

JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: JOHN FIRTH-SMITH

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JAMES GLEESON: John, we've sorted through the works that we already hold in the Australian National Gallery and we've got them into some chronological sequence. But before we look at the actual works, could you tell us a few biographical details? When and where you were born, for instance, the exact date?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, I was born in Melbourne in 1943.

JAMES GLEESON: The exact date?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Eighth of July.

JAMES GLEESON: Eighth of July. Did you study art in Melbourne?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: No. My father was a mining engineer and he used to travel quite a lot around the world. From there I went to New Zealand. I lived there until I was about eight or nine and then back to Sydney.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: One of the early things is I suppose I always had access to tools. Not so much spanners and engines and things, but wood and woodworking type tools. So I was always making things. When I got back to Australia we lived in a place on a river, which was very nice. We used to make canoes out of corrugated iron and things, which is all very good. So I've always made things, and I've always painted and drawn.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. So right from the beginning you were interested in making things, creating things.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: When did you decide to go to an art school, or did you go to an art school?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, what happened, my father died. I had to go to a boarding school. I was there for about eight years. The art teachers there were very encouraging. I mean, they always supplied me with paint and so on, on weekends, because my parents were overseas, they were in Malaya again. After my father died my mother remarried and went back to Malaya. I was there, so on weekends I always had access to the art room and the wood working room, and made things like canoes and did a lot of painting and all sorts of (inaudible).

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JAMES GLEESON: So your interest in the sea, or ships, has always been there?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, when I was in New Zealand we lived in a place right on the water. And then there was the river when we came back to Australia, so I've always been near the water and always had things floating, even if it was an old mattress. I remember on the river, for instance, there was this double bed kapok mattress that floated past one day and that became my raft.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: I had it sort of moored out the front.

JAMES GLEESON: It does seem to be a central theme in so much of your painting, the water, the harbour.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes. Well, you know, later on we might talk about some of that, in relation to those diagonal paintings too. So I always did have that access to tools, I suppose, which, you know, I'm very grateful for. Especially in a boarding school, which I didn't like at all, and ended up running away from there, after being there for many years. It was quite a naughty thing to do at the time. But anyway I did it, but I probably learnt more in the two or three months in Queensland. So I'm working again on a boat that supplied all the islands up there, Brampton Island, Hayman Island and so on.

JAMES GLEESON: What, actually building a boat?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: No, no, just working on it, almost like a slave, loading 44 gallon drums of oil and so on.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Then that would be taken to Hayman Island and unloaded and so on. But, no, that was quite interesting. But then I had to come back and it was very terrible. Well, it was a terrible experience coming back and facing my parents again after being such a naughty boy. But that was another lesson, I suppose. But I had to go back. They insisted that I went back to the school and apologised to the headmaster.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: To say that it wasn't him or the school, it was just something that I had to do, you see. So I went back there. But I must remember that the art master sort of appeared in the hallway while my parents were talking to the headmaster and I was sitting outside, to say, you know, 'Good on you', you know, 'Fantastic'. But at the same time after that he supplied paint and a lot of

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encouragement. In fact, even found a room for me in Paddington where I could work, and it was with a painter called Peter Dodd.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, I remember Peter Dodd. He died some time ago.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: That's right. Some time ago. He had a house in Paddington and I actually had a room there. I didn't actually fit in with it, that world. But I mean I was there in some sort of artistic sort of environment and he would sort of come along with a few tubes of paint and so on.

JAMES GLEESON: Did he teach you at all?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, he didn't, as an art teacher at a school, but they didn't have art as a subject like they do now. It was just an activity.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: A Wednesday afternoon you could either go and watch films or play cricket or do art. It was usually made up of people throwing clay at each other and so on.

JAMES GLEESON: So at that stage you were really teaching yourself, training yourself?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, even though I did then, after running away, getting the room in Paddington, I had to continue with the Leaving Certificate because it was the beginning of the year and, you know, it was a bad time to disrupt all that sort of thing. So I had to go to a business college, the Metropolitan Business College, where I went, but at the same time I went to Julian Ashton at night.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Because I couldn't get into East Sydney until the next year, you see, so I went along there.

JAMES GLEESON: This was the Leaving year?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: And you were going at night to Julian Ashton's.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: That's right.

JAMES GLEESON: What year would that be?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: And in the day I'd do the business college Leaving Certificate thing, but I very rarely turned up to that and continued at Julian Ashton's. But that was interesting at that time because I can't remember anyone

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else at night there now, but it was one of those things where you just had to draw the skull. Then Henry Gibbons, I think, would take the drawing over and hold it next to the skull. Unless it was perfect you couldn't move on to the other antique sort of figures and so on.

JAMES GLEESON: What year was that, John?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Must have been 1960, I think. Yes, it would have been 1960. Then, you know, I was just sort of reading everything and sort of looking at everything I could. But at that time, I mean, there wasn't really very much to see.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: There was certainly no literature around. I mean, I remember I had one book, I think, that I found somewhere, some European book with a few sort of painters in it and so on. There was a little book on the New York School and a few other little things around but very little really. When I was at the boarding school too, the interesting thing over the seven years that I was there, on weekends I'd go to museums and the art gallery, because you could get leave on weekends, you see, so I'd get the train in there and sort of go along there and look at things. But right through all that period the Aboriginal work always really intrigued me and interested me. Fairweather came, fitted in with that because I always saw some similarity there.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah, yes, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: And just generally things in the museum like sort of war canoes and shells and bits of wood, and bones and things. So I was always just looking at things.

JAMES GLEESON: Then when you went to the tech, it was East Sydney Tech, was it?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: I went to East Sydney Tech.

JAMES GLEESON: As what, as a full day student?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: As a full day student. That was in 1961 then. But I didn't really stay there very long because it seemed to be a repeat of that whole drawing and so on which I seemed to have done before, but not with the same sort of intensity or something. It didn't seem to have the same edge or something. I just worked away there and worked away there. It was very interesting there though because at that time at East Sydney Tech there would have been, I suppose, about five or six or even up to 10 people that have since remained, you know, kept working and so on.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

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JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: There it seemed to be a good wave of people going through the place at that stage.

JAMES GLEESON: Was John Olsen there then?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: He wasn't there then, but there were people like Martin Sharp, and Garry Shead and Jeff Doring.

JAMES GLEESON: John van Wieringen?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes, he was there. A couple of people that—and also there was an exchange thing with Melbourne, you see. I remember going down to Melbourne and people like Robert Jacks and all sorts of people. It seemed to be an interesting sort of group of people at that time. All very enthusiastic, unbelievably sort of enthusiastic and working all the time, day and night, you know. I mean, you'd just sort of paint all the time or make things. It was an incredible, energetic time.

JAMES GLEESON: Where was the impulse coming from? Was it the New York School that was (inaudible)?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: No, I don't think so.

JAMES GLEESON: It was before that?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: No, not really. It's funny because the generation with older people like Michael Johnson and the people that went away, that was always very strong, but it wasn't that strong. It was one of the only books that you could buy, so you sort of had that too, you see. Along with other ones with people like—oh, I don't know—all the Spanish texture painters, all sorts of people.

JAMES GLEESON: Tàpies and Millares. Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Tàpies and Millares and Saura and all those. So it was just a matter of trying to sort of see what was going on somewhere else. But, of course, we all talked about it, it would be fantastic to have a *Blue Poles* or a Pollack at that stage, but of course it came 10 or 15 years too late for that generation, which is always the case.

JAMES GLEESON: Of course.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: But we were all taking about wouldn't it be fantastic to have a de Kooning to go and look out.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. By the time they come, of course—

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Of course, things like Tom Roberts and Streeton's use didn't really impress very much. I must say that they affect me more now

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because I've become much more sort of aware of the landscape and Sydney and so on. So it was just a thing of just being energetic really, just trying to work it all out. But it was an interesting time.

JAMES GLEESON: You didn't go to any other art school after the East Sydney Tech?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: No. So I went to East Sydney. I was actually enrolled there for the five year course, but the first year there was more activity happening. Because the East Sydney Tech at that time, Cezanne was a very big influence and people had to actually paint on two by three foot pieces of masonite. There were all these racks that still actually sort of hang around there, which are these long box things that are about two feet high with little slits in them and you put your board in there. Then there's about a half inch gap, you see, before the next one so that the oil paint doesn't run and so on and make them dry. Nobody now knows what those things are, you see.

JAMES GLEESON: Mystery explained.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: That's right. But the thing was at that time and having had access even through books to people like de Kooning and Millares, Tàpies and so on, all sorts of people, Gorky and Burri—that Italian fellow that used sack— and all sorts of extraordinary people. I mean, they showed other possibilities. It wasn't that Cezanne was—I mean it was always asked why. What about Van Gogh and Gauguin and other people too? Anyway, so that became a bit boring really at the time for most people and people tended not to go there.

JAMES GLEESON: Was Passmore teaching there at that time?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: I had Passmore as a teacher. He was a very good teacher because he was never there. He'd stick his around the door and sort of glare and everyone was terrified and you'd go on working like the demon. But also the other thing that must be mentioned about East Sydney Tech at that time is there were very few serious students. It seemed to be a sort of a finishing school for girls at that time.

JAMES GLEESON: It always had something of that reputation.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes. So, you know, Passmore would sort of be glaring at them, you always felt, or something and never say anything to anyone that he probably felt that he should just leave alone. I'd teach one day a week and I'd just sort of almost work a bit like that too. It's very hard because if somebody has got something that you can see, you don't want to spoil it.

JAMES GLEESON: No, of course.

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JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Or say anything, of course. You find yourself spending most of your time with people that you shouldn't be spending any time with. But it's an interesting one.

JAMES GLEESON: When did you first begin to exhibit, John?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, it was in the second year, you know. Well, the first year almost petered out and I just wasn't going very much at all in the end.

JAMES GLEESON: Was that the show, that joint show you had with John van Wieringen?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: That's right. That was the next year. That was in the second year.

JAMES GLEESON: Sixty-three.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: At the beginning. That's right.

JAMES GLEESON: I remember that exhibition.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: I remember that time then because actually somebody that was of a great inspiration and importance, I suppose, was Clem Meadmore.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Because he lived in Sydney and he was very encouraging and was always talking about New York and painting and, you know, what it was all about.

