

JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: JOHN OLSEN

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JAMES GLEESON: John, could we begin with the earliest of your paintings first of all, and tell us anything you can remember about the *Bicycle boys*, which is one of the earliest ones of yours I recollect.

JOHN OLSEN: Well, it was the first group of paintings that I did after I left Julian Ashton's. Looking at the picture now, I remember that I was 26 years old.

JAMES GLEESON: What date would that make it?

JOHN OLSEN: That would put us around about 1954.

JAMES GLEESON: Fifty four?

JOHN OLSEN: Approximately. Looking at the picture I can see sort of strands of, you know, Passmore's ideas of draftsmanship. Then there's a young man's interest in, say, English painting of say Claxton and Keith Vaughan, and of course Marino Marini. But the story behind the picture is that I lived at Bondi at the time, and I used to go down to Centennial Park a lot. Centennial Park in those times—and I do believe it's the same now—they had a lot of bicycle riding. I was rather fascinated by the sort of difference of the human body weight to the lightness of the bicycle. It had a kind of airiness about it. They used to sort of ride up and down hills. The final moments of a race which often was 20 miles long, the winner would arrive and be absolutely totally exhausted. First and second and they used to embrace each other and still there was that strange kind of balance thing.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: I guess it sort of stands as a sort of disparity and airiness of human rejoicing with the peculiarness of the bicycle shapes themselves.

JAMES GLEESON: It has, I think as all your early work did have, this great exuberance and vitality and energy in it. You must have been aware of this because it comes in through your cityscapes and the harbour scenes. Do you feel that?

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, it's a strange thing that I don't think one really sort of pervades joy or exhilaration consciously.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

JOHN OLSEN: I think it's more a question of being.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: I never really sought to make pictures happy or exhilarating or outstanding moments of rejoicing, but somehow it seems to turn out that way. I

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think one becomes more conscious of these factors as one gets older, and one can perhaps go to the sort of people who share that kind of experience. Like I found it particularly in the vitalism of Gerard Manly Hopkins, and Dylan Thomas later on. The sort of shadow side of this vitalism I always found Lorca interesting. So, you know, there are those kind of factors. But I really don't think that one sets out to paint consciously the dark side of life or the joyous side of life, I really think that it's something that happens to you.

JAMES GLEESON: It happens to you.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: It's a spontaneous expression of your own inner state and feeling.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes. Sometimes I wish I didn't have it.

JAMES GLEESON: John, can you tell me anything about the history of the painting after it left you?

JOHN OLSEN: Well, it's a strange story. One's got to re-cast back to post-war Sydney and up till really 1960 that there weren't very many commercial galleries in Sydney at all and The Society of Artists and the Contemporary Arts Society were really the main planks of exhibiting.

JAMES GLEESON: That's right.

JOHN OLSEN: Then of course the Macquarie Galleries. I had asked if I could have a show with the Macquarie Galleries and they said, 'Yes, but you'll have to wait a while', which meant that it took a couple of years before I had a shared show. But what happened was in the interim, that Mervyn Horton opened the Galleria in Rose Street.

JAMES GLEESON: The first of its kind in Australia, I think.

JOHN OLSEN: Precisely, yes, it was very chic. He used to hang pictures and asked me would I like to hang some pictures.

JAMES GLEESON: That's where I first saw it.

JOHN OLSEN: Consequently—there were only three of them—all of them were shown in his Galleria.

JAMES GLEESON: And it was bought from the Gallery?

JOHN OLSEN: It was bought by Mervyn Horton.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: The last of the big spenders, who paid me 14 pounds down and 14 single quids for 14 weeks.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

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JOHN OLSEN: I was delighted. I'm also delighted on the price it went to the gallery for—I don't think BHP does as well as that.

JAMES GLEESON: It is oil on canvas, that's correct?

JOHN OLSEN: Oil on canvas, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Good. Fine. Well, now we'll go to the next in sequence. Would that be *Dappled country*, or the one we've mistakenly called *Abstract*.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, it's mistakenly called *Abstract*, but it would deal with images of landscape as well and of course animals and birds and people.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Do you remember giving it a title?

JOHN OLSEN: No. Look it would most certainly have a title and its title might well be *Bush walk*.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, well, we do have a card called *Bush walk*.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes. What's it called now?

JAMES GLEESON: One.

JOHN OLSEN: But they don't really tell us whether it's oil.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no. Perhaps they weren't able to identify it.

JOHN OLSEN: No.

JAMES GLEESON: Link it with the painting.

JOHN OLSEN: No, it looks to me to be an oil on canvas.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Any idea of the date it was painted?

