



The past brought to life ... (from left) Newcastle (1965), ink and watercolour on paper; Venice (1952), monotype and watercolour on paper.

# Free spirit says it all with the stroke of a pen

Margaret Olley is best known for her intimate still lifes but an exciting exhibition of her early drawings reveals her as an intrepid traveller.

## VISUAL ART JOHN McDONALD

AT THIS stage of her brilliant career, there is nothing that any critical review can add to or subtract from the reputation of Margaret Hannah Olley. There have been two retrospectives, two Orders of Australia, four honorary doctorates. She has been painted by Australia's best-known artists and hailed for her constant public benefactions.

As long as I can remember, Olley (born 1923) has been a commanding presence in the Sydney art world: generous to a fault with those people she respects but utterly dismissive of the humbug and pretension that fills superficial types with breathless excitement.

**Margaret Olley:  
Life's Journey**  
S.H. Ervin Gallery, until 28 June.  
Newcastle Region Art Gallery,  
August 15 to October 25.

**A Field Guide To Antlers  
And Islands**  
National Art School Gallery,  
until June 13

An Olley show, any Olley show, is always a newsworthy event and many are the gallery directors who have vied for a piece of the action. In recent years, Stephen Alderton at the Lismore Regional Gallery has found a few innovative ways to celebrate Olley's tenuous connection with her birthplace. Now, Nick Mitzevich and Michele Helmrich of the Queensland

University Art Museum have devised an exhibition that does justice to the years the artist spent in Brisbane and the works that have accumulated in the university's collection. The show has just commenced at the S.H. Ervin Gallery and will also travel to Newcastle, another city with which Olley has an indelible association.

As a title, *Margaret Olley: Life's Journey* has a disturbing finality. Listening to speakers extolling her deeds and virtues at the S.H. Ervin the other night, the artist might have felt like Mark Twain, who was once obliged to write to a newspaper refuting his own obituary.

There is, however, plenty of vitality left in that forceful personality and plenty of paintings still to be added to her catalogue *raisonne*.

However, the curators may be correct in assuming that the subject of this show – Olley's drawings – will not require a substantial sequel. In the early part of her career Olley drew constantly, filling one sketchbook after another. In later life she has concentrated on painting, almost to the exclusion of drawing. In a catalogue interview she makes light of this change. "Mind you, you're drawing all the time with the paintbrush," she tells Christine France. "Whatever you're doing it's all drawing – it's all related."

In fact, the move away from drawing has coincided with many changes, some brought about by age and diminished mobility, others simply a matter of temperament. In her younger days Olley was an intrepid traveller who thought nothing of

camping out for weeks – sleeping in temporary shelters and doing without the basic amenities – in search of subject matter. She made solo visits to New Guinea and Cambodia at a time when few women would have considered it safe or desirable.

While those days are long gone, she is now less of a free spirit, caught up in a whirl of commitments that keeps her close to home. When she has travelled during the past decade it has usually been to see major exhibitions by artists such as Vermeer and Matisse and always in the company of friends. The result has been a gradual withdrawal from genres such as landscape in favour of the hermetic pleasures of still life. Nowadays, allowing for the occasional excursion to the bush or beach, Olley finds all the



Eye and hand in harmony ... Olley's *Concarneau, Brittany* (1952), ink, watercolour and gouache on paper.

subject matter she needs within the walls of her Paddington terrace.

In this exhibition we meet a completely different artist: a young woman who made her first overseas trip in 1949, having recently become headline news as the subject of William Dobell's second Archibald Prize-winning portrait. Fleeing the attentions of an over-eager press, she left for Europe to begin her acquaintance with the old masters. She would stay in France for almost three years, returning in 1953 only because of her father's death.

During that first period in France, Olley drew everything in sight, with a quick, confident line that betrayed her exhilaration at finally being in a place where so many great artists had gone before. She based herself at Cassis, in the south, where she received visits from expatriate friends. From time to time she would set off on an excursion with David Strachan, Moya Dyring, Margaret Cilento or another boon companion. In this

way Olley visited places such as Brittany, Italy and Portugal, making drawings that may be seen in this show.

