Challenges of undertaking conservation treatment of mixed media artworks by John Olsen: A case history in conservation of contemporary works of art

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This paper discusses dilemmas and challenges associated with conservation treatment of two water-damaged mixed media artworks by John Olsen. These are important and beautiful large-format artworks on paper, poor storage of which had resulted in water and mud damage causing severe staining, loss of media and damage to support. Particularly problematic was identifying and delineating the artist's original work and differentiating it from the results of the water staining and media transfer, since these looked very similar and appeared consistent with the artist's style. The large format paper supports were also severely damaged, with tears, creases and delamination of layers. Treatment involved developing documentation to illustrate separate layers; mapping the original media; innovative dry cleaning techniques; washing; stain removal; and tension backing application to minimise the appearance of creases. The results of the treatment were agreed to be highly successful, delivering chemical and physical stability with pleasing aesthetics.

Keywords

John Olsen, mixed media, contemporary, paper

Introduction

Conservation treatment of water-damaged, large-size artworks with heavy stains and friable media is very challenging. The challenge becomes greater in distinguishing a lively artist's technique from multiple media transfers and stains that paradoxically resemble the artist's technique. With no scientific equipment available to differentiate and establish the nature of various marks, a close study of the artist's technique and relationship with the landscape is crucial. As in the present case, this can be made more difficult by the lack of information on their provenance.

In the case here discussed, technical difficulties were compounded by commercial considerations, exacerbated by the large size of the artworks and their deteriorated condition. The treatment plan needed to deliver an outcome within thirty chargeable hours for each artwork, plus moderate materials cost. The case therefore also illustrates the real-life situation, where treatment plans are influenced by how well we present them to the client, the needs of the artwork, financial constraints, technical abilities, and experience in assessment and execution of the project. Time and performance pressures are ever present, while access to specialised technical equipment for analysis and research is outside the commercial reality of conservation practice. Guiding the client through the conservation processes and negotiating the shape and extent of treatment is a significant, potentially time-consuming part of the conservation process, which is not discussed in this paper.

Artist

John Olsen is a master in the use of painting and printing techniques. He pushes the boundaries of traditional techniques, mixing media and extending their method of application. Hence, in reconstructing technique and following the artist's hand, it is important to understand his relationship with landscape itself.

John Olsen's primary subject is landscape. Typically it 'combines an implied aerial view with an ambiguous and seemingly unpremeditated figuration. His characteristically quizzical line and irregular squiggles and dots deftly render countless organisms, large and minute. Their environment is conjured through loosely brushed and stained expanses of colour … The same lines sometimes read as geological mappings. In Olsen's work there is no foreground / middle ground / background schema, nor any sign of European landscape's concern with human scale. Instead

he employs simultaneously the contrary vantages of naturalist and geographer or, to put it another way, the viewpoints of frog and eagle'. (Berlind 1993, pp. 141–142)

He uses a variety of medium, such as watercolour, gouache, pastel and oil and printing media. An 'irredeemable untidiness' is Olsen's signatory style. He says: 'The Australian landscape … arranges itself like undisciplined graffiti – like a blue cattle dog's hind leg' (Hart 2000, pp. 212–214). For John Olsen, the Australian landscape has spiritual qualities. He describes them using the Daoistic concept of presence where 'richness of emptiness' denotes 'fullness' of being. He explains: 'twenty-four spokes have a wheel, but the use of the wheel is in its emptiness, the distance between the spokes' (McGregor 2006, p. 149). According to Giles Auty, John Olsen 'has dealt with the unique physical and psychological experience of Australia', depicting its terrain in a similar way to traditional Aboriginal art—viewing the landscape from the air (Zimme 2007, p. 9).

