The remarkable Margaret Olley

Amid the eclectic clutter of her home – the source of inspiration for much of her lifetime's work – iconic Australian artist Margaret Olley talks frankly to **David Leser** about life, work and growing old.

This is a rare moment. A cool summer morning in the winter of a national treasure's life. This time a year ago, Margaret Olley was stark naked in her living room, painting and smoking, the strains of ABC Classic FM rousing from her little transistor radio.

Today, the grand dame of Australian art is dressed like a bag lady in the dappled light of her Aladdin's Cave, ashtrays still overflowing, her unfinished canvases winking from every room, the house a miracle of delicious, riotous, untameable chaos.

"Have you done your homework?" she asks shortly after my arrival. "I'm so pleased, because an awful lot of people don't [before they come]."

Margaret Olley might well ask about homework, but on the subject of housework she has no moral authority whatsoever. This celebrated former hat factory of hers in Paddington, Sydney, is a mess of such gigantic, outlandish proportions that her friend and dealer, Philip Bacon, now worries for her safety.

"Her clutter. It's the bane of my life," he tells The Weekly in an interview at his Brisbane gallery, shortly after his octogenarian client's sell-out exhibition. "It's becoming increasingly dangerous. There are now only tracks through the clutter to where she wants to go."

Being told this is one thing. Actually seeing it for oneself is another. Every room in the house groans with dusty catalogues, piles of letters and photographs, fresh and wilting flowers, rotting fruit, paint brushes, bottles of turps, cigarette butts, encrusted surfaces, not to mention a staggering array of exquisite sculptures, icons and original works by masters and – in some cases – friends. And, in between all this debris and treasure, in a darkened corner, a single bed where the 84-year-old artist sleeps.

"You are surrounded," she points out to me, "by Degas, Jean Bellette, a Bonnard drawing, Rupert Bunny, Matisse over there, Toulouse-Lautrec, early Justin O'Brien, Fred Williams … I'm just going around [the room]."

We are in the living room, a sideshow alley away from the famous mahogany dining table where the good, the great and the regal (real as well as self-appointed) come to talk and feast – writer Clive James, artist Jeffrey Smart, art critic Robert Hughes, conductor Richard Tognetti, comedian and satirist Barry Humphries … although it must be said Humphries prefers to paint here, not eat, because he considers the house a health hazard, which it is.

A lunch invitation has already been issued to Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and the day before The Weekly arrives with biscuits and pink Asian lilies, Sydney radio broadcaster Alan Jones has come bearing flowers and lemon tarts. A few weeks prior to this, NSW Governor Marie Bashir dropped by for a meal and before that, the governor-general, Michael Jeffery, came calling.

"The last time I cleared the table was for the governor-general," Margaret says now, proudly. (In fact, everything was just dumped into newly acquired laundry baskets.) "I cleared it all. I do it every so many months, then I find all sorts of lost items. I found money. I found all sorts of things."

A psychologist might choose to understand this apparent havoc by looking at her parents, Joe and Grace Olley, who moved house many times, but refused to discard anything. They might also note that, in November 1980, a fire swept through Farndon, the family home in Brisbane, destroying many of the treasures of Margaret's life.

As her biographer, Meg Stewart, noted two years ago, when her book, >>>

Margaret Olley, 84, at her Sydney studio, a flower-filled interior full of a lifetime of collectables and clutter that inspire much of her work.

Left: Margaret and friend Barry Humphries at the Gallery of NSW, with the William Dobell portrait of her that won the 1948 Archibald Prize. Barry is holding Meg Stewart's biography of Margaret. Below: Margaret, 26, with William Dobell in 1949.

"HER PAINTINGS ARE A REJOICING OF THE MOMENT AND THE SHAMBOLIC NATURE OF LIFE ... THAT IS THE GIFT SHE GIVES TO US IN HER PAINTINGS, IF WE SUBMIT TO IT."

Margaret Olley: Far From a Still Life, was published, "Margaret rarely talks about the fire, [but] her losses resulting from it crop up again and again in conversation. For many years, it was a subject she simply wouldn't discuss. Not even sympathetic friends dared to bring it up."

