

My Salute to Five Bells

By John Olsen

Member of the Order of Australia and Archibald-prize-winner John Olsen charts the journey of the biggest commission of his career—to produce a mural for the Sydney Opera House.

This book features a full reproduction of Olsen's illustrated journal, one of the most spectacular art manuscripts in the National Library of Australia's collection. Olsen's great intellect and creativity shine through in his lists of 'Things I like', haikus, and playful and poetic expression. His margin notes and reminders, such as 'You've got to interrupt the gestalt' and 'Remember Olsen vitality transcends pleasure', offer great insight into the artistic process of one of our living treasures.

Olsen reflects on the mural and Kenneth Slessor's poem, *Five Bells*, which inspired it. He includes funny anecdotes about and insights into the commission—appearing in this book for the very first time. Alongside his lively account are full-colour spreads and details of the mural, original works of art, a self-penned poem and a page from the hand-written notebook of Kenneth Slessor showing the words and imagery that so inspired Olsen. Robert Walker's beautiful black and white photographs illustrate Olsen's story; we see him painting directly onto the mural in situ at the Opera House and reaching to add a final detail as one of his assistants—a former Kings Cross bouncer—looks on.

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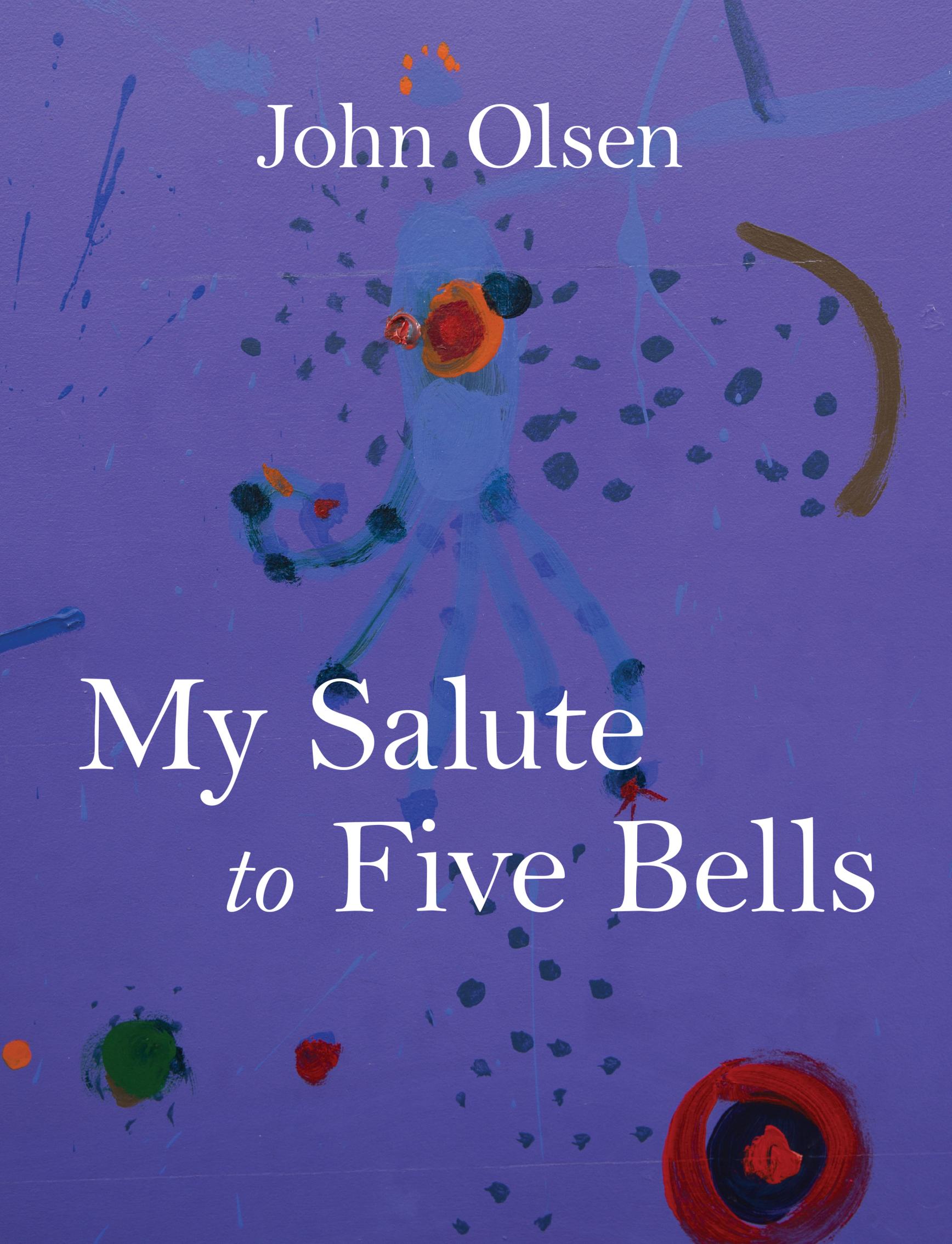
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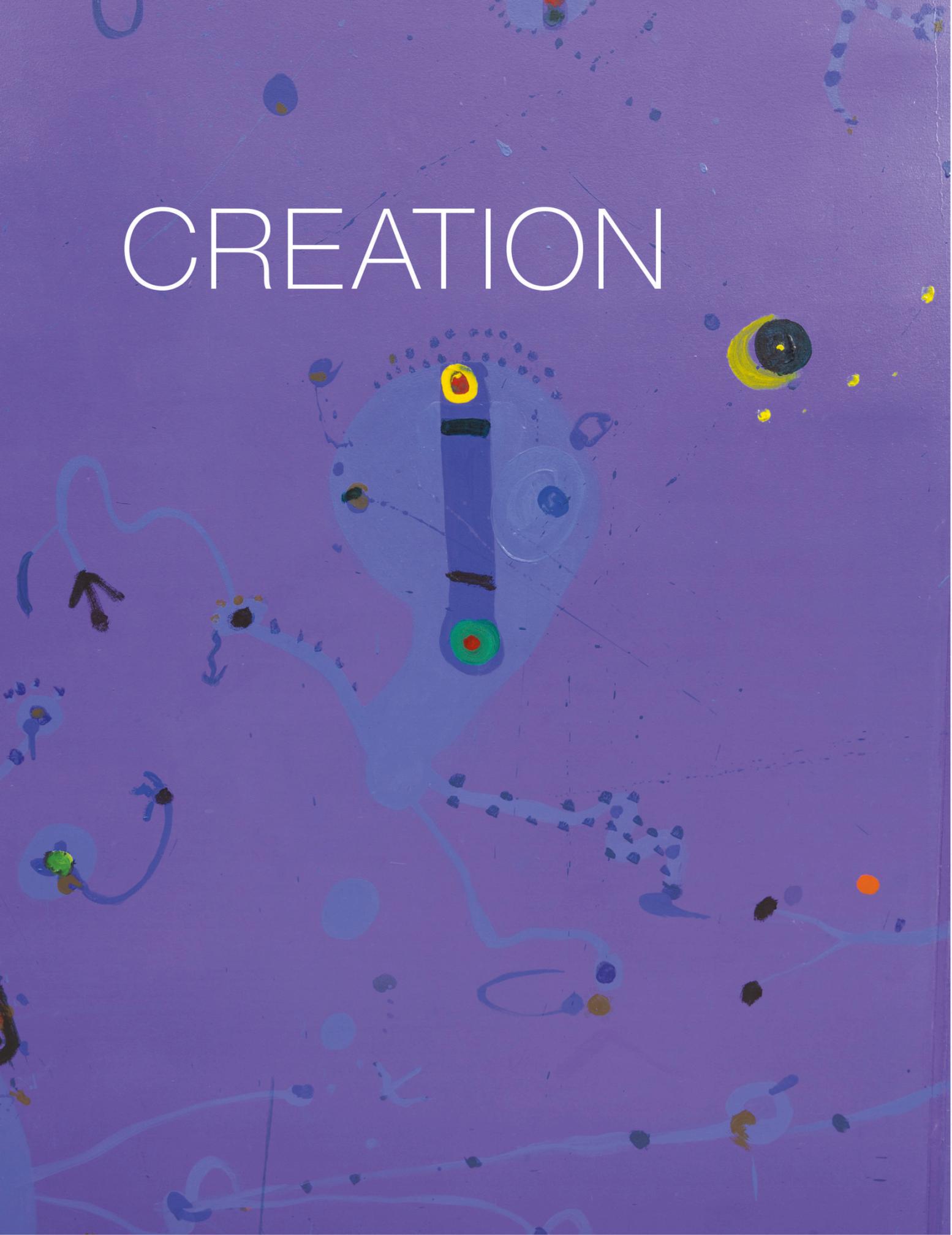


