

## **JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE**

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Tas, would you go through these photographs of works that we have of yours in the national collection and tell me anything that you can remember about them, the circumstances of their painting, anything that would help us in compiling our catalogue and giving us a background to the works? What about this one, *Half-caste woman*, what do you remember about that?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Well, I painted that after I'd returned from a trip in the North. In Broome there were quite a lot of people of Asiatic and Aboriginal origin and quite a lot of mixed marriages. The person I painted here—I really painted her from memory and from one or two small sketches—was one of these people who'd come from a mixed marriage, a sort of mixed line of Chinese, Indonesian and Aboriginal. But a very fine type of person. Almost, well, statuesque in a sense. She was a rather large woman too, which is unusual in people of the Asiatic races in the South Pacific.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You mentioned, I think, that you painted it in Sydney.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I painted it in Sydney. We had a flat in the Cross at the time and I did quite a lot of work on paintings from that period.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This was 1960?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** About that time yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Tas, did you always work in these portraits in oil?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Nearly always. Oh, some I've done in mixed medium, well, mainly really to sketch them out using colour with a bit of gouache, that kind of thing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see, and then working over them in oil?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Uh huh.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** But mainly the finished pictures are always in oil.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You mentioned too that you'd done a couple of sketches. Would they have been memory sketches or drawn with the model, the woman actually in front of you?

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**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** No, not with the person in front. I've never done that. I've always found that it embarrasses people, so that suddenly they withdraw. I think you can gain much more feeling about a person if they open themselves up and talk in a free manner. You can observe them then, and then if you want to you can go away and make a drawing on a back of an envelope, as long as you don't do it in front of them. I mean, I'm not really trying to make any of these cases ever, trying to make an exact portrait of an individual. I'm much more concerned with the type of person they represent, but in the sense that these people would be typical of that type of thing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Tas, you have a phenomenal visual memory, and this came through to me so clearly when Paul Haefliger showed me a group of sketches you had made one night, I think in a hotel bar. They were on a sort of bar pad paper on which great writers from the past, you'd visualised them. They were astonishingly easy to recognise. You knew exactly who they were. Do you hold in your memory the kind of visual appearances of things and you can then jot them down without any great difficulty?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Well, I think it helps. I think I was lucky in one way that years ago George Bell virtually urged me to train myself in this way. I found of course that it saves carrying a lot of luggage about if you can keep it in your head.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, you certainly could. That sequence, although, you know, they're dashed off probably in half an hour or so, are astonishingly like George Bernard Shaw and all the people that you—there was one of Charlotte Bronte and quite an astonishing sequence.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Well, they're the sort of people I think when you're at school you do an awful lot of reading in classics, et cetera. There are usually some photographs—some of them pompous, some of them rather strange—that sort of you retain in your memory, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, will we go to this one now? This is called *Country boy* in oil. I think you were telling me a story of how that came to be in the collection of John Pye.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes. Well, I remember, I remember the reason for that. I can't be quite accurate but I could easily enough check the other facts. But this was an exhibition. I think it was arranged after the death of Sydney Ure Smith. The painters felt that they'd like to put together some sort of testimonial to him. What we did was we painted pictures and an exhibition was held and they were sold. The money went to either the purchase of a picture or something of that sort as the Sydney Ure Smith Memorial. I don't think the money was put into a fund to purchase pictures, but to select a picture and present that to the gallery.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The New South Wales Gallery?

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**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** The New South Wales Gallery. This you can check. But I know that this picture which was purchased by Johnny Pye, that's how it came into his collection.

**JAMES GLEESON:** From there it came into ours. Now, to go back to *The drover's wife*. That we acquired in 1960 from the Macquarie Gallery. That would be from the first time it was exhibited, I take it?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** This *Half-caste woman*?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Oh yes. You made a mistake, you said *The drover's wife*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, did I? I'm sorry.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** That's all right.

**JAMES GLEESON:** We might just have *The drover's wife*.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I just wondered.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, *Half-caste woman*.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So that came directly from—

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes, that came directly from an exhibition.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. Good. We'll leave the works on paper. Oh, *Ceremony at the rock face* 1963. That's now hanging in the Library, National Library in Canberra, but will come on to our walls at opening day. Now could you tell me something about it? First of all the subject.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Well, it was virtually an initiation subject, an initiation of an Aboriginal tribal.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Had you witnessed such a ceremony?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** On one or two occasions. These were done in the far north—my memory's going—on the Island off—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Melville?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Melville Island. Well, some of the subjects of women there were allowed to attend and they were not initiation in the usual

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sense. But I think as a sort of tribal—I didn't quite get to know about the angle, you know, the inner workings of it all.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** But it seemed to be a matter of, I think—you see they have a curious business there. No mother brings up her own children. They have a proper mother and a mother. The proper mother is the mother who gives birth to them, and the aunts and others—or they may be cousins or they may be in-laws—bring up the children. But they're all of the same skin. This has something to do with that kind of business as to whether, you know, when they've come of age and they've been initiated that they have this kind of, I don't know, it's a kind of family ceremony almost.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. Is it to do with the getting together of the original mother and the—

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** That I really don't know. But I saw these going on just after the Pukamanis, \* or just before the Pukamanis, and I think they must have something to do with that. I didn't at the time. I was so interested merely in the visual aspect of it. I wasn't really interested in the anthropological side of it. To tell you the truth, there was no anthropologist there who could explain it properly to me, even if I'd wanted to, because I was over there at this thing with actually nobody but myself. I tried to ask the superintendent there but he, after all, was an administrator and not an anthropologist. So I never really knew what it was all about, but I was much more excited with the visual set up altogether.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Would it be true about this one too, that you painted it after the event?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** After it, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You stored the visual memory of it?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** That's right, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Were there drawings leading up to it?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Oh, I had some drawings, yes. I don't know what happened to them.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Never do.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, to go from that to a drawing, *Red setter*, which we acquired from the Behan collection, Norman Behan collection. Can you remember anything about that?

