

## **JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: LESLEY DUMBRELL**

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Lesley, can we begin right at the beginning? When were you born and where?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** I was born in 1941.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Exact date?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** On October 14. So it's almost my birthday today.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah, so it is. Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** In Melbourne, and I've lived in Melbourne all my life.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. You studied in Melbourne?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes. I went to RMIT 1959 to 1961 or '62. I've forgotten the dates, actually.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** I'll check.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Right. Good.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** To 1961.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Nineteen fifty-eight to 1961. So that our first work of yours in our collection is an aquatint of flowers which I think is dated 1961.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes, I did that in my fourth year at RMIT. Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So at that time you hadn't found what we now know as the Dumbrell style.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** No, no, not at all. No. RMIT at that time was a very structured place and the course was quite rigid. I went there because I wanted to be a painter. I always knew that's what I wanted to do.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Even at school.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Did you study it, you know, in primary and secondary school.

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**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Well, I think it just sort of fell, it just seemed to be that Lesley could do painting. She wasn't all that good at anything else, but that seemed to be what was going to be her forte if she was going to have one. I did always want to be a painter. So I think I was very lucky that I didn't ever have the confusion of not knowing what I wanted to do.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It always helps when you (inaudible).

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** It doesn't make any easier to do it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** But it is helpful at least to get that sorted out. But RMIT, well, my first year there I think we had three hours a week painting. By the fourth year I think I was doing nine hours a week. But there was a whole lot of other subjects that we had to do. We had to have a minor subject, and in my third and fourth year I chose printmaking and also sculpture. The print that you have comes out of that printmaking subject that I did with Tate Adams, who had just come to RMIT and set up the print room. He was a tremendous teacher and I got a great deal from him, so I really enjoyed his classes. I haven't done any printing literally since, but I did enjoy printmaking very much.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You told me you did etchings as well as aquatints.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes, yes. It was all within the etching, I didn't do anything else. I didn't do any lithos or silk screen or any of those other things. It was all etching or aquatint. Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Did you do many that you'd stand by now at that time?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** No. Well, as I told you before, I have destroyed all my student work, but I do have about six etchings left. Because I still feel that although, as you say, my student work doesn't relate to what I'm doing now, some of the etchings do in terms of subject matter in that basically my interest is in landscape not in people, if you like.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** My figurative responses are to do with landscape. The etchings are about, well, the flowers and then there's some landscape sort of etchings that are to do with form of mountains and things like that. That was the beginning of a realisation that I didn't want to paint people but there was something about landscape that I felt very deeply about.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

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**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** But I obviously took a long time to find the style that I wanted to work in. Although my work is non-objective, I feel very strongly that it has to start from something in reality.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It stems from nature.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes. In a way it's a translation of an experience I've had onto an emotional level, if you like, so that colour is the most important thing in my work, I always feel. My paintings always start out of perhaps seeing something responding to the colours that are there and the mood and the feeling that I have about the experience of that. Like a sunset or the sea or whatever.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Then slowly that colour will start to build in my mind and I'll realise that there is a blue painting in my head, or beginning to form, if you like. I think when the paintings are finished it really does mean something to me if people can look at them and respond to them in the same way as they would respond to, say, a sunset or some kind of physical experience of landscape and timelessness, about that experience. I think painting can pick up those things. That's one of the things painting can do.

**JAMES GLEESON:** How long was it, you know, after you finished at RMIT before you began to, you know, develop this approach that's now characteristic of your work? This sort of formalised, I suppose reduction of experience.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes, yes. Well, what happened was for about three years after I left art school I did very little work. I did a little drawing but very little else. Having had such a strong figurative training at art school—in fact, we were forbidden to submit abstract paintings for our final folio. It was still quite traditionally tied to Cézanne, Matisse, that sort of thing, but certainly not Rothko or Barnett Newman or, you know, other sort of art that you could be interested in, or Mondrian or people like that. I think by the time I'd finished my art course I really didn't know where I wanted to start. But what had always intrigued me was particularly Mondrian and Kandinsky were the two artists that I looked at their work and thought, 'I can't understand this'. Instead of thinking, 'Because I can't understand, it probably isn't any good', which is a sort of arrogance of students, I turned it round and thought, 'Because I can't understand it there's probably a lot in it and I'm missing it'.

So I read about them and I looked at as many illustrations as I could find of their work and sort of slowly began to see that there was something there that I was really interested in. It was sort of a love/hate thing of: I can't understand it but I really like it but I can't even say why and trying to analyse all of that. Then the other element was that in 1966, which was about three or four years after I left school, I got a job teaching at Prahran at the Art School. It was a very exciting

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and interesting time for me and in a way it was almost like that was my art education rather than my RMIT days.

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

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** The reason for that was that there was a lot of colour field painting going on at that time.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This would be when, about 1967?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Sixty-six. The staff at Prahran at that time was really very young. Well, there were artists like Jim Doolin.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah, yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Clive Murray-White, Alun Leach-Jones, Virginia Coventry, Elwyn Dennis, Peter Booth, and others. But we were all starting out at that stage. In fact, Jim Doolin was the first person to introduce me to Liquitex, the paint that I always use. He was a very articulate man and a tremendously interesting man to talk to. So it was a combination of these artists that I was suddenly thrown into contact with, inquiring into abstract art on my own, and also the beginnings of all the colour field painting and the serialised painting, and obviously Bridget Riley and the Optical painters. All of those things sort of came together for me and I think that it's true. I mean, it's often been said that sometimes you're lucky to be in the right place at the right time.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** I think that that's really what it was. That I was lucky that there were a lot of elements there that did come together for me and I really loved all the colour field painting, and I learnt an awful lot out of that whole sort of movement of work. Of course, the Field Show was on, I think, the next year, was it? Seventy-six, seventy-seven.

