



## FOREWORD

Newcastle Art Gallery is delighted to present *JOHN OLSEN: The City's Son*, an exhibition celebrating iconic Novocastrian artist John Olsen OBE, AO. Born in Newcastle in 1928, Olsen is considered a master painter and an Australian living treasure, awarded the Wynne Prize in both 1969 and 1985 and the Archibald Prize in 2005.

Since 1960 Newcastle Art Gallery has acquired 35 works of art by Olsen encompassing ceramics, prints and paintings spanning 1954 - 1992, all of which are displayed together here for the first time. The exhibition showcases the notable painting *Still life with boy* 1954, exhibited in Olsen's first exhibition at Macquarie Galleries in 1955 and two significant ceiling paintings created in 1964, *Life Burst* and *The sea sun of 5 bells*. Admired as one of Newcastle Art Gallery's treasures, *Life Burst* 1964 painted several years before the famous Sydney Opera House mural *Salute to Five Bells* 1973 exemplifies the artists' free-flowing, experimental technique which has become the trademark of his career.

Timed to coincide with the opening of the exhibition is the permanent ceiling installation of *The sea sun of 5 bells* 1964, which can now be viewed from both floors of the Gallery. In addition to the works of art drawn from the collection and central to the exhibition is the major new acquisition *King Sun & the Hunter* 2016, recently painted by Olsen to capture the essence of his birthplace. The Gallery is indebted to the Newcastle Art Gallery Foundation, Newcastle Art Gallery Society and members of the community for their support in acquiring a work of art for future Novocastrians and Australians to appreciate in the city's collection.



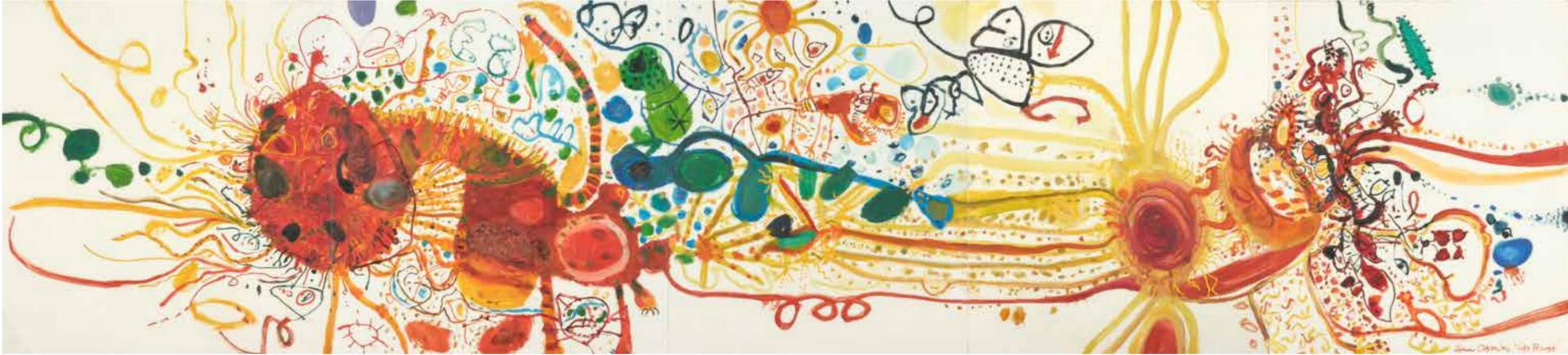
Complementing the new painting is the *Newcastle sketchbook* 2016. Donated by the artist, it contains drawings of the Hunter River that Olsen completed from both his hotel window and from the air - the artist's preferred observation vantage point via helicopter in April 2016.

*JOHN OLSEN: The City's Son* also features works of art that have been personally chosen by the artist from private collections that reflect his affection for Newcastle and the Hunter region's waterways; the beaches, harbour, lake, river and wetlands. Describing the selection as 'going coastal' Olsen trusts that they will resonate with the city's relaxed culture, vibrant and artistic, lifestyle heart.