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**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It's an early one, 1945.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes, yes. I did that of a dog which we had, an old red setter, old Sam, when I was actually at George Bell's, I think. I'm not too sure—about that time anyway. I must have been at home or somewhere like that because he spent his life at Boxwood Park, the property that we owned, or my father owned in the Riverina.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** So that's an early one. Done in red chalk, I think. I used to do it a lot of red chalk drawings at the time. By the look of it, it looks like red chalk.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Good. Well, we'll go on with other paintings. We'll leave the rest of the drawings for the time being. We were talking earlier about this earlier composition, *Shipboard still life*. You were telling me that it was done as an exercise, I think, set by George Bell.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes. Well, George Bell's school, he used to quite often set a subject. He'd say, 'Well, look, you can have a week to do it in and then we'll review it'. I think he set a subject called travelling or shipboard or what it meant, you see. Something of that sort, I know. But what it really meant was that a whole lot of people did compositions of luggage, so it must have had something to do with luggage and ships, because I think what he wanted was to get them to be able to arrange a lot of forms such as that. That's what that was.

**JAMES GLEESON:** When you first saw it you thought for a moment it was Peter Purves Smith.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** He was working with you in the school at that time.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** That's right and he was doing the same composition.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I think we have one that may be the very subject in our collection.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I'd forgotten I'd done one myself. But the whole thing was it gave the students—I suppose this is what Bill intended so long ago—gave the students an opportunity to form a kind of Cubist construction using ordinary everyday objects such as luggage, you know, and things like that.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Now, we acquired it from Joseph Brown in 1976. Any idea of its history between the time you painted it and the time we acquired it?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** No. It may have come from Geoffrey Jones, a painter in Victoria. I used to give him quite a lot of things which he had and occasionally he's written to me and asked me would I mind if he sold one occasionally. I've always had no objection whatsoever. I've always said to him, 'Make sure you get a good price'.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, we can check on that with Joseph Brown.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** He's a terribly nice chap, Geoffrey.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Good. Well, we'll leave that drawing, if you don't mind, for the moment and finish with the oils. This is one of our important ones, I think, *Emus in a landscape* of 1950.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Oh yes, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Now, that's been reproduced on the cover of several books, hasn't it? At least one I can remember.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I don't know, to tell you truth. I've never sort of caught up with them. But that was part of that exhibition at the '44 drought which I painted in—or was it 1950? I can't remember.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Nineteen fifty. We've got a date on it, yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Nineteen fifty. But it was originally from some of the things that I didn't paint at the time.

**JAMES GLEESON:** In that drought series?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** A composition. Yes. In the drought series, which I painted in 1944.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, as early as that?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Of the '44 drought. Well, they had two very dry years in New South Wales in '42 and '43 and it culminated in '44. It was the most serious drought in many, many times. But nothing could be much mentioned about it, but by the time '44 came along the war was in a position where these kind of things could be made known. I was commissioned by the *Sydney Morning Herald* to go down with Keith Newman, a very well known journalist of his day, and to report it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I remember those drawings.

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**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I did the drawings and he did that. As a result of that the following year I painted a series of pictures.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's '45?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** That's in '45. But there was still things I didn't paint, probably because at the time I wanted to think more about the subjects a bit.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** You store them away in your mind and then you come across some things like that and suddenly you think well, 'I'd like to do that now', you know. So that's how that probably came about.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What about, is it *The rabbits* in the Melbourne Gallery? Is that about the same period?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** It's about the same period, I think.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It's a late one that evolved out of that drought series.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Something like that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Oil again.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Oil again. Yes, this is oil.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Right. Well, *Golden Gully*. Oh, purchased—where did we get that? Christie's Auctions in August 1970. This is *Emus in a landscape*. Do you remember who bought that originally?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** *Golden Gully*?

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, *Emus in a landscape*.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Oh. No, I don't know, I can't remember. I can't remember, to tell you the truth.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, Christie's might be able to help us in that.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I don't think I ever knew actually.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Don't you?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** No. It was on loan in London somewhere for quite a while. I think it was bought over there. I'm not too sure.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, I see. It could have been bought from a London exhibition?

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**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** It wasn't bought from an exhibition. No.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, wasn't it?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** No, no. I don't know. I really can't tell you the history of it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No. Well, Christie's might be able to help us.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Oh, Christie's might well.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Now, *Golden Gully* 1949.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Purchased from Coventry, but I think it was part of the Travelodge collection, wasn't it, before that?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes, that's right.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It was bought from you by the Travelodge people?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Not from me, no.

**JAMES GLEESON:** From a gallery?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I don't know who that was.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It just had an owner before the—

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes, it did. I'm not too sure. Wait a minute. I think Kym Bonython had it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, that could be, yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I think Travelodge purchased it from him.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. *Golden Gully* always relates, in my mind anyway, to—is it the *Councillors house*?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Oh yes, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** A similar subject, surely? Does that come from the Hill End area?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes, all those pictures did.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That excavation, those sites of the old mines providing the foreground.



