

JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: RUDY KOMON

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JAMES GLEESON: Rudy, to begin with, can you tell me when you first opened your first gallery in Waverley, what year was that?

RUDY KOMON: I arrived in 1950 and I found by accident a small shop, which was a hairdresser shop of a first friend I met in Australia, and his wife had a nervous breakdown. So he asked me if I would like to take the shop over, so I took the shop over in 27 Albion Street, Waverley. That was probably a year after my arrival. Before, I was interested to show Australian picture and I through connection came very shortly in friendship with Dobell. I hawked his picture in a little car which I had, a Prefect, around continental clientele on the North Shore, Bellevue Hill and in the other districts and that was mostly at the weekend. From Monday on I opened the shop. Then I had to make a living earn my money as a driver. I drove a very rich manufacturer every morning at 7 o'clock to his factory and drove him back, and then with my car went to the Waverley shop. At 4.30 I closed the shop and picked up the big American car and picked up again the manufacturer, drove him back home to Vaucluse and went back and was working in the shop as it was necessary.

JAMES GLEESON: I remember going to that shop in Waverley and it was there that I first—I think the only time—met Dame Mary Gilmore. She'd come to see the portrait Dobell had painted of her.

RUDY KOMON: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: I remember her saying to me he'd painted not only her, but he'd painted her father as well. Apparently Dobell had caught some sort of familial trait that had come out and she recognised it.

RUDY KOMON: Yes. You see, it was interesting. It was an interview which was arranged with *Woman's Weekly* Ron McKie. The author was working on *Woman's Weekly* and he invited Dame Mary Gilmore to come to the shop and view the painting. She came with a woman writer called Kurtz and unfortunately her friend didn't like the portrait, so Mary Gilmore sent her out and said, 'You wait for me outside of the shop'. Then in front of Ron McKie she made the remark that first of all she recognised the eyes as the eyes of her father. When she was asked if she likes the portrait, she says, 'If a master like Dobell paints a portrait, so I think it is good enough to be painted by a man like Dobell'. She liked the portrait and from then on the portrait, which was a commission, was handled over.

JAMES GLEESON: Rudy at that time in Waverley did you have exhibitions as such, like one-man shows?

RUDY KOMON: No, no. You see, that shop was too small and it has only a frontage of 12 feet, you know. That was the main window and in the back was a little storeroom. So you couldn't have shown pictures plastered the picture all on the wall and I at this time were selling also antiques.

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JAMES GLEESON: Yes, I remember that.

RUDY KOMON: To combine the business. The demand of picture wasn't so great at this time.

JAMES GLEESON: But already by this time you knew people like Dobell and Drysdale.

RUDY KOMON: Yes, Drysdale later, but the first one was Dobell which I became very friendly and I visited him regularly and picked up his pictures and was handling the picture from that point.

JAMES GLEESON: What year was it that you found this place?

RUDY KOMON: That place I found in 1958.

JAMES GLEESON: Fifty eight.

RUDY KOMON: Fifty eight. It was a wine saloon of McWilliams and it wasn't successful at this time. I knew the people of McWilliams. They were very cooperative and helpful in buying the place for that reason, that they were able to transfer their licence to a better place. In Paddington there was no interest for wine.

JAMES GLEESON: So for the first time, 1958, you had a gallery where you could really mount shows of real importance.

RUDY KOMON: Yes. You see, the premises were occupied on the top floor so I was limited only on the downstairs bar and the back room of the bar. So I have with a friend organised and re-done the whole place on a more amateurish way. We even painted the building white, and the start of the Jersey Road after followed and all people were painting the houses white so it looked very soon promising, that district.

JAMES GLEESON: You started a fashion?

RUDY KOMON: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Rudy, at that time you were the first to move out into this area as a gallery?

