

John Stapleton

AUSTRALIA'S greatest living artist walked into a retrospective of his work last night and declared: "Haven't I been busy?"

Entering his son Tim's fashionable Sydney gallery, packed with an A-list crowd, John Olsen, 78, said he never expected things to turn out like this.

"When you're doing paintings, water colours, drawings, it's a day-by-day affair," he said. "You only see part of what you're doing. This is one of the excitements. You know part of yourself, but the other part is unfolding."

Although he has been painting since the 1950s, it is only in recent years that Olsen's work has hit sale prices in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

"People say to me it's all so silly, have you retired yet? Would I like to be walking around a golf course dissatisfied with my handicap? If you're alive in this way, a creative way, you have the splendour of nature and the vitality of human relationships. Why would I be so dumb as to retire?"

The retrospective of Olsen's work was held at the opening of Tim Olsen's new gallery in Queen Street, Woollahra, one of Sydney's most upmarket shopping strips. Film and television actor Rachel Griffiths, movie star Toni Colette, fashion doyenne Collette Dinnigan and prime ministerial aspirant Malcolm Turnbull were all in the crowd.

Tim Olsen said he was trying to



Laughing matter: Olsen and Rachel Griffiths last night

create a new style of gallery, with a contemporary New York loft-style feel to it.

The works of his father being sold yesterday were prints and works on paper, selling at close to the \$5000 mark, and including the well-known series of etchings, *Seaport of Desire*.

Dinnigan, who bought two of the pieces on offer, said Olsen's work never ceased to inspire her.

"It comes from the heart," the designer said. "It's cheerful and whimsical and appeals down the generations."

Australian landscape painter Tim Storrier said he had remained friends with Olsen for 30 years. "He's had a very long career, he's been successful since

the 1950s and I think he has earned his title as Australia's greatest living artist," he said.

Turnbull, who owns several of Olsen's works, said what was striking about Olsen, as one of the country's greatest painters of the sea and the desert, was his focus on the borders of sea and land.

"He paints brilliantly the point of transition, the shallows at the edge of the water," the banker said. "So many of his paintings, including his desert paintings, are about the edge of things."

Griffiths described the work as "beautiful, very imaginative".

"It has great whimsy and fun — it's hard not to like," she said.

"It's lovely to be at home and see a world-class artist."



Sitting pretty: Collette Dinnigan chats to John Olsen alongside lateral thinker Edward De Bono at Olsen's show in Sydney Pictures: Graham Crouch