*The Terry Whelan suite (Dinner service)* 1970-71 (detail)  
Collection of Terry Whelan





## WHERE THE BEE SUCKS, THERE SUCK I 1984

Olsen's art practice contains strong connections to poetry. He writes, collects and contemplates literature within his comprehensive journaling practice, which then informs his art-making. Read the following extract of prose from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and consider the ways in which Olsen has interpreted the text visually within the painting, *Where the Bee Sucks, There Suck I* 1984.

*Where the bee sucks, there suck I  
In a cowslip's bell I lie;  
There I crouch when owls do cry,  
On the bat's back I do fly  
After summer merrily;  
Merrily, merrily shall I live now  
Under the blossom that hangs on  
the bough.*

### John OLSEN

*Where the bee sucks, there suck I* 1984–86  
oil on composition board 183.0 x 244.6 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Presented through The Art Foundation of Victoria by  
John Olsen, Governor, 1986 (AC3-1986)





Study Olsen's ceiling installation *Summer in the you beaut country* 1962. How can displaying a painting in a non-conventional way shift the way the viewer experiences the artwork? Experiment with displaying your work in non-conventional ways and photograph the results. How does the meaning of your work change when it is displayed on the floor leaning on the wall? The ceiling? Suspended in mid-air from fishing line?

## SUMMER IN THE YOU BEAUT COUNTRY 1962

Identify and describe the most important art elements (eg colour, line, shape, tone, texture, form) and design principles (eg. space, repetition, unity, variety, movement, balance, contrast, proportion and scale) in *Spanish Encounter* 1960 and *Where the bee sucks, there suck I* 1984–86. How does the use of art elements and design principles in each work contribute to the ideas and meanings each work communicates?

Observe John Olsen (designer) Tapeccarias Portalegre Workshops, Portugal (manufacturer) est. 1946, *Joie de vivre* 1964–65. Olsen was introduced to the medium of tapestry during his travels to European galleries, and soon fell in love with this decorative, laborious art-form. How might creating a tapestry be different to creating a painting? What would Olsen have to consider with creating a tapestry that may not apply to his painting practice?

### John OLSEN

*Summer in the you beaut country* 1962

oil on composition board (a–g) 393.4 x 431.0 cm (overall)

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented through The Art Foundation of Victoria by Mr Frank McDonald, Fellow, 1978 (A12.a-g-1978)