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

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Ah, '66, '67 or '68. I can't remember now.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It was when the gallery opened.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes. Sixty-eight perhaps.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That was '68, yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes. But it was around that time that all that work started. In a way I think—I'm sure now, convinced now—that it was just good luck, but all of those things were right for me because I have stayed with that kind of painting rather than gone through that and into something else.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** So there must be something that I can't analyse, but it must have hit the right nerve or the right instinct or whatever.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Is there a strong Op influence in your approach?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Well, there was to begin with. It's definitely disappearing now in the work that I'm doing at the moment. But one of the things that intrigued me about Optical art, or serialised art really, was that it avoided the whole problem of composition. If you took an element and repeated it several times, you built up a momentum from that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** You didn't have to worry about whether the vase was on the left hand corner or you should take it out or put the chair two inches to the left or seat the figure four inches higher. I mean, all of those problems about figurative work I could never feel confident about. I never really felt there was an absolutely right decision to make about that. But with a repeated image I found that if I took an element and repeated it several times, then the sum total of the repetition would introduce another element again through the momentum of what would happen. That whole Optical area fascinated me because I thought that in a way you couldn't predict how the Optical part would work until you'd worked the whole thing out. You'd repeated that element several times and laid all the colours on and then by the time you put the last bit of colour on it, it either began to sing and jump or it just went flat. I could never quite predict that. To me that was, a sort of mystery and it was an intuitive way of working, although it appears not to be in that it's so calculated in its appearance and it's so technical to look at. But it actually isn't, or it didn't feel like that to me.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** But the other thing about Optical work that fascinated me was that it seemed that although the Optical element in art has always been there to some extent—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** It was taken up as a new element by Bridget Riley, Vasarely and that whole school of people.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Well, it was going back to Impressionism.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** That's right. It's always been there but it's never really been emphasised and then suddenly a group of artists were emphasising not just another style but a fundamental element in painting and bringing to the fore and

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making it the strongest part of the work. That seemed to me to be a really innovative development. That really probably not since Surrealism had there been a 20th century discovery, if you like, which wasn't just a stylistic one but it was something fundamental to painting. I suppose I was attracted to that because of enjoying it, you know, physically liking Optical work, and also because I really wanted to try and explore something new. But then that's again the arrogance of a young artist thinking, 'I'm going to blaze it', you know, 'I'm going to avant-garde artist, I'm not going to be an old fashioned artist', if you like. But, of course, whatever you inquire into you learn out of anyway. So it doesn't really matter where you start so long as you start and so long as you get in there and get your hands dirty, you will get something back out of it. I think that probably sums up my interest in Optical work in that by inquiring into it I learnt a great deal about colour and about putting one colour against another and what sort of jump you'd get and things like that. All of that knowledge is now building into the work I'm doing at the moment, which I think is more personal and much less tied to any particular school.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Lesley, I notice that—quite rightly you say colour, Op and colour are synonymous, you know—in your work you use that repetition of form with changes, variations in the placement which builds up a great sense of movement.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Now, this seems to me to be one of the strong characteristics of your work. That apart from the illusion of movement created by colour, there's also another layer of sense of movement created by the subtle changes in the placement of the strokes or the spots or the angles at which you place the lines and so on. Is that true?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** It's absolutely right, yes, yes. I think that, in fact, you've hit on something that is actually very fundamental to me. I think that was one of the reasons why I liked Optical work so much, was that it did imply movement. That it was a terrific contradiction in terms in that a painting is still, it's static, and it's a frozen moment maybe or like a photograph is but a painting can be too, a realistic painting. But everything sort of locked into place. But the Optical paintings don't, they move.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** They bounce around and they can be physically an affront to this.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** They can be very aggressive in their movement. I really love that contradiction of a sense of movement that isn't possible, and then that

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whole thing about painting being illusion anyway. Well, it's sort of off the track but it's the same thing, I think. In thinking about painting one of the things I've had to think about is what I think reality is.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** I have a real problem about people talking about abstract art because I don't think there is any such thing. I think the only way that we can respond to a painting is through some kind of real experience that we've had, whether it is just simply looking at a red colour field painting and saying, 'That painting makes me feel edgy. I feel nervous or anxious or angry' or, you know, all those obvious sort of emotions you'll have. But you couldn't just respond to it as just a piece of red.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** You do have this other thing, emotional association or 'That red reminds me of the red dress my mother used to wear and some red poppies she was picking one day' or something, 'and I just love it'. But you always weave it back into your own reality. Now, I don't mean by that just what you see like a table and chairs.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** But I mean your whole total reality which takes in your emotional life as well as your vision and your hearing and all the senses woven together, all that sort of thing. Yes, there was an underlying point there that I was going to make and I can't think what it was. Oh, yes. Well, it sort of goes back to the movement thing and the illusion of painting that if you can make a painting appear to move when it can't, then it sort of reinforces the quality of the fact that it isn't a possible thing, and yet you're experiencing something out of it which is real. I like all those ambiguous sort of areas of what experience is and what a life is and what a painting is, all sort of coming together. Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I think it's significant that you gave titles to many of your paintings after winds, famous winds, like the Mistral, Simoon and the Foehn and so on, which implies movement anyway and gives the clue in a way to the approach to the painting, to try and experience this sense of movement.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes, that's absolutely true. Winds particularly, I don't like wind very much. I mean, I'd much prefer today to be still and calm. But the titles were to do with the movement part of wind, but also the intangibility of it. Like you can't capture a wind and put it in a box and say that's a wind. All you can do is experience it. You know when you're out on a windy day and your hair's blowing about and it makes you cranky or irritable or excited or elated or whatever.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** That that actual experience of wind can't be transferred any further than the time you're actually in it. Whereas if you look at a tree and you think it's beautiful, you can look at it the next day and although the light might be slightly different it still looks like the same tree unless you're really thinking about that. But a wind isn't like that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** It's fleeting and gone and I think a lot of experiences are like that. Yes, so all of that really interests me. Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I think one of the richness's of our collection is that we have so many studies and drawings of yours and one can see how your mind works when you're working out one of these problems. The fact that you work on graph paper and that you plan the approach to this feeling of movement very, very carefully beforehand, is that true? You do a lot of preliminary drawing and working it out on graph paper beforehand. It springs from the emotion, but then you have to formalise it into a system.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** That's right. Yes. Yes. The other thing is, of course, that I can't just simply start a painting. Working in the precise way that I do, I couldn't work all of that out on a big painting and have it fall apart. So I have to really prepare it thoroughly, or else the time involved in making work would be just enormous.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It must take a long time to paint one of those large paintings, *February* for instance?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes, *February* was a painting that from the beginning of the idea to the finished painting was six months work. There were probably about—oh, I don't know—six or eight studies altogether for it and some drawings and then the painting itself. So, yes, it did take a long time. It was a very unusual painting for me. I had never painted anything as big as that before. In fact, it was a very important painting for me because it was the first time that I decided that there was something that I needed to do that would take a long time, and that I had to make myself do that. I mean, I expected that once I'd finished the painting it would be like an elephant. I would never get rid of it. It would be with me forever and that it was a kind of a real luxury to do that because I would earn no money from it. But I still felt that I had to do it anyway, so I just did it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. It was a climactic work for you?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes, it was. Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And, of course, is now the centrepiece of our collection.