It has been an absolute joy to curate this exhibition with the artist and I extend my sincerest gratitude to John Olsen for his boundless enthusiasm and passion; Tim Olsen, Katrina Arent and Olsen Irwin Gallery for their fundamental commitment to the success of this project, the private lenders for graciously allowing us to borrow their treasured works of art and Scott Bevan for his charming and insightful written contribution. Finally, I wish to acknowledge our local sponsors Experienced Office Furniture and Port of Newcastle for their generosity in supporting the Gallery's vision for this summer 'homecoming' exhibition celebrating Newcastle's much-loved and highly respected son... John Olsen.

### LAURETTA MORTON

Manager  
Newcastle Art Gallery



## KING OF THE SUN, SON OF THE HUNTER

WALKING into the Aladdin's Cave that is John Olsen's studio, my eyes are filled with water. Framed in the windows is a large lake just outside the studio. The lake's surface crinkles under the morning sun, as swamp hens pick around its edges. It is as though one of Olsen's stunning wetlands paintings has drifted off the canvas and settled on this idyllic patch of the Southern Highlands, where he and wife Katharine live.

I've been invited to John Olsen's studio not to admire the lake outside the window but to be immersed in another body of water, one that flows through both of our lives. Olsen, wearing a jumper of luscious red that seems to highlight that cheeky little boy's grin of his, rises from a chair and greets me.

'Have a look,' he directs, as he turns me to face a large painting on the easel. Initially, I stare at the sun radiating from the centre of the picture. But then my gaze heads to the river. A fluid band of blue, with a dark line in its depths, unravels along the left of the picture, separating and eddying around islands of linen. The bands reunite and continue down the picture before bending and flowing along the bottom. The calligraphic blue swish may be physically on the edges of the linen, but in every other way, it is central to this image. For it represents the Hunter River. John Olsen has not only painted that blue band, he has traced it back to the headwaters of who he is.

AUSTRALIA'S greatest living artist is a Newcastle boy. John Olsen was born at the mouth of the Hunter in 1928. He grew up in Cooks Hill, only a couple of streets away from the childhood home of William Dobell, another Novocastrian who has helped Australians see themselves in paint.

The town Olsen was born in was defined by the massive steelworks that had risen out of the banks of the Hunter River. 'The BHP' (and in Newcastle, you use the definite article when talking about The BHP, giving the place its due prominence)

drew thousands of job-seekers across the river, and it sent back across the water a sense of identity. Newcastle was a steel town. The heavy industries also marked the city in less welcome ways. Pollution sullied the river and made the air gritty. Olsen recalls his mother did the washing, especially the whites, according to which way the wind was blowing.

'I can also remember clearly the sound of the shunting coal trains - "ch-ch-ch",' Olsen says.

John Olsen's earliest memories are also tinged by desperate days. The Great Depression had gripped the world: 'They were very bad years. While my father had a job, with a clothing company called Cooe Clothing, there'd be scarcely a day when some man didn't come and ask to do some gardening or chop some wood. People were going to the markets on Saturday to get scraps from the floor, like cabbage leaves, fruit that had specks in it. It was just terrible.'

Even as a small child, Olsen was plotting his future. 'I was always scribbling in my mother's cookbooks,' he giggles, 'and I remember she complaining, and my father saying, "I'm worried about this boy, if he doesn't stop, it's going to blow his brains". Maybe it did!'

Newcastle Harbour was busy when John Olsen was a boy, with ships from all over the globe gliding past Nobbys into the port, and then out again, beyond the breakwater and over the horizon. As a child, Olsen experienced the sensation of sailing out to sea; his parents took him to Sydney on one of the ships that made the regular overnight voyage to the harbour city with the new bridge. In time, John Olsen himself would be like the great ships that headed out of the Hunter's mouth and into the world. He has lived in Spain, Portugal and London, painted around the globe, and he has followed rivers until they bloom into an inland sea, deep in Australia's heart, at Lake Eyre.

Although Olsen was just seven when he left Newcastle, moving to Sydney with his family, Newcastle has never left him or his art. The wharves, coal ships and beaches have been guided by Olsen out of his memory and into his paintings.

Olsen believes there has to be a sense of place in art; it defines not just an artist but what they create.

'The sense of place is the procreator of a work of art,' he says. 'Avoid a sense of place, and you'd finish up with visual Esperanto.'