JOHN OLSEN: We'd be looking at, say, roughly about 1963.

JAMES GLEESON: Was it exhibited anywhere?

JOHN OLSEN: I don't believe so, no.

JAMES GLEESON: It went to a gallery. I think we got it from Bonython.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, it probably was first of all sold through Clune Galleries, and then it would be a re-sale.

JAMES GLEESON: Through Bonython?

JOHN OLSEN: Through Bonython. Bonython should know this really.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Except that they were very poor in keeping records.

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JOHN OLSEN: Yes, it's disgraceful how often galleries just don't really. It's just a matter these days of an instamatic. But beyond that I really couldn't say anything like of its origins.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

JOHN OLSEN: No.

JAMES GLEESON: But at least we've established the fact that it is almost certainly *Bush walk*.

JOHN OLSEN: I think so. I wouldn't be definite about it.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

JOHN OLSEN: But it looks like that kind of genre to me. Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Did you do others in that kind of style, you know, of a similar kind?

JOHN OLSEN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Around what, '63 did you say, or '64?

JOHN OLSEN: Well, say from *Spanish encounters* through to about '65, I think. You know, it's sort of reflective.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, of that period.

JOHN OLSEN: Of a period and which is very much to do with interest in primitive art and, looking at this, it has a very strong affinity to the cobra thing.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN OLSEN: To be avoided at all costs.

JAMES GLEESON: I think it's a rather exciting one.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, it is, it is. You know, it's direct. It contains the urges that I've long felt that we'd have to, if one's going to be involved in Australian landscape and things in the Australian landscape that one shouldn't pass over the Aborigines. Like talking to William Scott when he was here a few years ago, he was very interested in bark paintings. Thinking about Scott's work, of how well the Aborigines are able to place, say, a kangaroo or, say, the crocodile that I have over there, a bark, of how well they design to a format. It would be very much Scott's preoccupation. But I do on the other hand think that, say, what Scott wouldn't know is to be an Australian artist that you understand the ethos of where these things come from.

JAMES GLEESON: Exactly.

JOHN OLSEN: So therefore like comparing this to Scott's thing is that it's much more animistic, you know. I know Scott for example likes Lasceaux Cave very

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much as well. But I always feel that Scott, that it's this very lack of the animism of the object that really is a fault in his own work.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: It sort of comes out as a designing thing. So like looking at this, that it sort of relates to an experience that I was very interested in before I left Australia in a picture called *Dry salvages* which is in the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: Which is from one of Eliot's—

JAMES GLEESON: Poems. Quartets.

JOHN OLSEN: Quartets, exactly. The remark that I really like was, 'I am in the landscape and the landscape is in me'. Meaning this: the relationship of ourselves and of what we are doing to the landscape and what the landscape is doing to us is a litmus paper on both sides. So consequently we are stained by the landscape and the landscape is stained and often polluted by us. So looking at this thing that one can see within the head there are sort of flowers and, you know, objects within the head itself that belong to the landscape itself. I think it has a rough kind of vitality about it. You know, in fact, I think it's sort of the kind of painting that young men do.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, that's appropriate since you were a young man at the time.

JOHN OLSEN: Lacking a certain subjunctive quality. It's a very outgoing picture and a very exuberant vital picture.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: The thing that I'm a little bit disappointed in is that it does look a bit too much sort of cobberish for me.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, that would have been in retrospect.

JOHN OLSEN: In retrospect, yes, yes. I wouldn't be thinking of it at the time, but somehow or other it does turn out that way, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Still it seems to me to be an important example of that period.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, it's representative, or rather it's sort of well represented of that period.

JAMES GLEESON: Good. Well now, *Dappled country* 1963, and this of course is one of my favourite ones. What can you tell me about it?

JOHN OLSEN: It's one of my favourites too, and I think it comes out as a very original picture. I've always liked it and I've like its sort of lyricism and, you know,

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its tangled bushy quality. It's very typical of the country it was painted in, Yarramalong.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah yes.

JOHN OLSEN: We were staying at the Clune's house, actually a family house, rather a beautiful old bush tumbled down place, but very lovely sort of smells of, you know, the fire and things of this sort. The trees are all around the verandah of the house and I used to paint out on the verandah. It's the beginning of a preoccupation which is still with me, and I think it's very very characteristic of the Australian landscape, its dappled quality. I've always admired for this reason, that poem of Gerard Manly Hopkins, *Glory be to God*—

JAMES GLEESON: Oh yes.

JOHN OLSEN: *For dappled things, the skies are coloured as a brindled cow for rose-mole on a trout that swims*, and so on. Just looking out at the trees here, that one is very much aware of this dappling quality, which I don't think, or I've never experienced the same quality in Europe to the same extent.