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**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes. That's right. Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So it is really a painting of that end.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes, that's right.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You had a house up there didn't you, Tas, at one time?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** No. I never had a house. Donald Friend had a home.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh yes, and Paul Haeffliger.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes. I think Paul's still got it. Donald Friend's old friend, Donald Murray, he now has the former Friend house.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Did you do much painting up there?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Oh, quite a bit around there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Sofala of course, yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Sofala and there's one of Hill End itself. I've got a large print of it up in the studio. I'll show you later on. The Geelong Gallery has that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. So this relates to that sequence.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Good. Now, again back to some early ones, *Nude in landscape*, a watercolour, no date.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Oh, that would be dear old George Bell's school—at least 1934 possibly, or '35. But there's a composition. Yes, a composition.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This was another, well, virtually an exercise set by—

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** No. I think it was I set out, I had an idea of painting a large, again, something like a large mural thing, only not on a wall. It never really eventuated. But these were the kind of compositions I was sort of working at.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You were clearly interested in mural painting at that time because this next one is a study for a mural of 1937. That would be a bit later than this one, would it?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Now, that study came to us, Joe Brown in 1976.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That would again be done at the school, do you think, or later? When were you actually at the school?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Oh, from 1935 to the end of 1937, or the beginning of 1938.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This drawing, was it one that you gave away?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes. Well, this I know. The sketch for it belonged to Geoffrey Jones and this *Nudes in landscape*, I think, belonged to him too.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So both of those coming from—oh, that came from the Holdsworth Gallery in Sydney, so it's come by a different route to this one which came from Joe Brown.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes. Yes. Well, it's got 'To Geoff' on it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** But on the other hand if he sold it through Joe, someone who bought it from Joe might have—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Re-sold it.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Re-sold it. Or the Holdsworth might have bought it from Joe, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Could have, yes, yes. Did you ever do the final mural of this one for which we have the study?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes. I did it on a wall at George Bell's.

**JAMES GLEESON:** In the studio?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes. But I think it was 1936 it was done really. It was done there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh. Well, that's interesting.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes, either at the very beginning of '37 or at the end of '36. Because I know it was on the wall there for quite a while, while I was still at the studio.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What became of it in the end, do you know?

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**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Well, the building was pulled down.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, I see. It was destroyed when the building—

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I suppose it did, yes. You see, it made a fine studio, teaching studio. It was on the top of one of those old four or five storey buildings with an old water lift, you know, you pulled a rope and went up. It had this great mass of floor space which could easily be divided off, you know, with hessian. With light on both sides it was a marvellous place for a studio. But as a building suitable for the value of the land, I mean there's a great shining glass thing there now.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Did you do the final mural in oil or what?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** No, it was in tempera.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. This is in what, oil?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** That I think is in oils.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** You know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The final version now destroyed was in tempera. So that's our only record of it.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** That's right.

**JAMES GLEESON:** *Burnt out country*; it has that we got from Artarmon Gallery in October '67.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Do you remember (inaudible)?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I think that was part of that show I had in London which contained paintings of a lot of Northern Australia.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What date would it be? I don't think we have a date on it.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** No. Around about the '57, '58. Somewhere like that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The late fifties.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It was part of a whole series you did on Northern Australia?

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**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes. But this picture, I think, it was sold over there, I'm sure.

**JAMES GLEESON:** In England?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I think so.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So it must have found its way back to Australia. Artarmon Galleries will probably be able to give us the provenance for that.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Now, this one you mentioned that you were pleased to see after so long—*Siesta*. Oil. Purchased from Macquarie Galleries in 1953. That's been in the collection a long time.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes, that's right.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So that would have been bought directly from an exhibition you held?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I think it was. I think it was bought from the—not necessarily an exhibition of mine, but probably a mixed exhibition. You know, something like that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I think I had two pictures in there at the time. I think it was this and another one with a running boy in Cooktown. They were both bought at the same time.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. This next one we come to. You did a whole series of people on verandas. This relates to them. Were they all done about the same time, or over a period of years?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** There were one or two done about that time, I think. I did a painting just a while ago—oh, a couple of years ago—which Brian Johnson sold to somebody, of old Ziggy on the veranda of the Putootah \* pub. I think the reason why one paints people on verandas is that people decide to sit on verandas and keep out of the sun.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's a very Australian activity.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Tas, was this anyone in particular, someone you knew?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** No.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** A character just made up?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Oh well, I mean, he represents the type of bloke who sits on a veranda and goes to sleep. You know those old characters. They're often pub keepers or storekeepers, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Well, I remember characters like Joe—is it?—and Mariah, Maria.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Sort of relate to this kind of composition.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** That's right, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** These are all North Queensland subjects?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Well, this one is.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And this one? This is now *Child running, Cooktown* so it is obviously.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes, that's right. Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This is from Pye too, acquired in 1963, a bequest.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Well, he may have got it from the—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Macquarie?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Macquarie, yes. May well have got it from there. I'm sure that this was in the same exhibition as them.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So *Siesta* and *Boy running Cooktown* came from the same collection, same exhibition?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I'm not too sure. I think it was a couple of paintings I put in. Or it could have been they could have been amongst an exhibition. I'd have to look up old records. I don't know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I know this idea of child running or playing a game in a desolate street or space is one that recurs in a number of your paintings.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I remember Mervyn Horton has one and there are several others.