John Olsen

My Salute
to Five Bells



CREATION



The commission for my Opera House mural came about in quite a surprising way. I was asked to lunch with James Gleeson, who was the Chairman of the Dobell Foundation and a very good writer and painter in his own right. He was also a very good poet as well, which is one of my lasting interests. He put it to me: 'Would you like to do a mural in the Sydney Opera House?' It was such a surprise to be asked. I think my reply was, 'Can I start tomorrow?' It was a generous offer, not enormous in terms of money, but the opportunity to do something at the Opera House was out-of-the-moon stuff! We talked about a site and he said, 'Well, you better come see what there is available'. Frankly speaking, there wasn't much available. At the rear of the



concert hall was the most splendid view of Sydney Harbour and there was no doubt in my mind that this was where the mural ought to be.

By this time, Jørn Utzon, the Danish architect who designed the Opera House, had resigned from the project after being refused pay, and left Australia. Then Davis Hughes came into it. Davis Hughes was Minister for Works and a senior Country Party member. I remember meeting Hughes after Utzon had gone and what arrogance! How delighted he was that he was in charge of the whole project! There was

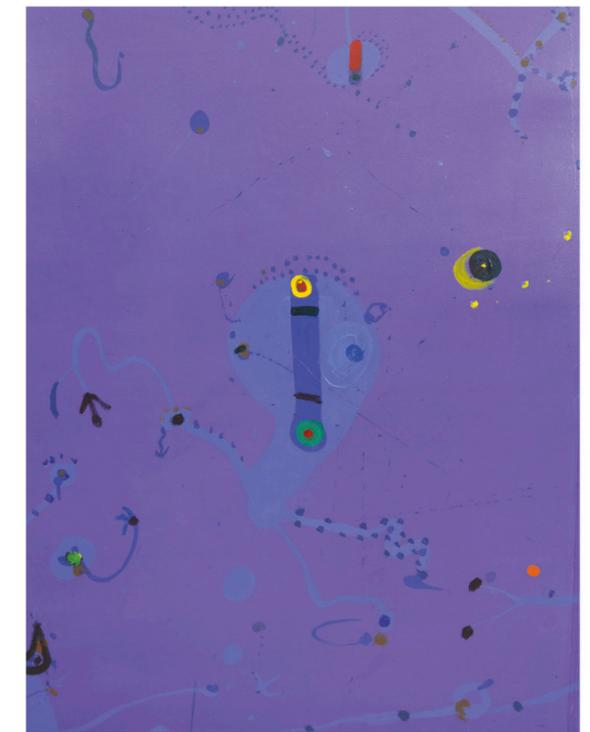
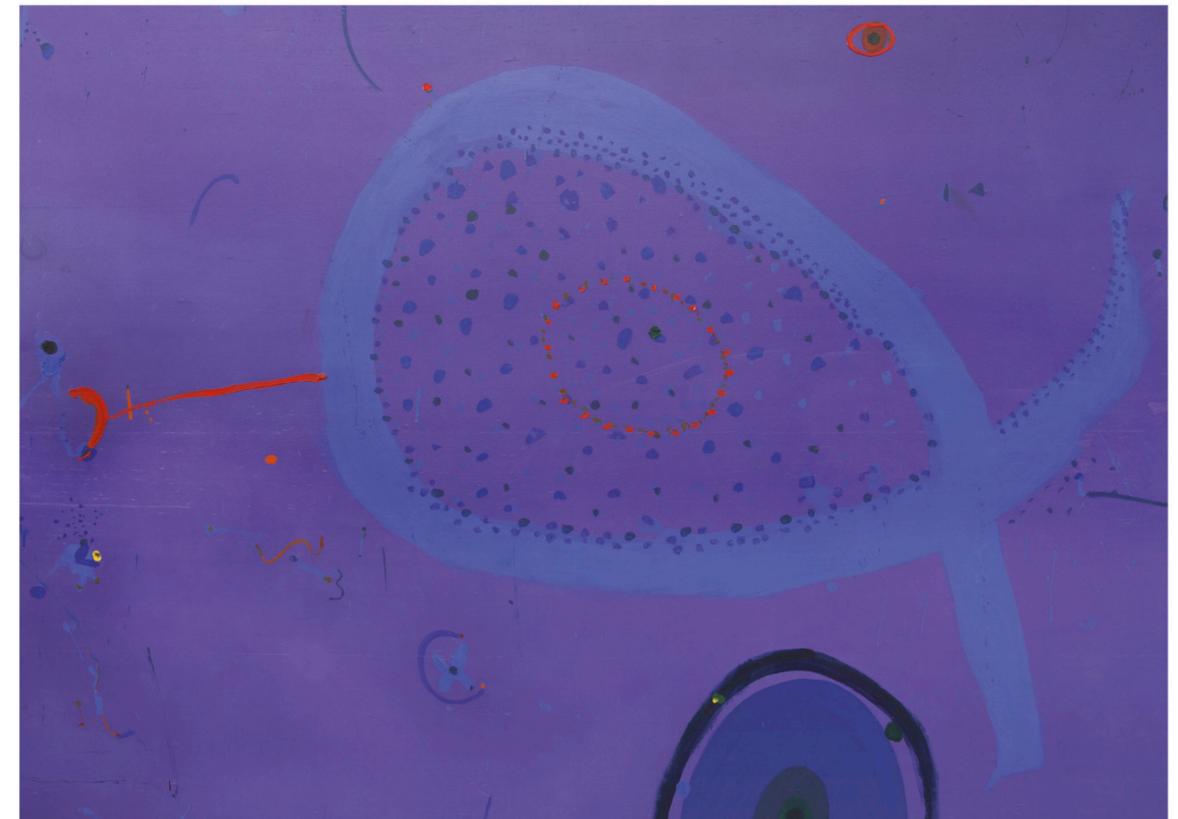
because it required the ability to understand spatial differences and to know the value of empty space. A lesson I've gleaned from oriental philosophy is that emptiness is as full as fullness, the great example of that being the yin and yang sign. It's the fusion of the black and white spaces that balances the thing. My mural has this richness of emptiness in the way that one can sink into the purple colour, then float on the light blue, becoming part of the heave of the sea. There is interconnection. Where Joe becomes part of the sea and the harbour, there's a line that's joining elements, a fish shape, a crab's claws. The big task, which is covered in this book, was finding that

wonderful moonlight colour. It was very difficult to get what I wanted. And there is a little green circle with black stripes—I don't quite know what that is anymore but it's very good! A squid, perhaps.

We decided that the mural would have to be installed before it was finished because the space in the Opera House is so dominating that you've got to see how the piece works in situ. It was such a good thing to do. The space and the siting were so dominating that the mural looked far too delicate. The consequence of that was that I had to make it much more theatrical. I did this on site. The changes were quite sensational, like these blackish lines and



Painting one of the panels in my wool store work space.