Today, when asked whether this stubborn refusal to throw anything out stems from the fire or her parents' example, she replies, "It would all add up to that … [but] if people would only stop writing letters to me … [about 250 a week] … They just come piling in and sometimes I can't cope."

And yet what grist for the artist's mill – a "magic cave of beguiling chaos", as fellow painter Jeffrey Smart has remarked, "Like an exotic bird she has spread her motifs for her paintings all about her – she doesn't need to travel far to find a subject."

Barry Pearce, curator of the Art Gallery of NSW, believes the "sublime jumble" of the artist's home resonates perfectly with her personality, one which celebrates the ordinariness of daily life. "Her paintings are a rejoicing of the moment and the shambolic nature of life," he tells The Weekly. "I think that is the gift she gives to us in her paintings, if we submit to it."

In other words, there is far more method to this madness than would at first appear. "The whole house is a subject," Margaret explains to me now over freshly baked mince pies. "You see, everybody else looks at all the piles of rubbish. Well, I don't see that. I just miss it."

Do you get annoyed if people ask you to "tidy up"? "Hmm," she says, her rheumy eyes inspecting me with a ferocious intensity … "my sister is the only one who says that remark."

And what is your response to her?

"Later … or I haven't the time at the moment. I mean, I would rather paint than cope with rubbish. It's a question of, 'You can spend your entire life cleaning the house or doing other things', and I would rather do other things, although I do have a cleaner who comes once a fortnight and all she does is the floors."

Does she blanche when she walks in? "No, she's Greek. She's very good."

AH, YES. MARGARET OLLEY. How does one do verbal justice to such a powerful force of nature? Over the decades, some of Australia's most gifted artists have tried to capture her – not entirely with success – on canvas, among them Russell Drysdale, Donald Friend, Ian Fairweather, Judy Cassab and, of course, William Dobell, who won the 1948 Archibald Prize for his Rubens-like study of her.

Margaret liked the Russell Drysdale one the best, the William Dobell the least, not because of the inscrutable Mona Lisa half-smile Dobell gave her, but because it turned her into a reluctant public figure. (More than 40,000 people flocked to the Art Gallery of NSW in 1949 to inspect the painting.)

"I couldn't look at it for years," she says now. "It took me years to really come around the corner [of the gallery] and make sure no one was looking. I thought there might be someone [a member of the press] looking at me looking at the painting.

"I went away at the same time as Bill [Dobell] won the prize and the press followed me all the way. It was my first brush with the press. It went on for years, until I got quite annoyed with it and found myself saying, 'And I also paint'. I was known as the Dobell model and I would say, 'And I also paint'."

Margaret Olley had an eye for the visual from the time she was a little girl growing up variously in the Tweed Valley (she was born in Lismore in 1923), in Tully in Far North Queensland and in Brisbane. It was all there for the taking – the blue butterflies and bottlebrush, the alamandas and Amazon lilies, the frangipani and poincianas, the sugar cane fields and the uncoiling currents of the Brisbane River, indeed, nature in all its rhapsody and involuntary instruction.

Although she produced her first book of drawings and collage in primary school, it wasn't until 1943, at the age of 20, when she'd enrolled at the National Art School in Sydney, that this daughter of a nurse and Methodist farmer came permanently under the spell of painting. A lifetime of awards and one-woman exhibitions followed, but it would take a retrospective at the Art Gallery of NSW more than half a century later – in 1996 – for her to receive the kind of recognition she truly deserved.

"[Margaret Olley] is a painter of tenacity and distinction," noted Edmund Capon, director of the gallery, "certainly not one to be diverted by any fleeting fashion. >>>

Left: Margaret poses in front of Russell Drysdale's 1948 portrait of her. Above: Artist Donald Friend in 1987, a close friend of Margaret's, whom she once proposed to.

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"I NEVER LIKED BEING OWNED. AND I NEVER HAD THAT NESTING URGE."

[She] is a part of that tradition, from Vermeer in the 17th century to Morandi in the 20th century – two of her most admired artists – which finds inspiration, beauty and a rich spirit of humanity in the most familiar of subject matter."

Today, sitting in the theatre set of her living room, with the light pouring in from her untamed garden, Margaret is more alive than ever to the embrace of nature. "People no longer listen to nature," she says. "If you want to learn anything, you'll find it in nature. Like relationships. One plant sometimes can't grow beside another plant. They require different nourishments … so they have to be separated. Some like more sun or more shade and that's the same with people."

