

# Inveterate traveller's images of the world

**W**ERE there any doubt about Margaret Olley's status as a national treasure, and one much loved in her former home town of Brisbane, the sizeable attendance at the opening of her *Life's Journey* exhibition at the University of Queensland (1200 people, plus 700 at the public conversation between Olley and biographer Christine France) would have put that to rest.

Olley's best-known works — the interiors and still-life oil paintings — are absent. Instead we see the world as this inveterate traveller has observed it: in pen and watercolour, monotypes, washes and a few paintings. These images have been little exhibited, yet they have value as travel notes and aides-memoires, underpinning the works that have earned her national reputation.

The exhibition includes a portrait of the artist by Donald Friend, *Olley, Paris* (c.1972) and it's a cracker, capturing her spirit and wit. It is also an indication of friendship, and Olley's travel in the company of other artists.

The earliest works, of Venice in the early 1950s, are translucent, observed scenes and, while these are Olley as we have rarely seen her, her interest in the human scale is evident.

Part of Olley's involvement with Brisbane was through the Johnstone Gallery, and in the '50s, she mailed drawings back from overseas for exhibitions there. From this period, *Cassis* (1951) was acquired by the university and is part of a body of works that initiated this show.

## VISUAL ART

**Margaret Olley: Life's Journey**  
University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane, until April 19. S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney, May 8-June 28; Newcastle Region Art Gallery, August 15-October 25.

Some early images from overseas are highly detailed, and scenes from Portugal (monotypes with strongly flattened qualities) are like village idylls. *Old Port, Nice* (1950) adds depth to what we know of Olley's still lifes, with watercolour bringing abstract qualities into the buildings behind the port.

In the last room, more gems emerge from Olley's trip to Papua New Guinea in 1968. These images use more watercolour washes, and are loose, humble in size, observed impressions of the landscape and local rituals.

Masked white faces in *Mudmen Goroka* (1968) details these fascinating rites, and landscapes such as *Mt Hagen landscape, New Guinea* and *Dualo Pass, New Guinea* suggest the dominance of nature in this place.

The catalogue adds academic weight and new research to these images. The exhibition is a strong contribution to research on Olley, her art, life and unique place in Australian art history and extends the innovative curatorial leadership now established at the University Art Museum.

Louise Martin-Chew



**Notes and aides-memoires:** Sketch titled *Brisbane River*, by Margaret Olley