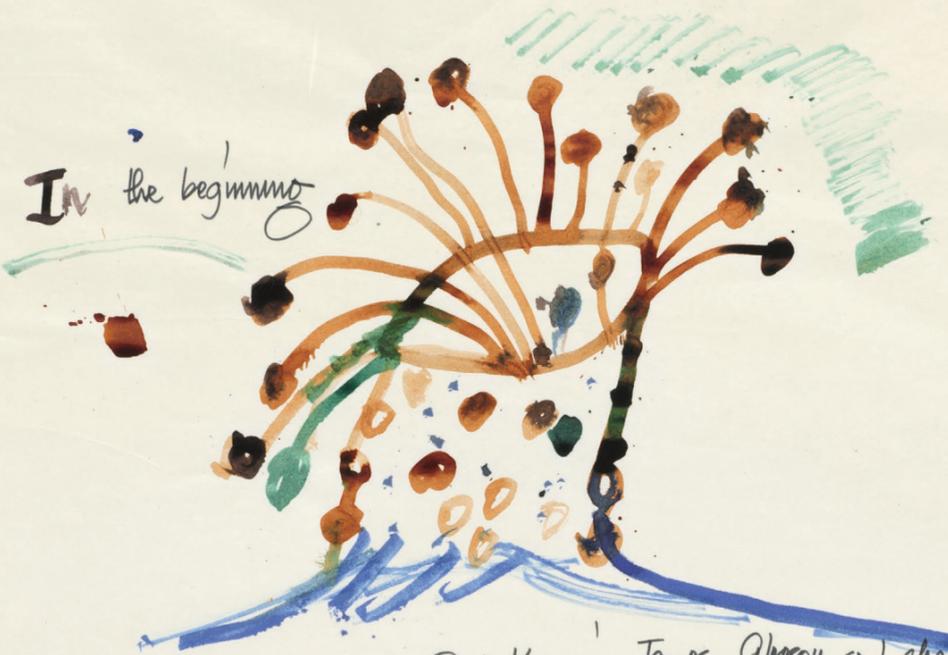
Mural details clockwise from top: a fish; a squid; a crab's claws.



nothing is
so beautiful
as
Spring

Spain

In the beginning



Dec. 71.

I am at a party at Rudy Komon's, James Gleason & I chatting over drinks - this is that conversation - suddenly he said to me "would you be interested in doing a job in Sydney Opera House." I paused - speechless ~~for~~ for a moment, I then said "lets look over the site first - but as a broad principle yes"

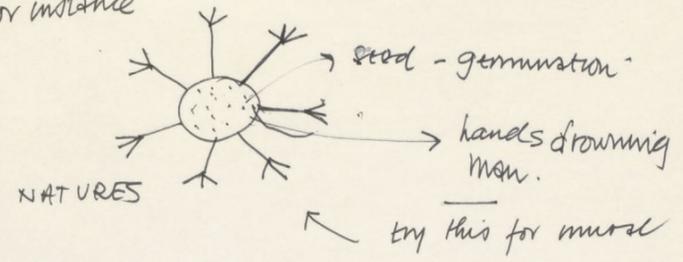
I am writing this journal which will serve as a record of things of all kinds of nature which occurred during the time of making the mural. I am not going to correct, I want the journal to have an immediate feeling of a living moment -

So called 'abstract art' is the true art of the 20th century, in my case it allows me to look at nature in multiple ~~levels~~ levels - the attempt to fuse many images into single concrete image. sea urchin for instance

don't think purely abstract art has any significance whatsoever an artist must believe he is painting reality

We see nature with a greater sense of TRANSPARENCY.

IT ALLOWS ONE TO INCREASE THE DIMENSION OF METAPHORS



Art should not be too accessible - once the mystery disappears we have only materialism left.

Painting has become a direct response - life's nerves exposed a choreography of its actions.



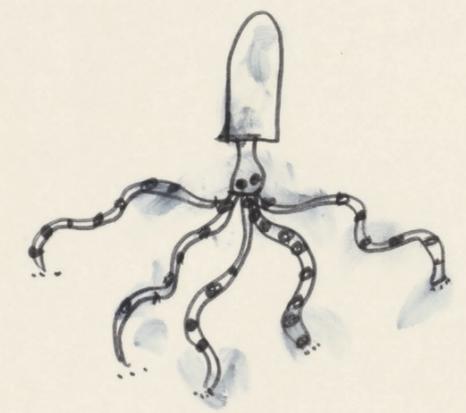
In painting, its values that destroys the harmony of tones by the introduction of elements alien to colour and partaking of 'chiaroscuro'. Since colour itself is mysterious in sensation it gives, we can logically enjoy it mysteriously - not as drawing but as a source of sensation proceeding from its own nature, from its own inner, mysterious enigmatic force - Gauguin.

Dec.