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**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Well, you see, they don't have confined places to play games in. Either they get out and play them outdoors where they've got a huge horizon or else they do them in a room.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well now, on to the drawings. We've talked about the *Shipboard still life*. That's a *Seated female nude*. I suppose it's a bit difficult to recall the circumstances in which you did a lot of those. Would that be a school, you know, a George Bell one or later?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Oh later, I think.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It was probably done from a model.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Did you work from a model much after you left school?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** No. The only time was when I came back from Paris and had a house in Toorak. George Bell used to hold up an evening, every Thursday evening, in which he'd get a model around his studio and various people would come around it and draw there. Sometimes I'd go there in the evening, and this is probably a drawing from one of those.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. This would be one of them. In the forties?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** When was that? That would be in the early forties, yes. Before we came to Sydney; very early forties.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Good. That's pen and ink, I think.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** That's right.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Good. Now, *Woman with children*, ink and wash. This acquired from Realities Gallery, Melbourne. I think it was part of a group we bought.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes. I couldn't tell you when I painted it. Some of these drawings, you know, were done probably years before.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** *Swagman*, ink without the wash, again from Realities last year. Now, *Study for painting Group of five figures on veranda*, red pen with grey wash. That's one. Now, did you actually do a painting of that, Tas?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** No, I didn't. No. Not that I can remember. I don't know why I didn't though.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** That's a nice one, isn't it? A good design. That's from the Holdsworth in 1972.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Oh, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** But this is obviously an earlier one, *Woman* 1936.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Oh, that's from George Bell's School.

**JAMES GLEESON:** George Bell's School. Purchased '76 from Joe Brown, so its history wouldn't know where that came from.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I wouldn't have the faintest idea.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** You know, when you're a student at school you give a lot away to fellow students, you know what I mean.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Malony, Realities Melbourne.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** You never expect in those days, never expect to sell anything.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That looks as though it's a study for a painting. Was it in actual fact done in a painting?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** No, I don't think so.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I think we've got the price wrong there, I'm sure that wasn't the price.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** No, but I do remember what she did. Silly woman. I put a price on it and she doubled it, which I thought was silly. I mean, she made too big a price. I said to her, you know, 'Look, for heavens sake'. I mean, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's again a real person, Malony, or a character?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** No, I knew Malony.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You knew Malony.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Where?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Oh, he was a head stockman on a property way out in Western Queensland. But I came across a couple of little old sketches of him

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and I drew him up again. I don't know where he is now. He's probably dead. Poor chap.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This was done some time ago?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Well, this drawing was probably done about a year, 18 months ago.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Or it might be more, a couple of years ago. I might still use him, I don't know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Well, it's a marvellous head, marvellous face, and *Old Tom* is good too.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** A real character again?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes. He's gone, unfortunately. I heard he'd died. I think that's the reason why I made a sort of drawing of him really, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** They're all memory drawings?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Well, this one is, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What about Malony?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Well, no, I suppose not really because I drew many of his pictures just away from him, you know, a couple of times. Just in the same way I've got drawings to do in future. I was just talking to old Tommy Sloan up there near Talibardi. \* He's a real character. But, you know, that's the way you go about it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, *Composition* we've already talked about before we went on air. We've got to do some research on that. You can't remember.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** No, I couldn't remember that at all.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Bought from Joseph Brown 1976, a work on paper. So we'll have to find it to photograph it first and then get Joe Brown to tell us what he knows about it, or come back to you once we've got a photograph of it.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes, that's right. I'll probably remember it then.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, there only remains this—



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**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I've got a better visual memory than I have for abstract affairs like names and people like that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** These *Kimberley landscape* lithographs, you were telling me were done with Janet Dawson in Melbourne.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes, I did the drawing down there. In fact, I'd never made lithographs before. It was the first lithograph I'd ever made in my life. She did the printing. She's an excellent printer. And a terribly nice person, you know?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, I do. She's marvellous.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes. I've got great respect for her. If I remember correctly, I was invited to do one of these amongst I think five other painters. They were more or less commissioned by the Victorian National Gallery Society of Friends or something or whatever, you know, whatever they call themselves.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This was, what, 1964?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes. It meant that the society could—whether they commissioned it or whether they were given a choice, you see, of a set of five, a set of five by five different artists.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh I see, yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Something like that, you see. So they got a set for a nominal price, you know that kind of thing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** But I know we were paid, the painters were paid. But what happened to the whole series, I don't know. I think they were limited to 50.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, well now this might make sense. This has been confusing me. *Kimberley landscape*, five prints. Could this have been your work in a folio of five prints?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Of five prints. That's what I think it is.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. That may, in fact, be this particular one. We've duplicated it in our registry.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** That's right.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Well, that clears that up very nicely.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** You may well have in your possession, you may have a portfolio of five prints.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** That would be it, I think. I think that's just what's happened.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes, well it's coming back to me now. I've a strange, sticky memory. But I think that's the whole explanation of that. I can't remember who did the others. I think Olsen was one.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was Klippel one of them?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I'm not too sure.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Klippel did a lithograph with Janet Dawson down there, but whether it was the same time I don't know.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I know she was doing printing for quite a lot of people. She had this—what do you call it?—press.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Lithographic press.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** She had it at the back of the—what was the name of that gallery?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Gallery A?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Gallery A, that was right. It was a great big fine heavy press. Janet, you know, is a charming but little creature.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Or she seems to me.

**JAMES GLEESON:** She was then.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** The way she whanged into that press, you know, it was terrific.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Go on.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes, really brilliant.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well Tas, I think that covers our collection at the moment.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Does it?

**JAMES GLEESON:** I think we might have a break and come back about the Commonwealth Arts Advisory Board later on.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** All right then.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Good.