Margaret speaks from deep experience. Her life has been a free-spirited ride through much of the 20th century (and on into this one). Despite numerous love affairs – big and small – with people such as art critic Laurie Thomas, former art gallery director Hal Missingham, artist Russell Drysdale (after the tragic suicides of his son and wife in the early 1960s), wealthy bisexual English baronet and painter Sir Francis Rose, and, of course, her most enduring love, interior decorator and theatre director Sam Hughes, with whom she lived for nearly 10 years, Margaret has never married, nor had children.

"I never liked being owned," she declares now. "And I never had that nesting urge," although she admitted on publication of her biography two years ago that she had once asked her great friend, gay artist Donald Friend, to marry her. Despite Friend's love and regard for this "tender, stubborn, intelligent, proud, simple and complicated" woman, he declined the offer, much to Margaret's subsequent relief.

"I'd had a drunken night with a man and ended up pregnant," she said. "The most hateful thing about the whole episode was he gave me crabs. I never said who the father was, but … in my drunken, muddled mind, when I first found out I was pregnant, I weakly and momentarily thought that asking Donald to marry me was a solution. If he hadn't got into bed with me at Hill End that night, I never would have suggested it."

Margaret's alcohol-fuelled years have been well-documented – from how she began having "a few nips" as a young woman in order to overcome her chronic shyness, to the manner in which her dabbling accelerated into wild, drunken episodes throughout the mid- to late-1950s. ("I could drink anyone under the table," she once boasted.) Her painting deteriorated to the point that some people thought she'd never paint again, until in 1959, with the support of certain friends and Alcoholics Anonymous, she finally won her battle with the bottle. She has not touched a drop since. "It's either you or me," she told herself at the time. "It's either you or me."

However, her depression, which was to emerge 42 years later, was another thing, and today, on this cool Christmas Eve, one can feel its quiet, baleful presence in the room. "Ever since the [sell-out] exhibition [in Brisbane in late 2007], I have been hovering," she tells me. "I went off and had a good painting day [yesterday], but it hovers about at this time of year."

A pregnant silence fills the room. "You've come to a point of drawing teeth, haven't you?" she suggests. Not at all, I reply, without confidence, hoping not to break the spell. "I've been helped out," she continues eventually, "by Professor Gordon Parker, who runs the Black Dog Institute [a facility specialising in depression]. He sort of saved the day. He got me off all these things I was taking and put me on something else … You suddenly don't become depressed. You generally lead up to it and it is just the final straw."

The final straw had come for Margaret around Christmas Day 2001, when the bushfires were ravaging Sydney and she was about to entertain friends for lunch. "I had all the food at the ready," she was to explain later, "but then I felt I just couldn't do it."

As Margaret fell into her dark pit, she was deprived of the comfort painting had always given her. "I couldn't paint. I had no energy. I wanted to kill myself."

So now, when it hovers, I ask, what techniques do you employ? "Instead of taking half a pill at night, as the doctors suggest, I take a whole one. I thought it had kicked in yesterday [the effects of the pill], but maybe I overdid it."

MARGARET OLLEY has probably been overdoing it most of her life. Painter, property owner, philanthropist, salon keeper, bon vivant, inveterate traveller, she seems to run on rechargeable batteries not available to most other mortals.

In 1971, at the age of 48, she visited, in one stretch, Bali, Hong Kong, Kathmandu, Benares, New Delhi, Tehran, Isfahan, Persepolis, Athens, London, Paris, Marrakesh, Fez and Madrid, only to then decide she would do the whole trip in reverse. Why? So she could see the same places in winter.

Fourteen years later, she took a six-month course in Egyptology, before setting out for Egypt via Perth, South Africa, Zimbabwe and the Greek islands, only to then fall dangerously ill in Crete with meningitis. Instead of heading back to Australia, she waited until she'd recovered sufficiently in order to press on to the pyramids. "I was determined to get to Egypt," she tells me now.

Today, at 84, she is still an >>>

Left: Margaret Olley's *Poppies and Lemon Squeezer*, 2007. Below: Margaret in the "yellow room", her favourite part of her famously cluttered home.