We have spent a lot of time getting ~~at~~ just 2 colours 'working' - in a mural of this scale it is necessary to plan - premeditate beforehand, its a curious thing by doing this that it allows one a more direct calligraphy. In the 90's everything seemed to be in such a hassle - all the formal elements going at once - plus the white heat of emotion - mostly it was all too much.

Jan. 11th. arrived back from New England Univ. nice contact with students as curious as ever - beautiful and to be able to talk to Andrew Sibly & John Firth - Smith unselfconsciously about art. Firth Smith said to me in the Sydney pub - I never knew we had so much to say to each other.

On return Mural looking too stilted it needs more wacky madness - ^{looking more human} - Bitch Goddess here I come - hell - one can never play it safe.



Primitive Instinct - while ever advertising exists the primitive instinct of man will never be dormant —



In "Salute to Slessors & Fire Bells" I wanted get the feeling at one time you are ~~flying~~ flying over Sydney Harbour and then almost simultaneously you feel you are sinking under the sea - MacLuhans - 'all at once world'

you do not invent your best ideas you find them.

Picasso may have said "I may start with a landscape & finish with a still life" I say you can have the lot in a single painting.

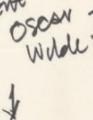


'Entrance to the Siren City of the Rat Race'

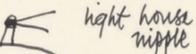
this picture is about Sydney Harbour on a hot January day - the ~~mad~~ mad rat race tempo of Sydney's traffic - the waxy fluid juicy fruit tempo "Ello John 'ows the missus awright?"

that vibrant vulgarity -

how can it be different Oscar Wilde?

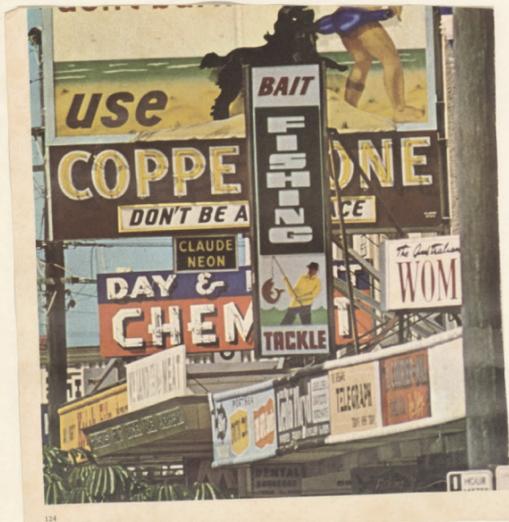


I've always ~~thought~~ thought that the formation of Sydney's land forms like a bitch goddess and frankly at times it frightens me. the breasty contours of its hills



AND when your sailing through the heads you feel as though your sailing through her arms — AND when you are coming into to her you feel you are going deeper and you are caught in her spidery net

Entrance to City of Opportunity
Entrance to the City of Desire
Robert Graves said. "there is a native tradition in English poetry - one that is rooted in love & dedicated to an ~~exploration~~ exploration of relationship between men & women - no individual love, no grass, no birds or animals that is what makes poems so disastrously dull."
— Some thing happens in painting.



Things I Like

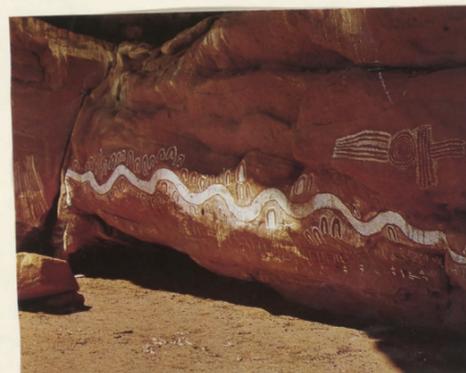
Aboriginal Art - the greatest art that has been produced in this country - it is formally superb fantastically different & creative when you go to the caves it fits into its environment (that necessary ingredient for any art - SENSE OF PLACE).