JAMES GLEESON: I didn't think any other artist apart from yourself has caught this quality in art, in Australian art anyway, the way you have.

JOHN OLSEN: I think also, Jim, that what occurs with this kind of dappling is that if one concentrates on the shapes, that there's an incredible animism in those shapes. That there is a kind of an enlarged metaphor in which the shape just isn't only the description of, say, a piece of bark, but it also contains a sort of simile relationship to animals, you know, creatures of this kind, which I think the Aborigines come into this superbly.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN OLSEN: That like the amount of condensation that they manage to accrue in a single bark painting is still probably the finest body of work that has been done in Australia. Even though I think what has subsequently happened in Australian art is that we have enlarged the understanding of the country itself. But I'm very fascinated to see how the Aborigines managed to condense what was such a hybrid experience of the physical aspect of what the landscape looked like into sort of single things. Sometimes it's a kangaroo or an emu or whatever, but within the kangaroo is also the landscape.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes. I understand that.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: This is a continuing theme in your work too, isn't it?

JOHN OLSEN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: This search for this animistic quality that involved everything with everything else, this continual interplay of force between inanimate and animate.

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JOHN OLSEN: Yes, well, one also observes this in Aboriginal mythology, where the snake god does devour, you know, the children and then regurgitates them out and they become other kinds of spirits. That the Aboriginal view of land rights isn't just real estate as we are inclined to look at it. Land right means his country, and his country is very very totemic. Like the river isn't only a river, it's the containment of the snake god.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: Or, say, in recent journeys to Lake Eyre contained within the lake itself lies the goddess Kurdamurka * who has the body of a crocodile and a head of an emu. Now, all of these kinds of things I don't think that it's by accident that the Aborigines managed to have a mythology of the kind of nature that it has without the landscape in forming that mythology. So consequently I think—and one can observe this in Arthur Boyd as well, and Nolan at times as well—that within the landscape it is not like symmetrically felt or romantically seen as one would see in European art, that there is a kind of animism in the landscape itself. Perhaps it's because of its naturalism, meaning that it's not sort of spoiled, that that spirit is very very strong in Australian art, and I think that it also gets back to what is so far the dominant factor in Australian art. Undoubtedly this will change but I think that the Celtic experience is the strongest experience so far in Australian painting.

JAMES GLEESON: Do you think that Celtic awareness of mysticism in nature is a link, well, that allows people like yourself to establish a rapport with the Aboriginal concepts or feelings about nature.

JOHN OLSEN: Well, I think so. I've talked to Xavier Herbert about that in relationship to his splendid descriptions of the escape in *Poor fellow my country*, which I think is probably the finest writing in the book itself. I think that our tradition is primarily literary which is very Celtic. I mean the Celts are stimulated by the word as much as they are by the image. One's only got to look at The Book of Kells, for example, to get that kind of connotation which is very much alien to the spirit of the Mediterranean which I admire very much. I mean you'd have to be a fool not to.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, of course. It's a different thing.

JOHN OLSEN: It's a different thing, exactly. I think that, say, this kind of achievement that we have managed to do in Australia is the real beginnings of the proper sense of identity and sense of place.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, that's fascinating and very interesting. I think you're right about it.

JOHN OLSEN: I don't know.

JAMES GLEESON: John, just a practical question now. How do you work on a painting like that? Do you work directly? You said it was done from the verandah of the Clune's place at Yarramalong. Did you actually paint it there, or did you do sketches first?

JOHN OLSEN: Yes. No. I did a couple of very sort of scant sketches of no value at all. But it also happens to be, you know, a view of mine that I think that one

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thing leads to another. Probably this is one of the great things of modern painting. That you don't know what you think is until you deal with one extension to the other extension. At a certain point the extension runs out. I think sometimes this leads in my own case to an awful proliferation of things. But, notwithstanding, you've got to be prepared to take a thing at its best, and so therefore the disaster area might be wider, but the peaks might be higher.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: I really feel very sorry for, say, people such as Leonardo or Michelangelo or any of those Renaissance painters who of course are great geniuses, but I do think the extensional metaphor is limited by drawing the strict cartoon. Which, by the way, even Rembrandt abandoned. I think that, say, that's been one great achievement over the last say 200 years, that the moving away from the rigid sketch to more an informal thing in which the state of being can more easily be stated.

JAMES GLEESON: You know, I feel this very strongly in your work, except perhaps in the mural which was a different proposition altogether.