To Olsen, Newcastle's sense of place is drawn from the river. 'One cannot imagine Newcastle without the river. Simple as that.'

The river was the reason Lieutenant John Shortland was excited when he sailed into its mouth in 1797 and named it after the infant colony's governor, John Hunter. 'In a little while,' Shortland declared, 'this river will be a great acquisition to the settlement'. Long before the British 'discovered' the river, the original inhabitants had been acquiring sustenance for body and soul from it. They called it Coquun, or Coqoon.

The river unites the people of the Hunter, and it divides us. We all say we love the river. But our love is conditional. We love it, as long as the river plays the role we expect of it. Along its 470-kilometre course, the river has to play so many roles and is clogged with so many competing demands. It is a spring and a port, a swimming hole and a reservoir, an irrigation channel and discharge drain, a wildlife nursery and a dump. It is, above all, the lifeblood and the identity badge of a region. The Hunter is the river.

It has also been a muse for artists, ever since convict painters depicted the penal outpost of Newcastle straggling to life along the river's southern bank.

'The Hunter has never been portrayed like this,' Olsen says, pointing to his painting. 'Not portrayed in this flowing sense, that the river isn't stationary, the river is moving.'

TO portray the river, John Olsen relied not just on memory. He returned to his birth city early in 2016, to observe and draw. His sketchbook teems with river life. He noted how Newcastle remains a harbour city, with a working port, as he quickly sketched the ships passing in front of his hotel window. From a helicopter, he tracked the river, as it unwinds down the valley, nurturing its banks and those who live by it, before it becomes wide and deep enough to cradle coal carriers, which he also drew. From the air, the river defied preconceptions of it being brown and dirty; it was blue, which the artist used as a reference for his painting. On the pages of his sketchbook, Olsen also depicted in smudges and swirls the huge stockpiles of coal, as the soul of the Hunter Valley is gouged out, transported to the port, then carried away by ships, to be converted into energy and wealth somewhere else.

'I'm pleased I did these drawings of observation,' reflects Olsen, 'because it somehow reaffirmed what I didn't want to do.' Instead of painting what he saw, Olsen was determined to portray what he feels. He wanted to transpose the rhythm and flow, the cadences and silences, of the river into something visual. To better understand the poetry of the Hunter River, he plunged into the verse of T.S. Eliot.

Olsen opens a copy of Eliot's *Four Quartets* and turns to 'The Dry Salvages'. In a voice that crackles with energy, the artist reads aloud the poet's words.

'I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river/Is a strong brown god ...'

Olsen has read this poem to himself many times. Its words and images transport him to the Hunter. Eliot's description of the river as 'sullen, untamed and intractable', and 'destroyer, reminder/Of what men choose to forget' reverberates with Olsen, taking him back to the family photos of his parents standing in devastating floodwaters at Maitland. In lines such as 'Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyor of commerce', you think about how the river feeds farmers' hopes in good years ('the smell of grapes on the autumn table'), and drowns them in flood years, and how those very same waters also inspired entrepreneurs to build heavy industries along the Hunter's banks. And the lines, 'Unhonoured, unappropriated/By worshippers of the machine, but waiting, watching and/waiting', remind us all that we ignore the very thing that has defined us, and made us, at our peril. To allow the river to suffer is to hurt ourselves.

As T.S. Eliot wrote, 'The river is within us, the sea is all about us'.

'That's exactly what I think,' enthuses Olsen, as he gestures to his work, 'because when I'm doing that, I am the river. Because I inject my sense of life of what the river is. That's a very important factor.'

'It's more attuned with, say, a painting of the blood stream. What I feel, I am! I had no idea this picture was going to look like that. But I had a feeling inside me that I'd get it there to look like that.'

Through looking at his new painting, John Olsen believes many in the Hunter will see what they already feel. And he hopes the work will encourage all of us to observe the river more carefully - and to cherish it.

'The importance of this painting is it reaffirms what they already feel and think. When the picture is shown, they're going to say, "Yes, we can feel that".'