JAMES GLEESON: Had he been to New York by that time?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: No, he hadn't. He lived in a little lane in Darlinghurst and he made furniture and things in those days. He did those world of steel sculptures that were just flat plains and then he made those puffier ones that are a bit—

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: I remember getting a few letters from him actually when he did get to New York sort of saying, 'Oh, you must get over here immediately'. But, you know, it didn't sort of happen really. I suppose in those days it was very hard to survive. One of the things about being a student at East Sydney Tech then was that you didn't get any tertiary allowance or anything. So you were sort of—

JAMES GLEESON: On your own?

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JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: On your own and you did have to sort of work in service stations or whatever. My parents were good. They were still in Malaya at that time. They did send something every week. But it was always a bit of a battle. But after that, the next year, 1962 was that joint exhibition which was quite interesting.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, am I correct in recollecting that exhibition as a very colour graphic one, linear, strong?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: No, actually, it's quite extraordinary because John van Wieringen, Ian—

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, Ian, Ian.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: His were very sort of colour graphic.

JAMES GLEESON: That's right, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Mine were just big areas. They were actually just like the corners of these sort of—I was looking at that review that you wrote sort of some time ago. One's joyous and romantic and the other one's sombre and so on. It's quite interesting, actually. But, in fact, that last show I had at Gallery 8—because I've moved into an area now where I was very, very near where I was when I did those paintings, which was down on the water on the harbour.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: The last show I had was very similar in a sense to that very first show.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, I seem to remember some works of yours that had a vaguely Olsenish look.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, they came a bit later, because he has an incredible influence. It was very hard to sustain that sort of rather big area sort of type of painting, I suppose. Everyone would say, 'Oh, there's nothing happening there', or something and, you know, you've got to sort of put a few more things in or something.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, in '63 you were pretty much in the forefront and you were using those big open spaces, weren't you?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, I always sort of felt like that. But something like this that came along later—

JAMES GLEESON: *Swimming.*

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JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: It's almost a thing of drawing a figure. It's funny seeing it, because in the drawing—I haven't seen this for years—I can see a leg and bit of a figure in here.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: It's just like a life drawing, but then their legs are out there and so on. But it's always the thing of just sort of wiping out, it's the thing that I put down a mark and it always looks so superficial or something, then I have to try and do it again or something. It always gets a bit sort of—

JAMES GLEESON: That was the kind of drawing that I was referring to as having a vaguely Olsenish look about it.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes. Well, there was a time—what happened then, after that exhibition, of course, we were almost forced to leave East Sydney. Because teachers at that stage felt that you had to sort of be older to have an exhibition.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Didn't approve of students having—

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: You know, didn't approve, and also students and so on. But we didn't sort of really think of ourselves as students or as good artists or anything. It was just an exuberant thing, you're just sort of having an exhibition. So we did that but then after that we sort of left and we went off to the country and lived there for about a year. Then we had a second exhibition the next year at the Hungry Horse Gallery.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. That would be '64?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes. Sixty-two, '63, that would have been.

JAMES GLEESON: Sixty-three.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: We just lived in this bombed out old house with no windows or anything. We spent every penny we had on paint, which was fantastic, and had an old Volkswagen Beetle which we loaded up with masonite. But not thin masonite. In those days you'd get masonite that was almost half an inch thick. We got sort of 25 sheets or something and we put it on the top of this Volkswagen. Of course the roof just sort of popped in and we were driving along and every time you'd go over a bump it would sort of get lower and we had this big dome coming in the other way, you see. So, anyway, we got up to this ghost town called Glen Davis, which didn't exist. Somebody said, 'Oh, you must go to Glen Davis, it's a fantastic place. You just find a house there and just move in'. But it wasn't there, there were just chimneys there. So we then just drove on into the sunset and found an abandoned house towards Hill End, at a place called Wattle Flat. But it had been used as a hay loft or something. You know, all the windows had gone and it was just filled up with hay, but there was enough. Most

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of it had gone but there was enough. We swept it all into one room that was a bedroom. It was quite fantastic sleeping in there. But we had a lot of interesting times.

JAMES GLEESON: That's when you painted the work that you showed at the Hungry Horse?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: No. It was funny though. It was a very interesting period because we painted every day religiously. It was for about eight or nine months. We'd go off hunting for foxes and ducks and things. It was an incredible sort of lifestyle. We'd go into Wattle Flat and we got to know some people there, the baker and get bread. Occasionally we'd come down to Sydney to buy more materials and things. All that time I don't think I did any painting that came off.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: It was a terrible time. It was this thing again of putting thing down and just, 'Well, what does it mean? It's just meaningless'. Yet, at the same time Ian would be out there sort of jumping around for joy and doing these amazing sort of calligraphic things which he seemed to be quite happy with. It was quite interesting. But then after that I think we actually ended up with about four or five paintings each on this masonite and, of course, the masonite would all butt together. They were quite big paintings at that time—six by four foot six panels—and because it was so thick, the masonite, I didn't have to back it or anything. It was just rigid.

JAMES GLEESON: It didn't warp.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: At the back of this old derelict house there was a sort of a room—it must have been a pantry—and we stored all the paints in there because they were all oil paints, you see, and very thick. So we couldn't take them back on the roof of the car, so we just left them there for about three months, you know, in this abandoned house.

JAMES GLEESON: Good lord.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: When I think back it's ridiculous. We'd nailed it up with bits of board, and it was just there. It's quite funny because I went back there earlier this year to that house. It's still there and there's still lumps of dried oil paint and old oil paint tubes and things lying around it. All the weatherboards have gone now and it's just a shell but there's still sort of traces of activity and so on there from that time.

JAMES GLEESON: What happened to the paintings?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, we then came back to Sydney and we found a boat shed on the harbour in Lavender Bay, which is actually being demolished now.

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It's quite extraordinary. At that time we rented this huge space. At that time it was when they were building the expressways in North Sydney and they were demolishing a lot of them. Of course we'd go off and get bits of wood from demolishers and the demolisher would lend us his truck to sort of get it there and so on. It was a very interesting period. You'd be driving this huge sort of five-tonne truck around. I'd never driven one before. Nobody knew how to drive it. But you'd get all this material down there and there seemed to be no traffic and nobody seemed to care. So we built this incredible house up in the roof, or a flat. Very rough, just made out of rough timbers and old butcher's windows that we knocked out the front of the boat shed looking over the water and we lived there.

Then once we lived there I started painting, because the show was now about three months away, you see.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: All these things that were no good, even though they were stored up there, they looked actually like Milton Resnick's or something.

JAMES GLEESON: Really.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Like I just couldn't—I'd put a shape in and then it seemed silly where the thing would end or start or how it fitted into the rectangle or something. So I'd just paint it out or something. So they were just surfaces. They were grounds really because I wasn't really happy with them, but I kept them just as things to work on in the future. So mine didn't really matter up there. I started working again in this boat shed. See, after the show the year before with those big shapes, I probably felt that I had to change or something. But then what happened when I was there, and I was basically left alone there. It wasn't sort of the two of us so much because Ian went off to work somewhere or something and I was just left there alone. That big shape thing came back again and I had it all resolved, probably because I saw ships going by with just bits of wood, or structures of things. I like the way things are made, you know, like sort of buildings and things, the way it's all sort of about gravity and stacking and all that sort of stuff.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: It's trying to get some process. Not like that but, you know, when one bit of paint goes over another bit of paint and it's just right. It's not sort of fiddled around or anything.

JAMES GLEESON: It's properly built.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: It's just made properly and so on. It just sort of worked out again.

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JAMES GLEESON: That began during this Lavender Bay period?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: That's right and, you know, that was an interesting time. I mean, I had a boat again. I was on the water. In fact, I like the country but I had another little—in fact, it was a boat, a canoe thing, that I'd built at school years before, you see. Even though I'd disappeared and run away the thing was left there and I could go back and get it. So there I was again having access to—because there's a certain sound of the water and lapping and serenity at night when it's dark but it's glistening and so on. I could just sit there and look at it for hours, you see. So somehow, even though I like the country very much, there's that thing of being surrounded by hills or something, or the limitation is as far as you can see which is that hill over there, or if you're out in the Western Plains it's sort of miles away. But somehow with the water there's this lovely opposite thing happening between the lapping and the slurping noises, and the tide going up and down and a few hours later it's lower and there's constant change and it can be grey and menacing one day and sparkling and blue the next. There's always a sort of lovely change. Even though there is a change in the country I always find it's sort of—

JAMES GLEESON: Less important.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: The trees are always exactly where they always are and other things to do with gravity again just there, it doesn't move. Nothing changes. The wind doesn't change direction and all the boats swing the other way or anything like that. So there's always this constant sort of sameness or something, which probably gets back to the thing if you put down the line in a painting or a drawing, it just stays there. It worries me. In fact, I possibly should be a sculptor working in sort of like Tinguely or something. That sort of thing is just moving or something, because I like that sort of element. Even though the paintings turned up being quite static, like a lot of these diagonal paintings, I mean. But, anyway, I always had access, I had access to the water again and just looking at boats and having a boat. One of the first boats I ever had at one stage was an old canoe. When my parents retired—at this time too my parents had retired from Malaya—they had a house down on Pittwater at Careel Bay. There was a time where we both, Ian and I, lived down there too in a little fisherman's house that was down there. Because that was very beautiful up there at that stage. Now it's very built out. But there was a little weatherboard fisherman's house there and there were huge angophoras looking over it and so on—very beautiful. Pity it's all changed but, anyway, that's what's happened. That was interesting because again there was this sort of lovely duality between the—there was a boat down there. When they retired in the garden was this old army folder boat thing which was about four pieces of plywood with canvas over the seams, and so you could fold it together and it would be a flat thing which you could carry.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

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JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: But you could open it out and put in a couple of seat things and the thing would become a sort of about a fourteen foot canoe, you see. Or it was sort of a funny sort of thing. Anyway, but the canvas was rotting slightly and it was sort of starting to sort of tear and so on, but that was one of the first boats I ever had. Because my parents never had boats, they weren't really—

JAMES GLEESON: Interested in them.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well. they had a little launch at one stage because they liked fishing but, I mean, it wasn't one of those sort of households where you just sort of grew up with boats and things lying around. It was just a sort of a thing that came out, I suppose. Always lived near the water though. For instance, in New Zealand where we lived it was incredible, there were wrecks (inaudible) ship on the beach. It wasn't a very big one but it was, you know, things like that. Just all sorts of interesting things because there is that flotsam and jetsam thing that just happens and interesting things just happen on that sort of tide line thing. It's like an accumulation, you know. This is where things just sort of build up. I don't try and consciously apply that in painting but that happens too, just the way the paint sort of builds up or marks just are left without it consciously being put there or something.