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### **Commonwealth Arts Advisory Board**

**JAMES GLEESON:** Before we get onto more general matters, could we just for a while talk about *West Wyalong*, which I hope one day will come into the National Collection. Can you remember painting that?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes. I do. Very much indeed because a very old friend of mine, who comes from the Riverina and who's family I've known for a long time, from Albury, and who'd been a legal family for a long time, who is now Mr Justice Nagel and he sits on the Supreme Court Bench and as you probably know has conducted this commission into prison reform which has been a big thing. He was practicing as a leader at the Junior Bar in those days and down in the country he had quite a lot of old soliciting firms who used to employ him on various cases. He had to go down and argue a case in the court at Wyalong. He said to me, 'Would you like to come down just for the weekend?'. So I drove down with him. I was rather fascinated with the town itself. I mean, I'd known it but I hadn't gone back to it for years, not since I've become a painter anyway. Mind you, I saw it a little while ago; visited it a while ago.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Has it changed?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** It has. It has, very much indeed. It's not the place it used to be. The temples of Mammon, for instance, all the banks have got fine new buildings in it, you know. The old verandas have gone—all that kind of thing. But I painted it, because I remember that evening. I was standing outside the pub under that veranda looking down the street. It was around about half past six in the evening when everybody's having tea.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Deserted, empty, yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Except the light in the window of the dagos, which we could always get a feed at, you know. You could drive 50 miles in those days and hit a town at that time and you wouldn't find a soul abroad. They'd all be at home having tea. But you'd always find Joe the Greek, he'd be open.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was Joe the Greek in your painting? It wasn't at West Wyalong?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** No. But it was just like that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. It was like that, characteristic of it.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** He ran a café, as they call it. God bless them.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, exactly. But, Tas, it seems to touch on something a little bit more specific than that, something almost universal, the sense of loneliness and isolation and emptiness. This is a town that's deserted except for this one mysterious light at the end of the street.

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**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** That's right.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Did you feel this?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Well, it was unusual one because it wasn't a straight-through-town street.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No. That bend.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** It bent around because it followed the old bullock tracks on the diggings when they were there. But the point about these towns is this: that they have the grand areas in the frontages, they're all false fronts.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** You know. Behind them there is a different thing. You get those beautiful pediments that are built up, you know, on wood or rather, you know—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Concrete, yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes, bits of concrete and things like that. Behind them of course it's a different story. Everyone all used to have a kind of a backyard, just like any other place had.

**JAMES GLEESON:** All the way through your art—I might be wrong but I don't think I am—is this sense of the vastness of the country and the loneliness that this implies. You must be conscious of that, and it certainly seems to come out in a painting like *West Wyalong*. There's a township there but it's empty. There's not a soul in sight. The only sign of human existence are the buildings, dead, except for that one light.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** But this is kind of pretty true of the life about. I mean, you can travel across vast areas of this country and you won't see a thing moving. You can travel right across Western New South Wales which produces, I think, over a quarter of the nation's wool clip and has millions of sheep in it, but you could travel over that all day on the way down to Adelaide and never see a sheep.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** It's very big. It's like searching for needles in a haystack. It's the same with the wildlife. The wildlife lies up at daytime. But this life, there's masses of life. I think I once said in something I wrote that at night time it's rather different. You can put a hurricane lamp down in the northern plains in the Mitchell grass and, God damn it, the things that move out of that grass are fantastic. There's a tremendous life going on. Small moths, lizards, all sorts of things come out of it, which are absolutely absent in the daytime. It's true

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of the marsupial life. So what it has is a strange emptiness, but at the same time it's peopled by all sorts of things.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** You know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Tas, how does it relate to Sofala? They're both similar sorts of paintings in the sense that they're empty streets in isolated country towns. Is West Wyalong earlier or later than Sofala?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I can't quite remember when I painted them. But I think it was about the same kind of period I was interested in painting buildings and places like that, roughly about the same. Both of them were the aftermath of gold rushes. The quiet year that comes down on an old gold town, after the honkey-tonks and all the rest of them have died. There are the old people with memories. These are the quiet sort of backwater period of the time, you know. Some of the places fold up and die altogether. West Wyalong and others didn't die. They still had a sort of thing, you know. I remember years ago in Western Australia, out beyond Kalgoorlie was an old field that the only way you could find out what it was, or where it was, simply by the sign boards that the local council had decided to put up. With a sign that said 'Here was the so and so pub where so many celebration dinners were held. Here was this'. But up on the top of the hill there was some smoke coming back up, going up, you know, from an old shanty. I took the old Land Rover up there and there was a very old man living up there. He said he'd come back and put his shack there. He was the only inhabitant left on that goldfield who knew what it was. He'd rather go back and die there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, that sense of something that's happened in the past that's still living in a tenuous sort of way comes through in those paintings very clearly, I think.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes. Well those towns make it that way, you know. There's plenty of dust on the boards, they're not well swept.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** But there was plenty of dust in the past on them too, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, Tas, I hope that picture comes into our collection. I think it's one of your great ones, and it's one that would fill in a big gap in our collection at the moment. But could we go now to another aspect of your work in Australian art, and that is as a member of the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board? I know you were a member for many years before you retired—was it 1972?—when the Labour Party came into power.

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**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes. Well, I intended to retire before that actually because I'd had a good many years. The only thing was that there was a sudden rapid change of government when McMahon's government came in and nobody quite knew what was going to happen. I thought, 'Well I better stay there', because sometimes, you know, if that happens you rock the boat a bit. I know one or two members weren't terribly well at the time, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** So I did stay on. But I joined it when Will Ashton was chairman.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What year was that?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Look, I can't remember offhand.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Early sixties?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I suppose it must be, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** How long were you on the Board?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Altogether about 11 years.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, that would make it about 1961.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Somewhere like that. What had happened was that I got a message from the Prime Minister's Department.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That was in the time of Menzies?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Menzies' time. Could I go down and have a yarn with him? I went down to Canberra and I must say he was very pleasant to me. He took me in and gave me lunch and that sort of thing. Said that he wanted me to come on because he thought that it was a good idea to get some of the younger people who were considered to be contemporary, if you know what I mean. That they had in view the idea of building a National Gallery and that this was going to take a lot of talk and thinking about, and it was a good idea to have some—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Even at that time, 1961?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes. Mind you, of course, I immediately thought well this is splendid that there'll be a National Gallery in three or four years, you know. I was completely unfamiliar with the ways of politics and the fact that Mr Menzies at that time was a master at the game. He could always procrastinate until he was absolutely certain that the vote was right. Then he would move. He would be right. Mind you, I think this was terribly good because, you know, if

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you're not engaged with public opinion and your way of life is not, you can find that you can be very very wrong by trying to do something too quickly. A lot of people don't like that. I think he was probably quite right. But what he was doing was preparing the way.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Who was on the Board at that time?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Well, there was Daryl Lindsay, Sir Daryl Lindsay, Dan Lindsay, Campbell of South Australia.