RUDY KOMON: Yes that's the first and you see it was impossible when I found out that you couldn't rent premises in town than the smallest shop. For instance, a bar would have asked thousand and thousands of pounds as key money to get in. So you see they could afford and they had the turnover, but we started something where I wouldn't have known what the turnover will be, you know. So you can't pay hundreds of pounds at this time, rent and key money, and then you are in a narrow place where you have only about 10 feet walking space into a bar.

JAMES GLEESON: Of course. Well that was a problem. So you couldn't have foreseen at that time that in fact Paddington would become the art centre?

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RUDY KOMON: But, you see, I was first of all thinking that as it is close to the city and close to important, I would say, districts like Darling Point, Point Piper, Vaucluse, Bellevue Hills, where all the people, the rich people lived where they had these beautiful houses without pictures. That they one day will become clients and will try to buy and decorate the picture, take the prints, or the reproduction of prints, off their wall and change it for originals.

JAMES GLEESON: So it really was a very strategically placed area for a gallery.

RUDY KOMON: Yes, it was, but it was a risky thing in any case.

JAMES GLEESON: Rudy, what do you remember of the galleries in the fifties? My recollection is that there were very few of them. I can think of the Macquarie Gallery of course that had been going for a long time.

RUDY KOMON: Yes, there was only Macquarie Gallery and then there was a gallery in George Street.

JAMES GLEESON: The Grosvenor.

RUDY KOMON: The Grosvenor run by Taylor, but that was not a gallery in the right word. Then they were not having exhibition, they were selling picture even if the pictures were some of very good quality.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. They dealt mainly in very conservative work.

RUDY KOMON: Very, very, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Was the Clune Gallery operative by the time you opened?

RUDY KOMON: No, no, no. That come much later in King's Cross.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. There were occasional exhibitions at places like David Jones and the Blaxland.

RUDY KOMON: Yes. David Jones, Blaxland Gallery were at this time, but they were not regular, they exhibited just when they felt like, and they had a different exhibition. They had not only paintings, they had furniture and antiques displayed, so that was not true picture galleries.

JAMES GLEESON: Rudy, I remember at that time there wasn't any real interest in art; nothing like the interest that developed in the sixties and seventies for instance.

RUDY KOMON: No, no.

JAMES GLEESON: The dealers at that time had a different attitude to artists and the public. They were more like—oh, I don't know—shops where they put up the work for a period.

RUDY KOMON: Yes, where they were selling on commission basis, what they could get.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

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RUDY KOMON: Yes. Very few important exhibitions at this time were launched, with exception the Macquarie Gallery which had good artists all the time.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, you introduced a new note altogether. I suppose, is it a continental attitude?

RUDY KOMON: Yes, it was continental and American that gallery has an artist on the contract and he's handled by the gallery all the time. Not only in the city where the gallery is but in other places like Melbourne, like Brisbane, like Adelaide, and even as far as Perth.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, that was an innovation because I remember we rarely saw art by any one but the Sydney artists in Sydney before the fifties. You must have been instrumental in bringing into Sydney and taking Sydney artists elsewhere.

RUDY KOMON: Yes, so you see the first artist which came from Melbourne, there was a group, they were probably known only when occasionally they exhibited in the Wynne Prize, in the Archibald Prize, but not one-man shows. So they came only through me like Len French, Fred Williams, Pugh, you see, Brack, Blackman, Perceval at this time, and later Arthur Boyd and Nolan. Then at this time they were overseas.

JAMES GLEESON: So you've spread you net very widely. It includes the whole of the Australian sort of art scene. You've arranged shows by Sydney artists also in other capitals?

RUDY KOMON: In other states, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes

RUDY KOMON: Yes, yes, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: I remember too that you've sought to introduce New Zealand artists to this country.

RUDY KOMON: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: You introduced some of the important New Zealand artists.

RUDY KOMON: Yes, I had you see Colin McCahon, you know, who I still think is the best and leading artist in New Zealand.

JAMES GLEESON: A very major artist.