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**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Well, I know. Well, that was amazing. You know, really I was very amazed by that. But that painting, the title *February* is about a time of year. I'm very interested in time, timelessness.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, let's find it here and look at it.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Freeze in time, that sort of thing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** We'll switch off for a moment until we find it.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** But it's about time in a special way for me. As you can see, I live by the sea. I think that each month of the year's got a different quality. I mean, the seasons spring, summer, autumn, winter are obvious ones that have been written about and talked about a lot. But to me February is a particularly beautiful month in Melbourne. We start to get the beginnings of our Indian summer, it's always hot, but a little bit balmy, and the shift between night and day is slow and it's often very warm, almost sub-tropical. You know, it's the only month in Melbourne when that happens. There's something about the light that starts to change into that soft autumn light about the end of February. So there's a pink, yellow, blue kind of spectrum that particularly at sunrise and sunset has a sort of longer life, if you like, in Melbourne.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** I sort of became conscious of that and realised that that was a painting. That was being presented to me. There was something about those three colours and the haziness of those colours and the way they grade through but they blend together. So that's really where *February* came from and the linear structure in *February*—and, in fact, a lot of the linear structure in my painting—is a way of reinforcing the basic colour of the painting, like the background colour, if you like. So that the linear colours are to do with articulating that colour further.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, I see. Has living by the bay side had a—I would suspect that in a painting like that it has.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Oh, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The colours on the water and in the sky must have had a conditioning affect on the way you approached a big painting like that.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Absolutely, yes it does. I've for years looked at the horizon line of the sea and that's just a line. I mean, you can put a line on a painting and it becomes a horizon line if you make it horizontal. But it's the most extraordinary line. The way that the sea and the sky work, you only have to have a couple of clouds on the right hand side and there'll be grey across the sea and then it will go to white where the sun picks it up, and then it'll turn into a soft blue

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and then by the time you've got right around to the left hand side of your vision it might be dark blue. The sky seems to be almost the same right the way through, but you get this modulation of just a line, if you like.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** That seems to be one of the most fundamental elements in a painting anyway, a line, a coloured line. I love that horizon line in the sea because it's so fundamental, yet it's so constantly changing. It sort of reinforces the feeling that I have that nothing stays the same. Everything's changing every second. All that exists is this minute, this second. I mean, we've got a memory of what happened before, we've got an anticipation of what might happen in the future, but really everything is just happening instantly and changing subtly all the time. The sea and the horizon line for me is a tremendous symbol of that. But then I really love the landscape. Although I live in a city and I've always lived in a city, to me Australia is still this sort of alien land that we don't belong in and there's this fantastic landscape that is harsh and brutal and that we can't survive in. I mean, all the centre of Australia is like that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** That sort of presence of the landscape, I think, affects all of us, even the people who live in cities all the time. To me it's tremendously exciting. I mean, I just get terribly romantic and woolly about all that. I could never live anywhere else because of the landscape, because that is the source for my work. Not that my work is literally about that, but that the whole feeling of that comes from it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Comes from it.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I understand. I can see now the way you're talking how this so positively relates, although it can be exhibited as a totally abstract work, to your experiences of living in this environment.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes, it is. Yes, it is. Usually, I suppose, the happy thing is that occasionally I paint a painting where I really feel I do get close to the feelings I want and then I'll find that those paintings are the ones that people respond to best. So I am beginning to get in tune with that communication thing of knowing what I want to say and being able to say it in some form that does begin to mean something to other people. That's been really nice, and *February* was one of those paintings. But the other thing in *February*—and I think artists are funny people and we've always got a whole lot of strands of things that seem like they don't fit together but they do—the other thing that I've always been intrigued by is pattern. *February* has got a kind of calligraphy feeling about it, even a bit like sort of Arabic or Islamic sort of writing or something. I like the fact that it's got that.

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Not because I'm interested in that in particular, but the fundamental thing of patterning, making patterns, seems to me to be something that's been neglected by our society now. It hasn't been in the past. But if you go right back to primitive art, the earliest possible art, you'll find little geometric patterns on bowls or even in the way women weave baskets.

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

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** I mean, if you look at Aboriginal art which is, you know, maybe the oldest art we've got in the world that we know of, all that pattern making is there right from the beginning. If we're going to analyse the visual elements that we deal with, making patterns is one of the strong ones, and it's one of the simplest and it's sort of the deepest based of all the visual images.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It's certainly very strong in your work.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes. Well, I like the fact that it's there because I like all of those links. I like even things like wallpaper or fabrics. All those things seem to me to be a reflection of a delight in decoration to do with a very fundamental response to pattern. I mean, we often use the word 'decorative' in association with those things, but to me decorativeness is not necessarily a bad or a good word; it's a descriptive word. The repeated elements in Optical work is partly to do with the Opticalness that was interesting to me but it was also to do with this pattern making business. It is still very much part of my work and I'm still trying to evolve from, if you like, that aesthetic. It sort of comes back into nature in things like—oh, one of the things I still haven't dealt with but one day I'd love to, is the dappled light that we get through gum trees, you know, which is just so Australian.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** They're very special different trees because of the way they cast light. Some of Robert's paintings of the bush have got that dappled light.