Olsen is very humble and reflective, saying: 'We are a new people in an old continent and we still have a lot of looking to do' (Crowford 2004). John Olsen represents landscape in an 'all in one' sequence where there is no use of perspective, gradation of colour or illusion of distance. Olsen sees the Australian landscape as having 'metaphorical and mystical dimensions' (Zimmer 2007, p. 30). He relies on his imagery, which is deeply influenced by his past relationships, beliefs and personal struggles (McGregor 2002, pp. 243–244). His conviction of inter-connectedness of all things is well represented in his artworks. At times, he uses lines to depict interrelations between all elements of nature (Hart 2000, p. x). John Olsen operates on the level of consciousness that embraces and accepts the Australian landscape for what it is. He approaches this subject with ease but utmost care. He is a very perceptive and patient observer of nature, who relates to it with heart, knowledge and understanding but without judgement.

John Olsen captures most iconic aspects of the Australian landscape – the light, weather conditions and their influence on the surrounding life, gum trees with their asymmetrical branches, Aboriginal spiritual connection with the land and the sense of oneness with it.

Background

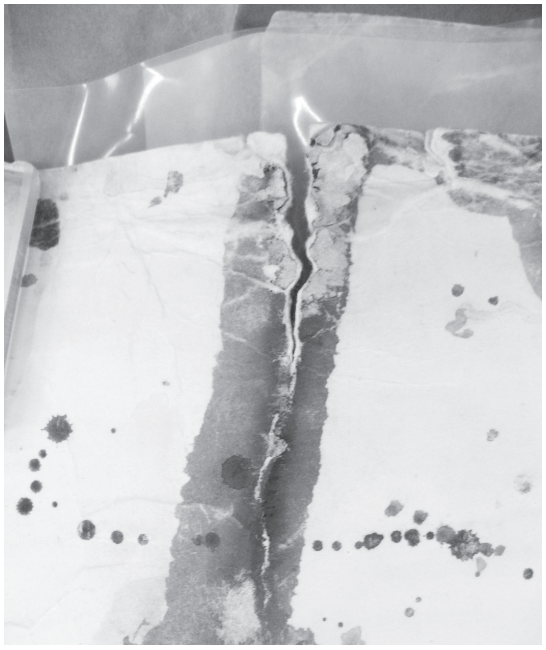
The artworks arrived at International Conservation Services Sydney at the end of 2010 for assessment of their condition and to determine if treatment to improve their aesthetics (mainly deep creases and stains) and enable them to be displayed safely would be possible. The consignment consisted of two artworks, each approximately 1 x 2 metres, rolled tightly together. One of them was dated 1979 and the only available information about their provenance was that they had just been discovered.

Figure 1 – John Olsen artwork on arrival

Condition

The condition of both landscapes was much deteriorated. Both works had been painted on a thick card stock, only lightly sized. This was severely creased, in some areas forming tears and delaminating. Planar distortion and cockling affected both artworks, probably due to the method and environment of storage. Tears and losses had developed along all the edges. Possibly due to water damage, there was a severe loss of internal size, resulting in a very desiccated paper with unbound, loose fibres. Abrasions had caused losses of media and paper support. Heavy surface dirt was mixed with insect secretions and smudges of mud. Some skinning of paper was noted. The paper showed signs of yellowing and discoloration. Loss of media was very severe through water damage and surface reduction. Some media transfer occurred from the past storage arrangement, where the artwork was folded onto itself. Cracking of media had occurred in some areas with thick media application. There was no evidence of any surface fixative. Remnants of thin packaging tissue adhered to media in several areas. One of the artworks was in a worse condition than the other, having foxing stains in addition.

Figure 2 – John Olsen artwork. Detail showing tear, creases, fragments of tissue adhered to the media and surface dirt