When some of her European drawings and watercolours were shown at the Marodian Gallery in Brisbane in 1950, a review in *The Courier-Mail* was titled "Margaret Olley steals the show". Elizabeth Young praised Olley's "dash and vigour" and declared her works to be "charming, competent and direct". Meg Stewart, who quotes this review in her 2005 biography of the artist, says that Olley was lucky to get such a positive response because her drawings were travel notes "done on the run", rather than major works.

This raises a curious problem, because Olley's pictures, as revealed in this survey, were most certainly travel notes but they have a freshness and vitality that is not to be found in many Australian paintings produced in that era. One misses this spark in Olley's work when she turns more exclusively to still life painting.

In her ink drawings done in Paris, Versailles and the south of France, we see the artist's talent for quick observation and her ability to suggest much with a few deft flicks of the pen. The eye and hand are working in perfect harmony. A dash of colour - red roofs in Cassis, green trees in Cannes - or a thin wash of ink provide all the atmosphere she requires.

At the same time that she was making these quick, virtuosic sketches, Olley was experimenting with a monotype technique she had learned from the British artist Sir Francis Rose. The show contains pictures of Venice, Dieppe and the Portuguese fishing village of Nazare, made in this slightly puzzling manner, looking like no other monotype I've ever seen. The lines in these works are more deliberate than in her ink sketches, with a slight fuzziness, like a blurred stencil. They are less spontaneous and more illustrative than the drawings.

Olley is probably at her best as a graphic artist when she is most casual. Her pen and ink works are stylistically of their time: they echo the work of countless artists whom we associate with the School of Paris and British neo-romanticism. Yet they are as individualised as a piece of handwriting.

When Olley returned to Australia and began to devote significant time to painting, her drawings become a bit more uneven. In some works she uses the unlovely medium of felt-tipped pen to turn out a picture in tradesman-like fashion. In her drawing of Stamford House (1956), there is no mistaking her skill as a draughtswoman but the monotonous line made by the pen is a far cry from the delicate threads and splashes of ink found in her European works.

In drawings made in Brisbane, Newcastle and Paddington, in New Guinea or Kuala Lumpur, she mixes up her mediums and styles. *Malacca* (1969), a rapidly executed picture of a sailboat, is

**One misses this spark in Olley's work when she turns more exclusively to still life painting.**

one of the most vigorous works on display. Some of her other drawings from Malaysia feel slightly perfunctory, as if she is going through the motions of recording a likeness, not putting heart and soul into the task. Most of her New Guinea watercolours really do feel like travel notes.

It was obviously not easy trying to jot down impressions when everything was in rapid motion, as in her pictures of native dancers. Then again, as Prue Ahrens points out in the catalogue, it is just as likely that some drawings were based on photographs - and this almost invariably drains the life out of an image.

Ultimately, the exhibition is much greater than the sum of its parts. Many viewers will experience feelings of nostalgia for views of Sydney, Newcastle or Brisbane that are gone forever. But even if one is too young to remember these scenes, Olley's drawings capture the spirit of a place and bring to life these vistas of extinct streets and houses. The fascination Olley found in these subjects has been communicated to her drawings and we can still feel their attraction.

As a final curiosity there are three early figure drawings by Olley in a show at the National Art School Gallery called *A Field Guide To Antlers And Islands* (until June 13). Small but brainy curator Katie Dyer has brought together the battered old props and casts used as models by generations of students, along with a selection of works by well known - and lesser known - alumni. In the former category, as well as Olley, there are drawings by James Gleeson, Ken Unsworth, Tony Tuckson, Dorothy Thornhill and Frank Hinder. It is not a masterpiece show but one of those rare exhibitions that seeks to analyse the nuts and bolts of the creative process. And if this is not sufficient, upstairs there is the eye-catching *Large Art 1720-2009*, by a more recent National Art School graduate, the artist known as What. Or should that be: What!?