**JAMES GLEESON:** In my opinion you already have caught some of that quality in some of your works, because you do get this spark or this fluctuation and movement from light to dark.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It's a very definite continuing characteristic, I think, in a lot of your work.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** I hope so. Well, that's one of the things that continues to interest me, yes.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Lesley, we have, apart from finished paintings, a sequence of studies leading up to it. I think that's very good to have because it allows us to follow the line of your thinking as you reaching towards the final statement. They are Liquitex on paper?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** All those studies.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes, yes they are.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And the final one this Liquitex on canvas?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** That's right, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** When you, say, make your studies, you draw up first, do you? Do you work with a pencil on paper first and then sort of work in your colour from that?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** How does it actually begin? On graph paper, the idea?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** I don't use graph paper that much. Sometimes I do. Usually no. I just start with a pencil and a ruler and a piece of paper. I have in my mind already the colour, the basic colour I'm thinking about, and something about the kind of movement of line that I want.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The linear structure (inaudible).

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes. It might start off with a pencil, just a pencil drawing without a ruler just loosely outlining the direction of lines and that sort of thing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Then I'll start with a pencil and a ruler and I'll start working out some kind of repeated element or system. I'll end up with a drawing. I can't really explain what the mesh is between the line or the linear structure and the colour because, you know, they don't come simultaneously. I know in my mind the colour.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Then I make a drawing. Then I start to put in the colour and make the colour work around the linear structure.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

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**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** I used to say that the linear structure was just a way of hanging colour across a painting, if you like.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** It's still about the only way I can describe it. I don't think you can ever—well, obviously you can never explain what you do in words or you wouldn't do it, you wouldn't visually do it. Again, I think it often gets very woolly when you try and talk about how you actually start work and make work. In a way, the best work that I've done has happened after I've been through a period of work where I've been struggling away with technical problems and everything is sort of workmanlike but not particularly interesting. Then suddenly I'll find my subconscious has taken over and I've been presented with something that I know what to do with at last. Then it's sort of like, you know, for a week maybe it sings along and it all just falls into place, almost as if I'm not doing it. Now, I've been quite intrigued to read about other artists and how they make work and how they explain it. I can see now why there's this talk of the muse or inspiration or whatever. That there's almost someone sitting on your shoulder telling you what to do, that sort of thing, because in words it almost seems that's the only way you can explain it. But then it makes it sound even further like a mystery. So I don't know. I don't know how to explain any of those things. They just happen.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes. I suppose that's true.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** It's true for all of us, I think.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, we'll leave *February* reluctantly and go to some of the other major paintings that we have of yours. *Foehn* is one of them.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** *Foehn*, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** *Foehn*.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** I don't know how you say that, *Foehn*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Where is it?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** This one here.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Switzerland, is it?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** I have no idea. Is it?

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**JAMES GLEESON:** I know I've heard of it, the foehn. It's rather like a Swiss or German name.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Oh, I see, I see. It's a wind, it's another wind. Yes. Yes, that's right, it's a cooler wind. It's a temperate climate wind. I'm not quite sure where it does come from now. I mean, I looked all those things up when I named them but I can't remember.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Lesley, this is an extraordinary one. It seems to me to be one of the most Op of all your works in the sense of movement that it sets out. The way it sort of concentrates and contracts into the centre into a hard, not a hard, but a tight sort of movement and eases out towards the edges. Mostly you've achieved that through just straight lines.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I think the backgrounds some of the lines curved.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** No, they're not.

**JAMES GLEESON:** They're not. They're all straight out. Well, that's the illusion.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes, that's right. That stage when I was doing that painting I really was at the height of my systems, if you like.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** I mean, slowly they dissipated in my work now. But one of the things that knocked me out about that painting was that every line is a straight line and yet there's this very strong spiralling curve.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Exactly, yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** It's purely an optical illusion.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's purely an optical illusion.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes, exactly. I really enjoyed all that. In fact, there's a second painting that's using that structure again. It happens a little bit, I think, in this one, but the other painting there are a series of white lines that run through the painting. Because they're on a blue green background, the white lines become bright yellow. It's completely an illusion. If you stand, you know, six inches away from the painting it's white, and you get back six feet and it's bright yellow. That's again a just a thing to do with the colour spectrum and optically how that works.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

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**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** I'm fascinated by the structure of our vision, the whole perception of how we see. Because in the end, oh, I'd say I envy birds. I'd love to have a bird's eyesight. It would be absolutely marvellous even to know what that would feel like.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** But all we have is our eyes and our instrument and our brain, you know, and all of that. Playing around with the illusion of some kind of reality that doesn't exist, as I was talking about earlier, I mean, Optical painting does that all the time.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** It's all so impossible and yet it looks real and convincing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** This painting, *Foehn*, is one of those paintings that's to just do with that perception really.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. It gives to me, at any rate, a very strong sense of movement of a wind, you know, how winds gust. It's gentle and then it increases in strength until you feel it, you know, very forcibly and then it eases away again. This quality comes through, I think, in the system that you've employed in an almost sensory way. You can almost feel it.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** That's really nice. Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What we're looking at now is a photograph of the study which we have.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** That's right. Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Unfortunately, I don't have the photograph of the final painting but we have that also in the collection.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** That's correct, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Which will make one night here for *February*.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The other one, the other major one, is what?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Well, *Ripple*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** *Ripple*.