RUDY KOMON: And brought some paintings here. Unfortunately, the reaction at this time wasn't a good one. So it wasn't a successful showing but definitely I covered my costs and you have to be an adventurer all the time to try something new. We have shown also overseas artists, but unfortunately I haven't been very successful, you know. Probably Gaudier Brzeska, one of the great exhibition I had, hardly sold one sculpture and one drawing of a major artist. I was lucky to bring these exhibition to Australia through my connection in London. Luckily, I saved the exhibition and it stayed and it is in the New South Wales Gallery.

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JAMES GLEESON: Rudy, I know your famous little black book where you have addresses and telephone numbers of people all over the world which you maintain and keep in contact with.

RUDY KOMON: Ah, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: This is something that I think is again unique in Australian art dealing. I don't think until you started this sort of practice of keeping in touch with what was going on all over the world, this had happened.

RUDY KOMON: Yes, yes. It was important and, you see, if you keep the addresses and the telephone number so in the 20th century you can dial today, you can even dial direct to London, or to America. But at this time if you had the telephone number so you could ring the people and you have to make quick decisions so you have to get quick results.

JAMES GLEESON: Tell me the story of how you met Ewa Pachucka because you introduced her to Australia, didn't you?

RUDY KOMON: Yes. Well you see, it was a pure accident. I was in Copenhagen visiting the galleries and most of the galleries are outside of Copenhagen. I walked into a gallery, returning from a trip in these districts. I visit a gallery and there was an exhibition of Ewa Pachucka. I didn't know her name and I liked the work and I was asking the owner who the girl is. He told me the story that he discovered her in London where she had the first exhibition. She was a Polish sculptor and produced these new type of soft sculpting in London—had a successful exhibition. He took then the exhibition to Copenhagen. I asked him for the address and when I gave him my card, coming from Australia, he said, 'That's a coincidence. That girl wants to migrate to Australia'. That was her plan. So cutting the story short, I found her and I couldn't get her the whole night, but at six o'clock in the morning before I went to the airport I got her, gave her my address and she was saying that she is coming and she will contact me. About a few months later she arrived here and I picked her up and I have shown her since and I think that she contributed a great thing to Australian art.

JAMES GLEESON: I certainly agree with you. Well now, this is a typical example of the way you just don't sit and wait for artists to come to you. You go out looking and searching and you make up your own mind which artists you feel are of quality and then go out to represent them.

RUDY KOMON: You see, that's why I went to Melbourne. I was very friendly with Len French, who worked as a display officer in the gallery. Through him I was introduced to other artists. The same thing happened in Queensland where I knew Molvig from Sydney and when he moved to Brisbane he introduced me to all the Brisbane artists like Sibley, Margaret Olley, Joy Roggenkamp, Rigby and so on. So you knew the people and if you need them so you just approach them and there was the black book always a great help.

JAMES GLEESON: It was a very active approach compared to a lot of the galleries that just sat back waiting for artists to approach them.

RUDY KOMON: Yes. You see, that's the first time I try not only to gain from the artist, but also to help them. You have to be interested in their life and in their

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social problems. There were some very problem people like Dickerson, you see, Molvig, which had always some trouble somewhere.

JAMES GLEESON: So you took on the role not only of dealer but father confessor.

RUDY KOMON: In a way and that's where I kept always the friendship with them.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, you mentioned that those two artists were the first that you had under contract.

RUDY KOMON: Yes. Molvig was the first and Dickerson was the second one in writing. All others were no written contract and I don't believe in a contract. I think it's an unmoral thing, even if it's still in existence today, especially in Europe and in America where the artist has to sign the contract and has to fulfil the contract. I was thinking even artists will be immoral; he will go away and I wouldn't take him to court in any case.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no. So it was a much more open sort of arrangement?

RUDY KOMON: Yes. After the first two contracts I had no other written contract any more; only a shake hands contract.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. But under these sort of arrangements you looked after the artists, advanced them money if they were in difficulties.

