



An Unstoppable Force

BETTY CHURCHER with JOHN OLSEN

'Talent is almost the minor thing, the great thing is character...
to be at the easel and try to work things out.'—John Olsen

TEACHERS NOTES



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Introduction

This is a film about an Australian artist, John Olsen, now in his eightieth year and still enthusiastic, inventive and delighting in the ways painting allows him to express himself and his responses to the world around him.

Synopsis

Widely regarded as Australia's greatest living artist, the exuberant 80-year-old John Olsen talks with acclaimed art commentator Betty Churcher about his life's work.

Still painting with all his creative energy in his studio in the NSW Southern Highlands, Olsen speaks of the influence of poetry and Spain on his art and his restless love of Sydney Harbour and the Australian bush.

Now at the height of his creative powers, Olsen has won many awards including the prestigious Archibald Prize in 2005 for his *Self Portrait Janus Faced*, in which he is depicted as the ancient Greek god who is capable of looking both ways at once.

'Janus had the ability to look backwards and forwards, and when you get to my age you have a hell of a lot to think about,' he says.

Through his private journals and sketchbooks, Olsen offers a rare insight into his creative process and love of painting.

He reveals the inspirations that led to some of his famous paintings including *Spanish Encounter* (1960), *Entrance to the Seaport of Desire* (1964), the Sydney Opera House mural *Salute to Five Bells* (1972-73), *Donde Voy? Self Portrait in Moments of Doubt* (1989), *The Bath – Birdsville, Bunny and Pointer* (1997-98) and *Sydney Harbour: Spring Tide* (2007).

As Churcher says, 'He is an artist whose lust for life has few parallels in Australian art'.

Curriculum links

This program would be a valuable resource for middle and senior secondary students of:

- Studio Arts
- Art History
- Australian Studies
- Biography
- Studies of Society and Environment

The activities in this guide are designed to engage students with the approach to painting revealed in discussions Olsen has with art historian, Betty Churcher, with whom he has been friends for many years. The emphasis is very much on Olsen's working method as we watch him creating drawings and paintings.

The filmmakers

An Unstoppable Force is directed by John Hughes who has worked with Betty Churcher on her *Hidden Treasures* series at the National Gallery of Australia and the National Library of Australia, *The Art of War* (2005) at the Australian War Memorial and the *Take Five* series (1999). Hughes says, 'One of the great pleasures in working with Betty is to observe and learn from her exceptional collaborative skills, and her concise and erudite insight'.

Betty Churcher was Director of the National Gallery of Australia from 1990 to 1997. She is an educator who has made many television programs to make art accessible to everyone. Her landmark series *The Art of War* (2005) provides an insight into the work of Australia's war artists.

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John Olsen



John Olsen was born in 1928 in Newcastle and moved to Bondi, a Sydney beachside suburb, seven years later. And so began his lifelong fascination with Sydney Harbour. In 1957 he went to Majorca in Spain where he lived and painted for three years. This experience had a lasting influence on his art. It was here that he began a journal, a fluid combination of words and drawings recording the events of an extraordinarily rich life. He continues to keep a journal. On his return to Sydney in 1960, his talent and originality was becoming widely recognised. His *You Beaut Country* series exploded the stereotypical view of the landscape as a placid place of sheep and gum trees. The bush became a joyous place bursting with life and incident. In 1972 he was commissioned to paint a mural for the just completed Sydney Opera House—*Salute to Five Bells*—inspired by Kenneth Slessor's poem, *Five Bells*. His work is characterised by a deep engagement with all aspects of the Australian landscape and a deep empathy with people. Now 80, Olsen continues to paint and draw in his studio in the southern highlands of NSW.

Over his long career, Olsen has exhibited his work throughout Australia. He is represented in all state gallery collections, the National Gallery of Australia and regional galleries Australia-wide. He is also represented in institutional, corporate and private collections in Australia, Asia, the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States of America.