"OLD AGE IS A BUMMER. I THINK YOU'VE GOT TO BE STRONG TO BE OLD."

irrepressible presence, surging down Duxford Street, Paddington, with her shopping trolleys, parting crowds at opening nights with her walking frame – dubbed "Moses" and coming replete with horn, cup holder and ashtray – attending and hosting famous dinner parties, and, of course, painting like there's no tomorrow.

"Hurry, last days," she has often remarked about herself, as if this life of hers were a closing down sale. And why not, when you consider that many of her beloved friends, painters many of them – Donald Friend, Ian Fairweather, Moya Dyring, Russell Drysdale, Jean Bellette, Jocelyn Rickards, David Strachan, Justin O'Brien – are long since departed.

"I'm a realist," she says now. "If I want to do something, I've got to do it this year or I've got to do it today. I mean, by the grace of God, I've only got so many years left, because the very end you don't want to know about.

"And the reality is, no matter how well you are, or how ill you are, you really only have today. I mean today is the only day you've got. Yesterday, well that was an interesting one, but it's gone. And tomorrow hasn't come yet, so you only ever have today."

When I suggest that there's a grace and gratitude in this philosophy, she replies, "I hope so. I could fall down on my old knees and be grateful for so much. I'm grateful for being here. And where would we be without friends?"

I ask her whether she thinks there's anything to recommend old age. "Old age is a bummer," she replies. "I think you've got to be strong to be old."

(Just prior to this interview, Margaret had both hands put in plaster because of a broken left wrist and an operation on the right hand to remove a melanoma. It was just before she was due to give a public talk and complete a number of paintings for the Brisbane show. "I just sat with this [left] wrist up, painting away," she says now, unconsciously imitating Renoir, who perhaps did his best work late in life with brushes attached to his arthritic wrists.)

MARGARET OLLEY has been known – and adored – for many qualities during her lifetime. As one of Australia's most generous philanthropists, she has been responsible for funding – or personally donating to galleries – artworks worth more than $7million. She insists she is only doing what her parents taught her was right and proper. "[The amount] is of no importance," she says. "[My parents] gave and gave and gave, not only to us, but to other people. I'd like to make [giving] contagious."

To some observers, Margaret's generosity of spirit might sit oddly with her strident political conservatism – her support for the monarchy, her long-standing opposition to welfare and arts bodies such as the Australia Council, her Depression-era belief in the politics of self-sufficiency – and yet, today, she welcomes the election of a Labor government nationally and in every state and territory, as well as the departure of John Howard from the political scene. Only problem is she can't quite reconcile the appointment of a former rock singer, ie, Peter Garrett, to the position of arts minister. "I'd like Maxine McKew to have the job," she says. "I think she'd make a wonderful arts minister."

Bullish political views aside, it is Margaret Olley's humanity that constantly shines through her life and through her art. Anyone who knows her well can reel off countless people – friends and strangers alike – whom she has spent hours counselling for their addictions. "I have a lot of people on my list I have been trying to help for years," she admits now. "That seems to be far more rewarding than doing a day's painting."

So you don't just live to paint? "[No], I live to help. Well, you're a miserable person if you can't help somebody else … people think I'm right of right. I'm not really. Sometimes I'm a pure communist."

Her friend, Barry Pearce, agrees. "She's a socialist inside a right-wing figure. She will help anyone. And by sheer persistence, she has come through as a genuinely great individual in the story of Australian painting. I adore her as a person and that adoration runs through everything I have to say about her painting."

And so, in these "closing down sale" days, it is friendship and art that Margaret Olley lives for as she follows the light shifting from one room to the other – through the love and clutter of this eccentric, fabled house – enabling her to harmonise with colours and create ravishing still-lifes that few, if any, Australian painters have ever been able to match.

"I am 84 and still wanting to improve," she says finally, sounding almost surprised at herself.

Have you created your masterpiece, I wonder. "No, I have a few other things I want to do. The thing is the enjoyment of doing. You're always hoping that the next will be better than the last."

So it's the striving? "Exactly. It's like a plant. I mean, seed grass will lie dormant until that slab of cement cracks a bit and then it will work its way up through the crack to the light and start growing. It's the will to live, isn't it?" ■

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