





Tim Olsen and Evan Hughes Driven by Human Intelligence

ESSAY TIM OLSEN AND EVAN HUGHES

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Tim Olsen and Evan Hughes, whose fathers were heavyweights of the Australian art world, are collaborating on a provocative new project. Olsen and Hughes intend to put the heartbeat back into art rendered “bland” by algorithms and passing fads.

Since when did any commercial art gallery offer “surgery hours?”

Since *Hughes at Olsen* opened in Sydney on May 1, that’s when.

Every Friday between 10 a.m. and noon, Evan Hughes will be ready and willing to speak to artists and art students who can simply drop by unannounced and shoot the breeze about whatever.

It’s an idea Hughes drew from Cambridge University where he studied art history. “The deans of studies always had surgery hours where anyone could pop in with any question they wanted at a specific time,” Hughes says. The idea also nods in the direction of Hughes’ father, the late Ray Hughes, who was famous for his impassioned conversations with droppers-in at his Ray Hughes Gallery in Surry Hills, Sydney.



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The surgery hours concept is a particularly intriguing aspect of *Hughes at Olsen*, which Hughes prefers not to call a gallery but an art space within a creative industries precinct. Whatever you call it, the small space in an office building in harbourside Rushcutters Bay is a joint initiative with Tim Olsen (son of the celebrated painter, the late John Olsen).

Tim Olsen can remember when Evan Hughes was born, and the two have remained friends across many decades.

With *Hughes at Olsen*, they're in business for the first time. "We like and trust each other," Hughes says. "In the Australian art world, that's rare."

Over coffee at a Woollahra cafe, Hughes and Olsen told *Artist Profile* that there is no financial imperative for them to do business together. "Either of us could retire tomorrow and just go and have a nice life somewhere," Olsen said. "But we have the capital and the patience to give back, and we're prepared to invest in that."

Hughes believes the Australian art world is being rendered bland and conformist by the intrusion of algorithms. "It's a great joy to build a new home for artists hungry for more than Instagram likes," he said. In a dig at AI, he is even considering having "driven by human intelligence" printed on the front door.

Hughes at Olsen is designed to be "a milieu, a safe space where people can think, where people can go in and exchange ideas and have no fear that someone's going to expect them to buy something," Hughes said. "That expectation of commerce puts so many off the art-going experience. It always has."

The new entity will be looking to champion artists who are "dedicated to an inner vision with little care about following fashion."

The gallery's opening exhibition, on view until 15 May, sheds light on what Hughes is talking about. Called *Beloved Imagination: Outside/In - a Century on from the Surrealist Manifesto*, outsider and self-taught



artists are being shown alongside artists who sprang from more conventional backgrounds. A focus on international artists is the key. Priscilla Bourne is the only local artist in the show, the other ten hail from the United Kingdom, the United States, and New Zealand.

Self-taught and late to art making, Alabama artist Thornton Dial (1928-2016) came to prominence in the 1980s making self-described "art of the Negroes" primarily with found objects. He believed the purpose of art "was to get people thinking."

Other artists include the self-taught, Indiana born, hair obsessed CJ Pyle; leading UK Surrealist Emmy Bridgwater; and contemporary New Zealander artist Matt Hunt, whose paintings are informed by pop culture.

Hughes is excited to have included work by another Black American Artist Mose Tolliver (1925-2006), who began painting following a crippling workplace accident. Tolliver painted mostly with house paint about subjects drawn from his own experiences.

Hughes explained "The entire programming ethos of this gallery is to find the balance between outside / in."

Hughes contends that many of his father's artists only achieved their stellar art world status by virtue of the eclectic stimuli they received at the gallery.

African handmade coffins, voodoo art from Haiti, and Chinese contemporary art were just some of the objects of fascination that were found there, either on display, in storage, or in Hughes' extensive library. That

kind of "cultural experience" can be of value in developing future politicians and business leaders just as much as future artists, Evan Hughes contends.

"An empty white room where art goes up for three and a half weeks and comes down is not what a gallery should be," he said. "[It should be] an interactive space whereby artists can always feel free to drop round and ask questions, where clients can come in and say, 'I know nothing. Don't try and sell me something but try and teach me.'"

Hughes last year was instrumental in developing the NSW Government's new arts policy, while working in the office of NSW arts minister John Graham MLC. In line with his approach to that policy, Hughes said, he wants to tap into a more holistic environment with various different creative industries going on in the gallery's precinct.

Hughes and Olsen are not put off by the tough times the gallery sector is going through, both locally and internationally. Hughes was recently in London, for example, and said there was "blood on Cork Street." "I could see desperation in everyone's eyes," he said.

But he is not fazed. "During tough times, that's when you work extra hard to make sure the artists are being seen by people, that people feel welcome and get to think about new things," he said.

Hughes at Olsen is on level four (there's a lift), 19A Boundary Street, Rushcutters Bay, Sydney. ■