**JAMES GLEESON:** He was Director of the South Australian Gallery?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** He was Director of the South Australian Gallery then. Dan Lindsay wasn't. He'd retired. Bill Dargie, Sir William Dargie, and Douglas Pratt and myself. No, there was nobody else then. The people who came on came on later.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Right. Now, at that time there was a plan for a National Gallery generally envisaged at the government level.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** This was the kind of long range planning. There was no planning done in fact at all. It was talked about for a long time.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** It was envisaged. We all had the idea.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, this came as a discussion between you and the Prime Minister. Had there been any formal discussions?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Oh well, he'd informed the Board. He'd informed the Board that this was what he had in view. He'd asked them, I think, whether they would object if he invited me on to the Board.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** They didn't put any objections in the way. I think he said that he wanted somebody who was a leader among the younger painters. Not younger painters, but the painting scene.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Or progressive, yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I think Bill Dargie wanted to have somebody on who, you know, was of the same age and all that kind of thing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** As a support. Because the Board at that time really had little policy, couldn't have a policy.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** It had no written policy?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Well, it had a policy in the sense that it bought pictures.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Only Australian?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Well, it couldn't buy anything else because our buying grant was five thousand pounds.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see, yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Which meant virtually that we couldn't buy very much at all.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no, no.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** This had been pointed out and unfortunately I think in those days—I don't think it was the actual fault of Menzies—in those days and beforehand the Board more or less invited the Prime Minister to look at the things that they had purchased. The Prime Minister's point of view on it was taken rather seriously. Now, this goes back to years before actually I joined the Board, and I think this is one reason why the thing was that if Mr Menzies didn't like something, well they didn't buy it. You know that kind of thing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** However, we pushed this point a bit and although we did do this we started to stiffen up very much on what we regard as a picture we wanted. I was very pleased to think that within a year—it wasn't anything to do with me particularly—I think that Bill Dargie and I think Dan Lindsay and Campbell and Doug Pratt had done a lot to get that buying grant increased. It went up to 10 thousand pounds. But before that we were virtually restricted to buying, you know—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Within that (inaudible). But you still had in mind the idea of a National Gallery in the long run?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Oh yes. Yes. Well now, this was the time we began to formulate a policy and that was that we couldn't possibly think about setting up a National Gallery unless we had something worthwhile to put in it. This was going to need money and it was going to cost money. So we could push this. We were lucky because the Prime Minister happened to be, as it was, as it was run, our minister. We did not have to go—

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. He was the Minister for Culture as well?



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**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** We didn't have to importune any other minister to do this. Also we didn't have to argue too much with Treasury. Treasury would support the Prime Minister's opinion if he just sets it. Fine. Well, working on these presumptions we had to work out what we were going to do and what we were going to need, and we certainly needed a hell of a lot more money. Well, after the resignation of Menzies, Harold Holt took a very I think good attitude to it. He said, although he was minister of the department, he did not consider himself to be an expert in art. The reason why we constituted the Board was that we were to be his, the Prime Minister and the Commonwealth, experts on it and therefore he would listen to our opinion on what should be done. Not only to buy pictures, but with the idea of forming a future National Gallery. Well, that was very good. He didn't interfere, in other words. He took our recommendations and he took our recommendations for a much bigger buying power. Now, I forget what it went to then but quite suddenly we found that we could buy pictures.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I remember a proposal which was made that 10 thousand pounds should be set aside to buy the works of art for the representation in the new Council's building of the Embassy in Tokyo.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** At that time Jack Gorton had had something to do—I think he was in the Menzies government. He had taken quite a part in looking after Foreign Affairs when Menzies was a Minister for Foreign Affairs as well as Prime Minister, he'd deputed to Gorton, you know, a lot of that work. I remember asking Jack Gorton what the Embassy was like there and he said, 'The Embassy is pretty frightful'. It was built by an Anglophile, a Japanese, who had the whole thing plastered with small lozenshatz \* panelling, you see, which would look splendid if you put hunting prints and etchings of that sort on the tiny rooms. It was a nice Elizabethan sort of, you know, interior. But he said the new chancellery building was a very different one. It's a fine modern building. I said, 'Well, that's the one I'm interested in'. Well, I had the opportunity of going around and talking to the blokes, and I got a very good Molvig and I got a very good Olsen and I got a very good piece of sculpture, and I got quite a lot of these things which today would be considered major modern paintings. I got them for seven thousand pounds—a pot 10 thousand pounds. I was paying these boys a good price. We were all very pleased about this. Now, these are things that could happen. You see, the Board was in that unique position in those days of having two strings to its bow. It could buy for the forthcoming collection and add to the collection that was, or it could buy for Foreign Affairs because Foreign Affairs relied on the Board to buy them. But the pictures we bought for Foreign Affairs remained the property of the Board.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's right, yes.