JAMES GLEESON: Don't you in some of your work use bits of things that you'd found, flotsam, jetsam?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Oh, earlier on, yes, I did.

JAMES GLEESON: I don't think we have any in our collection, but I seem to recollect—

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: No. Well, there's very few of those left now. I've got a couple of them, but there were numbers of them. Well, before this, between that period then of that second show and, say, 1965 or six, there were a whole lot of periods. For instance, at that time of going to demolition sites and things, I was always intrigued with, you know, how people would put one bit of lino over another bit of lino and there'd be a whole history of lino under the lino. I did a lot of lino paintings at that time, and paintings with sort of bits of wood and old kitchen cupboards on them, all sorts of funny things. But they were so bulky and difficult to move each time they just finally just all ended up on the dump, except for a few that were flatter which could be stacked.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: It was always really just about that thing of old and new and hard and soft and ,you know, the land and the water, or whatever, all that sort of duality thing that would really interest me. Still does very much.

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JAMES GLEESON: You didn't use it for its association, you know, sort of what you'd call it a sociological association, sense of the past?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, there was that, but there were a lot of intriguing sort of things. I couldn't understand, for instance, going out into the country—because at that same time too a lot happened around that time. Oh, it still does. But Ian and I bought an old house at Berowra Waters and some woman had been murdered in there or something. It was very cheap. It was an old stone house on a lot of land with sort of orchards all around it. Way back off the road, a very beautiful place. It was 5,000 pounds on seven acres of land. We somehow got something like 400 pounds each deposit and that was enough, which was a lot in those days. I mean, it was incredible but we did it, we got it, we somehow got this place, you know. But the repayments were—I don't know, I forget now—like 100 pounds a month or something and, you know, we just could never live there or go there because we were constantly sort of filling up cars or working. Ian would work in a restaurant that his uncle had something to do with, being a wine waiter or something, and I was doing other jobs just to pay these bank—

JAMES GLEESON: Make a payment.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Of course we couldn't live up there because we'd be in the city trying—

JAMES GLEESON: Earning money.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: So we ended up parting with that, but we did a lot of things up there. Like we'd go up there and sort of take up huge bits of wood, doors and windows, and great plans to do all sorts of things, building studios and things. But of course, it just couldn't happen.

JAMES GLEESON: It didn't happen, no.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Because of the financial reasons. But, I mean, it's always like that because you get enthusiastic about doing something. You just can't do it. But you want to do it, so you somehow do it anyway, but it's never quite how you want to do it or something. It's a funny one. But that was actually after we left the boat shed. Because we were at the boat shed for about three years and then we got that place and, again, it was our country house.

JAMES GLEESON: That would take us, what, up to about '65, '66?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes. But during that period there was a lot of experimentation. There was a place in Hunter's Hill that I had for a studio at one stage. It's hard getting it all into some—because I haven't thought about all these things for sort of years now. But there was a whole sequence of sort of moving into other areas, and that's why all the work got lost really because you'd always be on the move. I mean, there were always these landlords that would kick you

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out because you got paint on the wall or something like that, you see. So you'd constantly have to end up in these places like boat sheds and old factories and so on. At that time it generally wasn't the types of places to live because they were very seedy. I mean, there'd be sort of drips and sort of you'd live on the top floor which would be all right and downstairs it would be quite grotty. But all those sort of works all sort of tended to be about that sort of type of thing.

For instance, like the bush and then somebody carves out a sort of an acre lot and puts a brand new textured brick house with speckled tiles and one of those doors that look like a Mondrian. I remember in those days that everyone's garage door looked like sort of modern sort of European hard edge type, you know, thirties Bauhaus type paintings or something. Three triangles or four squares or something, I suppose. They just have gone completely now, haven't they? The roller door has taken over or something. But that was a very interesting time. We used to sort of talk about these incredible things. So I'd do things like bush paintings, very realistic ones, with sort of knotty old trees and things and just put something like one of those garage doors—not a real one—paint something like that in it. It was totally foreign. But I just haven't got any of those any more. I've got a couple of similar ones. Very interesting, but it was just a period of working through ideas really which have come out. They're still there but they're just probably not as obvious.

JAMES GLEESON: John, *Swimming* is probably the first work of yours we have. It's just, what, a charcoal drawing, is it?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, it's charcoal and paint.

JAMES GLEESON: Paint?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes. So it was a figure on the beach and people in the water and then just the paint became the water sort of going over the figure or something. But that would have been done with a number of other works like that, it wouldn't have been some—

JAMES GLEESON: Part of a series, is it?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: That's right, because I always work with a lot of things happening at once. So, you know, that would have been two or three drawings. Well, not a series like you have them on the wall and you just make a few marks and so on. I mean, it wouldn't have been a planned process. It would have been a drawing of somebody sitting on the beach and then I just would have started putting the paint on it because I didn't like it or something. Something happens then in the drawing.

JAMES GLEESON: Would the original drawing have been much more realistic, much more academic in character before you started erasing or—

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JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Probably not. No. Probably would have just been—it's quite hard sort of looking at these because I've got a few of these still at home. For instance, I had a dog. I've always had dogs and there are things like the way they wriggle around and hamburgers. I remember doing a whole lot of drawings of hamburgers where you just get a bun at the top and a bun at the bottom and all this sort of lettuce and stuff. But then it looks so silly that, again, you try and do something to it to make it a better work. More than worrying about what it was about.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: That's what happened here. But then suddenly why it was called *Swimming* is because the paint did start being a bit like the water. Sort of, you know, going over the figure and so on. It was actually all about the actual real process of somebody being in the water, the leg sort of with water over it and so on.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: But it's very interesting actually, figures in the water, if you can stand a figure in the water, because where the water level comes, the light sort of, you know, it all distorts.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, does something strange to the—yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes. That French photographer Lartigue is very interesting like that where he's got people sitting in those rubber sort of rings and the legs are these funny little things hanging out the bottom and so on. It's interesting looking at works like all these works here that you've got is that, of course, it's interesting, the selection or the ones that have ended up in the National Collection at this point, just flipping through these quickly because at that time thinking that that drawing would ever be in the National Collection is just mind boggling really. Not that it isn't good or anything, it's just that it was one—

JAMES GLEESON: I think it's a beautiful drawing.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: One that was just done though, that's the point I'm trying to make.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: All these were just done, and all the other paintings were just done with the same intensity and the same desire to get them all on this level. But it's interesting that these were the ones. It's like somebody going along picking somebody out of a battalion or a platoon and saying, 'You are carrying the garbage bins today' or something, or 'This one's the one in the collection'. I

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don't know what I'm saying. But it's all quite mind boggling. I think we'll go on to the next.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Which is just *Untitled*.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: *Looking at the harbour through the smoke of my pipe*. Well, there was a series of those again. In fact, it's really interesting just remembering that because the other day I was looking—oh no, I saw a book about six months ago called *The Glorious Years*. I don't know if you know that book, it's quite a big book.

JAMES GLEESON: No, I don't think so.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: It's not really about art or painting or sculpture. It's just about the early years of Australia, except it's illustrated with old postcards and paintings and so on.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: In there I saw a couple of Streeton's that I'd never seen before. They were probably quite small paintings. I've never seen them. I don't know where they are or anything. Quite long paintings, but very narrow.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: They had the series of ships at Circular Quay that ran right down the middle. I was quite amazed.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, I know those ones, yes. We have one in Canberra.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: You know, they were all down the middle and there was something up above and something down here. But one thing I noticed was that there was a little tug or something in the foreground and the smoke coming out of the chimney was a very incredible device that I suddenly looked. It appeared in all the paintings in that book and all the paintings of that period everywhere in the world. One of the incredible things I had going for me was smoke.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Because smoke could become the sort of transparent, sort of vague vaporous thing that could link up shapes and so on. Then I started looking at things like Streeton's with headlands and there'd be a ship over here but the smoke would link up with the headland and thing. But this is only in the last few months. Earlier when I said that, I mean, I'd never of ever noticed that 15

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years ago, you see. I always thought Streeton and Roberts and people like that were not that sort of exciting, but actually I am noticing those types of things now. But, of course, now you can't use smoke. There's no smoke. But it's funny with *The harbour through the smoke of my pipe*, because maybe subconsciously it was just meant to be a sort of gas, like you have a headland coming into a painting or a ship, it's all solids. The smoke's just this gas, this thing that's there but it's not there. That was one thing that interested me.

JAMES GLEESON: That sort of contrast in density.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes, that's right. Because, I mean, paint's a wonderful thing. I mean, one of the reasons I probably paint and don't become a sculptor or build boats or something is because it's so difficult to come up with a good painting. You know, to try and actually push it somewhere and make it mean something more and, you know, particularly at this point of time. But, you know, it becomes harder all the time.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: But it was just that thing of trying to get all the sort of qualities in the paint. I mean, paint can be thick like butter or it can be thin like water.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Or it can express things with those sort of densities like gas or solids.

