

Education Kit

JOHN OLSEN GOYA'S DOG



**NATIONAL
ART
SCHOOL**



Contents

Overview	2
Introduction	3
John Olsen	3
General Activities	4
<i>Dónde voy? Self-portraits in moments of doubt, 1985</i>	5
Drawings and Prints: Portraits of Other Artists	6
<i>Le Soleil, 1965</i>	8
Don Quixote Enters the Inn, 1989	9
Recent Paintings	10

Cover:
John Olsen
Le soleil 1965
oil on hardboard
233.7 x 307.3 cm
Private collection

Overview

This resource been written in line with the Years 7-10 Visual arts Syllabus and the Higher School Certificate Visual arts Syllabus, as a guide to exploring the exhibition or as a pre/post-visit resource. Tertiary students and the general public may also find the resource useful.

Teachers will be able to use this resource in conjunction with the works in the exhibition to engage in a critical and historical study of the art world and to investigate artists, artworks, worlds, and audiences from a range of cultural, political, historical and social perspectives and use these to inform their own artmaking practices.

In examining the works showcased in the exhibition as part of a collection, the students will gain an understanding of the value of the audience as a body of critical consumers and will appreciate their own role, as well as those of the critic, as audience members. The students' investigation of the range of expressive forms, themes, and genres which the works encompass, will also serve to inform their artmaking.



Introduction

John Olsen: Goya's Dog spans eight decades of the artist's practice, from the 1950s, when he first visited Spain, to the present. This exhibition tracks the influences of these Spanish encounters on the artist's sensibility, his palette, and how he views the landscape and the human condition. It delves into the introspection and darker elements that pervade his work, and contrasts these with the sunny, more exuberant aspects of his practice.

Goya's Dog features over 50 major works, sketchbooks, and drawings, many not seen in public for generations.¹

'The National Art School Gallery exhibition *Goya's Dog* traces formative moments in Olsen's life: moments that sowed the seeds for a practice that integrates introspective yin and effervescent yang, and journeys and experiences that led Olsen, like the figures in *Donde voy? Self-portraits in moments of doubt* (1985) to look backwards in order to look to the future, and indeed make sense of the present.'²

The circular nature of life can be seen in the artist returning 'full circle' to the themes that inspired him as a young man, as the most significant artwork to have a profound influence on Olsen as a young man continues to deeply influence his painting practice today. *The Drowning Dog*, one of Francisco Goya's 'black paintings' created in the 1820s, is known for the dark pigments Goya used but also for the dark themes of its subject matter. This work still hangs in the Museo del Prado in Madrid. In 1985 Olsen painted *Goya's dog, life escaping a void* and again now in 2021, Olsen has returned to this subject matter, painting several new reflections on this topic.

'I'm 93, and I'm more entranced with the dark side. Not in a mournful sense, but in a sense of enquiry.' John Olsen, 2021

John Olsen

John Olsen is one of Australia's most celebrated artists, with a career spanning more than eight decades. He is best known for his painting practice which moves between figuration and abstraction however Olsen has worked across a broad range of art media including printmaking, ceramics, drawings, large scale tapestries and murals. In doing so, Olsen has adopted a distinctive style that is defined by his use of colour and energetic form. The landscapes, for which Olsen is perhaps most well-known, depict semi-abstracted Australian scenes of outback vistas and expansive waterways that teem with life.

Born in Newcastle, New South Wales in 1928, Olsen studied art in Sydney including at East Sydney Technical College (now the National Art School). In 1955 he took part in the important exhibition *Contemporary Australian Paintings: Pacific loan exhibition* and in 1956 showed in the benchmark exhibition of abstract works *Direction 1* with John Passmore, Robert Klippel and others.

Olsen lived in Europe from 1957 to 1960, settling in Spain. During this period, he became influenced by Spanish artists such as Goya, Velazquez, Miro and developed an interest in Eastern philosophy and poetry, which has continued to inspire his work. Soon after his return to Australia, he painted the exuberant *Spanish encounter* (1960), which encapsulates a vitality stemming from his experience of Spain combined with the pulsating activity of Sydney's inner-city life.

The image of the sun – the energy at the core of all life – is a reoccurring motif in Olsen's work, along with the egg and the seed. Similarly, water in all its forms has provided Olsen lifelong inspiration and has inspired numerous paintings such as *The bay and tidal pool* (1977) and *Nightfall, when wattle stains the doubting heart* (1980).