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**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** So it meant that we could try our arm on younger painters. No National Gallery would in its right mind in most parts of the world ever buy pictures by living artists. They'd have to be proved.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's right, yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** But we could prove, and we did so. We bought pictures when we could for these embassies, for this, for that, for so and so. We were getting together a pretty good collection in the end for a very small amount of money.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Tas, what happened to the pictures that you bought that didn't go in to the embassies? Was there some storage facility at that time?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Well, they had a storage facility but it was here, there and there, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see, just odd rooms all over.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** One place in Canberra here and somewhere else and, you know, a bit of a thing like that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No central repository?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** No. Because we didn't have a staff, you see.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No. What did you operate on, with a secretary?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes, we did. But as it grew bigger, as the buying grant got bigger, the need for these things came up and the Treasury came to the party, the Prime Minister's came to the party, they more or less regarded this as a kind of thing which we would have to work out for ourselves, and therefore storage came into it—care, so to speak. Although we still had a small staff so to speak, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Who was your secretary at that time? Was it Cummings, or Valda Leehy? Was she there at that time?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Well, she was the secretary to the Secretary. We had Bill Cummings and we had—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Brendon Kelson?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Oh, he came later in the piece.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Later, yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** But we had a man who was a terribly good chap too he was. He's now the Chief Librarian in the Parliamentary Library.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** What was his name?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Don't let him listen to this record, but I've forgotten it. But he was very, very good.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Not to worry, we can find that out, yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** But the great thing was that the grants were getting bigger.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, year by year they were increasing.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Sure. Then when Harold disappeared, Holt disappeared, we'd got to a pretty good level. When Gorton came in it was like Christmas, in a sense. He walked in and virtually said, Look, let me see'. By this time we'd had a policy and this was to buy what we could, the best we could, to use what we could and take the advantage of buying the younger painters—in other words, a second string to our bow—and to surge on. When it came down to ideas of designing a National Gallery, we hadn't got to that kind of stage. But we had got to the stage of putting on discussions about it. When Gorton came he was very sympathetic.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Can I just interrupt at this time? Your collection policy at that time was Australian art. Does that include, say, the New Guinea aspect of it?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes, it did. It was coming in well and truly.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So it was a sort of Australia and the area.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Oceania.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oceania.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** See during this time a session was drawn up and Lindsay chaired what was a commission to look at all these aspects of it. I was away for a year in England but the Commission sent me all their reports and asked that I wrote long reports back, you know. I didn't want them to close the door too much on things. If you cut things down to narrow aspects and say, 'Right, we'll deal with the South Pacific' or we won't deal with the South Pacific or China's out of our orbit or somebody else is out of our orbit, you can get terribly close and before you know where you are you've closed the doors on various other aspects such as that, which you find very hard to open. I said, 'Look, you know, what we've got to regard is that Australia is part of the South Pacific. It's part of the Far East. It's all part of that. It's influenced politically and it's influenced from a trading pact economically. So we've got to look at this area in the same way. We've got to even look at the West Coast of America'. Historically this has had quite a lot to do with us.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** So that was where this concept came in as Australia, as a centre reaching across the Pacific?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Oh yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, I see.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I said. 'Look, all we have to do is have a look around. You'll find that practically your common navigator is Captain Cook. You can't cut him off', you know. I'm glad to see they did adopt that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** How early was this notion mooted, Tas? Some time in the mid sixties?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Oh, this goes back to, yes, about '65, '66 when the Lindsay Report was brought up. The Lindsay Report came out on that. I was in London having a show there in '64, '65. I got these reports coming over and I wrote back my answers to them, you know, or opinion. I'm glad to see they kept the open door policy which was a very important one of the period, you know. You see, it was very hard to say to yourself, 'All right, how much money are we going to get? What kind of a building is it going to be, if it's going to be a building at all?' It may not have come along for 25 years. It's taken a long time anyway now, as we know. So what you couldn't start doing was to narrow the thing down. If you narrowed it down and had an adopted attitude and a policy, well, we would have been in a worse position. We'd had a bad case to argue.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So you deliberately kept an open door policy for as long—

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Oh, sure. That's why the Board did that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That was very wise, I think.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Well, the Board did that and I think it was very wise because it enabled them to be able to start putting together a collection, which Bill Dargie was very anxious to do, on South West Pacific primitive art.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I think this was a splendid idea. It also enabled us to pick up what we could. Well, we got some good Thai sculpture, that kind of thing, you know what I mean, things of that sort. It kept us really sort of on our toes a bit on this and this was very good. Then we found that we were getting an increase in money and this became really something because, look, I've always thought that policies that matter are only policies if they're supported by dough.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

[sound distortion]

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**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** We had certainly got to this stage where we were getting a million bucks. This was really something. This was where we could really begin.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I think that's about the stage when I came in.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** That's when you came in.

[sound distortion]

**JAMES GLEESON:** Tas, we were talking about the time when you broke the sound barrier and got a million dollars to spend each year.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes, yes, that was right.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This was, what, in the early seventies, was it?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes. Just before, well I'd say, the Gorton Government entered. Then there was that shemozzle, as you remember, and the McMahon—

**JAMES GLEESON:** I came on to it.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** That's right. Well, you came on to it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** With Fred Williams and David Dryden.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** That's right. Yes. All sorts of things happened then. Quite suddenly we were virtually kicked out of the Prime Minister's Department.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** We were given to Mr Howson.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was this in Gorton's time?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** No, McMahon's time.

**JAMES GLEESON:** McMahon's time.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** He reconstituted and he lumped arts, Aborigines and the environment under one ministership and we found ourselves under a junior minister, the most junior minister in the cabinet. Something which I quite frankly and publicly said was quite ridiculous. I think also it was an insult to the Board and to a very good chairman in Bill Dargie, because Bill Dargie was a very good chairman.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, he was.

