



## JUSTIN O'BRIEN

### THE SACRED MUSIC OF COLOUR

*You've got no idea of what it's like being inside my brain: it's terrible.*

Justin O'Brien talking with artist, Jeffrey Smart

This is the first major Justin O'Brien retrospective since the artist's death in 1996 aged 79. The exhibition will include 94 paintings, watercolours and drawings spanning seven decades. Many of the works have not been seen for more than 20 years in a major state gallery.

Encompassing a picture of the artist's complete career, this exhibition will endeavour to liberate O'Brien from the perception that he was merely an illustrator of religious themes in the modern era. The sumptuous detail of his still lifes, portraits, landscapes as well as religious narratives attest not only to O'Brien's commanding use of colour and form, but also reveal his wide-ranging knowledge of art history and literature.

Justin O'Brien was born in Sydney's south west in 1917 into a deeply religious Irish Catholic family, the third of five surviving children. It was his mother, Teresa Mary, who nurtured her children's creative talents and instilled in them her spiritual heritage. School was tedious for O'Brien and he escaped its confines early to study art full-time, becoming a teacher of the craft when others his own age were still sitting for exams.

According to Barry Pearce who knew the artist well, *'O'Brien loved people, loved drawing and painting portraits and ensembles of figures, and telling stories through time-honoured themes. He illuminated through a deep biblical knowledge basic questions of the human condition played out like a sort of timeless medieval procession.'*

*'But above all he yearned for an answer to the big question concerning a transcendental existence. His answer came, not through religion, but an aesthetic, manifested in the intense music of his colour, its harmonies and dissonances; and by the inventiveness of his design.'*

'At the same time' says co-curator, Natalie Wilson, 'parallel to the richness of his art is a remarkable story of compassion and respect shared between the artist and the people he encountered throughout his life. O'Brien was captured by the German army at the beginning of World War II and spent almost three years in a prison camp; firstly near Athens, then Torun, Poland. Here his camaraderie, his humour and his gift for lifting the spirits of fellow prisoners became legendary.'

After the war, O'Brien's teaching at Sydney's Cranbrook School also became renowned and many of his students went on to become practising artists. One ex-student, Martin Sharp, describes him as his 'art father' because of his fervent belief that the study and practise of art was a genuine doorway to fulfilment.

Justin O'Brien died in 1996 in Rome, the city that had been his home and spiritus locus for three decades. His passing was mourned by all who knew him; friends, family and countless pupils. He died with singular pride that the Vatican, centre of his faith from which he had drifted and returned to, had acquired one of his paintings, *The Raising of Lazarus*, for permanent display in its galleries of modern art.



IMAGE CREDITS: All works © Estate of Justin O'Brien

above: (left) *Jesus meets His afflicted Mother* (IV) from *Stations of the Cross* c1959–61, pen and ink, watercolour on paper. Cabrini Hospital Malvern, Melbourne.

Commissioned for the Cabrini Chapel and donated by Mr Alwyne Rowlands, Surgeon 1905–85, benefactor and founding member of Cabrini Hospital

(right) *The Virgin Enthroned* 1950–51, triptych: oil on canvas. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest 1951

previous page: (left) *Nativity* c1949–50, oil on canvas laid on cardboard. Private collection, NSW; (right) *The terrace no 1* c1971–72, oil on canvas laid on hardboard. Private collection, Sydney

Supported by



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On view: 18 December 2010 – 27 February 2011  
Art Gallery of New South Wales  
Art Gallery Rd, The Domain, Sydney

Hours: Open daily 10am to 5pm, Wednesdays until 9pm

Admission: Free

[www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au)