RIVERS are often used as a symbol of life itself. After all, rivers start and end, or, at least, become something else as they flow into the sea. Rivers twist and turn, run dry and overflow, they wash away the banks, but they also make the soil fertile. Indeed, as he grows older, John Olsen has called on the river-as-life metaphor in interviews.



John OLSEN OBE, AO *Spoonbills Coorong* 1973 lithograph (ed. 3/25) 48.4 x 61.2cm Purchased 1975 Newcastle Art Gallery collection

With this new painting, he tells me, a lifetime's experience has gone into the depiction of the river. As I look at the image, I think of Eliot and a few lines from *Four Quartets*:

'Home is where one starts from. As we grow older/The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated/Of dead and living.'

In this painting, John Olsen has journeyed 'home', back to the place he calls a 'soul city', a place that has helped shape his own soul and vision.

'To be a Novocastrian is an identity, and for those who live in Newcastle, it means something to them,' Olsen muses. 'They know they're different - "Don't come your Sydney tricks here!'. 'And, socially, why else would I be asked to have this exhibition - invited, actually - because for Novocastrians, identity is important. There's a kind of a stubborn will about it. They see themselves as being different.'

'While ever they've got that, they've got substance. They don't belong in that Sydney myth.'

Perhaps, as a Newcastle boy, Olsen also absorbed a vital lesson for being an artist.

'The Novocastrian ethic is "No bullshit!";' he says. I reply that's not a bad ethic to take into art. 'Exactly! Because the primary thing is feeling.'

JUST like a river, the artist can change course without warning. I ask Olsen what the painting is to be called.

'*King Sun & the Hunter*,' he proclaims.

Lauretta Morton, Newcastle Art Gallery's Manager, seems surprised. Her eyes ignite brighter than the Olsen sun in the new painting she has been admiring and imagining as the centrepiece of the upcoming exhibition.

'I thought it was, *The river is a strong brown God*,' Lauretta says. 'No, it's not!', the artist counters, before his face folds into the cheeky boy's expression once more.

'Well, I've changed my mind!'

The studio is filled, not for the first time, with a starburst of laughter.

What remains unchanged is the exhibition's name. *JOHN OLSEN: The City's Son*.

Hearing that title, the artist points to his painting and declares in a voice dripping with, to use an Olsenism, the 'juice of life':

'The city's son has presented the Sun!'

### SCOTT BEVAN

Scott Bevan is a Newcastle-born writer. His books include *Bill: The Life of William Dobell*, *Battle Lines: Australian Artists at War*, and *The Hunter*.

**LIST OF WORKS**  
Newcastle Art Gallery collection:

John OLSEN OBE, AO  
born 1928 Newcastle NSW  
*Still life with boy* 1954  
oil on canvas  
59.9 x 74.2cm  
Gift of Lucy Swanton 1974

*Tres amigos* 1960  
gouache and crayon on paper  
68.0 x 48.7cm  
Purchased 1960

*Life Burst* 1964  
acrylic on plaster on hardboard,  
3 panels  
146.4 x 641.0cm  
Gift of the Sir William Dobell Art  
Foundation 1976

*The sea sun of 5 bells* 1964  
oil on gesso on board, 3 panels  
366.5 x 536.3cm  
Gift of Ann Lewis AO 2011

*Altar* 1966  
oil on canvas  
96.7 x 79.3cm  
Purchased with assistance from the  
Art Gallery and Conservatorium  
Committee 1967

Robert MAIR  
born 1943 New Zealand  
John OLSEN OBE, AO  
born 1928 Newcastle NSW  
*How many stars in your bowl? How  
many shadows in your soul?* 1970  
glazed stoneware  
17.7 x 49.4 x 48.8cm  
Gift of Lady Drysdale 1996

*Cat kitchen (black and white)* 1973  
lithograph (ed. 7/25)  
72.4 x 93.9cm  
Purchased 1973

**Private collections:**

*Double sided frog drawing* n.d.  
mixed media on paper  
47.0 x 34.0cm  
Private collection

*Waterbird* n.d.  
watercolour, gouache and pastel on  
paper  
79.0 x 104.5cm  
Private collection

*Excitable Tree* 1969  
oil on board  
121.0 x 90.0cm  
James and Jacqui Erskine collection