JAMES GLEESON: I think, you know, your talking about it reminds me of Monet's, you know, *Gare St Lazare*, that railway station full of air and smoke and dust.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Oh, yes. Then you get that rigid sort of roof.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes. Well, I mean, that was fantastic. I really like those sort of plays of all that type of—

JAMES GLEESON: Density.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Densities and things and atmosphere and qualities of things and so on. Again that's the thing. For instance, if a ship comes into the harbour—and where I'm living now the bridge is there. I mean, the bridge is just amazing because it just hangs there. But a ship comes under that and it almost fills up the space under the bridge. You know, it just fills up the whole space under the bridge so that you're not—and the bits of the sky and the city just

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become these little glimpses around the edges really, along with the superstructure on the ship. But it's so dense, all that. The solidity and the strength of the bridge and this sort of incredible manmade ship and it's all on this sort of soft floaty water thing. It's just so amazing. I mean, you can go down and kick the water and it just sort of splashes, but you can't do that to the ship.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: It's this weird sort of—but to think that the thing is just going under the water too. It's like an iceberg or something. It's all very (inaudible).

JAMES GLEESON: This is interesting because so many of your paintings have this great density and the flashing things around the edge, the edge of your painting, seems to be this kind of peripheral impression you get of a city away from the density of the bridge or the ship. Has that been a sort of conscious—

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, that whole thing of the edge of the picture, I mean, all that Olitski stuff and all that other sort of edge type painting. But, I mean, I was always way back early on sort of very interested in people like Bonnard and Degas and they were very conscious of the edge. I think the edge of the picture, it's not the edge that is where you place things. It's the fact that it's like a box and you have to put things into it.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Or it's an area that you have to fit everything into. For instance, with these diagonal paintings later, it's like if you've got a room as big as this and you've got to get a bit of wood in that's sort of 10 feet longer than the room, the only way you can fit it in is by putting it in diagonally.

JAMES GLEESON: Diagonally.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: One of the interesting things about diagonal, that line in some of them, is that it's the longest element you can put into a painting; is one thing. So it gets back to a structural sort of thing which interests me with that building all over again.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: I mean, I'm going through that all the time because I'm always knocking out walls, I always have, always building houses. There's that thing if you have to sort of knock out a wall and put a huge beam in, the beam has to go into each wall at each side, so it's longer than the room, you see.

JAMES GLEESON: Than the room, yes.

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JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: So you have to knock out one hole, poke one end in and drag the other bit into the room and then lift it up and then move the whole thing back through the other hole.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: To sit on the wall, you see. Which is actually this sort of process, you see.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah, so these diagonal lines are really developed out of this sense of construction?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, it's very difficult because actually the first one of those is not really about that. It's almost that's what I'm doing and getting inspiration from. But I don't try and apply it like that because once the process of the painting starts, that's something else.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: But it's a subconscious thing that seems to come out, and it's a lot of analysing later goes into all this too.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: I mean, I didn't think about all that before I did the painting. This is just something. Wondering why I've done them or something later. But, no, the way they happened was I was in New York actually.

JAMES GLEESON: This is *Across 1*, is it? Is that the one that comes after?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes, that one. Yes, well, we didn't talk about the smoke one very much but, anyway, we could go on a bit if you want to about that one.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, well let's finish that one.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: But that was just basically that thing. I like the way if you can get up on top of a headland and look down at the way headlands come into the harbour like fingers and so on.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: You get a lovely, you know, difference of quality between the trees and the rocks and these sort of built up things. I found an old Persian—or not found, I bought one years ago—very cheap rug at a rug gallery. It's not very big but it's an interesting one because it's just a flat woven rug and then it's got pile that comes in from each side, like fingers, all the way up.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes.

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JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: They're like headlands coming in and the flat part of the rug is like the water. It's like actually flying over something like the harbour. It's not as irregular, it's quite irregular thing, but it's very beautiful. It's just sort of again that texture sort of something. I mean, I'm just amazed that nobody's really working with texture. When I talk about that I don't mean the Spanish school but sheets of glass next to sheets of fern next to sheets of brick and, you know, just walls of panels of things, because I don't think anyone's really done things like that. I don't know, may be they have. But things that you can go up and touch and actually get some sort of—

JAMES GLEESON: Tactile response.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Tactile sort of response to and so on. But that is what sort of happens. I mean, you get that sort of surface of the water and the surface of the rocks and the land. It's just that visual tiled sort of quality that is there, that is just that play between the two. And the smoke was another thing. It wasn't really about trying to record anything.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: It's like these diagonal things aren't trying to tell about building. It's all something about really the abstract qualities of the things that are around us all the time.

JAMES GLEESON: They have been absorbed into your subconscious and just come out in one way.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, it's like the side of a new Mercedes or something, which is a beautiful sort of burgundy and 500 coats of paint of whatever it is with the chrome strip along the side and it's immaculate and so on. Then somebody might scrape along the side with a truck and just gouge in a line, which is breaking through all that immaculate paint and exposing the metal which has rusted over a week because it happened a week ago. Then the two weeks before that somebody had put another dent in it and that man had come along with that pink putty and puttied it up. Not conscious of making any shapes though, just somehow putting it on there. So it's just a play of all these sort of types of marks and things, but they all have to be saying and doing something in the right place.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Just a build up sort of evidence of man being there or something, I don't know.

JAMES GLEESON: This feeling was coming through in '65, '66?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: That's right, and early with those things, you know, the garage doors and the bush. It's always the same things really that have sort of

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interested me. But there it was just a thing of almost just sitting on a rock and looking down at the harbour and smoking a pipe but noticing while you're sitting there that all the smoke's coming out of the pipe and blurring your vision, you see, so that you can have things that were dissolving in other things.

The harbour ones that were concerned about yachts and things on the harbour and the collage was used as the manmade element on the water. So the paint was nature and the collage was the manmade which related to the early thing. After that it was trying to take that a bit further and it was almost a thing of trying to fit things in, thinking of the whole rectangular area of the painting as being one element and then trying to put marks on it that were sort of opposite or something. So that it ceased to be about a view or about a natural situation, but making a situation in the painting. To do this I started becoming aware of the importance of the rectangular quality of the painting. The first decision about doing a painting is what proportion is the painting. You know, that's the first decision. I started thinking then well you can have a long painting or a square painting or a round painting or a triangular painting. That's the first decision really. Then once you've made this arena you can then make marks and things which have to relate to that first decision of what the size of the painting is. So right from the beginning it's not just pulling a sheet of masonite out that happens to be four by three so that's the size of the painting. So you can have a painting that's 20 feet long and only an inch high, or whatever.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, it's an active decision, and the first one in the process.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: That's right. So that then started taking over from that thing. That became almost like the manmade decision or the manmade thing on the harbour, you see. Then the marks on it were sort of the natural thing, you see. So any paint you put on the canvas was like weathering on a plank of wood. The plank of wood might be 20 feet long and six inches wide, but the way the deterioration, bird droppings, dirt, rot, all that sort of stuff, alters the shape and the character of that thing. So that in making up the stretcher, I'd sort of make a decision on the shape of it. They were always generally rectangular but some of them did actually have extensions added on to them and so on. Then I'd allow the paint to just be this weathering process on that surface. There might have been marks or something like lines, and most of them were vertical at that stage, vertical lines.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Then there were a number of them where I think the proportion was something like six squares and then I'd take one whole square out of the bottom, so that I'd have a sort of a stretcher that was sort of like that.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

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JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: And one bit would fit in perfectly so it became a rectangle. But instead of having to paint a very fine line, just the fact of where they butted up, and they were two separate stretchers, meant that there was just a slit there. You know, things like that, just working with—well, it was like sort of the vertical ones that you'd chop in half and one bit would fall down and then the other bit would fall down and you get things happening like boxes and things. It's quite interesting because they were about sort of trying to become very conscious of the process of painting and the problems of painting. Because I'd tended to have spent the last, whatever it was, eight years going through the bush and the new house and the harbour and the boat and all that sort of stuff about these opposites and so on. Now it was just trying to work it all out in an abstract way and leaving all these figurative elements out completely.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. What years were these? This was what, the mid-sixties?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: That would have been from about 1966 or seven until about 1970. There are numbers of paintings. For instance, there were some that were big arcs and the thing is it was again trying to fit the longest, a very large sort of—

JAMES GLEESON: Element.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Element into a picture that's unbroken. Like a diagonal, you see. It's like doing a Tarzan thing and just bending down a bit of cane and then putting it into a box. Then the fact that it wants to do that, holds it in place, you see.

JAMES GLEESON: And gives it tension?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: And the corners actually sort of become these sort of parts where those bits sort of stay in. They can't move out of the corners, you see. So this arc is just in there. I just sort of became interested in doing things like that. They were just about almost a physical thing of trying to put something into the painting or something. Of course, I'd thought of doing things out of bits of wood and wire. I thought of doing a sculpture which filled up a room where you had a stainless steel pipe that was a straight bar. Again, you got into the room and the only way you could get it in was, say, putting one bit in that corner and because it was longer you'd have to arc this great thing right across the room. But I never actually made any of those things, but I did think about making things like that.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Did this precede the painting of these arced—

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes, they all came after the painting. See, what seems to happen is I sort of almost instinctively come up with things that have come out of some sort of process that I seem to go through. I don't know how it works. I

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haven't decyphered that. But afterwards I spend a lot of time just sort of contemplating and meditating and wondering why I've done it and so on.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Which at times I don't decypher but I sort of suddenly see things there. A lot of those arc paintings that I did do, I realised at that same time the studio that I had was a very old house with French doors with fan lights above, with arched fan lights that were dark ultramarine stained glass, each one, above each French pair. The fireplace was an arch. Everything seemed to be arched. I consciously wasn't interested in, you know, arcs. But somehow or other I just noticed that they were also around at that time and the paintings, of course, fitted in quite well with these things. But it all seemed to be something that happened later. But I do work very instinctively and quite impulsively and like to work it out on the painting. I don't sort of work anything out much or do sketches for things.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: So it all happens in the painting. Often the paintings that I'm always the most happiest with are the ones that have really been the ones where I've worked out something new for myself in that particular painting.

JAMES GLEESON: Can I just interrupt you for one moment to go back to *Looking at the harbour through the smoke of my pipe*? Can you remember whether that was oil or acrylic? We don't seem to have a record of that.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: I think all those very early paintings were all oil paint.