JOHN OLSEN: Well, you couldn't do that.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

JOHN OLSEN: Somehow I came to the conclusion that a mural has to sit back more than you'd readily do in easel pictures.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN OLSEN: It's more of an inferring quality rather than a grabbing quality.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: Though I must tell you, Jimmy, that I'm still working on that mural.

JAMES GLEESON: In your mind?

JOHN OLSEN: No, no. I've painted on it.

JAMES GLEESON: Have you really?

JOHN OLSEN: And nobody's ever noticed, which disappoints me enormously.

JAMES GLEESON: Good heavens. Well, that's news. So you're still at work on the Opera House mural?

JOHN OLSEN: Well, I'm very disappointed about the whole thing, that nobody's ever noticed. You see, what happened in the Opera House is that we really were racing against time a lot.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

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JOHN OLSEN: It was very frantic and one really awful thing that took place is that the workmen never really let us alone and it was a big hassle. It was an enormous problem.

JAMES GLEESON: That must have been a nightmare.

JOHN OLSEN: Well, I had to give up for a while because I could see that I was on the edge of a nervous breakdown. I went and, you know, stayed up in North Queensland for a fortnight and then I came back and it was about this time of the year, Easter. The workmen were all away and so I said to the people who were working with me, 'This is our big chance. We've got to make a drive here because we won't get the same opportunity again'. So we did, and we just called it quits for that moment. But what's happened subsequently is that over the last three years I've been working at it. I have a book, a journal of those Opera House times.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN OLSEN: I think it would be very interesting for people to go with that book.

JAMES GLEESON: And check it out.

JOHN OLSEN: And check it out.

JAMES GLEESON: John, that was one time when you did a great deal of preparatory work, a large number of sketches and details, simply because it was a different kind of process conditioned by the fact that it was a mural in a big space.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes. Well, I did that, but even with the sketches one found that it was just very important to extend out from it. In fact, at one stage I was really just sort of, you know, dropping buckets of paint on it just to break up that sort of too tight quality in to something that was more sort of lyrical and moving. Actually it was an interesting job and I knew very well when I took it up that the Opera House was such a controversial subject that no matter what you do you couldn't win public approval of it.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, not from everybody, no.

JOHN OLSEN: Except sort of putting naked girls on white horses or something. Which is very intimate but at the same time I think that what's happened with it. Rather than it being, as it was when it was first erected and came as an enormous shock to people, as not being an intimate object, I think it really now has found its sort of proper place with people and I'm amazed at the amount of people who now really say just how much they love it at night, which is the time.

JAMES GLEESON: This is the proper time to see it.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, you can't because there's so much light sort of drenching down on it during the day.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, we see it as a nocturne.

JOHN OLSEN: Of course. Well, I mean the theme of the poem is a nocturne.

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JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: So, you know, but I do think that my own life wouldn't have been the same without having done that job. I think that I learnt an enormous thing from it, and I do think that it had a very big influence on what I was to subsequently do. Because from that point onwards—in that picture there is a sort of quietness and a building up to an emotion rather than an attack on an emotion.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN OLSEN: I learnt a lot from that, and I think that that is reflected very much in the Lake Eyre pictures later on.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. I feel that there is—

JOHN OLSEN: Much more muted colour.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: But much more sort of calculated in a broad sense. I'd also got to admire Morandi a lot too.

JAMES GLEESON: John, can you put into words the nature of those additions that you've made to it. What has inspired you to do it? Have you felt that it needed additions or what's the character of those additions? Are they little accent notes?

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, they are, they are. The character of them is more towards extension to perhaps enlarge the metaphor just a bit broader. That's all I could really say of that, yes. It's like dealing with a hypothesis, isn't it?

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Yes, well, that's fascinating. I had no idea you were up to that.

JOHN OLSEN: Oh, we don't give anything, Jimmy. *Dappled country* was shown in the Clune Galleries in 1963. It was the time when I designed the tapestries *Joie de Vivre*. I think it was one of my best shows looking back on it. I always liked that picture and it was bought by Helen Sweeney.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah, yes.

JOHN OLSEN: It's one that I should have really kept, but necessity calls. It was purchased from Gallery A, they say here, but I think Gallery A were the agents for Helen.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, I think they were.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, that's right.

JAMES GLEESON: So it would have come straight from the first exhibition to Helen Sweeney and through her to Gallery A and to us.

JOHN OLSEN: That's right.

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JAMES GLEESON: Fine.

JOHN OLSEN: The initial price of it was 400 guineas.

JAMES GLEESON: What did we pay for it?

JOHN OLSEN: Three six five. That was quite a good buy I thought. Yes, that's good buying.