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**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes, that's a very early painting. Well, that's the black and grey one, that one. Oh, it's '72. Yes. That's quite a different painting because it's a tonal painting. Colour is, you know, what I'm most interested in. But, of course, colour and tone are part of the same thing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Every now and again I throw up some really tonal paintings. I can never predict when that will happen but it does happen every now and again. *Ripple* is one of those. But it's also going back to a very early stage in my work where I was still almost, oh, like building a house, just working out how to construct a painting and what would happen if you put a dark grey and then a slightly lighter grey and a lighter grey again and you get this slight blurring sort of buzz on the edge between two greys where the light grey and the darker grey on the edge, the lighter grey gets lighter than it does in the middle of that strip.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** You know that thing, which is a very simple element in painting, but I just wanted to make a painting that would use that. Actually, one of the things that I haven't said which is to do with the three paintings we're now talking about is that they're all quite large. Oh, I think *Ripple* is about four and a half feet by six and half feet or something, maybe a bit bigger than that. *Foehn* is about eight feet by five, and *February* is eighteen feet by six. Although I do a lot of work on paper and often my work is seen on paper, the works on paper are always a means to get to the paintings. One of the elements about the paintings that's terribly important to me is the scale of them.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** I feel that once you are not dealing with recognisably realistic images like a jug or a chair or a table, it doesn't matter if the jug or the chair or the table is two inches high, you'll still see it and feel it and perceive it at its normal spatial size in relationship to you, in your perception. But once you get away from that realistic image into a non-objective sort of painting, I think that the paintings have to become environmental enough to make it possible for you to immerse yourself in them, if you like.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Create their own—

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** So they have to create their own environment to build their momentum and their strength.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.



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**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** So even with this painting *Ripple*, which is a very simple device, one of the things that I didn't know then was what would happen. I mean, I could see what would happen on paper, you know, 20 inches by 24 or something. But what would happen if it became six feet by four feet and what would the impact of the scale of that? So at that stage I think I was just very much learning, beginning, trying to begin to learn some of the language of what paintings are and how to make them, how to construct them. I'm very conscious that I'm the sort of painter that just has to plod along. In a way I'm glad I am, because it's sort of like I'm climbing up a hill slowly and I'm slowly getting up the hill. So that's all right. Maybe I might one day, you know, get to the top or something of the hill. Not the top of anything else. But the other part of my work is that I started off really learning the craft of painting and slowly trying to find out what I wanted to say with that craft. I'm now a lot clearer about what that is. Also I've learnt to more and more bring in what my own idiosyncratic sort of personal notions about things are and having enough belief, I suppose, in myself to be able to say, 'Yes, I can say that if I want'. Even if it isn't heard, I still need to say it and feel comfortable about that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Lesley, one we've got here marked as gouache, *Study for Simoon*. Is it in fact gouache or Liquitex?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** It will be Liquitex.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes. They are all Liquitex.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's inaccurately described. It is Liquitex. I think *Study for Simoon*, we don't have the original of *Simoon*, do we?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** No, I still own that actually.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Another wind?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Another wind, yes. Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This is a hot wind, if I remember.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes, very hot wind. Yes, it's a very funny red and orange and dark brown sort of painting. It's very hot and very claustrophobic. A lot of these Optical paintings, and *Simoon* is a very good example of it, are very aggressive paintings. I think at that stage I was still, I suppose, going through the sort of things that most young painters go through of 'I am a serious artist and if this is an aggressive painting, well, you've got to come to terms with it. It's up to the viewer to fight it to get it' sort of thing. Whereas now I sort of feel quite differently to that. I no longer really feel I've got to prove things to myself about whether I am or I'm not an artist. It's just I make work and that's what makes

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meaning in my life and so that's what I do. So I've relaxed on a lot of that stuff. But now I'm teaching again a bit and I can see the same thing happening in students. I just see it as being a necessary part of getting on with becoming a painter, I suppose. But in a way my affection for these paintings like *Simoon* is really more a sort of wry giggle at the fact that I had to get that out and go through all that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** While we're on the winds, what is this called? I think we've got—

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** This one, there we are.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, a further of the wind series is our *Study for Mistral*. We seem to have either two versions of it or one very bad photograph of the same thing.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Well, you could have two versions of it. I think I did about four studies for that painting. Yes, so that it's possible, I just don't know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I have a feeling that they are two—

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** There was painting that's got a very strong green in it, and it's an uneven sort of green. Again it's about colour. I had a lot of trouble exactly the right balance of colour in the green and then there's some orange-y red lines that grade slightly from an orange through to a red, diagonally from one side to the other. Just getting the exact balance of those colours was very difficult, so I had to do it two or three times to get it sitting exactly the way I like. In fact, at this stage I was working probably with about four colours altogether in a painting. I might grade one of the colours slightly but basically it would be only four colours. At that stage—

**JAMES GLEESON:** (inaudible).

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes, it was really not to do with reducing things down to being simple; it was more to do with only being able to be simple. Only being able to balance four colours and get them spatially sitting and getting the emotional key out of them that I wanted and the overall feeling and also the Optical part working.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** In a way I think that abstract or non-objective art is a bit like learning a language in that you have to learn an alphabet and then learn to make a word, you know, if you're learning a language.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

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**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Because, in a sense, non-objective work you're inventing your own language, or your own symbols for saying something, then it is a little bit like this business of an alphabet. At that stage I was getting to A, B, C, D.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, I understand.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** But I was waiting for X, Y, Z to come up. They weren't getting there at that stage.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This, I take it was after the *Ripple*, the grey—

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So now you're really coping with colour but you are limiting yourself to a palette of, say, four colours with slight terminal gradation.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes. That's right. Yes. It's amazing how it's sort of escalated. Oh, a painting I did a couple of months ago, I just counted up all the jars of colour I had connected with that painting. I think there were 120.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Goodness.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** So, you know, a lot of them are only just, yes, slight—

**JAMES GLEESON:** (inaudible).

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** So that's all changed an awful lot. But this was very much at the beginning of just learning, as I say, learning the craft and learning something about the direction I wanted to take in a very simple way.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Do you regard those wind paintings as a sequence, exploring different possibilities of movement? The fact that you've given them all names after famous winds seems to suggest that you've thought of them as related in some way.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes, they were. Yes, yes, they are. They are very much to do with movement and probably all the wind paintings are the strongest of the Optical work I did. They're the most Optical in that sense.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** So the titling of them does group them together and gives them that sort of presence, I suppose.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, we seem to have those well represented in our collection.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Right.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Now, where do we go from here?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** We've done *February*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** *Study for February* we've done. *Foehn* (inaudible).

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Well, now you've just really got a series of background work.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Is that one of the studies for *Stridor*?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Oh, these ones. No, that's *Aubade*. Oh, yes. Right. That's right.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Tell us about *Stridor*. That was a finished painting you did?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes. It's now in the Queensland Art Gallery.