*Bird and Kangaroo landscape* 1979  
lithograph on Arches paper, 2 colours  
(ed. of 50)  
90.0 x 64.0cm  
Private collection

*Down under Spoonbills and Swamp  
frogs* 1979  
lithograph on Arches paper, 3 colours  
(ed. of 50)  
90.0 x 64.0cm  
Private collection

*Moonlight and Distant Wattles* 1980  
oil on canvas  
106.0 x 121.0cm  
Olsen Irwin Gallery

*Untitled - Lake Eyre Frogs* 1983  
mixed media on paper  
98.0 x 69.0cm  
Private collection

*Kitchen Ambience* 1990  
oil on canvas  
137.0 x 183.0cm  
James and Jacqui Erskine collection

*Myself, eminent philosopher and  
scientist viewing sea objects* 1973  
lithograph (ed. 5/25)  
48.3 x 58.2cm  
Purchased 1973

*Spoonbills Coorong* 1973  
lithograph (ed. 3/25)  
48.4 x 61.2cm  
Purchased 1975

*Tree frog* 1973  
lithograph (ed. 5/25)  
40.5 x 39.3cm  
Purchased 1973

*Avocet and leaf* 1976  
etching, aquatint (ed. a/p)  
40.3 x 29.6cm  
Gift of the artist 1977

*Bird and billabong* 1976  
etching, aquatint (ed. a/p)  
dimensions variable  
33.2 x 40.3cm  
Gift of the artist 1977

*Frog and the lake* 1976  
etching and aquatint on paper (ed. a/p)  
40.5 x 27.2cm  
Gift of the artist 1977

*Wild camels* 1976  
etching (ed. a/p)  
40.3 x 33.3cm  
Gift of the artist 1977

Arthur BOYD  
born 1920 Murrumbidgee VIC, died  
1999 Melbourne VIC  
John OLSEN OBE, AO  
born 1928 Newcastle NSW  
*Arthur Boyd and John Olsen* 1978  
etching on paper  
31.8 x 50.4cm  
Purchased 1979

*Frogs at Kakadu* 1992  
mixed media on paper  
72.0 x 69.0cm  
Private collection

*Harbour Tidal Pool* 1993  
watercolour on paper  
100.0 x 190.0cm  
Private collection, Victoria

*Fish Soup* 1999  
mixed media on paper  
64.0 x 51.5cm  
Private collection

*Moon and Flooded River* 2002  
oil on linen  
160.0 x 145.0cm  
Private collection

*Seaport of Desire* Set 2002  
set of 7 etchings  
43.0 x 59.0cm each  
Olsen Irwin Gallery

*Humpty Doo* 2004  
mixed media on paper  
88.0 x 100.0cm  
Staley Private collection

*Metamorphosis, Still life turning into  
landscape* 2004  
oil on canvas  
137.0 x 153.0cm  
James and Jacqui Erskine collection

*Salt Lake Eyre* 2005  
oil on canvas  
182.0 x 200.0cm  
Sophie and Tom Matson collection

*Lake Alexandrina: The Barrage* 2006  
oil on canvas  
137.0 x 153.0cm  
Private collection

Brett Whiteley about to pounce 1979  
lithograph (ed. 52/100)  
65.9 x 50.5cm  
Print Council of Australia Patron print 1979

*Earth hold suite* 1979  
Portfolio of 12 prints:  
*Dragon veins*  
*I had a room*  
*Cicada singing*  
*Black cockatoo*  
*Night bird*  
*Earth hold*  
*Jessica's poem*  
*Cliffs*  
*Forever the snake*  
*Morning tide*  
*Littoralis*  
*Earthlock*  
Portfolio cover  
materials variable: etching, aquatint,  
sugar lift on paper (eds. a/p)  
dimensions variable  
Gift of David Bradshaw through the  
Australian Government's Taxation  
Incentives for the Arts Scheme 1988

*Burning tree I* 1982  
oil on linen  
50.6 x 40.3cm  
Gift of Terrey P Arcus through the  
Australian Government's Cultural Gifts  
Program 2012

