Its wheels eased onto the tarmac and eventually the plane turned for the terminal, cruising into a perfect Sydney October day. It was 1998. The beginning of a project that would introduce me to twelve extraordinary people and I was starting perhaps with the most extraordinary: artist and philanthropist, Margaret Olley.

I had come to Sydney to interview Olley, not on her art practice but about her memories of the hearth, as part of a studio exploration of memory, place, and ritual arising from the domestic kitchen that would become my PhD, *Colours of the Kitchen Cabinet*.

In our preliminary discussions, Olley had been encouraging, definite, and very clear about what she could offer in terms of insights. She had also been unwell and warned me that when the day came she may not be able to speak.

I arrived at her Duxford Street gate a little apprehensive, but there she was, smiling like a lively bird, guiding me into a seat and starting at once, before I had a chance to open my notebook and gather my writing implements. I was still trying to survey the spaces, trying to take in the mass of detail.

With great energy Olley swept into the discussion, with me scrabbling to catch up. Gesturing to the space made familiar by her own paintings, the photographs of others and the many stories told by people who encountered Olley in her home, she began –

*It’s like The House That Jack Built. When looking for a house I saw the ‘shed’ over the fence and fell in love with it. When the property became available I tenanted the main house and created a home out of the ‘shed’. I moved this and that – pointing around her – all quite illegal.*

*I remember a long time ago moving further down the road to a three-story Victorian house that was to be my perfect house. You know, painting on the top floor, living below. But it didn't work out. The house sort of controlled you. I couldn’t wait to move back into my shed.*

Olley’s house is actually in the grounds of a Victorian period, two-story house in Paddington. At the far end of the garden, there is a structure made of tin and louvers – her beloved ‘shed’, once a hat factory.

We were seated at her centrally placed dining table awash with papers, books, catalogues, invitations, vases of flowers and objects, all lit from the window above.

*It doesn’t matter what you paint, it’s how you paint it,* she said, pointing to a striped blue and white jug with a metal handle. *See and there it is –* Olley opened a catalogue and pointed to a painting in which the jug was represented. She smiled impishly and pointed to piles of catalogues. *I like to take two of everything particularly photographs and catalogues so I can give them away, but I forget to give them away.*

*I love familiar things I’m always looking for something…wonderful shapes. People give me things. If I don’t relate to them I recycle them. Everything goes together here. Look it’s beautiful in shape, almost like a gourd, curvaceous.* Olley holds a pewter
coffee pot with a domed lid, finished with a very fine finial, slim legs that curve to form little feet, and a turned wooden handle. I love collecting. I find things in very out-of-the-way places. Ganesh’s familiar, for example. The happy looking and very large rodent, normally found at the foot of the elephant-headed Hindu god Ganesh, it came originally from Joan Bowers [Sydney Antiques dealer]. The piece made a circuitous route, through other hands, and eventually found me. I presented it to my house as a gift.

Somehow Olley had made a cup of tea without leaving her seat. She had succumbed to a walking frame for the wider world but inside her domain she used ingeniously placed piles of books, chairs and other objects to steady herself as she moved. Now the monologue gathered pace.

I was born in Lismore, New South Wales, in 1923, but registered in nearby Kyogle. I was brought up in the country. My father picked up a parcel of land in Queensland at Tully in Northern Queensland, far away from civilization. My brother and sister were born there. Later we moved to Murwillumbah and eventually to Brisbane. We moved around a lot.

I remember Tully was a wet place – I rode a pony to school across a river. At six I was sent to St. Anne’s boarding school in Townsville. Now that cut the cord. I remember huge wild mango trees surrounding the school. The fruit tasted of turpentine. A St Anne’s favourite was to boil and slice this stringy fruit and serve it as pudding. It was revolting. I wouldn’t eat a mango for years.

I remember flashes of childhood. Camping holidays for six weeks at a time to a remote beach where cousins would join us from Sydney. In those days there was no corner store and all provisions had to be made in advance. Cooking went on for weeks in preparation. Nothing was ever thrown away. We used tins like Arnott’s biscuit tins with lids to carry food, with butter to keep it fresh.

I was brought up with no electricity and no refrigerator. Coolgardie safes hung in the breezeways and we had water bags. Now even the people in the Antarctic are looking to hook up to electricity to keep things cold.

At home I remember the kitchen being at the centre of the house and my mother was a fabulous cook. This was the time of the depression and yet we had plenty to eat. We had chickens and ducks, so there were plenty of eggs and then there were house cows. We churned our own butter. There seemed to be cooking always going on. My father was a wonderful vegetable grower and what we didn’t need he gave away to needy families. We had mushrooms galore. In the kitchen there was a fuel stove but my mother, despite the depression, insisted on one of the very first Primus gas stoves.

My mother loved baking. She made Gold and Silver Cakes. Twelve eggs and a pound of butter went into these cakes that were always square for better packing. Yolks went into the Gold Cake and the whites went into the Silver Cake along with arrowroot and a pound of butter. We loved stirring with the smell of cooking it was very exciting. And I remember marble cake.