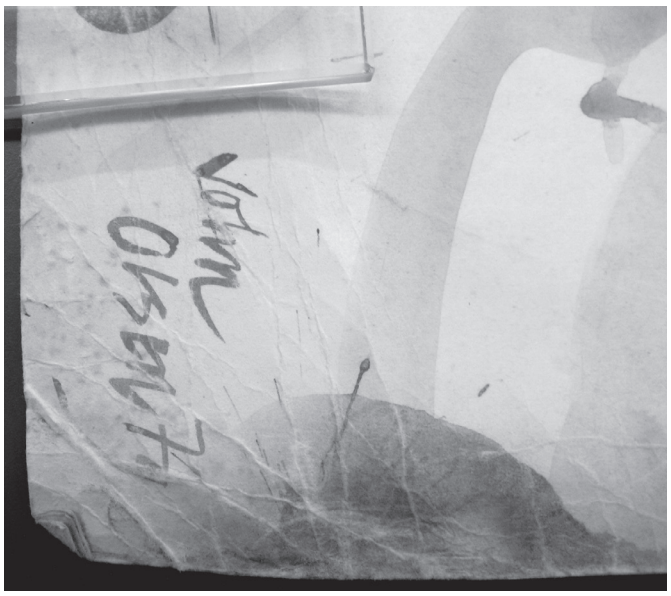


Figure 3 – John Olsen artwork. Detail showing delamination of paper, severe creases, loss of media and foxing

Artist's technique

John Olsen is known to creatively explore painting techniques. In both artworks, the artist used interchangeably watercolour, gouache and pastel. Characteristically of the artist's style, the application of paint medium was very dynamic. It appeared the first layer was made from diluted paints (gouache, watercolour and possibly crushed pastel), and then dry pastel lines were drawn over. The same media were used in both artworks.

Treatment proposal and dilemmas

The first dilemma in treating such deteriorated and problematic artworks is that improper treatment could cause further deterioration and damage.

Three treatment plans were proposed for each artwork: full conservation treatment; minimum conservation treatment; and interim preservation (in the event the client did not wish to proceed with any conservation at that time). Each treatment proposal stipulated expectations and risks associated with it. The client approved the full conservation treatment for both artworks. This treatment option addressed physical and chemical stability as well as improved aesthetics. It was expected that the minimum outcome of the treatment would be significant reduction of surface dirt and creases, removal of deterioration by-products, consolidation of support and introduction of alkaline buffer.

The proposed conservation treatment was based on consideration of the artworks' condition, anticipated benefits of the treatment, the client's directions, and the lowest risk of modifying them.

The identified risks were associated with the much deteriorated state of the paper. Weak and damaged fibres along the crease lines could separate from the paper support during wet treatment. Existing tears could deepen or new tears could form from deep creases. Delaminated layers of paper could separate. Planar distortion also meant there was a risk of the paper support being permanently stretched in some areas. There was also a high risk of media transfer or reduction during the treatment.

Both artworks required surface cleaning to remove or reduce dry mud, extensive insect secretions and transferred media. A dilemma was whether to wash or not to wash, given the physical condition of the paper, its size and risk to the media. Paper was damaged, torn and delaminated in some areas, while media was highly water sensitive and its friable nature could be further affected. Without washing, it would not be possible to remove water and mud stains, as well as discolouration. Also, washing would be necessary if foxing-affected artwork was to receive stain reduction treatment. We considered localised washing only, but this was likely to cause more problems by creating tide marks and internal tension between differently treated parts of support. The decision to wash the artworks prevailed, based on the assumption that washing would improve paper stability and reduce stains. Because of the weak areas in paper support, it was necessary to minimise risk of further damage by utilising a supported washing process with minimal moisture. Blotter wash was discarded due to its potential for pushing the stains deeper into the paper. Immersion wash was also discarded as flowing solution would likely disturb friable media. Suction table treatment in combination with atomiser application of washing solution was selected as most suitable, providing good physical support, moisture control and low risk of impact on media.

What about media transfers? They could be left as derivative markings recording the events related to the artworks' storage and not impacting on their physical or chemical stability. Does artwork not acquire its own life from the moment the artist releases it? However, the prevailing rationale in this case was to remove the transfers as they were not part of the original hand and intent.

Bleaching was required on both of the artworks. Out of the spectrum of bleaches used in our lab, only hydrogen peroxide and sodium borohydride were considered suitable for this purpose. Hydrogen peroxide was chosen as more controllable and leaving less chemical residue and also posing less risk of causing further delamination of paper.