*Burning tree II* 1982  
oil on linen  
50.6 x 45.0cm  
Gift of Terrey P Arcus through the  
Australian Government's Cultural Gifts  
Program 2012

*Burning tree III* 1982  
oil on linen  
50.5 x 40.2cm  
Gift of Terrey P Arcus through the  
Australian Government's Cultural Gifts  
Program 2012

*King Sun & the Hunter* 2016  
acrylic on linen  
170.0 x 300.0cm  
Purchased with the assistance of  
the Les Renfrew Bequest, Newcastle  
Art Gallery Foundation, Newcastle Art  
Gallery Society, Laurel Bale, Experienced  
Office Furniture, Peter Frost (in memory of  
Denise Frost), Eric Hardman Family Trust,  
John and Margaret Tonkin and public  
donation 2016

*Papageno and the birds* 1992  
lithograph (ed. 6/150)  
33.0 x 26.0cm  
Gift of Dr Joseph Brown OBE, AO  
for the Gallery's 21st birthday 1998

*Newcastle sketchbook* 2016  
charcoal and ink on paper  
13.0 x 20.5 x 1.2cm  
Gift of the artist 2016

*King Sun & the Hunter* 2016  
acrylic on linen  
170.0 x 300.0cm  
Purchased with the assistance of  
the Les Renfrew Bequest, Newcastle  
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Office Furniture, Peter Frost (in memory of  
Denise Frost), Eric Hardman Family Trust,  
John and Margaret Tonkin and public  
donation 2016

*The Big Wet* 2010  
mixed media on paper  
76.0 x 95.0cm  
Private collection

*Lake Eyre - Jackboot Bay* 2011  
mixed media on French cotton paper  
160.0 x 120.0cm  
Private collection

*Popping Bluebottles (Barrerojoe)* 2012  
oil on linen  
200.0 x 250.0cm  
Private collection

*Sydney Harbour the Tide comes in* 2013  
oil on canvas  
150.0 x 250.0cm  
Private collection

*Paella by the sea* 2014  
mixed media on paper  
80.0 x 80.5cm  
Olsen Irwin Gallery

*Paella Marinara* 2014  
mixed media on canvas  
79.0 x 87.0cm  
Olsen Irwin Gallery

*Encounter at Hidden Lake* 2015  
oil on linen  
140.0 x 150.0cm  
Olsen Irwin Gallery

*Round and about the harbour* 2015  
oil and acrylic on linen  
160.0 x 170.0cm  
Private collection