JAMES GLEESON: John, it was after the Opera House that you made this visit to the dead heart, the interior, Lake Eyre, and that sparked off a whole series of exciting new works. Can you tell us how that came about, how you became involved with the dead centre and what you found there?

JOHN OLSEN: It's interesting, Jimmy, because what happened at a certain point is that one of the criticisms that I had with Abstract Expressionism, which of course I was influenced by, that it had implications of object but very little observation of it. I think that beyond a certain point that the inference of Abstract Expressionism as a formal way is and was far more than it was readily telling. That it was my own view that it was existing more in the sense of implication, rather than in the sense of proper mystical observable fact, which one does see in primitive art.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: That their observable fact is enormously strong, be it from Lascaux or Ulmara or any of the cave paintings that we see in Australia. It was an enormous decision somehow—you know, what might seem very very simple looking back on it—it was an enormous decision to pull back and start drawing objects again. Because, say, to certain sort of abstract friends and conferees of mine, you know, it would be implied it was a kind of a sell-out. But what Paul Klee said after his trip to Morocco as a young man is the thing that I've always remembered. On returning to Germany he said, 'The first thing I must do is disappoint my friends'. What is implied in that is a new sense of freedom and independence. One may be wrong, but I think that for me there is nothing more sort of enervating than trying to repeat a past experience.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: I think it's much better to be totally wrong but still feel free in yourself that you're at least doing the best you can. Now, what involved say Lake Eyre, and indeed the story of Lake Eyre, is just one of the greatest miracles that's happened in our civilisation. Lake Eyre had never completely filled in all our civilisation. It was called by Eyre, the discoverer, one of the most forbidding places that he'd ever seen in the world. This sort of endless miles of just salt lake, and the lake is immense; it's 90 miles by 40 and just nothing. A subsequent explorer and really a man who told us so much of Lake Eyre is Rosemary Madigan's father, C T Madigan, who was one of the great explorers of Central Australia.

JAMES GLEESON: Is that true? I didn't know that.

JOHN OLSEN: And, in fact, was the first man to cross the Simpson Desert.

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JAMES GLEESON: Well that's something I didn't know. That's very interesting.

JOHN OLSEN: Extraordinary. There is a very interesting book that he wrote called *Across the Dead Heart*. So I had become friends with Vincent Cerventi, and Dr Douglas Doord * of Zoology Department of Monash, and I'd done a couple of films on wildlife for the ABC television. Now, the interesting thing, and I think that, you know, when we reach out that we do find a world that we're looking for, and how varied and how different it can be once we decide it can be. The interesting thing about scientists is that they not only look at nature from the point of view of a phenomena, they look at nature as a point of view of process. It's this process quality which of course interested me enormously and why I found it very very interesting going out with them. Where, say, you could be looking at any bird or any thing, be it grass or whatever, and they'll sort of describe its process. So that related very much to what, you know, I found. Now, looking at these pictures, they're all on a kind of an aerial view.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN OLSEN: It also, I think, relates to a long standing interest in oriental art, in which a Sung master wrote that landscape is such a vast subject that it can only be seen in its proper detail from up high.

JAMES GLEESON: Did you actually ever see it from up high?

JOHN OLSEN: Oh yes, oh yes. No, no, indeed. We managed to hire the small aircraft from the local cattle station.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. So it is based on direct observation?

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, yes. I can show you sort of direct drawings that I've done from the aeroplane.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN OLSEN: I think that, say, it's at this particular point where the landscape is rutted and this spirit of animism is very easily observable. So it's in that kind of thing that Lake Eyre became a sort of vast interest to me.

JAMES GLEESON: For you it seems to have a special significance, a kind of symbolic quality, almost the way, say, the average person thinks of Ayers Rock as a symbol of the heart of Australia. Do you feel that Lake Eyre has some property or some quality that stands for a particular experience?

JOHN OLSEN: Well, I think it does, Jim, and it's very interesting how many Australian artists and writers have used the centre for the theme of their writing and painting. I think that it's because the centre still stands for the kind of metaphorical soul place. It's an arena where the unconscious can freely roam. I am talking about the collective unconscious.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes, yes.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes. I think, say, that every sort of country has its sort of places which the sort of soul and the unconscious can freely roam. Reading the

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Argentinean writer Borges for example, it's the Pampas. Looking at English painting, the best of it is the sea. I'm thinking of Turner.

JAMES GLEESON: Turner.

JOHN OLSEN: I think that, say, what the sea happened to represent to the English is an interesting factor of why for absolutely almost impossible reasons how they could ever imagine that there was an inland sea. I think that they were moved towards that sort of thing because of the sea's hold in the English mentality, right from the earliest times, yes. I do think, say, that what we have in the sort of population development in Australia in which that Australians seemed to live on the edge of the five ulcerous sores, as A D Hope calls it.