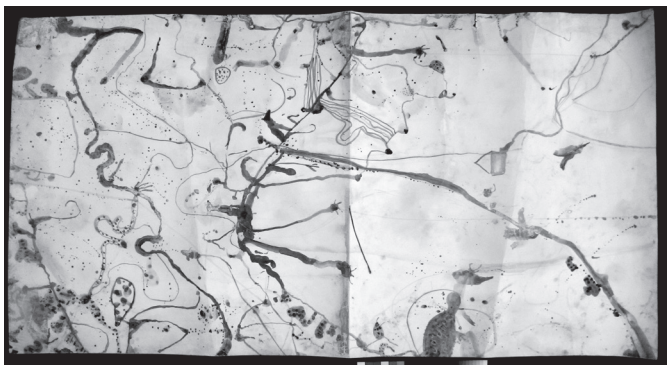
Because of the friable nature of the media, physical manipulation and use of consolidants would cause some media loss. Also, application of consolidants on both recto and verso of painted areas would be required, entailing very large areas of consolidant application and extensive hours of working with harsher solvents in consolidant removal. The loss of size and deteriorated condition of the paper meant that consolidant would also need to be applied outside of the edges of painted areas. Hence the use of 90% ethanol in de-ionised water solution via controlled application with an air gun and the concurrent use of a suction table were proposed. It was anticipated that only selective washing would be possible. Spray application of a non-aqueous alkalising solution of magnesium oxide through the verso was identified as the most suitable method of buffering. Application of paper repairs and the application of Japanese tissue backings would be necessary to consolidate tears, losses and delaminated areas of support. The original paper was relatively porous, and application of cellulose powder or linters would be too dense and separation between original artwork and repair could occur. Q-cells added to well-macerated cotton linters provided the desirable mix. Surface sizing was deemed necessary despite unfixed media, as the paper surface appeared opened and desiccated, with loosened fibres. Also, media loss was already so extensive that the three-dimensional appearance of pastel form was minuscule. Humidifying and flattening in a Gore-Tex sandwich was also proposed if necessary.

Retouching 'where necessary' was anticipated, as much of the media was abraded or removed, particularly along crease lines. Retouching in itself required a firm approach of applying retouching media only to areas evidently affected by mechanical loss and not interfering with areas that looked to have been intended by the artist, such as where media losses developed through application of layers or where media was purposely developed into tide lines.

Method

Both artworks were photo-documented before, during and after treatments. Preliminary media tests were conducted, establishing similar reactivity of media on both artworks. Standard media stability tests were performed with de-ionised water, ethanol, acetone, white spirits, and toluene. Monitoring media tests were conducted through all the treatment phases. Test results showed all media were rapidly activated by water and acetone, while white spirits and toluene produced some activity. All media were stable with ethanol, but for the treatment to be beneficial we needed at least a small water component to dissolve and remove water-soluble stains and deterioration by-products. Hence, subsequent tests were performed using 70%, 80% and 90% ethanol solutions. Gouache medium was stable in 70% ethanol, while pastel required 80% solution to remain stable. It was decided to use 90% ethanol to minimise the risk that media might retain the solution of ethanol and water and also to possibly allow larger quantities of solution to be used during the treatment. It was desired to utilise a suction table to purge through deterioration by-products and staining. The paper thickness was borderline for being effectively treatable on a suction table, but the paper was not very dense.

Figure 4 – The John Olsen artwork exhibiting the worst damage, before treatment



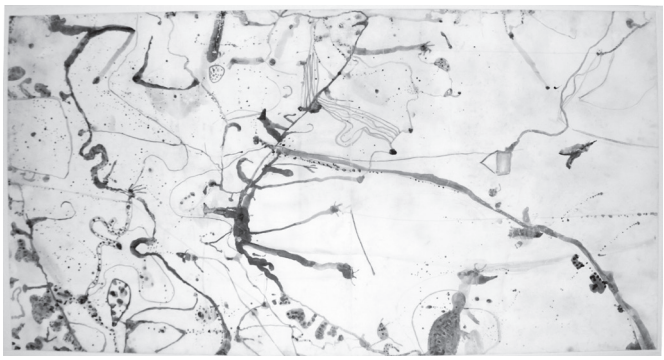


Figure 5 – The John Olsen artwork exhibiting the worst damage, after treatment

Identifying and delineating the original artist's markings from mud stains, insect secretions and transfer of media was particularly problematic. To aid identification, the images of the artworks were divided on the computer screen into three parts