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**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I think he did a lot. But from then on we were cut down a bit, if you remember.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** We were cut down a bit. But just before this I had got to the stage where I thought, 'Well now things are going to go well, we're getting this kind of money obviously it's going to go on and increase and it's going to be this and that. I've had 10 years of it. I'd like to get off it now', you know. So I wrote a letter of resignation, or retirement if you like, when the sudden change in government came and one or two members were a bit anxious and they said, 'Well, could you stay on, do you think, for a while?'. Well, I didn't want to rock the boat in any way, so I did. However, I retired later because when the new government came in, after the McMahon government fell and the new Labour government came in, there were going to be so many changes that I thought. 'Well look, it's time I got off'.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Tas, at that stage had a decision been taken to build a gallery?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes. Oh, there had been. There was one period in those four or five years before that in which we'd held a seminar in Canberra and quite a lot of people came up to it to attend it—architects and various people that were interested, state gallery directors, all that kind of thing. This was held in Canberra over a period of two or three days and it was a very interesting seminar. It wasn't discussed as though it was a matter that this seminar is to be held to discuss the feasibility of building, but it was discussed as though it was an exercise, and what would happen if we built a National Gallery, you see. The architects were very interesting. I remember Roy Grounds had a lot of interesting things to say at the time.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was this before he'd built the Science Academy?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Well, yes, I think he was probably working on earlier designs and that's probably one reason why he was invited to it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** But it was an interesting seminar and I think it did a lot to consolidate the parliamentary view.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was Col Madigan present at that seminar?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I can't remember if he was. I don't think he was. But I wouldn't be sure on this point. I know at this time, you see, it was a difficult thing to formulate in one way. One might have a policy to say, 'Yes, we're going to build a National Gallery'. One had the knowledge that the Prime Minister intended to back this. But you see the Prime Minister was faced with this issue:

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would the National Gallery be built on the flat, would it be built where Government House is, or would it be built up on Capital Hill?

**JAMES GLEESON:** So the site hadn't been determined?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Well, the sight was a thing which was rumbling around because nobody knew where Parliament House was going to be re-sighted.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes of course.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Menzies took the politicians point of view, which is the perfect one in this circumstance to do, was to let them argue it out on the floor of the house. Now, this argument could go on, as it went on, for three or four years. I remember Calwell at the time wanted Parliament House to be built down where the Gallery is. No, no, he wanted it on the Capital Hill, that's right. People said that cathedrals should be built on hills and parliament should be with the people on the flat, you know, those arguments. So on two or three occasions votes were actually taken in the house. But the Menzies method I think was right, even if it took three or four years. By that time people were sick of the argument and they were sort of saying, 'Right', and he was going to get his way anyway where he wanted it to be.

**JAMES GLEESON:** He wanted it down by the lake?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Well, he wanted it down by the lake quite obviously.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see, where it turned out to be.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Sure. Parliament House could be built where it is now anyway. It's got room behind it. If anybody wants to build a cathedral they can put it up on the hill. Or I think they're putting one or two other things up there, but still. So it's quite obvious that it could balance the public library.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** But these things were argued fiercely in the house and finally, you know, what was voted in this one year, three years later people were tired, sick of the argument, and they said, 'Oh well, go on. All right, put it where you want'. Good way to win a parliamentary argument.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Patrician.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Patrician, yes. But maddening, of course, for people who wanted to build it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So frustrating when you were enthusiastic and keen to get on with it, yes.

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**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** As I can say, I spent 11 years on that Board, invited on because we were going to build a National Gallery and 11 years later it hadn't even started. But it was under way.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Without those 11 years it probably wouldn't have got started. I think they were very important years.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, Tas, now it's not so far, another three years and it should be opening.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Well, that will be grand.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Have you been down to see it?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** No, I haven't been to Canberra for some time. I'd like to go down one day and have a look at it, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, you must.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** I hope I live to the time when I can see the opening, it would be good.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well look, just make an appointment, ring me up and come down. You should see over the building at the present stage because it's looking really good.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Is it, yes?

**JAMES GLEESON:** It's a realisation of your dream as well as Bill Dargie's and a lot of other people.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes. Well, we had to argue a lot about it and by God did we have to put up with the attitudes of people who thought it was a waste of money and time and, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was there much of that in Canberra?

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Oh, there was an awful lot, you know. I mean, you know, there's an awful lot of things. I always remember once an old friend of mine, good old conservative cattle bloke years ago in Queensland, he used to go on about that white elephant Canberra and why do tax payers have to put their money into building that bloody silly place down there. I said, 'Have you ever been down to Canberra?'. 'No' he said, 'Wife wants to go down', he said. I said, 'Well next time you're down south go and have a look around it'. Anyway, they did. When I saw him in the Queensland club one day I said, 'Did you ever go down to Canberra?'. 'Oh yes', he said, 'Spent a week there'. I said, 'What do you



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think of it?'. I said, you know, 'You were so much against the whole thing, what did you think?'. 'Oh well' he said, 'I suppose it's a pretty good thing really' he said, you know. 'Can't have the nation having a capital like a lot of old baggy arse humpies', he said, you know. 'I suppose' he said 'They should have it that way'. I said. 'You mean you enjoyed yourself?'. He said, 'Well, yes, and so did the wife', you know. So there's some justification then. If there's some justification from that then we've got a pretty good justification for a National Gallery.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, Tas, thank you very much. I think that gives us a very good survey of just, you know, what happened in those very important formative years of the Gallery.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Yes. Right, thanks very much. Jimmy. I hope to Christ you don't have to cross examine me too much else.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Next time it will be Peter Purves Smith. Thank you very much.

**SIR RUSSELL DRYSDALE:** Well, you won't get Maisie now.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no. Later.