JAMES GLEESON: Were they?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: It was only really after about that period that I started using acrylic and that's because I was using bigger areas and I wasn't worried too much about the quality of the paint. I was using flatter paint or something.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Because in deciding on the proportion of a lot of these paintings, the diagonal ones and a lot of the vertical ones and horizontal ones at that time, a lot of that flatter paint in the background was actually in one sense—particularly in these later ones which you haven't actually got an example of—it was almost as if the background—this container line one's a bad one but in some of them with a horizontal line that goes right through the middle of the picture, that was so there was no problem of like I'll have it a third down or third up or any of that. So it was just, 'Well, we'll just put it in the middle'. And you know from the beginning before you start that it's in the middle so there's no problem any more. Then it's just a problem of getting the paint right. But a lot of them I put the line

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down the middle and then it just became a matter of working the paint up to the line and so on. Any sort of bits that remain there weren't actually consciously put in. They were almost like the things that just ended up there. Like a crack in the cement in the street collects the cigarette butts and the pebbles and the matchsticks and things because it's lower and it just all falls into the cracks. So you get a crack where things accumulate. That's what those things were about. But in the background, why a lot of them were flatter and used with acrylic is I want them very flat because I wanted the colour there. So that actually the line, that was the painting, the line, the two inch painting by the length of the painting and all of the background was almost like colouring the gallery wall.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: So instead of the painting being two inches high on a white gallery wall, you could put it on the colour that you wanted to work it against.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: So the actual background of the painting was just the wall, as you were. Well, I'm not explaining it very well.

JAMES GLEESON: I understand.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: You understand what I mean?

JAMES GLEESON: The central thing was, in fact, conceived as the painting.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: The thing that I was concerned about is the painting, even though there are—not so much this one. This is a bad example because here it was about this thing that again fits into the rectangular thing. It's like something, it just fits in there. But it doesn't go out of the edge, even though I'm concerned about the edges. It's like a fish tank or something, everything's in there. The painting has to contain everything. Even though I'm concerned about the edge, I hate the thought of things going out really like Degas now.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: I'd like it all just to be contained. Like a piece of music or something, it's all in there. It's not something that goes out too much. But I mean headlands, for instance, coming into a painting. I don't like them at all any more because you're conscious of the whole continent going on forever or something with this little bit sticking, you know. So I like the thing to be contained, and that probably happened with these type ones. Even though there's sort of things forced into corners, it's like thinking of the whole rectangle as being like a room. You can only put things into it, you can't sort of go through—well, you can go

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through the wall but it's really trying to get it all in there right, right in the rectangle.

JAMES GLEESON: That's *Across 1*. Now, that dates from '72, I think. I think we have a couple from that period. *Untitled '72* and *Across*. Between *Looking at the harbour through the smoke of my pipe* and *Across 1*, you went to America.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: I did. Well, that was in 1971 and it was a year of travel. What I did, I hitchhiked to Darwin and went through to Portuguese Timor and through all those islands and got to Bangkok, got to Europe, and very little money. I then drove tourist buses all over Europe. Not all over Europe. It was actually known as the midnight sun trip or something.

JAMES GLEESON: You were the driver?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: I was the driver. The first trip I went on I was the co-driver. They were only small mini vans things, Ford Transit vans with tents and things on the roof. They'd only carry about 10 people. You'd head off from London for about five weeks and you'd stop at campsites and things. But it was quite good because I did three of those trips and one of them was disastrous. I think there were about five New Zealand girls and seven Australian girls and they were constantly complaining about things like whether we'll have Australia above New Zealand on the back of the bus and things like that. Anyway. But some of the other trips were quite good. There was a Canadian couple and various other people, two South African nurses and various other people that were interesting. On one of the trips—generally there was an itinerary and you had to be in Amsterdam on a certain day, stay there for five days and then you'd move on to sort of somewhere else, you see, Copenhagen or some place. But one of the trips was marvellous because all sorts of people had all sorts of places they really wanted to go to. Somebody suggested the Tuland Man in Denmark, that peat bog man, and so we drove over there and saw him. The whole itinerary just went by the board, you see, and nobody cared and nobody worried. But with the other group, with the girls, if they weren't there right on the time that their brochure said they of course got quite upset and insisted on complaining and so on. So that was interesting. I saw a lot of things that I normally couldn't see. Actually, my mother's parents used to come from Norway, way up in the Arctic Circle, and it was quite interesting going right up that way, right up past the Arctic Circle, because they'd always talked about it. In fact, Norway's a very interesting sort of country. I found sort of geographically very dramatic and—

JAMES GLEESON: I've never been there. It must be.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: And incredible continuity everywhere architecturally. I mean, those stave churches all made out of wood and so on, amazing sort of buildings and things. Beautiful fishing villages in fiords that were just reflecting like mirrors in the sort of stillness of the water, but all painted a yellow ochre or that red oxide, dark red barn colour and white and amazing sort of—a very small

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population. I think about three million or something, but amazing place. Sweden, of course, is very different. But I was very glad to drive those buses. One of the things was that the people that ran this bus tour thing also had link ups with another company that would leave London with about four or five new Land Rovers and go down from London to Johannesburg. They'd go across deserts. No roads or anything.

JAMES GLEESON: Good Lord.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: They just set out, you know, on a safari and you'd have hack through jungles and if you came to a river you'd have to build a raft and go across and so on, which really appealed to me, you see. This is one of the reasons why I drove these other buses. One, because I didn't have to pay rent anywhere in London. I could drive and I got a very small salary. It was a bit of a racket really. They'd get Australian or New Zealanders or Canadians to drive these buses because they wanted to see things, you see.

JAMES GLEESON: Did you go on one of those African ones?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, I didn't. I wanted to. I wouldn't have been a driver, but I was trying to say that I was an artist and I wanted to draw and so on. But I never did that. But that's actually one of the reasons why I did drive those buses too, that it might have got me on one those. But then I decided I was so sick of all that sort of thing that I just wanted to go to New York. But when I got there, of course, I was sort of quite penniless. I had a sort of return airfare but that was about all, so I could come back at any time but I sort of didn't really have much money. So I had to work when I got to New York. So I was renovating people's sort of lofts and things.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Working with sort of Jamaicans and things, which is quite interesting. At the same time, there was a fellow there that owned a huge sort of loft building, who sorted rags on the ground floor and he'd sort of get all the bits of satin and put them into one bale, and cotton and so on. That'd all go off to Spain to be re-shredded and turned into new bolts of material. But he allowed me to have one whole floor for a studio if I did a few jobs for him, you see. I thought, well, I'd only have to do one or two jobs and then I could paint happily away. He, of course, thought that I'd be around sort of to do jobs all the time, so there was a misunderstanding there. But I finally got thrown out of there in the middle of the night. The lift doors opened and I was saying, 'Oh, I'll get out tomorrow' all that sort of stuff, but it was now.

JAMES GLEESON: Really?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Everything went out on the street. It didn't matter, it was just the thing. I wasn't really concerned about doing paintings, it was just a good

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environment there to sort of just to be able to go off and look at paintings and galleries and then come back and look at your own paintings that you're doing and seeing how they sort of—

JAMES GLEESON: You were actually painting then?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes, I was actually painting there and I did buy a lot of material and do a lot of paintings. I was probably there for about six weeks or something, and then I had to get out of there. I remember I carried then one of the paintings, or two of them that I was quite happy with, all the way back to Michael Johnson, who was sort of living there at that time. I was working on his roof at that stage, on the actual roof with a skylight next to me.

JAMES GLEESON: Go on.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Anyway, it was just so interesting, just working like that with soot and so on. It's again just one of those sort of times that I enjoyed, you know. I did leave one painting there. And how these diagonal paintings happened was because at one stage there I just wiped one out somehow. Like I just thought this is ridiculous and sort of like just did a very bold mark, but suddenly I saw this sort of tension thing going from one side to the other. It was almost like something to cancel out, because I was leaving soon or something.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: I just wanted to destroy them all, cut them up or something and it was just a mark that somehow appeared.

JAMES GLEESON: With a brush?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes, just with a brush, just a very sloppy sort of mark, and suddenly I saw that sort of possibility of that format. The one that I left there is sort of a funny big sort of shape that goes across like that. Like a big cigar or something. It wasn't a fine, a thin line.

JAMES GLEESON: This was '71, 1971?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: That was 1971. Then I came back and then I started doing that one, and this one *Across* is one of the first paintings I did when I got back and one of the first diagonal ones.

JAMES GLEESON: This one we haven't a photograph of. It's on loan in London. *Untitled '72*. But I think from this same exhibition, Gallery A in Sydney in April '72. No. Well, that would be bought later.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes, it's hard to know which one that is, *Untitled*. I can always remember their names.

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JAMES GLEESON: Did you often just call pictures Untitled?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: No. No, I usually always give them a name.

JAMES GLEESON: Do you think this one might have had a name and we just haven't picked it up?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: It might have, yes. There are a few untitled. The titles usually come from just things; for instance, *Peanut time*. At that stage the woman that I was living with at that time was having a child, you see. We thought of this little sort of embryo growing and growing and growing. They look like peanuts, you see, so *Peanut time*. I think that was at the time when we first discovered that she was pregnant or something. So, I mean, that title's nothing to do with the painting, just *Peanut time*.

JAMES GLEESON: No. It's just a way of identifying.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: It sounds like sort of eating peanuts or something.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: But it's really about that embryo, when it starts off it's the size of a peanut and looks a bit like one. There was another called *For Laurie and the peanut* which the child was born on the same day that Laurie Thomas died. So I called one *Laurie and the peanut*.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: So they were all sort of titled but they sound, you know, they sound sort of comical or whatever, but they are actually sort of just about the type. They're like dates or something. I might hear a bit of music that I like or something, or read a line in a poem that I like or something and that is about that day or the time that I'm thinking about those things. Or names of ships are good.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: For instance, this one, *Container line*, it's just about a container ship or something, you know. In fact, there's one particular company of ships that come into the harbour and the hulls are green.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Very dark green. They've got a yellow stripe right down the middle of it, which I've only seen. So, you know, I don't know what they're called, but they're just names. They are just names about the time that—

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes. I wonder if we should try and find out.

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JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: I can't remember. There are a few untitled but they are usually ones that I take somewhere that I haven't sort of decided on and somebody says, 'Well, what's the title?'. I'm sort of in this sort of quandary where I haven't sort of come up with one or something and it just becomes *Untitled*. But there are probably about three or four.