Olsen has won many awards over his long career including:

1960 Rockdale Prize

1961 HC Richards Memorial Prize (Queensland Art Gallery), Perth Prize

1962 Royal Sydney Show Prize

1963 Georges Art Prize, Melbourne

1964 Launceston Prize, Tasmania

1969 Wynne Prize (Art Gallery of New South Wales)

1977 Order of the British Empire (OBE) for services to the Arts

1985 Wynne Prize (Art Gallery of New South Wales)

1989 Sulman Prize (Art Gallery of New South Wales)

1993 Australian Creative Fellowship

2001 Order of Australia (AO)

2005 Archibald Portrait Prize for *Janus Faced* (Art Gallery of New South Wales)¹

Works shown and discussed in *An Unstoppable Force*

These include:

Spanish Encounter (1960)

Entrance to the Seaport of Desire (1964)

The Sydney Opera House mural, *Salute to Five Bells* (1972–73)

Donde Voy? Self Portrait in Moments of Doubt (1989)

The Bath – Birdsville, Bunny and Pointer (1997–98)

Self-Portrait Janus Faced (2005)

Sydney Harbour: Spring Tide (2007)

as well as drawings and studies from Olsen's journals and sketchbooks.

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Student Activity – Watching the film

During the film, we are privileged to be witness to intimate conversations John Olsen has with Betty Churcher about how he works. This is a rare insight into a great artist's working method. As you watch the film, make notes about Olsen's method.

Creative processes

- What are some of the continuing motifs and colours in Olsen's work that are exemplified in the painting we see him working on in his studio in the early part of the film?
- '...for me...one thing leads to another thing, that you make a mark and it's talking to me to push me this way, do this, and so this kind of conversation, that this rapport that I'm having with it is vital...But there is a consequence to all of this; the picture can't be planned because you don't really know how it's going to finish yourself.'
How is this approach to his work illustrated in what we see Olsen doing with the 'paella'* painting as he talks to Churcher?
(*Paella is a traditional Spanish dish made of rice and many other ingredients, named after the dish-shaped pan in which it is cooked and served.)
- 'It's not really an abstract painting, is it?' – Betty Churcher
In what ways does Olsen explain that he does not think his paintings are abstract? What are some of the objects incorporated into this 'paella' painting?
- 'Dancing', 'gypsy country', 'organic' and 'instinctive' are words Olsen uses to describe how he creates feeling in this work. How are these qualities illustrated through his working method?

Influences and development

In the next part of this film Olsen describes to Churcher how he started out as an artist and what have been the important influences on his artistic development.

- What was one of the most striking aspects of his *Spanish Encounter* painting completed just after Olsen came back from Spain in the early sixties?
- In 1972, what was the major commission Olsen was awarded that kept him busy for 15 months?
- A decade before this, Olsen painted a large picture called *Entrance to the Seaport of Desire*. How does this work prefigure the work that is now such an integral part of a major Sydney landmark?
- When the mural was assembled, what important changes did Olsen decide to make and why?
- In her discussion of *Sydney Harbour: Spring Tide*, completed 30 years after his earlier works based around Sydney Harbour, Churcher refers to the 'wisdom and restraint shown in this picture'. What do you think she means?



John Olsen, *Spanish Encounter* (1960). Image courtesy of the Art Gallery of NSW with thanks to John Olsen.

The journals and the Archibald Prize

- Like many artists, Olsen has kept a journal that incorporates drawings, writings, newspaper cuttings and photographs of his life and working processes. One of the drawings is of Janus, a Greek god who protected entrances and exits, usually depicted as a god who looks both ways.

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He subsequently wrote a poem—*Janus Faced*:

*Sitting in the studio's afternoon,
Summer's gone,
Now's the time of freckled leaves
and long shadows.*

*Men and women after sixty
in slippers feet
pause on the stairs,
Janus faced.*

*The exclamation sounds
of magpies
to the still sleeping earth,
past and present.*

*Self delights in a well worn brush
on an ancient palette.
Time trickles and avoids a vacuum.
Janus faced.²*

In 2005 Olsen entered a work called *Self Portrait Janus Faced* in the Archibald Prize for portraiture, 'preferably of a man or woman distinguished in the arts, letters, science and politics'. The picture was awarded the Archibald Prize when Olsen was 76. What does he say about his readiness to compose such a portrait at this point in his life?

- Churcher sees this rather uncharacteristically dark picture as a companion piece to a painting Olsen did some years earlier called *Donde Voy?* [Where are you going?] *Self Portrait in Moments of Doubt*. What are the similarities in these paintings?