**JAMES GLEESON:** When was that?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** That was '72.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Before the wind paintings?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What does the title *Stridor* mean?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Oh, God.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I've caught you out. You've forgotten.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** I'm not sure that it's not a wind too. But I'm not sure.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Is it? It sounds like a wind, doesn't it?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** I can't remember. I'm not good with words. I mean, I can't spell. I can't write. I'm no good at any of that. But the meanings of the words, if you look them up in a dictionary, they're usually ambiguous enough not to be a direct description of the painting.

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

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** But they will give you some sort of lead, like the winds do. *Aubade*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well I know what *Aubade*—

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**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** What's that one?

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's *Dawn's song*, isn't it?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** That's right, that's right. It's about that time of day. Now, *Stridor*, they were together. So that title must have something to do with—look, I can't remember. I just don't know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** They do have a march-like quality, like marching across the page, and I wonder if it had anything to do with stride in that sense.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** No, I don't think so. No, no. It could even be musical. Sometimes I title things to do with a musical interval or phrase or, you know, something basic to music. Partly because I like the time element in music, like a piece of music you have to hear the whole piece.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** In a way I think paintings require a lot of time too. But it's not the same sort of time as sitting listening to a piece of music, but it's over a period of time you continue to look at a painting on and off and it starts to speak to you more and more because of your involvement with it. Not necessarily in a serious way but just because it happens to hang on the wall and you keep looking at it whether you're having a cup of coffee or whatever. It sort of starts to sink into your subconscious, I suppose.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, that's something you dealt with in that painting *Phrase*, isn't it?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So we'll come to that presently.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** That's right. But these studies for *Stridor* were really just playing around with a vertical band or stripe and then breaking across the band with a diagonal, a very oblique diagonal. And working out proportionately what sort of diagonal line I wanted and exactly how I wanted to divide up that vertical band. The exactness of that sort of thing is really very important to me. The angle has to be exactly right. Not that it's mathematically right, but that it has to feel right. The balance has to be there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And the Optical impact.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** That's right.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

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**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Because although you talk about there's a lot of movement in my work, the movement has to be still with a sense of balance or harmony. It's very easy to just get it to look wonky or moving so fast that your eye just shoots off one side of the painting and doesn't come back into it again. So that although things move they still have to be static or they have to hold, you know, and relate. Right through almost all of my work there's a continuing interest in diagonals. It has to do with the balance of things. That if you throw something slightly off balance, then you have to counteract it in some way and balance it in another way. That whole balancing thing I find really exciting because it's almost like creating your own world in that, although paintings aren't real spaces, physically you've got to be able to respond to them comfortably so they have to balance and you have to feel as if you could belong in them. You know what I mean?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** So, you know, I play around with elements a lot just trying to get that balance going.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, we've got one, two, three, quite a few, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ten studies for that painting.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** That's right. That would have been done over about a period of a week of just every day getting up and thinking, 'I still haven't got that problem solved', and slowly getting there, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The final one in Brisbane is a big one, I take it?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes, it's about six feet by eight feet.

**JAMES GLEESON:** One of those that creates its own environment (inaudible).

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes, very much so, yes, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That will be central to the problem we were dealing with, the scale?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Oh, definitely, yes, yes. Well, actually, *Stridor* was an interesting painting and I do like it very much because it's got a lot more colours in it. You know I've been talking about this thing of *Mistral's* only got four colours in it, I think. Well, *Stridor* has got about 10 or 12. You know, that varies. I mean, some paintings have got more than others. But *Stridor*, it's really like a colour spectrum in it. It's got red, yellow, green, blue, purple, orange. So it doesn't have

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brown. But it's, you know, the sort of primary, secondary colours sort of spectrum. Making all those colours relate together by softly grading, say, the background blue or the background green across the painting. The red is constant in that painting but in some places it looks like a really sort of Madder Lake, you know, cold blue.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** In other places it's almost like a bouncing bright orange. It's not the colour changing. It's not the red changing. It's the colours behind it. Yes. I really love that thing about Optical painting, that you can play with colour like that and you can fool people.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Fantastic, isn't it?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It really is.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** It's so exciting to see how differently colours can work. You know, just a slightly different shade will throw each colour off.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Of course. Now, from that exhibition which was one that you had at the Ray Hughes Gallery—

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** When was that?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** That was in '74.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Seventy-four. I notice that we have a *Study for gust*, I think somewhere.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** That's right. Yes, you've got a series. This is one of them. Here we are over here.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah, yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Those ones. Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So that there is one, two, three, four, five studies for *Gust*. Now, that obviously was an important painting too. The studies leading up to it are fascinating.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Well, it was more the studies. The painting ended up being tiny.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Did it?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** It's only about, well, it's 28 inches by 39, so it's a very small painting for me. It was a very meticulous, tedious, overworked, not overworked painting but a very much worked on painting because the drawing up was just so fiddly. I don't know why it only ever was small, I can't remember. I think it was because I didn't have the confidence to do it bigger. Every now and again you get like that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was it very complex?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes. Well, you can see sort of how—

**JAMES GLEESON:** See, yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** I mean, it's worked out on a grid system but it's a grid that gets smaller and larger, you know, and ripples across.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah, varying (inaudible).

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes. Then all the lines are angled, you know, diagonally across the grid.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** It's a very Optical painting, but you can see actually these sketches do sort of help to show you how I think. I'll start with a pencil drawing like that, which is just to do with the curving feeling I want to get, and then start to think about the systems that will give me that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Give you that.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes. That's sort of thinking about one sort of progression. And this was another. You know, how rapidly I angle things and what height and width and so on.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Then slowly getting to the stage where I can start working out these variations, and then that would be the beginning of working out a colour variation.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Now, of those six, is there any sequence in which they were done? Can we number them perhaps in the order in which (inaudible)?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes, you could. Yes. I'd say it would probably go one, two—



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**JAMES GLEESON:** This is No 1 and this one will be No 2. This is the way up, is it?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** No. Oh, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Number 2.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** That would be three and that one's four. I'll tell you about that. Then this last one was where I was thinking about doing something quite different. I didn't pursue it. I then went back to the fourth one and blew that up.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. So this is No 5 (inaudible).

