

Olley's emergence as an icon of Australian art

Monday, 10 March 2014

This is the second in a series of feature articles about the Margaret Olley Art Centre and the celebrated artist it honours.

This article examines Margaret Olley's emergence as one of Australia's leading painters.

Margaret Olley was a larger-than-life figure in the Australian art scene, as famous for her gregarious zest for life and her generosity as a patron and benefactor for the arts as she was for her colourful still-life paintings.

Her artworks featured at more than 90 solo exhibitions, treasured for her intimate style of painting which she really started to develop when she left home to attend art school and further her studies.

Olley began classes at Brisbane Central Technical College in 1941 and two years later moved to Sydney and enrolled in an art diploma course at East Sydney Technical College, where she graduated with A-class honours in 1945.

She then quickly became involved in the post-war Sydney art scene, which included artists such as Jean Bellette, William Dobell, Russell Drysdale, Donald Friend, Sidney Nolan, Justin O'Brien and David Strachan.

Olley held her first solo exhibition at the Macquarie Galleries in 1948, the same year Dobell painted an Archibald Prize-winning portrait of Olley dressed in a gown fashioned from parachute silk and a hat adorned with flowers.

She made her first international foray the following year, living in France and travelling extensively to Spain, Brittany, Venice, Lisbon and London.

When her father died in 1953, Olley returned to her mother's home to live and paint and she remained in Brisbane for 10 years, painting for exhibitions, designing theatre sets and murals, and opening an antique shop in Stones Corner.

She gave up alcohol in 1959 and her creative output and wellbeing increased as a result. This was the beginning of decades of commercial success with galleries and collectors, enabling her to invest in properties in Sydney and Newcastle and giving her the independence to continue to paint, travel and eventually become a benefactor to artists and public galleries.

Olley established the Margaret Olley Art Trust in 1990, to acquire paintings for public collections, the same year the first retrospective of her work was held at the S.H. Ervin Gallery in Sydney in 1990, accompanied by the launch of a monograph written by Christine France. It was followed by a retrospective exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW (AGNSW).

Olley was appointed an Officer Order of Australia (AO) in 1991 and a Companion of the Order of Australia (AC) in 2006.

AGNSW made her Life Governor of the gallery in 1997 and named the Margaret Olley, Twentieth Century European Gallery in her honour in 2001.

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The Gallery and Café is open from Wednesday to Sunday 10am – 5pm.