

MAKING CONNECTIONS WITH ENA JOYCE

I MEET ENA AT HER LIGHT-FILLED MODERN townhouse just off Leura Mall a bit after 9 in the morning. The living room overlooks the leafy gardens of the adjoining children's home. 'When the leaves fall they pile up on the balcony,' says Ena. She has set out a pile of catalogues, photos and cuttings for me to look through. Ninety-two brings its own celebrity and Ena has recently been given an exhibition titled *A Life Long Calling*, at the local Rex-Livingston gallery. It has gone well even though much of the work was not recent and Ena has been out of the public eye for some years.

We talk of the gallery and the show and Ena asks me why I think Margaret Olley is so famous. 'When I was at the

gallery yesterday,' she says, 'David (Rex-Livingston) told some visitors that I knew Margaret Olley and they wanted to have their photos taken with me! Do you think it was because of the money she gave away?' she asks.

I'm not sure of the reason either. Olley's work is widely enjoyed and in a country like ours, art world celebrities are few and far between. But Ena's question gives me pause for thought. Olley was born in 1923, three years before Ena, and in a competitive world three years can give you a head start. Ena's question, so early in our conversation, has also made me aware of her sense that she hasn't achieved the celebrity she had hoped for. I also recall that in the Rex-

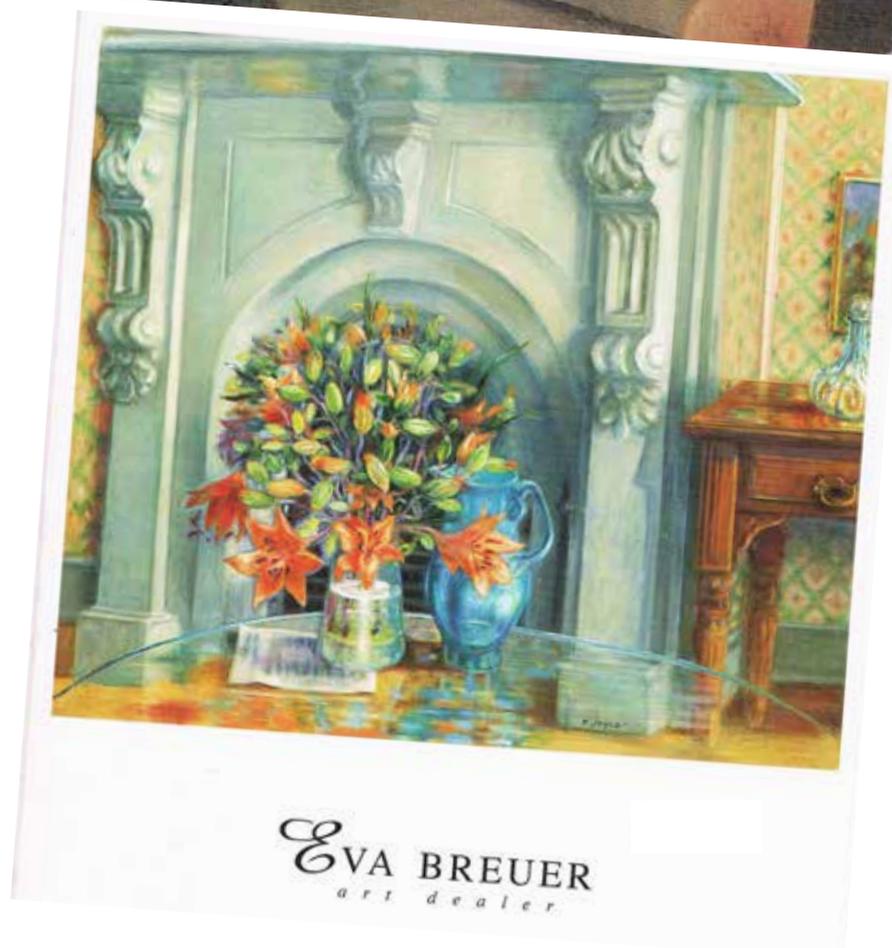
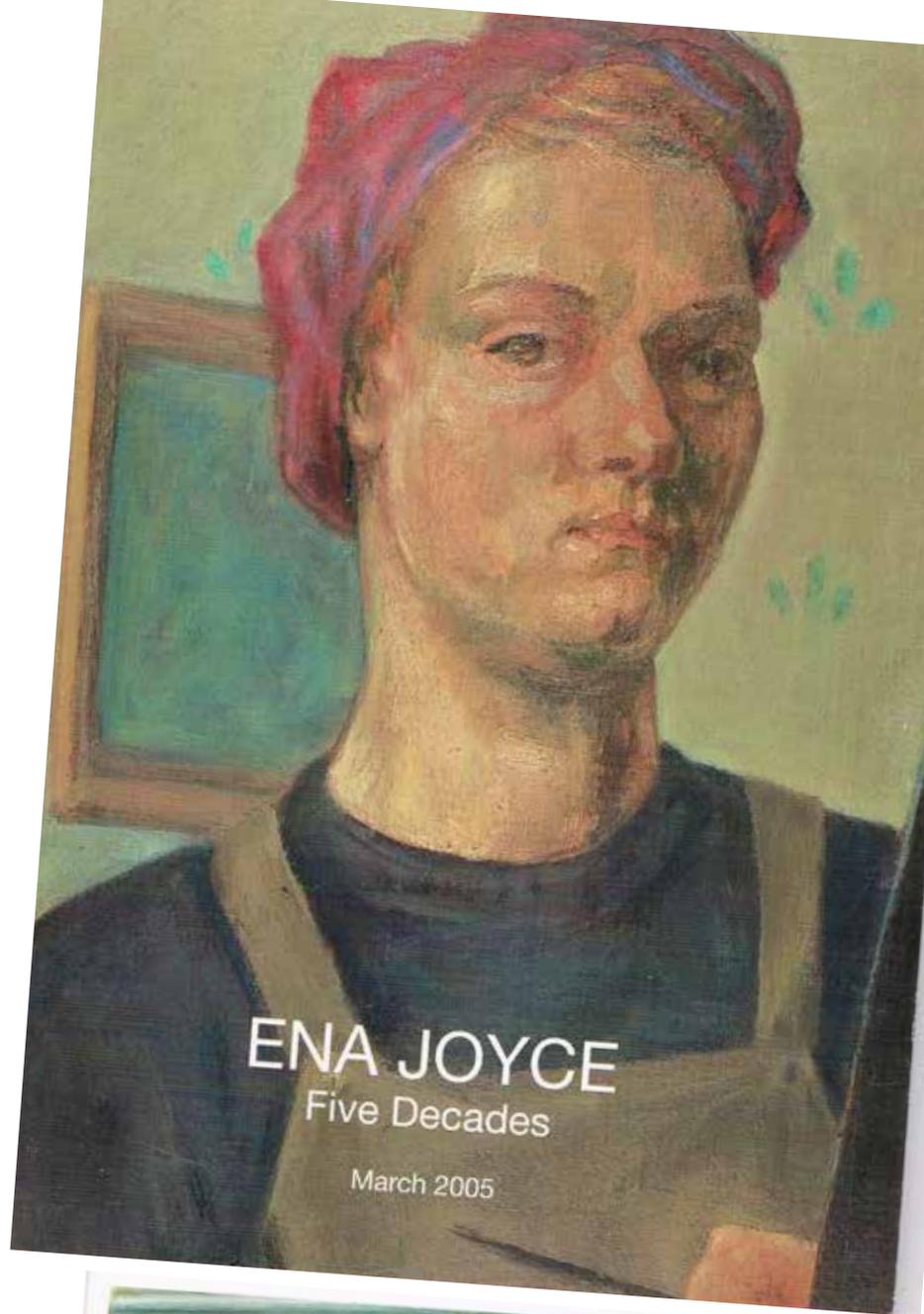
Livingston catalogue Ena's son Conrad has written perceptively that she is 'a paradoxical mix of modesty and immodesty'.