RUDY KOMON: Yes, yes. That was the important thing. That's where they never forgot. Even if I didn't have the money, I had to borrow it, and I probably borrowed it easier than these people—then there was something. The bank would have known that the gallery was paid for, so there was a fundamental guarantee of the capital.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Rudy, let me see now. Where are we? You, yourself, you were born in Prague, were you?

RUDY KOMON: No, I was born in Vienna of Czech parents. Both parents were Czech and so I was a Czech born in the old Austrian Hungarian monarchy, where Vienna was the second greatest city of Czechs. The first wasn't Prague, the first was Chicago.

JAMES GLEESON: Really?

RUDY KOMON: Where there were about two million Czechs, and then came Vienna, nearly with half a million Czechs. So that was the second greatest city and in third line came Prague.

JAMES GLEESON: Goodness me. What year were you born?

RUDY KOMON: Nineteen hundred and eight.

JAMES GLEESON: Nineteen hundred and eight. You were educated in Vienna?

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RUDY KOMON: Half in Vienna and half in Prague. I was working as a journalist for a Czech paper in Vienna as a correspondent, so I stayed half my life in Vienna and half my life in Prague.

JAMES GLEESON: Prague. You moved around a bit?

RUDY KOMON: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: That must have been a pretty difficult time for a journalist. This would be in the thirties, I take it?

RUDY KOMON: Oh yes. That was the worst time. I have seen every revolution or every putsch or every coup d'état in central Europe. It started in 1932, in Vienna, with the social revolution, the Nazi revolution, and killing of Dollfuss, the Ausschluss in Vienna, the occupying of Czechoslovakia before the war started in 1939.

JAMES GLEESON: Where were you in '39?

RUDY KOMON: In Prague.

JAMES GLEESON: In Prague. Tell me what happened then.

RUDY KOMON: You see, I lost my job as unreliable. To save myself to go on the forced labour that they sent all these people which were unreliable, to forced labour into Germany in the munition factories and in the occupied country later. To save myself I had a friend who was in the film industry and the film industry was even accepted by the German, even if it was the total Czech film industry they were accepted. I got a job there to be an assistant of the director. That means I was holding the screen to do the proper lighting when we were filming outside and we filmed one film for nearly the whole occupation of the German, and also in a way sabotage also.

JAMES GLEESON: You spread it out.

RUDY KOMON: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: So that one film took the whole time.

RUDY KOMON: The whole time. You see when the sun was shining we couldn't film, then it was too strong, so we had to wait for the clouds and when it was raining we couldn't film, so we waited for the next change of weather. Then we needed lovely clouds in the background.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. When did you leave Czechoslovakia?

RUDY KOMON: Yes, I escaped in 1948. I was lucky again to have some friends in Switzerland, so I went and stayed two years in Switzerland and when I arrived I asked for migration to America, Canada and to Australia, and Australia came first. Being a fatalist I went straight away and accepted to come to Australia.

JAMES GLEESON: Any regrets?

RUDY KOMON: Never regret it, never.

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JAMES GLEESON: Well, you seem to have brought a European sort of attitude to life to this country with you. You enjoy not only good art but good food and good wine, and have been very important in all those areas in this country.

RUDY KOMON: You see, I remember that for instance in 1950 a bottle of wine was only a threepence dearer than beer. So you can imagine what work goes in a bottle of wine and what little mechanical work goes into producing beer.

JAMES GLEESON: Rudy, now first some other things. I know that you were very interested in the attempt to organise some system of paying royalties to artists on re-sale of work.

RUDY KOMON: Yes, yes. Up till today if I re-sell a picture I give the artist 10 per cent. I personally think that it is necessary. It should be a law that the people who are re-selling work should honour the author, like to pay him his royalties.

JAMES GLEESON: Do you feel that there is any sort of way that this can be officially done? I know you do it just out of a sense of rightness.