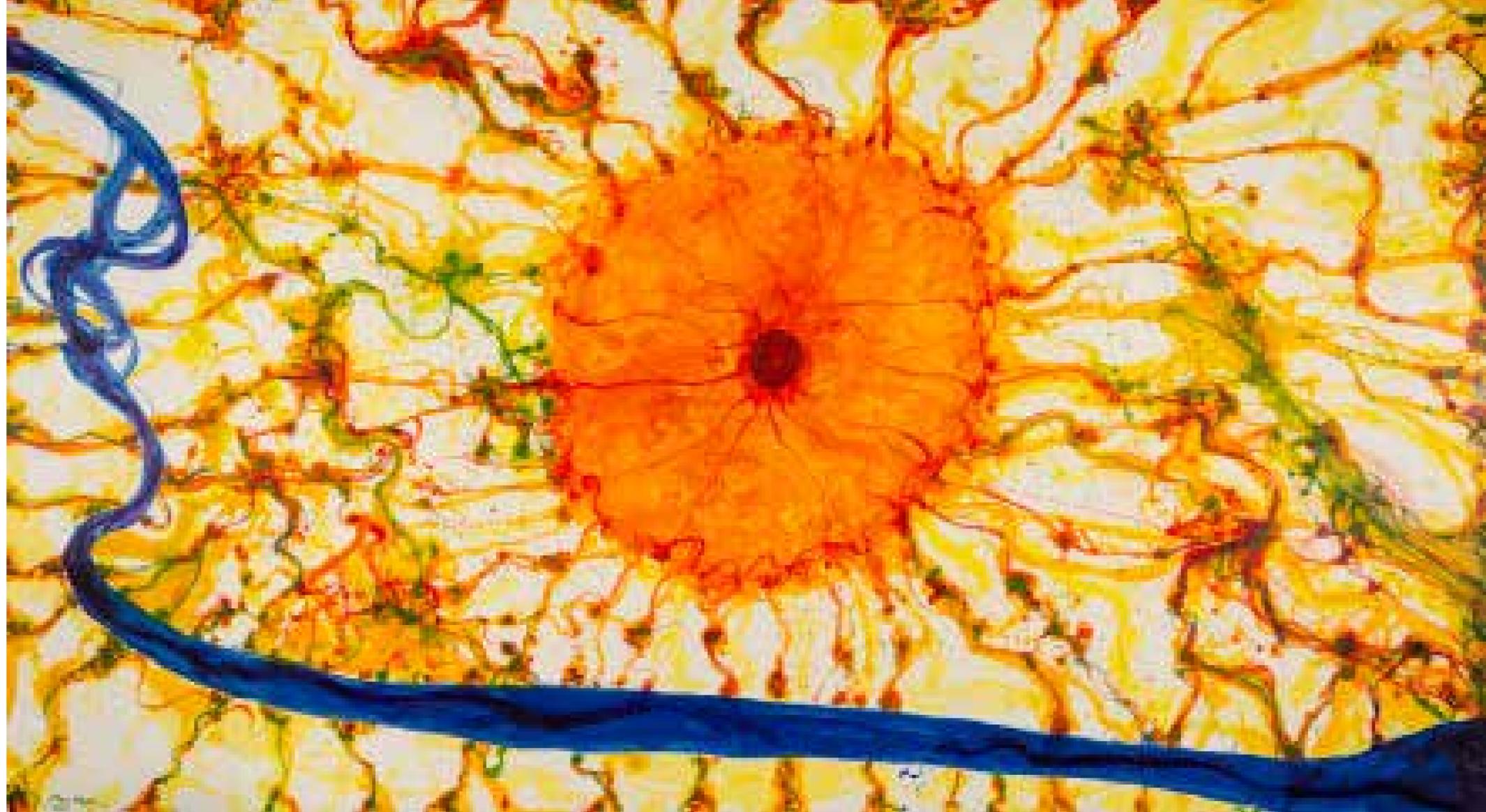
*Childhood by the Sea - Popping  
Bluebottles* 2010  
oil on linen  
167.0 x 183.0cm  
Wiggs Family collection

*Lake Eyre - The Desert Sea* 2010  
mixed media on French cotton paper  
153.0 x 102.0cm  
Private collection

*Sunny Morning - Tree Frogs* 2010  
mixed media on paper  
76.0 x 86.0cm  
Private collection



John OLSEN OBE, AO *The sea sun of 5 bells* 1964 oil on gesso on board, 3 panels 366.5 x 536.3 x 9.8cm Gift of Ann Lewis AO 2011 Newcastle Art Gallery collection  
John OLSEN OBE, AO *Papageno and the birds* 1992 lithograph (ed. 6/150) 33.0 x 26.0cm Gift of Dr Joseph Brown OBE, AO for the Gallery's 21st birthday 1998 Newcastle Art Gallery collection  
John OLSEN OBE, AO *Tree frog* 1973 lithograph (ed. 5/25) 40.5 x 39.3cm Purchased 1973 Newcastle Art Gallery collection



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JOHN OLSEN: The City's Son is made possible by:



Newcastle Art Gallery gratefully acknowledges ongoing support from:



John OLSEN OBE, AO *King Sun & the Hunter* 2016 acrylic on linen 170.0 x 300.0cm Purchased with the assistance of the Les Renfrew Bequest, Newcastle Art Gallery Foundation, Newcastle Art Gallery Society, Laurel Bale, Experienced Office Furniture, Peter Frost (in memory of Denise Frost), Eric Hardman Family Trust, John and Margaret Tonkin and public donation 2016 Newcastle Art Gallery collection

978-0-9943466-6-7  
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Published for the exhibition  
JOHN OLSEN: *The City's Son*  
5 November 2016 - 19 February 2017



*John Olsen*  
the city's son

5 NOVEMBER 2016 - 19 FEBRUARY 2017