and each was printed in colour on A3 paper – the largest print size available to us. Joining the components together gave us two expanded A1-sized images. Several layers of polyester film were then superimposed onto the image and bound together using a pressure sensitive tape to form hinges. The resulting 'sandwich' provided an opportunity to record the position of each problem. Each layer of polyester film was assigned to record a different issue – insect secretions, mud, stains, water stains, media transfer and abrasions – with a different coloured marker. Particularly difficult to discern were mud stains and some media transfers. These required careful investigation and familiarity with the artist's hand.

Extensive surface cleaning was performed on both artworks. Lightly sized paper prevented the use of block plastic erasers. A Staedtler 52560 shredded-plastic eraser was gently used on verso to reduce surface dirt. Insect secretions were removed with the point of a scalpel. The bulk of media transfer stains and mud residues was initially reduced with the side blade of a scalpel, and then with wheat starch propelled with nitrogen oxide gas using an air gun. Severely desiccated, delaminating or damaged areas were not surface cleaned with this method. Tissue residue was removed with tweezers after spot humidification of the areas in a Gore-Tex sandwich.

Cracking media were consolidated with Klucel G using a soft brush. Klucel G was used for sizing, allowing full reversibility of sizing and subsequent surface preparations for retouching and infills.

A wetting component was superfluous, given the high concentration of ethanol solution used in the washing process. Washing was undertaken on a suction table, a small area at a time. A 90% ethanol solution was applied using an air gun maintained at a 90 degree angle to the work. This process was very effective in removing deterioration by-products and reducing stains. Some stains remained visible, but the supports needed to be stabilised before stain reduction treatments could be proceeded with. Japanese tissue backings were applied to both artworks using the Japanese tension backing technique with machine-made sheets of Kozo and Zen Shofu paste. Tears and delamination were consolidated during this process. Both artworks were humidified in a Gore-Tex sandwich for one hour prior to application of backings, allowing paper supports to expand. Paste was applied to the Kozo sheets and allowed to become almost dry. One by one, the artworks were applied to the backings and flattened from the centre to the sides, eliminating creases and alleviating distortions. Both artworks were then covered with Reemay and blotters and pressed under Perspex and a heavy weight and left overnight. Blotters were changed several times the following day and the artworks again left under blotters and weight overnight. The following day, the blotters were removed.

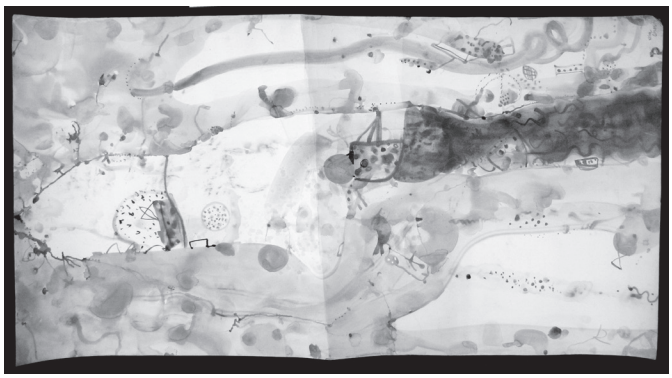
The artworks then were treated with a 2% solution of hydrogen peroxide with a few drops of ammonia to shift the pH of the solution to 8. This bleaching solution was applied with an airbrush, brush or pipette to the required spots and areas on rectos. The less damaged artwork required only a few areas to be treated for stains; however, the other artwork needed more extensive stain reduction to reduce foxing stains. The less damaged artwork was not washed after the treatment, but the other artwork was washed again on the suction table to remove chemical residues. This caused the creases to return, making a second application of tension backing necessary.

Both artworks were surface sized with Klucel G in ethanol applied to rectos with an air gun. Each application was allowed to dry completely before repeating the treatment. High substitution methylcellulose was brushed onto areas requiring retouching and infill.