RUDY KOMON: But, you see, as it is a law in France and in Europe, so why shouldn't it be a law here? Then I think it's fair if the radio pays the royalty for songs and for poetry and for theatre, why the artist shouldn't have his royalty.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, I agree absolutely. But now is there still a lobby to try and get a law for this going, or has it rather lapsed?

RUDY KOMON: I think it was supported but it lapsed and I would say that is the fault of the organisation of the artists, then the organisation of the artists should take it in hand. I'm sure they will be successful in the same way as the tax deduction, which I was fighting for a long long time, and saying that if America can do it and if Europe can do it, why Australia can't do it. If you look to America, their wealth came only from the own people who were much more civic minded than the people are in Sydney and in Australia, then I think Melbourne is much more civic minded in that way as Sydney today. Look up all the big collections which were built up in small places in America. I would say small, small cities where you wouldn't dare—all smaller than Melbourne and smaller than Sydney, and even smaller than Brisbane. They all have their big collections which are donations on account of the tax deduction. You see, it will be for the government only a small drop of water in a big sea but what they will gain is for the next generation to build up a big collection of good art.

JAMES GLEESON: Rudy, I know you number among your friends some leading, you know, politicians and people in the public service. Now, is it through those contacts that you were able to lobby in favour of this?

RUDY KOMON: Yes, yes. I have to say that there are a lot of politicians which are interested in that, and it would need probably a stronger pushing of more people and pressure. I think it will come and it has to come in Australia. If you look again I will show Victoria in a better light than New South Wales. First of all, you have the regional galleries which lately are coming up like mushrooms after rain. There are about 16 or 18 regional galleries in Victoria, and I know only of two in New South Wales.

JAMES GLEESON: Newcastle and Wollongong.

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RUDY KOMON: Newcastle and Wollongong. You see, there should be in Bathurst, there should be in Armidale, yes. You see Armidale has a university where they are housing the Hinder collection. They should have built there a gallery with government support. I think it will come but the pressure should come from both sides, not only from one side.

JAMES GLEESON: Rudy, you were actively involved in the commercial gallery dealers association.

RUDY KOMON: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Do you feel that they have a role to play?

RUDY KOMON: I hope, and they are fighting for their role and I think they should be represented on the Art's Council. Many of the exhibitions they could support, they could advise, so I hope that that will also come in the near future. Organisation of the dealers association is a very strong organisation and the members are selected as far as we can select it now.

JAMES GLEESON: Rudy, looking back over your career as a gallery owner, what gives you the greatest satisfaction? Is there any one that you feel that you've brought forward, any artist that you feel you've been very instrumental in fostering, any one particular one?

RUDY KOMON: You see, I would have to start with Dobell and you know I remember people coming after years, saying I should have bought that Dobell for 15 guineas, and now it's worth fifteen thousand. That will repeat. I didn't repeat, let us say, with the generation which followed. There were lots of disappointments. For instance, one of the most under-rated artist is Molvig, and only now after his death he has fine recognition with a retrospective show, a man of great ability and a great contributor to Australian art which even older artists accept.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, I would agree with that.

RUDY KOMON: From the younger generation you can see that definitely painters like Len French and especially Fred Williams as the younger generation. You see these people are on the limelight for the last 10 years and they are only 50 years old. They are young people and they will prove next to all the others that Australian art is as good as any art anywhere in the world. Unfortunately, there is not enough done internationally for Australian art and let us hope that the government will in the future take more action for advertising Australian art.

JAMES GLEESON: Rudy, you've obviously got a remarkable eye for picking quality. The shows you have, the artist you exhibit, clearly shows this. Are there any sort of areas of art, kinds of art, that you don't really like, don't approve of or find less interesting?

RUDY KOMON: Yes, I think I will never compromise with the new gimmick art, and I think art is no gimmick. If an artist has to use to gimmick to draw his attention to his work so I don't want to show him.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, Rudy, I think that gives me a very clear idea of the way you think and what you've contributed. Thank you very much indeed.

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RUDY KOMON: Thank you.