JAMES GLEESON: Would you have exhibited it in Gallery A in Sydney in an exhibition *Untitled*?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: I could have. I could have, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, you could. Anyway, we haven't got a photograph of that.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: But I can, I can. If I can get some photograph I can tell you about it.

JAMES GLEESON: All right. Well, when that comes back from London we'll get a photograph and we can check it with you again then. Now, *Peanut time* is still that diagonal descending to an area in the bottom right corner. I wonder if *Untitled* was a similar—

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: It possibly would have been. At that time, '74, I was actually trying to get away from that at that stage, and became more concerned with the scene of just putting a line down the middle. Because even though a diagonal is a line down the middle of a rectangle, this was just putting a line down the middle again. So it wasn't a thing of trying—I wanted sort of the painting to be more about the paint. So that it's not where the things are or anything or the composition of the thing, it's just more about getting the paint right. So these things just went down the middle. But the interesting thing I must say about the diagonals, or going back to those arc ones very quickly, when you do put an arc in a picture from the bottom left to the bottom right corner that arcs right up into the picture, it tends to pull the bottom corners in. You'd think just doing that would try and push them out, but it doesn't. It pulls them in. So the painting tends to look like that.

JAMES GLEESON: Opening at the top.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Opening at the top. What happens with the diagonal line on a square painting, it tends to become a diamond.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: The other thing that was crucial about all those diagonal paintings was that if they weren't the right proportion, the rectangles, if they weren't squares but were rectangles and I hadn't worked them, well, not worked them out but I hadn't sort of—at one stage I became aware of the proportion. If

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they weren't the right proportion, the rectangles in the painting, I hated the triangles on the side that the diagonal made. In other words, if you had a painting that was sort of not the right length or something, those shapes there became very ugly.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: So it was a matter of getting them to a point where they look right, you see. They seem to work with a square, but with some of them they weren't so good at all. The other thing is that it was crucial, as soon as you had something going out of the picture again, the thing just cut it in half. So it was very important to be able to get a feeling of the thing going around the ends, you know, or the fact that it was all contained within.

JAMES GLEESON: So that the line was held inside the surface?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: That's right, it was inside, because if it got too close to the edge it would just cut it in half. And the same with all these ones, all of the ones with the lines down the middle and so on. The other thing that's interesting is that all the diagonal ones that work best—there are some that go from the left bottom corner up to the right top, but they are very different. There's only about two or three of those and they just don't seem to work properly. It's because your eye reads down the line into the corner from left to right.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. From left to right, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: And when it goes the other way it just goes off into space or something.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: So you read it down into this sort of full stop.

JAMES GLEESON: This kind, where it moves from the top left to the bottom right, is a descending movement.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: It's a descending movement and it's stopped there in the corner.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: But the other way you sort of ascend.

JAMES GLEESON: Ascending, and nothing stops it.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: There's nothing stopping it. Even if you cut the line short somewhere, it's sort of still sort of going off. So most of the ones that do go from the bottom left to the right, and there are a few, the line becomes very washed

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out. So it's quite strong down here, but it's all just sort of washed out. In that *Ten Australian's* catalogue there's one of those reproduced that goes the other way.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah yes, yes. I remember.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: It sort of is quite washed out.

JAMES GLEESON: In *Peanut time* I notice you've half washed out the line, or overlaid it so that it breaks and falters as it descends.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, that's interesting because what happens in some of these, and it's something that happened when I was doing them, is that I realised that with certain colours, the red ones were the sort of a blue that set up some resonance between the red and the blue, and you got this buzz going on with one next to the other.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Where the thing just seemed to vibrate. But with other colours it was hard to set it up. I mean, you could with yellow and mauve or something.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, complimentary colours.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes, but I mean I just wasn't interested in doing yellow and mauve ones. But what happened though, I did do a number of them where it wasn't about that and some of the diagonals would actually look as if you could—they weren't bars, they were actually slits you could put your hand in, you see. And other ones were things that you could grab.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, that lay above the surface almost.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: That's right, were above the surface but going in like a needle or something, you know. So that that's almost a surface here and that's like a knitting needle or something going through a jumper. So this end was actually three feet out from the canvas and that end was going through to the other side, you see. So that you started getting this thing of the thing not only being a diagonal across the picture, but actually coming out at one end.

JAMES GLEESON: So that you're not concerned with what's called the integrity of the surface there. Here you're really playing around with making the surface appear to be not two-dimensional.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes, yes, and trying to just destroy that flatness or something.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

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JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Some of them worked and some didn't. The other thing is that they also are like crowbars trying to remove rocks or something. You know, there's that element of leverage or something about them which interests me at the time. The other thing too, on sort of things like Fijian sailing outrigger canoes, they have a weird rig on their boats where they don't have a boom which is the usual that runs along the bottom of the sail.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: But they attach a sail to the top of the mast and they have a spar that goes to the outer edge.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh yes, yes. I've seen them.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: And they've always really intrigued me, things like that. Because rigging of sailing boats—

JAMES GLEESON: Like a sort of upside down triangle bouncing on the point.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes. Well, there's that one and then there's another one where they have great rectangular shaped sails with one spar that goes right out to the end of that sail, and then a shorter one that goes to the top of the rectangle, so quite an interesting rig. European rigs. I mean, all those sort of rigs on yachts and ships and things over the years have been quite intriguing. It's all to do with the tension and things supporting things, holding things up, wires and all that sort of stuff. I mean, I've got countless volumes on rigging of ships and boats and design and all sorts of stuff, you know. I mean, I'm very interested in that.

JAMES GLEESON: It's obviously part of your whole (inaudible).

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: It's not again that thing of that's why I did them. All that thing about the crow bar and doing things that are all happening while I'm doing the pictures. I'm discovering things and that's why I do the next one, you see. It's not trying to sort of decide to do a series before you've started and then do five variations or something.

JAMES GLEESON: You don't work out the program, mental program, and then make the pictures to illustrate it?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: A lot of things like this in the corner—

JAMES GLEESON: Those rectangles.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Is that I tried to set up a thing where that sort of did that or something, you see.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

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JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Almost formed a sort of an angle like this, except front on or something.

JAMES GLEESON: A triangular—

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, but seen from above.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, no, front on. So that that looked like this.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: You know, like a wedge and then this diagonal thing going up behind but the top of it would be out further. So it was really playing with space really.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: And that was just by getting that thing of light hitting one side and not the other, and it was quite a simple sort of thing. I don't know, I was just playing around with that, but at the same time having areas of the painting that did look flat. I remember doing one horizontal painting which I was always very happy with where the bar dissolved, appeared, dissolved, appeared.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: What that tended to do was make the whole surface of the painting look like a bit of corrugated iron, even though it wasn't regular like that. Like a woman who puts a needle through fabric and bits of the needle expose and bits disappear and it tends to make the thing sort of come and go.

JAMES GLEESON: So that there is a sort of optical concern in a lot of your painting? The way the eye reads.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, there was certainly at that time. I mean, I was sort of quite interested in seeing what you could do playing around with those things of distorting the surface and changing it and proportions of pictures and so on.

JAMES GLEESON: John, in *Peanut time* you get this contrast between a very precise edge and then a melting, a painterly kind of part down the bottom right hand corner. Does that relate back to that painting you did of *The harbour through the smoke of your pipe*, where you get these opacities and densities?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Oh, I think so, yes. I really feel that one of the things about painting is something of—I mean, the only thing that makes any painting a good painting is the paint itself.

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JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: It's not the artist talking about or whatever's been written or anything, it's just the painting has to survive. You know, I'm not really interested in personality type artist situations where there always has to be the artist around to discuss what he's doing or talk about it. But it's trying to explore every possible way of getting the paint to express what you want it to, and it is about that thing of the thin paint, the thick paint and so on. It's like that's hard and then down here it's looser.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Something like that's put on very consciously, very self-consciously, those lines.

JAMES GLEESON: The sharp, clear lines.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes. I mean, they're not filled in. I mean, I do them quite quickly and I don't use masking tape or anything.

JAMES GLEESON: You don't?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: No. Sometimes I do. Sometimes I have, but generally no, because I can never be bothered doing that or something. At some stage I have used it though in some of the paintings. For instance, with those ones like the (inaudible) like *Burnt* and *Burning* that you referred to earlier.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: At that stage I used to go and buy canvas that was striped canvas from canvas shops that already had the stripes on them.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Then I'd paint up to those stripes.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: So that I didn't paint those stripes in it.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, they were actually in—

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: They were on it, you see.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: So it's that thing of wanting something that you can almost work up to. It's like a net if you're playing tennis or something, you see. That's the

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thing that you're getting over all the time. The thing with putting something in there like that is that you can work up to it or you can work over it like this. It's just an edge, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: See, I see sometimes the whole of the sort of ground here as like being the tide coming in or something and it's coming in again.

JAMES GLEESON: This is *Peanut time*. Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: You know, it's like the tide or something, and it's just sort of where it goes in and out and, you know, leaves a wet mark. It's not water, just the wet mark or something. But it is all about the process because I never sort of really know when to stop or something. I just keep working on them. See, when I put something in like that I don't think that it's just going to stay there, because it might be changed, so I never worried too much about finishing it.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: But then when it's right for me I don't then want to go back and touch it. That's what happens. The thing just becomes something that I just cease to be interested in. That's almost how they become finished. I just can't do any more. It's not that I've decided they're finished or anything.

JAMES GLEESON: Although they're clearly, you know, abstract in appearance, nature, an awareness of nature is a very strong element in them, isn't it, always? You mentioned this feeling of the tide coming in. It's that awareness of the living quality of nature and natural forms that gives it its vitality, I would think.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes. Well, you know, it's hard. I'm just trying to think looking at this photograph, you know, something like that, I mean, you can imagine the ship here with a rope going into the water and it disappears or something. It's just that thing of when you do get something like a rope that goes from something—

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Especially with the water and it goes right through it. It's one of those things you can make something go through a wall, drive it, something but it's so much more interesting because you can vaguely see it and there's all this sort of stuff happening around it and so on.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes (inaudible)

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Which gets back to that swimming thing, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

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JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: So it's all really the same sort of interest really, you know. It's probably quite a naive sort of fascination with it. You know, I just sort get so much feedback (inaudible).