Losses were filled using well-macerated cotton linters pulp mixed in de-ionised water with a small amount of methylcellulose low density and Q-cells. Tweezers were used to replace the pulp, and then Reemay was placed over the infill area and a blotter pressed over to draw out as much moisture as possible. Infills were designed to cover the losses only without overspills on the adjacent areas to prevent any need for corrections after drying.

The less-damaged artwork was then retouched with a brush using gouaches and powdered pastels. Both artworks were alkalised with magnesium oxide on versos.

Figure 6 – The John Olsen artwork exhibiting the least damage, before treatment



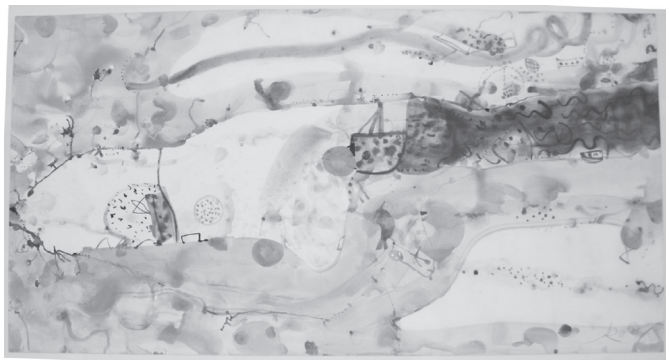


Figure 7 – The John Olsen artwork exhibiting the least damage, after conservation treatment and retouching

Conclusions

Both artworks received the standard level of attention during their treatments, with the addition of prudent consideration, extensive research into the artist's work and more frequent photo-documentation during the treatments (unpaid hours). After conservation treatments, both artworks were chemically and physically stabilised. The less-damaged artwork received minimum retouching, giving very pleasing results. Unfortunately the allocated treatment time was exhausted before retouching of the other artwork could commence.

Many approaches used during the treatments, such as the method of backing application to water-sensitive artefacts, could be utilised in other circumstances. However, it is important to emphasise that the treatments discussed above were not standard work practice but adapted to the needs of this particular project. Also, the working environment, staff competency and general discipline adopted during the treatment contributed greatly to the achieved results.

In the course of working life, we engage in the treatment of many culturally significant and/or valuable artefacts. Sometimes we remember them through photo-documentation and reports, but on occasion they so engage us in the fulfilment of the job-related processes and tasks that they embed themselves in our memory. The two landscapes by John Olsen provided such a memorable interaction.

Acknowledgements

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Materials

Ethanol
96% vol
Technical grade
Supplier: VWR

Compressed nitrogen
Supplier: Supagas

Zen Shofu wheat starch
Supplier: Talas

Methylcellulose
400 cps
Supplier: Talas

Methylcellulose
4000 cps
Supplier: Preservation Australia

Klucel G
Supplier: Talas

Japanese tissue paper
Kozo 25 gsm
Supplier: Paper Nao

Kikusui tape, Japan
Supplier: Sophie Brown Conservation Framing

Gouache
Art Spectrum AS Artists' Gouache
Winsor & Newton Designer Gouache
Daler-Rowney Designers' Gouache
Supplier: Oxford Art Store

Hydrogen peroxide
35%
Supplier: Chem Supply

Ammonia
32%
Supplier: VWR

Cotton linters

De-ionised water

Gore-Tex

Polyester film

Q-cells ($Na_2SiO_3/NaSO_2$)

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Author biography

Kate Papierniak holds both a Bachelor of Arts (Cultural Heritage Studies) and a Diploma in Materials Conservation. She specialises in conservation treatment of paper-based materials, books and photographs. Kate began her Australian career as a paper and book conservator at the State Library of Western Australia and later as a conservator for the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery at the University of Western Australia. The majority of her working life Kate has spent in private businesses, in a partnership – Preservation Services – and as sole proprietor of Papierniak the Paper Specialist. In 2008, Kate established the Preservation Foundation to promote and undertake preservation of culturally significant heritage materials. She joined ICS in 2009, where she applies her extensive knowledge to a wide variety of projects for both private and institutional clients. Kate is a professional member of the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material.

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Notes