Olsen's prestigious career is recognised by his success in winning the Wynne Prize in 1969 and 1985, the Sulman Prize in 1989 and the Archibald Prize in 2005, among many other awards throughout his long career. He was awarded an Order of the British Empire in 1977 and an Order of Australia in 2001.

¹ <https://nas.edu.au/john-olsen/>

² Wolfson, Chloé. "Where Am I Going? Moments Of Illumination And Doubt In The Work Of John Olsen." *Art Monthly Australia* no. 328 (Winter, 2021): p 88



General Activities

General activities have been designed to aid students to better comprehend the artworks as well as John Olsen's styles of painting. These activities have been divided into three sections, which teacher can use to enhance the students' knowledge and also provoke curiosity.

Pre-visit Activities

- In a small group with your fellow students discuss your ideas about painting. What are your ideas about what painting can be and what can it express? Make a list of your key findings.
- Research the work of a Spanish artist of your choice from the list below:
 - Francisco Goya
 - Joan Miró
 - Diego Velázquez
- Write a paragraph about the three key concepts in their works and their unique painting styles.

In Gallery Activities

- Choose 3 artworks that grab your attention. Look at them closely. How might these artworks be connected? In the space below, explain three big ideas that might connect the artworks to one another.
- Refer back to your research on Spanish artists and your group list of ideas about painting. What else have you discovered today that might be new or different after your experience of the exhibition?
- List the painting techniques used in this exhibition. Create a visual diary of these techniques and note the variations in effect. What technique do you prefer and why?

Post-visit Activities

- Inspired by this exhibition, choose a painting technique that you have not attempted before. Apply this approach to a landscape, portrait, or a narrative scene of your choice. What have you learnt from this process? Are you happy with the result? Consider these questions when you present your work to the class.
- Write a review or analysis about your favourite work in the exhibition. What emotions does the image convey and why is it your favourite work?



Dónde voy? Self-portraits in moments of doubt

Dónde voy? Self-portraits in moments of doubt was painted by John Olsen in 1989. *Dónde voy?* (or *Where am I going?* In English), captures an aspect of Olsen's practice that is in contrast with his other works which are more about irrepressible vitality and nature. In this introspective painting, Olsen confronts the darkness in his life and looks mortality in the face.³ In the left-hand panel, the artist's 'well-known Napoleonic dome' 'pushes into a lighter golden section occupied by a dark rectangle shape: dawn breaking on the horizon of the darkened mind. In the panel on the right, all is shadowy, save for the eerie tones of the egg: hope floating in the void.⁴

Discussion

- What might be happening in this painting? What details provide clues? How does the title influence the meaning you find in the work?
- Look carefully at the figures and their placement. What do you think each character might be thinking or feeling?
- How has the artist used colour to represent emotion and what is its purpose in the composition?

Activity

Create your own self portrait representing different aspects of your personality. Consider how your emotions or favourite activities might feature in your portrait. Use contrasting colours in your composition to heighten the narrative in your work.



Dónde voy? Self-portraits in moments of doubt, 1989
oil on canvas (diptych)
183 x 366 cm
Private collection, Sydney

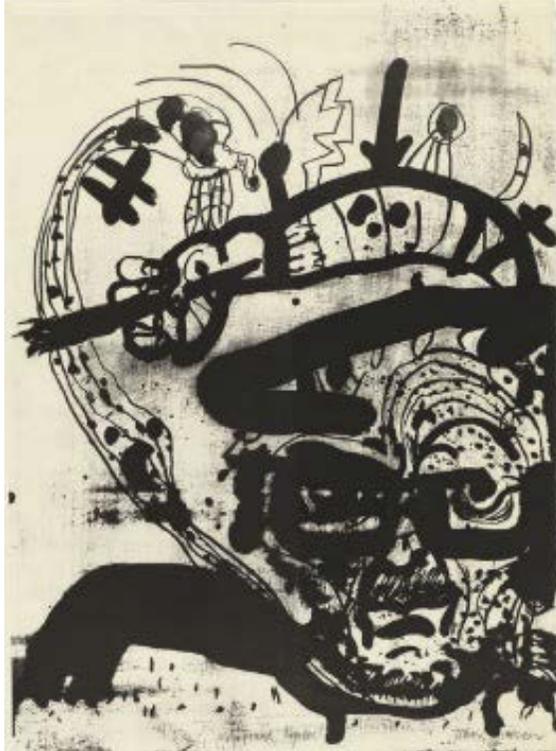
³ <https://nas.edu.au/john-olsen-goyas-dog/>

⁴ Wolfson, 2021. P. 88



Drawings and Prints: Portraits of Other Artists

John Olsen was inspired by many renowned artists who came before him. This section of the exhibition is dedicated to Olsen's drawings and a print featuring portraits of some of the artists he most revered.