Ena has always been a professional artist except for a decade or so when she concentrated on raising her son. As a young woman in Sydney during the Second World War she was awarded a NSW Travelling Art Scholarship and chose to travel to London where she found herself in a bomb ravaged city, studying and living in Hammersmith on the Thames – 'in Black Horse Lane' she tells me, living above a greengrocer's and neighbour of the likes of Alec Guinness and other notables. 'He would borrow the trolley of the greengrocer to take his skiff down to the river', she says. She shows me drawings of the eyot in the Thames (a small island) which was painted numerous times by Passmore and other local artists, as well as by herself in a work she feels is one of her best, of a young girl with a pram walking beside the river.

Opposite was a school where Alec Guinness would entertain the children. These days of freedom and learning in London were brought to an abrupt end when Ena's brother was killed in a car accident in Australia, an unusual and shocking occurrence in those days, and she returned home. Her parents were almost destroyed by the tragedy, dragged into a pit of despair, and she too was very depressed, she explains, even requiring shock treatment.

Ena was sent to Ballarat to convalesce. I asked her what she did there at a girls' school. 'Oh I made the girls' beds, gave them breakfast, did some cleaning, that sort of thing', she says. She was soon befriended by the local doctor, an art lover and collector who gave her the room above his surgery to use as a studio. One of the paintings in Ena's recent exhibition was made from a drawing of that time, of the milkman delivering milk, observed from her studio window. Then Ena became an art teacher at the school, which is when she met her Russian émigré husband who had also found himself teaching in Ballarat. He had travelled as a young Jewish Russian child from Samara, to Harbin in China, then to Shanghai where he was sent by his uncle to boarding school and remained during the war (a city which suffered shockingly from Japanese bombing). He had loved China but post war there was nothing for a young Russian Jew there and he found himself with a ticket to Australia. Work was hard to find here and he ended up a teacher in Ballarat.