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** But it was starting to think further.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Proceed.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes. But, I mean, I work like that all the time. I go through an awful lot, or at times I go through an awful lot of work on paper with just things like this where I look at that and think, 'Is that a system I want to use or not?'. Then either I pick it up or I don't. Yes, or I get bored with it or whatever. Or I feel different the next day.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, now we have *Phrase*.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes. *Phrase* and the studies for *Aubade* really are done around the time of *Ripple*, the painting we were talking about earlier.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, the grey, yes, (inaudible).

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes, where I was still dealing with a vertical stripe and a variation of bands of colour through that. I hadn't started to add the diagonal shifting, which we've just been talking about in those other ones. So I was really just playing with colour there and seeing. Well, particularly the study for *Aubade*. What I've done is, the background stripe, the broader stripe will go from, say, a dark brown to a soft lighter warmer grey. The colour will just simply have the black colour—it's almost black—would just simply have a little bit of white added to it each band. It just goes out from the centre to light and then back to dark again. You know, the same way. So it's just a repeated system of colour. Then these little thin lines would be, I think in these ones, they're a constant colour. It's a blue green or yellow red or something.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** They would do the same thing as happens in *Stridor*, that you get this real change in the thin bands of colour because the background colour is changing all the time. Just as a phenomenon of optics and the way the colour changes, I found that really exciting and interesting to work with, so I did

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this series of striped studies just to see what would happen, just to play around with that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Lesley, you told me—well, we have four—that they fit together as really two keystones.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And they are numbered on the back.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** That's correct.

**JAMES GLEESON:** In the order in which they should be hung.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** You can see actually how they fit together. Those two probably belong together and this piece of paper's been cut on one edge, so you haven't got the white.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** So that will join in to—well, it probably goes upside down. They probably don't even necessarily fit together, you know, but that would fit along to there and you'd get this full—

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

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** It was just that I didn't have a big enough piece of paper.

**JAMES GLEESON:** They're quite sizeable, aren't they?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** There's no mystery about that. Oh, yes, I think they're about 30 inches when they're both put together.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. Yes. Did you do a final painting of *Aubade*?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes, I did.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Where is that now?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Susan Stanton from Abraxas Galleries in Canberra bought it for her private collection. So she still has that painting, I think.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Good. *Phrase*, now you mentioned earlier that was, you know—

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** That's part of the same—

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Used in the musical sense, the title, and it's part of this same system that you were (inaudible) after *Ripple*.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** That's right, just bands of colour. This one had a much more complex set of colours in it. It's got blue and green and yellow and red. Instead of just tonally grading the colour, I think I changed it from blue to green across or something. I can't quite remember exactly what it was now, but it was a very strongly coloured study, and I did actually then make it into a small painting. I ended up painting it out. It is still a painting but it's very, very different. I found that I couldn't control the colour.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** It just got out of control and so I pulled it back to a tonal, sort of fairly monochromatic sort of set of colours. Actually, I've still got that painting here somewhere at home. I want to show you because it's interesting to see what happened to it. Oh, there it is. It's this one. So it's just gone back to red blue sort of brown.

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

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** It just lost itself. I think that's the same painting. It doesn't look like it but I think it is.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I'm sure it is. Yes, I think it is.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** So I had a lot of trouble with that. I mean, every now and again this is another thing about scale, that although it appears that having worked out so meticulously what I'm doing on these studies, it's almost a case of just simply reproducing it on the canvas. Sometimes that's true, but mostly the scale affects the colour and the proportions do vary. Although it looks like it's a direct blow up, if I blew up some of these linear paintings the line would become, say, a quarter of an inch thick or half an inch thick if I took it directly up. So what I have to do is then re-scale the proportion so I still have this thin line feeling, so all the proportions change. The other thing is that once they get up on scale sometimes the colours are too strong or dominant or the key is just a little off. It will mean that having covered the whole painting, I'll then have to go back and work into it and just adjust, say, the pink. Having adjusted the pink, I find the purple's gone out. Then once I've got the purple right, well, really the background green is starting to look a bit dead. They might only be a few shades adjustment, but they either sit or they don't.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** They have to work or the whole painting falls apart because I'm only using, you know, such a small range of what painting can be, that it has to be right. Very, very fiddly.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** This though you felt was successful, this stage of *Phrase*, but when you took it up to the larger scale—

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** The colour just jumped out.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It didn't work.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** No, just didn't work. No.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So it became a different kind of painting altogether.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Altogether. Yes. Yes. Quite often I lose them all together. I mean, I can't even resurrect them at all. But sometimes when I start to play with the colours I find that I am actually painting a new painting literally. But it becomes a kind of battle, that I know if I lose the painting all together and not resolve it in any way then I've come to a sort of brick wall. So even if I resolve it in a less satisfactory way than my original intentions, I learn something out of resolving it and I have got the beginnings of building on to the next painting. I find I can't really work with three or four paintings going at once. It's always one painting.

**JAMES GLEESON:** One. Concentrating, yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** And then the next one comes out of that last one, or a little bit of it does. So it's a very, you know, step by step sort of process, and you can see it quite clearly.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Lesley, we have two from that Ray Hughes show. It must have been something of a show. *A study for noon*.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes. That's a very big painting. It's 120 inches long by 75 inches high. So that's—what?—10 feet. Yes. The title is a bit like *February*. It is about the light at midday in the middle of summer. You know how you can walk out of the darkened house into a really glaring light and all of a sudden all the colour gets bleached out and goes black and white, and the shadows have got no colour but they're intense.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Well, this painting, I was trying to capture that feeling. It's got a sort of dark red and a dark brown and a pale-ish blue and a sort of acid yellow in it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** The way the diagonal line cuts through the vertical lines makes it a very wriggly, very busy painting. The progression of the diagonals running through it in a sort of V shape get smaller towards the centre, so you get

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this sort of really confused zingy centre where it's like that out of focus thing when you just walk out of doors and, oh, you can't adjust to that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** So it's a very hard painting to look at. It is one of the most aggressive of my paintings but the aggressiveness in this particular painting I don't mind because it wasn't to do with my aggression. It was to do with a physical state

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, and light.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Of light, yes, and a real Australian characteristic about light, I think. I still own that painting. I don't know that it's one of my favourite paintings but it does mean something to me because it was one of my more objective paintings in that I did feel I captured something external to me in this feeling about light. I was pleased to have got to that point where I could meet one—you know, my aim for the painting did seem to be met. It didn't make a pleasant painting or a likeable painting but it was a painting that worked. So that was good.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, yes. Well, I'm glad we've got the study for it.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** I think you've practically finished them all.