My friend Rapotec, **1984**

lithograph, printed in black ink, from one stone on medium-weight smooth white wove paper 74.3 x 55.4 cm (image), 74.3 x 56.6 cm (sheet) National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Gordon Darling Australasian Print Fund 1995

'This is Stan Rapotec at seventy: looks very much like a Nankeen kestrel, I think. Perhaps of my generation he is the artist who most symbolised abstract expressionism; his black angular brush-lines are like iron rods thrown down by Zeus, colour is an indifference to him. His work, like himself, has a very dramatic appearance. When either of them are in a room, I think a clap of thunder is about to take place...'



Lloyd Rees, c. 1987

watercolour, ink and wash on paper 79.5 x 60 cm Private collection, Adelaide

'Lloyd Rees — a note to a young artist: At 93 he was spent; his beloved Majorie gone — his eyes had rendered him to depressing blindness. Yet spiritually he never demurred, never was there an Australian artist who emanated [sic] such love. In his last interview he said "if you look for light it is always there"'



Degas – the last years, 1886

ink and wash on paper
76 x 57 cm
Collection of the artist

‘During his last days at dusk Degas would walk down Rue Laffite to look in the windows of the great dealers of the period. After all, he was the great Flaneur. ‘My legs are still in working order, my eyes? GOD I’M SCREWED’. His body was so small that when they lifted the coffin his body rolled! ‘Tell Forain to say at my funeral to say simply – “He loved drawing & so do I”’



Renoir IV, 1987

mixed media on paper
76 x 40 cm
Collection of the artist

‘But soon Renoir was immobilized by his illness – and had to be carried by stretcher up to his studio. His brushes were prepared for him and placed on his lap. Renoir would become engrossed in his painting and forget the grief and loneliness and worry that the death of his wife and the call up of his sons were causing him. In December 1919 he asked for his brushes and palette – he worked on a flower piece that reflected none of his pain. He put down the brushes after a time – lay back on the pillow, sighed and said, ‘I think I’m beginning to learn something now’’. A few hours afterwards he died.’

Discussion

- List the different emotions that you feel when you look at these drawings/print?
- Analyse these images what do these portraits tell you about the characters they portray?
- How does the artist use line for dramatic effect? Which elements are the most dominant and how do they influence our understanding of the works?

Activities

- John Olsen is famous for saying that painting and drawing was like taking a ‘line for a walk’ where he did not let his pencil leave the page. Working with oil stick or charcoal create a single line self-portrait while looking in a mirror.
- Write a letter to your future self. What do you aspire to be? What advice would you give your future self?



Le Soleil

Olsen made additions to *Le Soleil* in situ at a home on the Northern Beaches of Sydney, including the handprint of one of the four daughters. The painting is still in the same family collection and hung on the ceiling overlooking the ocean, and is one of the few Olsen ceilings in a private collection.

Discuss

Ask students:

- At first glance, how does this painting make you feel? What qualities in the work make you feel this way? Think about the composition and arrangement. Discuss how these enhance the emotional impact.
- How has the artwork installation influenced your understanding of the themes in this work?
- What technique/ materials have been used by the artists?

Activity

Just as John Olsen has used the sun to represent his feelings and memories of his time in Spain, think of a key symbol that represents and communicates your connection to a particular place. Create an artwork or write a short story about how you belong to that place.



Le Soleil, 1965
oil on hardboard
233.7 x 307.3 cm
Private collection



Don Quixote Enters the Inn

Don Quixote is believed to be the first modern novel by Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes. This novel revolves around adventures of a self-proclaimed knight, *Don Quixote*, his squire, *Sancho*, and their horse and donkey; *Rocinante* and *Dapple*. Olsen, whose passion for poetry, literature and history is inextricably linked with his art practice, immersed himself in the culture, noting: 'You don't understand the Spanish unless you have read *Don Quixote*. What a work of art it is, that has captured – and also, reflecting it back upon them, helped create – the spirit of a whole people. It is a book one can live by. This is the highest aspiration of art.'⁷ (In this exhibition, Cervantes' protagonist is the subject of *Don Quixote enters the inn* (1989), a dual-toned composition where sunny optimism and messy reality collide.)