Ena has one son ('and I was lucky,' she says). Conrad lives in nearby Katoomba and has supported and promoted her work throughout their lives. It was he who helped organise the recent exhibition and he has written about Ena's work.



Ena surprises me with a direct question. 'Which painting will you put on the cover?' she asks. 'I don't know, maybe none will be suitable.' I baulk, but her directness allows me to respond similarly. 'I don't usually decide until all the articles are complete and then I choose something which is striking and jumps out. It is actually not usually a painting. I can't promise that you will be on the cover.' She has already told me that a white background for the cover will look best. 'What about this one?' She points to a green tree-filled painting on the wall beside us. 'Hmmm,' I respond, 'I don't think that would work.' I have already admired another landscape, one with stronger greens and turquoise. 'I don't like that one,' she says, 'that's not as good a painting.' We parry a bit longer about the pros and cons of a cover picture. I am enjoying the idea that when you're 92 you can say exactly what you think.

I have chosen several of the works from Ena's recent show to discuss in this article for the magazine. The glowing Summer water view on the back cover of the catalogue has been described as 'Mediterranean' by David Rex-Livingston. 'Of course it's not, I've never been there. You can see this is a gum tree,' she says. 'It's Sydney, and it's very very small.' She shapes her fingers as an oblong to give me an idea of the size. The painting of plumbago and stairs was the interior of their Randwick home, a Victorian terrace house where she lived for over 40 years, 'and those are the stairs up to my studio on the third floor'. I hear more memories of the painting of the girl with perambulator on the bank of the Thames.

I want to know what Ena was doing and thinking which was recorded in particular works, how it was to be living there and then. After all, an artist records a slice of a particular time and place and this is something that Ena is acknowledged as having a special aptitude for. I am conscious that she has lived an interesting life in times very different to those experienced by most artists working today, and I want to learn more. But Ena keeps drawing me back to the present. Perhaps I am asking the wrong questions, asking for words when an artist's expression is there in their painting.

Ena had travelled to London again in the late fifties with her husband, on sabbatical. They lived in what was then the new Barbican development, reclaiming the devastation which had been wrought by bombing around St. Pauls. He was 17 years her senior. Ena's godmother was Treania Smith, co-director of the Macquarie Galleries and later in her career Ena had many exhibitions both there and with Eva Breuer and had won the prestigious Portia Geach Portrait prize for her painting of artist George Lawrence in 1977. Hers has clearly been a very successful career with wellknown teachers, colleagues and friends, with shows at renowned galleries and with awards. In some ways this reflects a time now past. Now there is less art being sold, galleries are closing at a rate of knots, art magazines are ceasing publication and celebrity is achieved for... for what?

Sun cancers requiring removal on her face and near her eyes (from painting for so many years outdoors in the Australian sun, she explains), some slight deafness, the imminent fall of the autumn leaves as another season comes around so quickly... I wonder what I will be thinking about and where I will be when I am 92. She draws every day, still drives and walks to the local supermarket just a street away. What life could be better?

Amongst Ena's papers she shows me a photocopy of her profile by Marie Geissler published in Craft Arts International magazine in 1996. Marie has written at least 150 artist profiles over the years, a remarkable feat. Her profile of Ena cannot be bettered today in its information and observation. Craft Arts magazine ceased publication several years ago but all its past issues will shortly be available on the internet.

It seems an interesting coincidence that Ena has asked my thoughts about Margaret Olley and her celebrity. In the same year that Marie Geissler was writing about Ena for Craft Arts, an intrepid young Sydney writer and photographer Anna Maryke, accompanied by Robert Walker, was commissioned by our magazine, OZ ARTS to interview Margaret Olley – a challenging assignment for any young writer.

Anna Maryke's and Marie Geissler's experiences of interviewing these two high profile women artists would probably have been very different. Ena then and now is a smartly dressed, slim, good looking woman with attractively coloured hair and a pleasant, if forthright, manner. She has travelled widely and in fact has led an adventurous life in pursuit of her painting, particularly after the death of her husband. Olley could be tetchy and demanding. She was feisty and lived a bohemian lifestyle, different from Ena's. The work of the two artists bears similarities in a number of areas and it might be said that they are equally talented as artists, so what does make for the celebrity of one over the other?

When Anna Maryke asked Olley what advice she would give young artists, Olley was emphatic: Get a job! And by that she meant a job to provide a steady income. Olley had a business head that supported her painting and later the money she made she gave to art institutions. Over the years Olley's celebrity grew, while for most artists the passage of years and fewer exhibitions would mean a gradually diminishing public profile.

That's life you might say and does it matter? Would Ena really trade lives with Olley in order to achieve her celebrity? That's a question I will have to ask her the next time we meet, although I think I already know the answer.

Carolynne Skinner

Read Anna Maryke's interview with Margaret Olley at www.ozarts.net.au