Ginger Cake my mother made couldn’t lie fallow. It had tart lemon icing. It had to be eaten on the first day or it slowly began to ferment. By the fourth day it grew whiskers. And I loved root ginger beer. The ‘mother’ or female plant was passed around in an almost covert manner. It was a sweet, refreshing drink, the best. I tasted it again in Sri Lanka eighteen years ago.

Where I was brought up there was no corner shop, you had to make things. At Tully we made an orange drink with oranges, lemons, and a packet of Epsom salts, very good for the blood. I also liked a special lime cordial made from West Indian limes. It was created for diabetics so it was without sugar. It was really thirst quenching.

My mother cooked a shoulder of lamb with garlic and a bay leaf inserted into the flesh and a skewer was used to close the pocket. She cooked it quickly in a hot oven,
then put foil over and cooked it slowly for several hours. Not like French or English lamb that is underdone. I still use my mother’s recipe. I love mashed potatoes. You get the best results if you get the cheapest, oldest potatoes and I always add cream.

My mother also made a terrific Dandy Pudding. I wish I’d asked her more, I don’t know how to do it. I guess the recipe went when the house burnt down. The house in Brisbane was a wooden house on stilts and it burnt to the ground with all of the mementos and possessions of the family.

At Christmas my mother cooked a wonderful Plum Pudding. She cooked it in a copper hanging from a copper stick. I was fascinated by the way the pudding was wrapped in calico, the pleating around the edge, and the skill and confidence of my mother to successfully wrap it in this way. I loved my mother’s Plum Pudding but not her Christmas cake; it was dry.

I had an old Aunt, one of the first physios in Brisbane. She used to say ‘I only like salt and pepper on my food’. She made wonderful Batter Pudding it was about her only claim to fame. She was actually a role model for me. She was single; did anything she wanted.

Women have to be more like men. In my day women had one eye on the baby, one eye on the pot and one eye ahead. Women need to learn to be more like men with their tunnel vision and sharp focus. When I paint that’s what I’m like. When I paint I love painting to music especially the radio, ABC Classic FM.

My father went to war and when he returned he became a beekeeper. He raised queens and sent then through the post. That wouldn’t get past Australia Post today. There were special little boxes made for the transport of queens. Inside the box were two circles with a small corridor between the circles for the workers to feed the queen. The queen went into one circular compartment and the workers in the other, along with some food for the journey. A gauze covering went over the top and then the package was tied with wire and a big addresses label was attached.

Suddenly her conversation skipped to the present, into her adult life and what she likes, and doesn’t, in a kitchen. Olley’s dinners were legendary, and from the attention she paid to both food and its setting it was clear there was no distinction for her between life and art, that it was all part of the same rich fabric. As she shared her reflections and opinions I remained almost invisible, writing as fast as I could, entranced by the theatricality of the moment.

The first kitchen here had a small window but I began to crave more light during winter. So I had the wall pushed out to create a new kitchen. I shift, build, change, all the time. I compromise all the time.

In the kitchen I love watching people of experience cooking, it’s like watching a conductor. But I don’t associate with Mixmaster’s and their constant beating, I loved butter churning or hand beating butter and sugar.

People in the city seem cagey about recipes.

I can make a whole meal out of leftovers. I hate waste, it’s criminal. I hate waste of any kind.

I haven’t had a dishwasher for seventeen years. I use this small table and this is all I have to prepare a dinner for ten. You get into a system: a plate here and here.

Look at the house in this photograph. It’s a beautiful house, very large. It has a huge kitchen and yet they bring in an outside caterer. They don’t even use it.

I make a wonderful Rose Madder Beetroot Soup. I called it my Rose Madder Soup because of the colour. I use a bunch of parsley, blend it finely, add two cans of beetroot, sliced beetroot, beef stock, thickened cream, nutmeg, pepper and salt. It’s a lovely soup for summer sprinkled with chives. I’m mad about beetroot even tinned beetroot.
I have a very particular approach to eating, especially when I’m working. In the morning I like slices of apple and at lunch a mug of diet soup. My favourite is Beef, Vegetable, and Croutons. I don’t know how they manage to maintain the crispness of the croutons. I like to eat at night. I’m addicted to Schweppes soda and these flat fruit biscuits.

I look up and Olley is smoking. I still have a good palate. Smoking has heightened my sense of taste. The only thing I don’t like cooking with is coriander. I hate it with a passion. It’s the only thing I can’t bear. I feel very connected to the fruits of the earth. And then there is ‘Still Life Pudding’ – she gestures to the many arrangements of fruit in her living room – when the fruit in my arrangements gets a bit spotted, I cook them up.

Drawing our time together to a close, she says, Life is a great school. Be quiet and watch, learn from the mistakes of others…and yourself.

But I can’t make soufflés.

Her deep-throated chuckle was interrupted by the arrival of visitors come to take Olley to an exhibition-opening at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. While she prepared herself I talked with them and took in as much detail of the room as I could.

Those two hours of conversation were unforgettable for me, and I offer them here in honour of Margaret Olley’s wonderfully generous character and her remarkable life. After a successful 2007 exhibition with Philip Bacon Galleries in Brisbane, Olley told a journalist that painting had been her one sustaining passion. It’s all I’ve ever wanted to do, she said. When the Mon Dieu comes for me, I’ll say; ‘One minute, I’m not ready. I have to finish this painting.’ And that’s exactly how she died.