Drawing and other portraits

- How does Olsen's use of charcoal mirror his approach to the creation of paintings?
- What are the qualities Olsen is attracted to in the portraits he has done of ordinary people encountered on his travels—the old man in Dingo, Queensland and *The Bath – Birdsville, Bunny and Pointer*?
- How do these paintings relate to Olsen's better-known landscapes?
- Olsen now shows Betty Churcher and us some of his drawings called *Letters to a Young Artist*. These are all of artists who have been major influences on Olsen's work and include drawings of De Kooning, known for his exquisite drawings but who later felt that his skills as a draftsman slipped when he became part of the New York School. There is also a drawing of John Passmore, Olsen's teacher, who according to Olsen was 'somewhat of a misogynist... but...a brilliant teacher', and Pierre Bonnard, who celebrated life through colour in his art. How do the drawings which incorporate text as well, express respect and admiration for these artists?
- 'The lovely notion of drawing an idea; I want to draw what I think, making the picture a kind of narrative. My work tells a story. But the picture is bigger than the story. The story is the beginning of the conclusion.' – John Olsen.³
What do you understand this statement to mean in terms of Olsen's working method as we see it in this film?



John Olsen's 1987 artwork *De Kooning*. Image courtesy of John Olsen

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Doing enough but no more

- Finally we see Olsen returning to the *Paella* painting he was working on in the opening scenes of this documentary.
- As Olsen puts the final brushstrokes to this painting, what are the things he is most concerned to avoid? What do you understand by the term ‘the sacredness of negative space’ in relation to painting?
- Betty Churcher believes that Olsen ‘is an artist whose lust for life has few parallels in Australian art. [His] contribution to the history of Australian art has been his gift to us of a new way to see the land and ourselves. Both the dark contemplative side of the Australian nature and that easy going loose-limbed ebullient side of the Australian ethos.’
- From what you have seen in this film, and perhaps other examples of Olsen’s work such as the early *You Beaut Country* series, how would you assess his contribution to and influence on Australian art, and how we see the land and ourselves?

Style of the documentary

- In half an hour, Churcher offers us insights into Olsen’s creative processes as well as a brief and selected history of his development as an artist. What do you think the program does best in opening up the world of John Olsen to people who may have heard of him, but who are unfamiliar with his work?
- Betty Churcher has had a long friendship with John Olsen. Do you think this makes the nature of the exchanges between the two of them more relaxed and open?
- What would be lost if this program had been broadcast in black and white?
- How do both the archival footage from the 1970s and the contemporary footage of Olsen at his Southern Highlands home in NSW work to place Olsen in a landscape that has been a driving force in his creative life?
- What did you find most interesting and revealing in this portrait of an artist at work?

Further activities

- Collections in Australia. Next time you have the chance to visit a national, state or regional gallery that holds some of Olsen’s work, have a look at the pictures to develop your understanding and appreciation of both the fluidity of his line and the intensity of his colour.
- Read a review by art critic John McDonald of Olsen’s 2007 exhibition—*A Salute to Sydney*—to celebrate his eightieth birthday at his son Tim Olsen’s Gallery in Sydney in late 2007.
www.smh.com.au/news/arts-reviews/a-salute-to-sydney/2007/12/03/1196530518043.html
- At the Tim Olsen Gallery website, read about John Olsen and a review of his 2007 exhibition, originally published in *Art in America*. This site also has a number of images of Olsen’s works:
www.timolsengallery.com/pages/johnolsen.php?artist_id=1

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References and Further Resources

Books

Deborah Hart, *John Olsen*, Craftsman Press, 1991

A lavishly illustrated account of Olsen's life and work to 1990.

John Olsen, *Drawn From Life*, Duffy and Snellgrove, 1997

Olsen's account of his life and work, written in the form of a reflective journal.

Ken McGregor, in consultation with Jeffrey Makin and John Olsen, *Teeming With Life: John Olsen's Complete Graphics*, Macmillan, 2005

John Olsen, *My Complete Graphics 57–79*, Gryphon Books and Australian Galleries, Melbourne, 1980

John Olsen, *Salute to Five Bells: John Olsen's Opera House Journal*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1973

Websites

<https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/prizes/archibald/2005/28103/>

<http://www.olsenirwin.com/john-olsen.php>

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www.printsandprintmaking.gov.au

Endnotes

1 www.evabreuerartdealer.com.au/cv/olsen_john_bio2.html

2 Read by John Olsen in *An Unstoppable Force*, Film Australia 2008

3 Quoted in Deborah Hart's book, *John Olsen*, Craftsman Press, 1991, Introduction, page ix

An Unstoppable Force - Betty Churcher with John Olsen

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