JAMES GLEESON: The cities.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and so on. On this basis it would seem that we in Australia lead a saucer like existence and that Lake Eyre is the lowest level below the sea, some sort of 40 feet. In the end what sort of comes out of it is that everybody is interested in the centre but nobody wants to live there or, you know, sliding into the middle of the saucer and the saucer is Lake Eyre. So often in these pictures I have arbitrarily chosen a shape which is saucer like at the bottom. That's a long way (inaudible). When you start pictures, you don't really think of that.

JAMES GLEESON: No. That comes afterwards.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: But John, in a way it's a little bit like the Dead Sea being in a depression, a low level, and yet you found it to be absolutely teeming with life and full of a sort of vitality.

JOHN OLSEN: Well it contains, Jimmy, this kind of contradiction that with the advent of rain it was absolutely full of life. Full of fish, there were hundreds of thousands of seagulls nesting there. How they ever sort of thought to go to Lake Eyre is a sense that we don't know. Pelicans, emus, kangaroos, incredibly beautiful flowers, everything was just having a ball.

JAMES GLEESON: Well that's it, so it wasn't dead; it was only dormant.

JOHN OLSEN: That's right.

JAMES GLEESON: Then it sprang into life and everything was right for it.

JOHN OLSEN: They had a frog there.

JAMES GLEESON: Is he the subject of these leaping frogs?

JOHN OLSEN: Yes. He's an incredible thing. They can lay dormant under the sort of thin coating of mud for up to 50 years.

JAMES GLEESON: Good lord.

JOHN OLSEN: The first rainfall they just absolutely like explode outwards.

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JAMES GLEESON: Isn't that strange?

JOHN OLSEN: Amazing, isn't it?

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Nature is endlessly fascinating.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, yes. Then what happens is a remarkable similarity between their croaking and rejoicing is to the didgeridoo.

JAMES GLEESON: Is that so?

JOHN OLSEN: Quite, quite extraordinary. [*making the sound of a didgeridoo*] like that. So I mean, you know, Lake Eyre to me represents a number of factors and the reason for the title *Edge of the void* is just to continue what Eyre really thought about it. And was Malcolm Campbell's land speed test place, where he broke the land speed test. The thing has all the layers of sort of contradiction and interest, enormously interesting. I've gone back and now it's sort of slowly returning to what it really always is, and there are millions of dead fish, and it's just returned to that same kind of situation.

JAMES GLEESON: Goodness. John, what's the Goyder Channel?

JOHN OLSEN: Well, the Goyder Channel is the channel that joins Lake Eyre South to Lake Eyre North.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, I see.

JOHN OLSEN: They are both very big lakes. The train from Adelaide to Alice Springs, The Ghan, used to go very very close to the Goyder Channel.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN OLSEN: But Goyder was a remarkable Surveyor-General of South Australia, and it was Goyder who really sort of mapped out the safe areas of the limits where you could not grow wheat beyond or sheep beyond.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes.

JOHN OLSEN: So that's the story of the Goyder Channel.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes. John, I remember this as a very big watercolour, or gouache is it?

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, yes. It's on Japanese Torinoko paper which is the same paper that the Japanese make their screens from, and that's the exact size of the Japanese screen. It's made from a mulberry pulp, which makes it very sort of porous. It doesn't really behave the same as ordinary watercolour paper, but it's a fascinating paper.

JAMES GLEESON: How do you spell it?

JOHN OLSEN: T O R I N O K O. Torinoko.

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JAMES GLEESON: Torinoko. John, what would be the best method of preserving and displaying that? Sitting it on silk and hanging it?

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, I think the best thing, what I think we'd find with this particular picture is that it's floating.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: It would be covered with an acrylic frame, a plastic sort of frame, which suits it.

JAMES GLEESON: It does, yes.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes. I also like the idea of just the thing sort of hanging like the Sung Dynasty.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN OLSEN: There's something very nice about that, isn't there?

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, I think it's marvellous, yes, yes. But Jim Mollison I know had the idea. He's in fact sending one of our conservators to China to learn the techniques of setting paper on to silk and hanging them as scrolls. Does that appeal to you as a way of

JOHN OLSEN: It can be appealing, but I think that his biggest problem will be preservation.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Well, this is it. We're conscious of it, a big sheet of paper like that does pose problems of keeping it flat in a vertical position. One of the ideas that was discussed was finding out this technique and putting it down on silk. Those things in China have lasted for many thousands of years.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes. Yes. You see, we were abominably trained as far as understanding what papers were and what inks are and, you know, it was a terrible generation in Australian art, you know, when I think of some of the Nolan's.

