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Olsen ready to brush with MPs to save art

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Happy to picket Parliament House ... John Olsen. *Photo: Steven Siewert*

JOHN OLSEN, the elder statesmen of Australian art, is preparing to go toe-to-toe with the federal government over proposed changes to superannuation policy, which he says threaten Australia's status as a creative nation, the livelihood of emerging artists and the viability of the art market.

Olsen last led political protests almost 60 years ago when he and fellow art students marched on the Art Gallery of NSW to complain about conservative judging which had awarded William Dargie his seventh successive Archibald Prize.

In the *Herald's* archives is a black-and-white photograph dated January 1953 of a vocal Olsen, missing his trademark black beret and cane, one hand pumping the air and the other clutching a placard reading: "Archibald decision death to art".

Now much older and slower in gait but no less concerned, Olsen is willing again to mount an easel-led protest and picket Parliament House if the government backs a recommendation for art to be scrapped as an investment for the nation's 450,000 self-managed super funds.

Olsen is patron of the Australian Artists Association, a lobby group campaigning against a redefinition of art as a collectable and personal asset for self-managed super funds.

As a result of the recommendations of the Cooper review of superannuation, do-it-yourself investors would be limited to buying art for love, not capital gain, but funds approved by the Australian Prudential Regulation Authority could continue to collect art for investment.

The group warns that disentangling the way tax breaks affect super and the art market's growing profile could threaten \$100 million in sales annually.

Olsen, who won the Archibald Prize in 2005, describes the proposals as "retrograde".

"Artists and people throughout the art industry are rightly fearful for their careers, their jobs and their businesses. Our standing as a nation that respects and nurtures art is being irreparably damaged by these recommendations."

Olsen said that he would never buy a piece of art for anything other than its beauty, but it was reassuring to buyers "when they know they have something of value".

Tom Lowenstein, an arts accountant who co-ordinates the association's Save Super Art campaign, said the issue had unified the industry.

The association estimates that 15 to 20 per cent of the Australian primary art market is bought by self-managed super funds, representing \$100 million in annual sales.

A spokesman for the Arts Minister, Peter Garrett, said the recommendations were in draft form only and he would meet arts representatives next week.