Discussion

- What might have happened in this painting? What details provide clues?
- Describe the objects, animals, and colours you can see.
- What message do you think this composition communicates about the key character Don Quixote?

Activity

Draw a portrait of your favourite imaginary character. Include symbols, objects and even an animal that represent ideas about the character.



Don Quixote Enters the Inn, 1989
oil on canvas
183 x 244 cm
Private collection, Adelaide



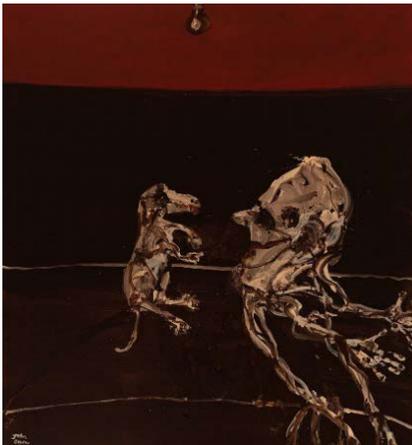
Recent Paintings



Reflections on Goya's dog I, 2021
acrylic on Belgian linen
150 x 140 cm
Collection of the artist



Reflections on Goya's dog III, 2021
acrylic on Belgian linen
125 x 140 cm
Collection of the artist



Reflections on Goya's dog II, 2021
acrylic on Belgian linen
150 x 140 cm
Collection of the artist



Velázquez's eggs, 2021
acrylic on Belgian linen
125 x 140 cm
Collection of the artist

Discuss

- Ask students to look at the works as whole come up with a list of themes and trends.
- What is similar? What is different? What items appear in multiple artworks?
- How do these artworks communicate a sense of loneliness and isolation?
- Compare and contrast these four images – does their meaning change if you view them individually or as a suite of four images?

Activity

Create your own set of paintings based on your experience during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Refer to John Olsen's use of compositional devices in your artworks.



Mental Health

If this exhibition has made you think about your mental health or the mental health of someone you know and you need to talk to someone, we recommend the following resources.

Kids Helpline

1800 55 1800

kidshelpline.com.au

Free phone and online counselling service for young people.
Available 24/7.

Black Dog Institute

www.blackdoginstitute.org.au

Mental health resources and support tools.

Lifeline

13 11 14

lifeline.org.au

Provides all Australians access to crisis support and suicide prevention services.

1800 RESPECT

1800 737 732

Support if you, or someone you know, is experiencing sexual assault or domestic and family violence.

Parent Line

1300 1300 52

www.parentline.org.au

Parent Line is a free telephone counselling and support service for parents and carers with children aged 0 to 18 who live in NSW.

headspace

headspace.org.au

headspace is the National Youth Mental Health Foundation providing early intervention mental health services to 12-25 year olds.

Reach Out

www.reachout.com.au

Online youth mental health service.

Beyond Blue

1300 224 636

www.beyondblue.org.au

Provides support programs to address issues related to depression, suicide, anxiety disorders and other related mental illnesses.

NACCHO

National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation

02 6246 9300

www.naccho.org.au

Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services and Aboriginal Medical Services in each state and territory.



National Art School

NAS is the leading fine arts school in Australia, with a unique, studio-based teaching model that has nurtured many of the country's most renowned artists. Building on its 100-year history at the old Darlinghurst Gaol, the school looks to the future as a 21st Century centre of artistic excellence and provides a vital cultural hub in the heart of Sydney, promoting art and creativity for everyone.

'I'm 93, and I'm more entranced with the dark side. Not in a mournful sense, but in a sense of enquiry.'

John Olsen, 2021



Find Us

156 Forbes Street
Darlinghurst, Sydney
NSW 2010

+61 2 9339 8744
enquiries@nas.edu.au

CRICOS 03197B

Look at Us

nas.edu.au

@nas_au

NationalArtSchool

@nas_au

Join Us

To find out about events and what's on sign up for our mailing list at nas.edu.au

School Workshop Packages

Inspired by *John Olsen: Goya's Dog*, NAS is offering School Workshop packages in Drawing, Painting and Printmaking. For package prices and available dates visit nas.edu.au

JOHN OLSEN: GOYA'S DOG

MAJOR SUPPORTER



PUBLICATION SUPPORTER



SUPPORTER



WITH ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FROM THE OLSEN EXHIBITION SUPPORTERS GROUP