JAMES GLEESON: The materials they used, technical.

JOHN OLSEN: Thinking of Passmore, of course, who was a nightmare and Fairweather. I've really in the last, say, ten years begin to understand what really good paper can do and only it will do it.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: Rather than what we used to do before, just use any bit of cartridge and things like that, which of course turns yellow. I'm again thinking of some of those beautiful Molvig drawings which nothing in the world can be done.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no, no.

JOHN OLSEN: You know, it's just tragic.

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JAMES GLEESON: Tragic, yes.

JOHN OLSEN: What one learns about paper is that paper is such a—

JAMES GLEESON: The Gallery to conserve these works on paper, but it's such fine quality of paper, I don't think there's any problem about preserving them as such. But for display that is another matter when it's on such a large scale.

JOHN OLSEN: It is. It's true, Jim. I think that what I've been doing to it is really the safest thing. I certainly wouldn't have paper exposed where it has large areas of white.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no.

JOHN OLSEN: I think that you're leading to all kinds of stains and foxing and things of that sort, and I mean even thinking of some of the Sumi things, I'm just thinking of that one Paul had.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: A beautiful screen.

JAMES GLEESON: It got (inaudible).

JOHN OLSEN: It did, yes, yes. It's a big question.

JAMES GLEESON: It is a problem. Of course these works should never be on display for more than, say, six or eight weeks at a time I would say. Otherwise they get too much light.

JOHN OLSEN: The Torinoko doesn't go very yellow.

JAMES GLEESON: Doesn't it?

JOHN OLSEN: No.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh well, that's good to know.

JOHN OLSEN: They won't have great bother with it.

JAMES GLEESON: What about the watercolour or the gouache? Now will that stand—

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, it will. It will stand a lot of exposure. They wouldn't really have to worry.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh good.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes. I'm more concerned about the handling.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: Which is a khadi. I'll show you some down in the studio. It's a khadi sort of paper—very expensive.

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JAMES GLEESON: I bet.

JOHN OLSEN: When I bought this, I'm speaking of the price five years ago, it cost 15 dollars a sheet.

JAMES GLEESON: Goodness.

JOHN OLSEN: So it would probably be around the twenties now.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, it would. John, this wouldn't have been painted out there.

JOHN OLSEN: No, I'd do a number of sketches, yes. Very difficult to paint in the face of nature.

JAMES GLEESON: Of course.

JOHN OLSEN: Even talking to Freddie about that a few years ago, and it's only recently that Freddie's been able to do oils out there from nature. I don't mind working in nature, but I don't like to have that sort of didacticism of the subject directly in front, and to try and chase that around.

JAMES GLEESON: It can tighten you up too much.

JOHN OLSEN: Oh yes, yes. It sends you quickly back to art school, James. To be avoided at all costs.

JAMES GLEESON: Now that one I think we bought from, yes, the Ray Hughes exhibition in Brisbane in 1976. That was entirely devoted to these.

JOHN OLSEN: Lake Eyre, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Lake Eyre.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, exactly.

JAMES GLEESON: A beautiful exhibition too. This I think came from the same one.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, exactly.

JAMES GLEESON: *Life approaching void.*

JOHN OLSEN: Yes. Well this one deals with just the whole like, you know, suddenly that everything in the lake is fecund. What one finds is that nature is enormously generous in its, you know, sort of proliferation of life, it's much greater than it actually needs. But with the advent of rain that life came instantly to the void, Lake Eyre. So that's what this picture is nominally about, and pretty active isn't it?

JAMES GLEESON: It's full of activity. Good. The same things would apply, the same treatment.

JOHN OLSEN: Same treatment, yes, yes.

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JAMES GLEESON: Some more drawings.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, we can talk about that. This *Birds by the lake*, it's a drawing that I like very much, and it sort of gets back to my liking of Munakata.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah yes, yes.

JOHN OLSEN: I've always admired this quality that Munakata has of the relationship of positive to negative. Where, say, in *Spanish encounters* the line was just sort of straight and fairly direct, in this one the line moves at a slower, lumpier pace, with the idea of relating to the sort of negative ground more. It also deals with something that I've—even though I trained at Hayter's in etching, but I've really in the last 10 years done a lot of printmaking, and it relates very much to what one has to be thinking about if one's doing printmaking.

JAMES GLEESON: You weren't actually having a print in mind when you did this?