When we finally get over our cultural cringe proliferated and encouraged by idiot critics in this country - ignored by politicians, and even today called by beer slugging Territorians 'the art of underdeveloped minds' we may come realize the paintings in the escarpment area of Arnhem are - more varied

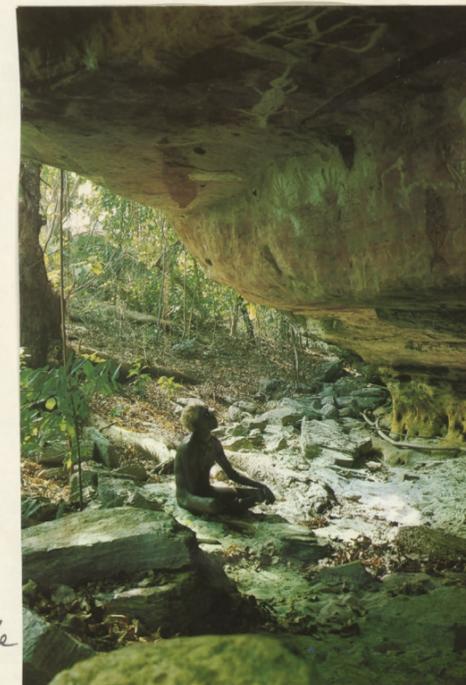
- more inventive
- greater life & religious force

than LASCAUX CAVES or Altamira Caves.

what metaphors Animal Men flowers gun nuts.
↑ the line ~~sets~~ the metaphor.



Talking to the English painter William Scott recently, he said he could not understand why Australian artists don't study aboriginal art on the basis of drawing - for the best of it has such a remarkable feeling of space - I jumped with joy at this remark for it's been a long standing hobby horse of mine. What of course he couldn't know about is it also is so magnificently charged with the mystic of the Australian landscape & creatures



students should never be involved in fashionable trends - go to the past for the significance of the present.

where are you dead man?



At the end of the session, we go to a pub called the "Four in Hand" to let down a bit. "The Four in Hand" is popular artist's pub - heaven knows why the place looks like some tumbled down western movie with as much courtesy & service - bang! bang! sharp, sharp but that's where the action is - here you can let down let up

that Pubs in Australia are the only situations where you can enjoy that nice walk up egalitarianism - you don't have to know the man to have a good old yarn - bash the breeze and leave & never see him again. Len French used to call a popular pub in Melbourne his university - the Four in Hand in good spirits is sometimes known as Bill Roses chapel for here he can let fly his earthy views on art, religion & the surge forth.

With him was an Austrian poet Rudi Krausman, he had with him a beautiful prose poem called "The Fish" - how strange I should see it now, for it has a fusion of the sea & other worldness I'm trying to get in the mural - sea fluidly flowing to the edge of the universe - I quote in part

"The Fish is unaware of its sufferings between day & night. The beaches are his doors to an unbearable world whose light destroys him. He is more colourful than a dream & reflects the fate of the seas. Were he to shout he would lose his nobility.

There is no emptiness at the centre of the fish's concerns. Whether quiet or moving, he is aware of the power of the moon. The glow which illuminates his loneliness. Ships are clumsy shadows which glide past his periphery. He is a symbol for painter but not for fishermen."

I like to be in the middle of a buzzing honey pot of images changing & evolving. The progression of these images need not be in a logical progression (oh no - they should also be completely contradictory) - I like painting to have a human unpredictability about "who knows what I will see when I step out of my front door" In this progression of one image to another, each has the seeds of its own destruction or force energy - so the image declines & falls - such is life.



Tim at 11.



So many painters today have forgotten poetry in their paintings & it's the most important thing
Poetry - Picasso.



man hand & fish

it's Easter & our Opera House workers have gone away - a chance to really drive through. The mural is seeming smaller & smaller & I have it all in my mind and it must now come down to my hand - so it's seems so very tiny - like a drop of water. I particularly want that feed back at night with the city's lights and buzzing boats like hundreds & thousands, & raising the question what is reality? what I see or what I feel?

Right from the beginning of my encounter in the opera house I have been always impressed with the pendulum of nature always swinging backwards & forwards into the building into something like a big hat!

Easter Saturday. We have done it! thank the Lord that's it -

Pack up the paints - let put the brushes in the box & walk out - it said it's finished - there's nothing more I can do for you says the doctor now you will have to look after yourself - not even the art crickets will have the last say - you will. 70' x 10' you have to be a lunatic ok. Paul Klee you said you would never do it because you don't have the people with you - I say that's the very reason why you would



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