



Power of four (from left): Cressida Campbell, Peter Kingston, Kevin Connor and Elisabeth Cummings feature in the summer exhibition, Destination Sydney. *Photo: Nic Walker*



Greatest living artists (from left): Peter Kingston, Elisabeth Cummings, Cressida Campbell and Kevin Connor. *Photo: Nic Walker*

Destination Sydney names Elisabeth Cummings, John Olsen among greatest artists

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Most mornings Kevin Connor can be found sketching faces in the dining room of Bill and Toni's in Darlinghurst. He likes the cafe's comings and goings, watching the daily parade of faces and figures. But not today.

A photo call has brought Connor and fellow artists Cressida Campbell, Peter Kingston and Elisabeth Cummings to Cremorne Point Wharf in the company of an ABC film crew, two photographers and a documentary filmmaker.

Even with John Olsen absent it's a unique gathering. Historic even, nods the celebrated curator Lou Klepac.

At the height of their gifts Klepac has selected these contemporary Sydney artists for inclusion in a stunning summer exhibition of 140 paintings and drawings celebrating the importance of the city of Sydney, its harbour and hinterlands, as a source of artistic inspiration.

Destination Sydney anoints the four – Olsen makes five – as the living successors of four of the greatest names in Australian art who have lived and worked in Sydney: Brett Whiteley, Lloyd Rees, Grace Cossington Smith and Margaret Preston.

But a more modest group you could not get. In silver beard and bucket hat the self-effacing Connor looks more like a fisherman than twice winner of the Archibald Prize, an artist once described by Edmund Capon as Australia's finest urban expressionist painter.

Connor paints faces, figures, buildings, laneways and busy streetscapes and is irresistibly drawn to the surviving remnants of Sydney when it was the biggest seaport in the South Pacific.

"I'm not a social realist," he says quietly. "I've found a lot of poetry in the Haymarket, Darlinghurst and Pyrmont."

Connor's had a "couple of shows" at the Art Gallery of NSW, he says, while urging me to speak to Campbell, whom he describes as "the greatest printmaker in the country".

Campbell points me back to Connor and introduces me to Kingston. Kingston looks around for Cummings, who at 82 is doing the best work of her career with her studies of the city's bush hinterland and desert country.

No other city in Australia has had the power to inspire artists down the century as much as Sydney, notes Klepac.

Lloyd Rees was on the way to Melbourne from Brisbane when his ship stopped in Sydney, in 1916. He looked through a porthole at the city and became the "greatest lover of Sydney if ever there was", says Klepac.

The city was formative in the abbreviated career of Brett Whiteley, best known for the multipanel *Alchemy* (1972-73) and paintings of sun-drenched beaches and the harbour.

"People think the exhibition is about painting Sydney; it is not," says Klepac. It is how artists living and working in Sydney tap into its collective energy: "That's the alchemy of the creative process; that's what produces the spirit of a city."

Destination Sydney is to be staged across three galleries, the Mosman Art Gallery, Manly Art Gallery and

Museum and the S.H. Ervin Gallery in The Rocks, modelling a template for future collaborations between the key public galleries.

Mosman Art Gallery will present Connor, Kingston and Olsen, including a new work, *Round and about the Harbour*.

At Manly the ebullient works of Cummings will hang next to the striking harbour vistas of Whiteley and the visionary paintings of Rees. Campbell joins Grace Cossington Smith, and Margaret Preston at the S.H. Ervin Gallery where six years ago a 25-year survey of Campbell's work broke the gallery's attendance records. Nine artists all up are showcased.

Other than reminding Sydneysiders of the city's natural beauty and energy and the depth of its artistic influence, the exhibition gives overdue national recognition to the five living artists.

"If Kevin Connor had been born in England he'd be as famous as Frank Auerbach, whose pictures sell for a million dollars," Klepac says.

"He's very modest, so he doesn't push himself, but he devotes himself to painting. All the artists are incredibly modest. Anywhere else in the world people would be queuing outside their doors trying to get a picture, they are that good."

Cummings was 17 when she came from Brisbane to stay with cousins at Mosman to study art, and was instantly captivated by the harbour, the trees, rocky outcrops, "the smell, the whole thing, and art school". "It was a good time."

"Sydney has been very important to me. It was my beginning, getting away from finishing school, coming away from home; the beginning of art school," she says. "It was the beginning of life. And then coming back from Italy, it was to Sydney I came."

Kingston was born on the opposite side of the harbour in Parsley Bay but now paints in a studio in Lavender Bay, from where he has chronicled the moods of the working harbour in full-sun brilliance, fading light, inky moonlight and gloomy downpour.

Destination Sydney carries a footnote of caution for those who would overdevelop the harbour foreshore and turn it back from its working origins.

"We have a lot of precious things on the harbour and we should preserve them," says Kingston. "Whenever we hear the words, 'let's upgrade', it means watch out."

On a more intimate scale, Campbell creates woodblock and watercolour compositions of interiors and still lives. Her works, she says, are autobiographically Sydney only inasmuch as she draws from what surrounds her. She finds beauty in everyday objects.

"It's more the way I look at the world than necessarily the subject matter," she says. "I like the intimacies of the rocks and banksias and the combinations of man-made objects and nature."

"We are all [here] interested in the same subject; it can inspire all of us, but we each have our different visions."

Destination Sydney at Manly Art Gallery December 5 to February 14, the Mosman Art Gallery December 5 to February 7 and the S.H. Ervin Gallery December 11 to February 21.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/destination-sydney-names-elisabeth-cummings-john-olsen-among-greatest-artists-20151211-gl0osf.html>