JAMES GLEESON: Well, it's that quality that gives it, to my mind, an extra dimension away from the purely abstract.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Oh, yes. Well, it's certainly not sort of concocted sort of art. I mean, it's you know it's something that I just sort feel about and do and then when I get excited about doing one I do another one because one's excited me to do another one. But the interesting thing about all this period and probably at this point of time, I've done more things in certain areas. All those earlier things, for instance, like that garage door in the bush, I only did one or two and they've gone now. But I'm really now spending a lot more time exploring all the possibilities. With those diagonal ones, I mean, I just did every one every left to right, right to left, upside down and some with nothing in them at all except the diagonal. Some were just like that with none of the stuff in that, just all one colour with one diagonal in them.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. I remember there were quite a lot of the *Container line* series.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: That's right, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: We have two that are related, *Container line 1* of '76, and *Seagulls sleep here* of '77.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes. Well, *Container line 1* is an interesting one. I remember sort of working on that one. I've always liked that one. Because somehow or other it just ended up there again. It's interesting looking at the two photographs because they were done between *Container line* and the *Seagulls* one because they were actually done at different periods, but it's interesting how this thing happens here.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Even though they're not chopped off sort of things, it's still sort of there or something. I was quite happy with the way just that shape fitted there or something and that going down the middle and this somehow being half of that. I mean, I only see it now really.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: And where the sort of bend comes. You know, there it was. I mean, that just came about. I don't know. It's funny looking at them. What can you say? I'm quite happy with that one now. I mean, I remember that show

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and that was—the other thing too was that it's like removing an old cupboard from the wall or something. We talked about that, didn't we, earlier?

JAMES GLEESON: No.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: You know, for instance, in this thing that I'm doing now where I'm just trying to fix up where I'm living, I've knocked out one kitchen because the floor that I'm living on was once two flats, but originally it was just one floor. So they'd filled up the hall and on one side was a bathroom on the other side was the kitchen. Again, in pulling up horrible old kitchen cupboards covered with grease and sort of Worcestershire sauce stains and honey dribbles and all that sort of stuff and grease and horrible stuff, you remove this thing, and where the shelves were on the wall the 50,000 different coats of paint it's had in 50 years have all dripped down behind that, behind the cupboards.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: And left the original colour which might be something like a terrible pink or something with all these light blue, green, dark blue, white, white, cream, all sorts of colours that had dripped down behind, and that's where the shelves came off, you see. Then the whole cupboard sort of makes a sort of a vague thing too where it was, so that you end up with an interesting process, you see, of how the thing got to be like that. That's also the process that I like about how paintings are made too. Just the way things end up being in the right place or something, and if they're not right—I mean, Rembrandt was a great teacher for me there. I mean, I remember reading somewhere that if he painted a nose he'd sort of realise that he had to paint the nose and he'd sort of put the brush in the paint and put it on there in a few flicks of the wrist and so on. If it was wrong he wouldn't go back and fiddle around and change it. He'd then just scrape it off and do another one. So he might do 500 noses, and the last one, until it's right. Then when it's right it just looks as if it's done in five minutes, you see, which it was. But, I mean, it's a matter of just getting each mark looking so easy and simple. But it's sort of if it's not right you scrape it off and do it again, you see, until the whole thing just gets to a point of looking as if it was just all very easy. I mean, I remember watching Segovia play the guitar once and he's just sort of sitting there, sort of his hand running up and down the neck. Now, there was none of this sort of, you know, big effort.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Just very loose and casual, which is a nice way to get them to look, I think.

JAMES GLEESON: John, one technical point. Do you paint with the canvas in a horizontal position?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Generally, you know, on the wall.

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JAMES GLEESON: On the wall.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: I gathered that from the way paint dripped.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, I hate that thing of having to climb up ladders and looking down.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: I have to look at them all the time. There have been times where I just, for instance, put something on the floor and then put an incredible wash over the whole thing or something.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: But generally it's not just working on the floor walking around.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: But I do sometimes do put things on the floor and just run over them with wash, so that the wash you put on soaks into the grooves and the crevices. But now in the last couple of years I've been using oil paint again.

JAMES GLEESON: Have you? When did that start?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Oh, possibly about two years ago, and I'm just using linen and sort of—

JAMES GLEESON: *Container line?*

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: No, that's acrylic.

JAMES GLEESON: Acrylic.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: This one was oil and acrylic.

JAMES GLEESON: *Seagulls.* Oil and acrylic.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Because again that's a very large painting and most of the painting that happens on the bars are oil paint.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: But the ground's acrylic.

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JAMES GLEESON: Mainly acrylic.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: But that's on cotton, most of these paintings at that time. I can't remember with that one but I think this one's probably all acrylic.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: But now I'm just using oil paint. I really love oil paint. I like the way you can put it on. I always did earlier with these other paintings. I'm working on smaller paintings now.

JAMES GLEESON: Are you?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, 10 feet. Well, actually, 10 feet's about the longest but they're only about that high.

JAMES GLEESON: This is an enormous one, isn't it?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, that is, that's like 15 feet.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, *Seagulls sleep here*.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: So what's happened now is that the paintings, 10 feet's the average size that I'm working on but only about three feet high. So they're quite long.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Narrow.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: You know, well, I just really do like oil paint. I've always tried to keep that quality though of the paint. But the trouble with acrylic paint, it does tend to just round off. Nothing remains exactly as you left it, which I like about oil paint. So you can't lie.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: You can't sort of blame the paint or anything. I think that thing of getting the paint right is something that that gives me a lot of the satisfaction out of painting. You know, just knowing that, you know, it's right.

JAMES GLEESON: While we're on this technical business, do you give them a surface when you've finished, wax or varnish?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: The acrylic ones?

JAMES GLEESON: Or any of them.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: No, I don't actually.

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JAMES GLEESON: The paint is just as you leave it?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes. You know, perhaps something should happen to them, I don't know. I've looked into that. A lot of the acrylic ones are quite heavily built up.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: For instance, this one *Container line*, it's got a lot of the actual pure acrylic mediums in it which makes it quite a durable surface. Some of the early ones that are just stained canvas, I mean, obviously will pose a bit of a problem, I suppose, with any sort of—I remember actually getting one back from somewhere that somebody had scribbled on with a felt pen or something. Well, I mean, like a fool I said I'd try and fix it up. I spent about a month sort of trying to.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: But, of course, once I started painting on something and it's another painting, I can't sort of adhere to that thing of restoration or anything. I started trying to alter it or changing it or something. But, anyway, it was a terrible business. But I think one like *Container line* should be very durable and *Seagulls* and so on. I can't remember the other ones. But generally, I mean, the best materials have been used that were available.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: What happens though with any paint that gets thick and builds up, it does get brittle.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, of course.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Any handling on the edge here, they usually crack around the edge where people put their thumbs in when they're lifting them and so on. But they should be all right.

JAMES GLEESON: Good. So there's no wax surface or no varnish on the surface at all?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: No, no. Nothing at all, no.

JAMES GLEESON: That's a particular favourite one of mine, I must say. Personally, I think *Seagulls sleep here* is a very major one of yours.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes. Actually, one thing about that painting that intrigued me was that again there was this thing of the very self-conscious line down the middle that accumulate things. Almost like standing at Bondi with the two inch pipe railing that you stand. You know, like one of those, and it's been painted

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green, pink, black, blue, and it's all chipped and bits of enamel, bits of rust. All that sort of stuff that happens on a thing like that.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: A banister or something. Yet, at the same time, it's like some distant horizon thing or something. This other thing is just like a spontaneous (inaudible), like a flight of a bird, or just a mark scratched in the sand, or something that happens in one go, has to be right. I mean, that was incredible putting that line in because, I mean, it was that thing, it's either right or wrong, you know. I sort of knew what I wanted but I didn't want it to look like something I just did in there. So it was just there and, in fact, it just came off. It took a long time to do that painting, but that line just came off there and I was very happy with it. Because in a lot of them, if that doesn't come off, you can't scrape it away because that was just squeezed out of a tube like that.

JAMES GLEESON: I was going to ask you how you got that continuity.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: So you sort of contemplate and then run up there with (inaudible) and away you go. So there's that amazing sort of looseness as well as this incredible sort of restraint. Also I like the way that hung off there like a string, like a cat's cradle thing or something. Almost as if you sort of have all the string in your hands and you do that and it goes tight or something. You know, those cat's cradles things with sewing and stuff.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, of course.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: It's got that sort of element which did intrigue me. I did a number of paintings like that but that one just sort of worked well.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, I wondered how you got this line, this sort of dependent line that came down from the middle bar to look so fluent and spontaneous.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes. That was amazing. I remember doing that and it worked.

JAMES GLEESON: That's by squeezing the tube, straight from, and walking along with the tube?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes. Yes, well, it really was walking along with that one too because that's 15 feet.

JAMES GLEESON: Exactly, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: It was that thing of almost running along there because, I mean, if the tube had run out in the middle or something. So you always have to

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go off and buy new tubes. If it doesn't work you think, 'Oh well, there goes another \$7.50 or something', which is just crazy. Or what you do is scrape it all off and do something else. I don't know. It's a funny process, painting. I like those sort of types of (inaudible). It's all stopped, has it? But there it is.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, there's one more *Choc #1* 1977. Graphite, paint on white paper.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, there were four that were about this sort of, well, not series but a number of things where I was working, and what it was basically was again getting back to basically a diagonal thing.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. We'll just stop and go on to a new tape.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Okay.

JAMES GLEESON: John, we were talking about *Choc #1* which we bought from Ray Hughes in Brisbane in September last year. No, two years ago, 1977. You were saying that it was one of a group of four.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, this one's one of a group of four that were on that theme. Then there are probably about another six that are also about a triangle in the rectangle like that, except they don't have all these sort of other bars and things. It's just a triangle. Again, you know, later it sort of occurred to me, I wondered why I did this and so on. It's again putting the largest sort of triangle in a rectangle and so on. It's also very crucial, the proportion, here.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Because otherwise what tends to happen is that you sort of start getting things like kite shapes that happen. When you put a line like that that goes down to the other end, and in the middle you get a right angle and all sorts of funny things that start happening. The geometry of it.