**JAMES GLEESON:** *Ripple*. Yes, we have no photograph of that but we've discussed the study.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** No. Yes, that right, yes. Well, it's almost identical, yes. Oh, yes, that's right, now you've got *Littoral*. That's a more—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Can you remember that?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes, that's about the most recent thing you've got. That was done after *February* but in that same year, '76.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Seventy-six.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Actually, it was a very important painting and a very important study for me because if you look at *February* you can see that the lines, the calligraphic sort of feeling in that, is still to do with a repeated system.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Right the way through. *Littoral* was the beginning of breaking down the repetition. It's still working with a series of grids—like you can see that dark line runs through in a sort of rectangular diamond shape.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** But it's like having a series of grids and slightly off placing them, so that although that line there does seem to run through it, it doesn't fall, that isn't the same as that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see, yes. They're not in an exact straight line.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** The sequence is being thrown off. So it was the beginning of getting to something I really very badly wanted to do at that stage with my painting, and that was start to break down the systems and come back to a more direct and intuitive way of working where I didn't have to rely on a graphed up gridded system to make the marks I wanted to make. This painting is the beginnings of the work that I'm now working on which is to do with—actually, it's interesting—coming back to some of the things I rejected very early. Things like composition and random placement and directly drawing without ruler and pencil to start with and then using those drawings as the basis for the paintings. Instead of going through all this meticulous gridding system thing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** I've discarded all of that now and broken up the structure enormously. But still you can see that this work that you have in your collection is the groundwork for what I'm doing now. So that the steps are still obvious steps that are all along the same line, if you like, but the exciting thing is that now I'm working much more quickly and I think the way that I'm working is much more direct and is getting closer to this sort of emotional level of things, which I'm most interested in. The intuition is stronger and I guess I believe in myself a bit more and I feel more confident about making marks and taking risks. I guess that confidence has come out of the sort of apprenticeship of working with all these systems.

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

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** And really getting to know all of those things so thoroughly that I could start to discard them.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Now you know you can take risks.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes. That's right, yes. So *Littoral* is the beginning of a new phase.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This is a study?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** There's a final painting?

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**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** There's a painting, yes. It's in a private collection. Janette Abrahams in Melbourne has it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** But it was in the same show as *February* that that painting came from.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. Again I notice it's listed here as gouache.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** It would be Liquitex. Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And on white Bainbridge board?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Oh, probably, yes. Occasionally I do that, yes. Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Good. Now, this was an independent drawing unrelated to any completed painting.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes, it is, except that it was to do with this thing about progression of lines, you know, the division between a line, that sort of thing. Just working out almost on a number system what that would mean.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Lesley, is that one that you can date?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Oh, it's probably '73. It's around the time of *Aubade* and *Stridor*. Those paintings were done at the end of '73 and then *Mistral* and *Gust* and those paintings sort of the beginning of '74. So they were all around the same sort of year and time.

**JAMES GLEESON:** (inaudible). We can't identify that.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** No, no.

**JAMES GLEESON:** We have a lot of drawings in here somewhere that just give us no information about—

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes. Although, some of those will relate to the ones we've got there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** (inaudible).

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes. I can't remember really what else you've got. I mean, really the photographs and what we've said has probably covered all of those things anyway, I really think.

**JAMES GLEESON:** *Flowers* is your 1961 coloured aquatint, done as a student at—

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**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** That's right, yes. Yes, that's got a story but I won't tell it to you now.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Why?

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Well, it's an anecdote. It's interesting in that when I was in my fourth year at RMIT Tate Adams, who taught me printmaking, was very enthusiastic about my prints. He suggested I should submit it for an exhibition that was going to England of young printmakers or something. So I think that at that stage Jim Mollison was at Gallery A in Melbourne and he had something to do with organising it. I can't remember now. Anyway, for some reason he had it and it didn't go into this exhibition to England but Jim kept it in the Gallery for a while, for about a year. Then he rang me one day and said, 'No, look, you know, we've still got this print of yours. You might as well come and get it'. So I did go and get it, as far as I can recall. That was the first time that I'd ever submitted anything for anything professional.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** It was just very odd that the link was through Jim Mollison that that was so. When I saw this turned up in your collection I thought, 'That is absolutely weird, because I don't know where it's comes from'.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, it came from Gallery A in Melbourne.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** It says it comes from Gallery A in Melbourne but I can't understand how it has because I thought I collected it. But perhaps I didn't, you see, and it's been there all that time.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Fourteenth of the ninth, '76.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes. It's only just, I suppose, that Jim Mollison's now the head of the National Gallery, but it just seemed odd to me. You always remember your first things, you know, that ever happened to you.

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

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** For it suddenly to turn up again is very odd.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, as part of our repository collection at this point it's a quite important part. Lesley, I think that covers it very well unless you've got anything else you'd like to add.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** No.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That really is excellent coverage.



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**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Well, no, the only thing I'd say beyond that is that words are difficult. As I said to you before, you can only say what you think about yourself and I am looking at work now that I did two or three or four or five or six years ago. Obviously for all painters it's always the painting on your easel at the moment that's concerning you.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The most important, yes.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Of course.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** So, you know, I've said what I think about these things and I've tried to be accurate but that's not necessarily more than that. You know, that's all it is. Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Thank you very much indeed.

**LESLEY DUMBRELL:** Right.