JAMES GLEESON: The sort of geometry, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: But also it suddenly occurred to me that it was like the diagonal paintings but trying to open up the diagonal. It's like putting a tent post in the middle of the painting, or getting a Stanley knife or something and just cutting a diagonal and then trying to open up the canvas or something. I can't remember in this one but also one of the things I really like working about on paper is that you don't have an edge like you do with a painting where the canvas ceases, ends, and you can actually use the white of the paper. So that in doing that, that white of the paper round the edge of the painting is the same as this triangle, so it's almost as if you've sort of torn it, you know, it's exposed. So the white of the paper is part of the painting. It's as if, if that wasn't there and that wasn't holding that up all that would be back there and you wouldn't see it.

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JAMES GLEESON: Yes (inaudible).

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: So it's trying to expose what's behind all the time or something. Because painting is a thing about putting one thing down and the next thing on top and so on. You know, if you are working on something that there is a step from the very first clean bit of canvas that you start on, to the last mark that you put on. I never feel the need that you have to just paint in the whole area. It's just a matter of putting down areas of colour or marks and it's a slow build up of things that make the painting work. It's like that one earlier, *Peanut time*, in the corner there I think that's sort of quite raw canvas. That's because it was all sketched in first and then the paint was just brought up to the corner. But I didn't know in advance that it would be like that. It's just how it ended up.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: So, again, that accumulation thing. It's a matter of thinking, 'Well, maybe I need something somewhere' and you put it in. The reason why this is quite sort of loose is because with these types of works on paper, and all the works really, I never think that it's just a work that I'm working on. I'm not too worried about being too neat with them because I don't think of them ever as being really finished works.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes. They're sketches, working things.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: They're just sort of sketchy things. Even when I'm working on a 15 foot painting I'm still likely to just think of it as not being precious or something, so I can just be free to make a mark. If it actually does drip or something, well, then I think 'Well, it will probably all be painted out soon anyway, so it doesn't matter'. But suddenly often things just happen and they end up being right. But I did one painting like that. It actually became interesting because it had two of these triangles in it. I started off with one and then somehow one ended up there or something and another one over here or something but I only ever did one painting based on all those.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: It's just an odd ball like the ones done, say, between the boat harbour ones and the ones in 1970, you know. I seem to go through these sort of odd ball periods.

JAMES GLEESON: Atypical works.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes. But I find them quite interesting. But they're always the ones that I always sort of end up with.

JAMES GLEESON: What is graphite paint?

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JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Graphite?

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: I don't know what that would be. It's actually pastel. It's just a Liquitex paint. I think in here there's sort of actually pencil, 6B pencil or something.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, what they mean here is graphite—comma—paint on white paper. I couldn't work out what graphite paint was.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Graphite paint. It is a new one, isn't it?

JAMES GLEESON: Graphite is the pencil mark, and paint and that is Liquitex?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes, it's Liquitex. With a lot of these other ones I have used sort of a locally made acrylic paint. So, you know, we just hope that the local manufacturer knows what he's doing. I mean, one of the most ridiculous things about sort of materials in Australia is the cost of them.

JAMES GLEESON: Of course.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: I mean, they're very expensive.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: You know, it's like most artists, you know, by the time you pay the framer and the gallery get their commission, and you pay the art shop or whatever, you know, the transport, you end up with very little.

JAMES GLEESON: Exactly, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: I mean, the last show I've had with oil paint and Belgian canvas and so on was just astronomically expensive. That's just how it happens to be. But, I don't know, I'm never stingy with materials.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: I can spend a fortune on material. Because I like to be able to know that I can squeeze a tube like that. If it doesn't work I just have to forget about it. Because I've always been very generous, you know, with material.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: It's not because I can afford it but it's just because I like the quality of the material, to be able to sort of—

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JAMES GLEESON: Feeling of the matter of the paint.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes. It's like, I suppose, if you're conducting and you want a symbol crash or, you know, whatever, you can put it in there without worrying about it.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, I think the moment you have to worry about the amount of paint you're going to use, you begin to lose that richness of the surface.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, I just do enjoy painting, but it's not an enjoyable activity when I'm painting. I chain smoke. I get very neurotic, but I enjoy using paint. It's almost taking it all out on the paint, on the canvas.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, John, I think that covers our present holdings of yours. Is there anything else you'd like to add to what we've already said?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Can't think of anything really. It's sort of hard to remember what you've said, actually, let alone what I should have said.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, I think you've covered it very well. It gives us a great insight into the way you work.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes, it will be interesting reading the transcript and it'll be amazing sort of hearing it. Well, we'll see what happens anyway. All I hope is that I can do some more good painting. Yes, it's hard to think, you know, what will happen in another 10 years, isn't it?

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Well, John, thank you very much indeed.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Pleasure.

JAMES GLEESON: John, you were telling me of some of things that do interest you and perhaps in some subconscious way have an affect on your painting. What were those?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, things like native artworks, like African masks and New Guinea masks, Aboriginal bark paintings, Persian rugs. Things that have sort of made where the process of making them determines to a large extent the quality of the finished work, which is to do with this thing why I'm interested in just painting and the paint has to be a very crucial part of the picture. But, you know, over the years I've done quite extraordinary things to survive. I mean, I used to make musical instruments at one stage and repair them.

JAMES GLEESON: Did you? What sort of instruments?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well, I always play a banjo, but not a banjo out of a jazz band but a mountain type style. A five-string banjo with a little peg on the side, and I used to make those and still have a number of those and things and repair

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them. All sorts of funny things I've done. I've always sort of built things and been involved with architectural sort of building things in a crude sort of way, you know, like bits of wood from demolishers and old tree stumps and all that sort of stuff.

JAMES GLEESON: Can I ask you one thing? With your interest in tools and equipment, machinery and objects of that sort, how do you regard Bob McPherson's painting? He seems to me to be—

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Well actually, Bob, I haven't seen him for years but when I was last in Brisbane I had a show up there where actually this picture was.

JAMES GLEESON: *Choc?*

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: *Choc 1.* I remember he was living almost next door. I don't know if he's still there.

JAMES GLEESON: As far as I know he is.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: But I've always sort of liked talking with Bob. It all started because he told me that he was working somewhere in some dry dock and along with a team of about 60 other people, with huge things like shovels on the end of 40 foot sticks and so on, had to scrape all the barnacles off ships. Because, in having a boat myself, every year I had to pull the boat out of the water, and one of the very interesting things about it is that suddenly you're aware of the whole form and size of the boat, you see, because usually you only see this white hull or whatever it is floating on the surface. You're not aware of what's under the water. Suddenly it's out of its element and you're aware of the whole form and shape of it, and then you've got to set to work scraping barnacles off the thing. But it's like seeing a whale out of the water or something. It just becomes another thing altogether. But when he was telling me how he was there sort of scraping barnacles off a huge sort of ship, I mean, that's just mind boggling. Of course, he is very involved with similar things.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Like marks on wood.

JAMES GLEESON: What kind of a mark?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Where people clean their brushes on the wall and there's sort of a paint shop or something. Well, all those things really intrigue me too, you see.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. There does seem to be some sort of compatibility between (inaudible).

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JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Yes. Oh, no, I haven't seen much—I sort of almost work a bit like a hermit in the city. I mean, I'm sort of always busy doing things that I'm doing and I don't always get to see all the shows.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: The only reasons I really live in the city is because I like the harbour and the water. I'm not a recluse but I do spend a lot of time just doing the things that are really important to me and I don't often get around to see all the shows. But I've always, you know, thought that Bob was, you know, somebody that I enjoy talking to and I always found his work interesting but I don't quite know what he's doing now. I've seen the paintbrush ones, with the little brush with one marker getting to the bigger brush. All that stuff, well, that is intriguing. Because when I am painting these pictures I do use the biggest brushes.

JAMES GLEESON: Do you?

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: I've always had the belief that you can make the finest line with a six-inch house paint brush, which you can. You just put paint on the very corner of it and use that, you see, and use it like a tiny little brush. So it is mastering tools. One of the things about all tools that, you know, I learnt at quite an early age is that they've always got to be sharp, especially saws and chisels and all those things. Very sharp, you know. The sharper they are the better work you can do and all that sort of stuff and it is about knowing how to use tools.

JAMES GLEESON: The capabilities.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: And understanding the paint and understanding the tools and things. I am, you know, very interested in that. You know, just doing it properly. I mean, I really enjoy seeing paintings that are just well painted. I mean, Matisse or someone like that, van Gogh. It's incredible, like all the brushes going one way and then just a few over the other way and it just melts together or something.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: It's just brilliant. I mean, it's just incredible. I must say that Roberts and Streeton and people, you know, I think it's the Robert's one of chopping wood or something.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: There's one with a tent and then there's a man sort of chopping wood.

JAMES GLEESON: Ballarat Gallery.

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JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: I mean, that's just an amazing painting because I mean each piece of freshly split wood is like just a few brush strokes or something. It's like meat. It's like Soutine painting meat where it's got all the fat and the juice and everything just in the brush stroke. It's not painting it in later or something. I really like that. But there was that American painting, George Bellows, of the boxers where there's one brushstroke that goes from the neck down to the heel or something. Those two people boxing and there's that little heading turning around and so on. There's a lot of things like that. I remember seeing in New York when I was there an exhibition of something like 400 years of American painting, and George Washington crossing the Delaware and Frank Stella and all sorts of people from the beginning to the end. Some of the paintings that really impressed me most were the Albert Pinkham Ryders.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: Tiny little paintings like this of moonlight and so on with the moon behind the clouds. I didn't see the moon but it was just amazing sort of glowing like Vermeer or something. I've always loved Vermeer, because it's like a tile or something, so beautifully painted.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: So it's not only that it always has to be big and bold.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: However it's done, you can always tell that it's well painted or something. I think that's the important thing. It's not that it has to be abstract or modern or the big brush or anything.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no.

JOHN FIRTH-SMITH: It can be a tiny brush as long as it's put on with that same positive. We'll see what happens in the future. I could go on for hours.