JOHN OLSEN: No, not at all. But I was just thinking of how in a particular technique that I happened to enjoy called sugarlift. It's one technique that Miro does very well in which again you don't know how it's going to behave because it's really a wondrous thing. But it makes you think of the quality of line and more like while Spanish encounter is direct, that this is also dealing with floating values, of wash.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: I just thought that's an interesting thing to—

JAMES GLEESON: Well, that came from the same exhibition of course.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes. Marvellous, that boy, you don't have to tell him anything.

JAMES GLEESON: That's good.

JOHN OLSEN: Looks like he's taking all the bush out.

JAMES GLEESON: Now this comes before these.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Since it's obviously related to *Five bells*.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes. Yes, well the use of this symbol is that in *Five bells* the man becomes part of the elements. What happens here is that he's joined. It's quite a nice little modest sketch in its way.

JAMES GLEESON: It is.

JOHN OLSEN: But the man is joined by the squid and the fish is sort of leaving his head, and the other elements are surrounding him, which is really the theme of the whole mural.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

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JOHN OLSEN: Being sort of part of.

JAMES GLEESON: So at least we have that sort of minor representation of that period of the works.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, yes, that's right, yes. I don't think it goes very far but it's interesting as a reference to have.

JAMES GLEESON: No, it is interesting. That one came from Barry Stern, Sydney. Have you any recollection of how it would have got there?

JOHN OLSEN: Not really, no. I forget who bought it. No, I don't really know.

JAMES GLEESON: No. Anyway, it's clearly yours.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes. Oh it is, undoubtedly, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: *Wimmera River*, gouache 1969.

JOHN OLSEN: Well, this is one that I used to go out whilst living in Victoria, out to Horsham and Jeparit and the Wimmera is a lovely place. It just really, you know, continues what I've previously said about it before. From my memory of it, this has a kind of a strawy wheatish quality about it, which of course that's what that country's about.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: It's a sad country in a way out there. It's vast spaces. It's Mallee country.

JAMES GLEESON: There's quite a number of artists, including Boyd, but your treatment is entirely different.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: That came from White Studio in South Australia.

JOHN OLSEN: Oh yes, I remember. Yes, I do remember this.

JAMES GLEESON: You had a show there?

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, in 1969. Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: So it would have been bought from that exhibition?

JOHN OLSEN: That's right. It was bought from the exhibition. Was it bought from the exhibition? I think '69, was the Gallery buying things then?

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, it probably was.

JOHN OLSEN: Was it? Yes. So it wasn't bought from somebody else?

JAMES GLEESON: Commonwealth Art Advisory Board.

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JOHN OLSEN: Ah, that would be it. That's what it would be, yes. That's right.

JAMES GLEESON: John, what made you go to the Wimmera? Was there any connection?

JOHN OLSEN: Just an interest.

JAMES GLEESON: Just an interest.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes. Well, this big picture I have here is of the Wimmera.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah yes.

JOHN OLSEN: Lake Hindmarsh, which in fact is the introduction to the Void pictures.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah ha. Yes it has something of a similar—

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, in which the centre of the Lake is half the Ying and Yang sign. You know like you've got the—

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, of course, yes.

JOHN OLSEN: Well, the product of an artist's unruly imagination.

JAMES GLEESON: We'll get onto that presently. John, now we're coming to the etchings.

JOHN OLSEN: Well, that's ruttet, yes. I did a whole folio called *Edge of the void*, which was one of my first experiences of the Lake itself and there you've got light approaching the void which is a similar thing to the gouache. Again you can see that kind of saucer like bottom that I mentioned.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN OLSEN: This is a bird called the Christ bird, because it can walk on lily pads.

JAMES GLEESON: Pads, ah yes.

JOHN OLSEN: It's a feat by no means exaggerated. It's an extraordinary bird.

JAMES GLEESON: Goodness.

JOHN OLSEN: This is of course things on the edge of the lake, the emu by the lake where we were just out on a boat and we saw these emus by the side of the lake. I've got a marvellous photograph of that which is in this National Geographic at the moment called GEO.

JAMES GLEESON: That would be interesting, yes.

JOHN OLSEN: Australia's going to have its own geographic. But the strange kind of peering and mad imbecile curiosity that emus have. You can attract them quite easy by waving handkerchiefs at them.

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JAMES GLEESON: Good lord.

JOHN OLSEN: They're so stupid. There's that etching there, Jimmy.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah yes, yes, yes.

JOHN OLSEN: Which is a factor that I've just been thinking of a lot lately, of how things can pass each other at different speeds. Like one thing is stationary, and another thing is moving, and they're both contained in their own life or, as the Orientals say, in their own isness, but they're in a different kind of sort of thing. I've just done something of a dog which goes right across this page. Just as sort of honey-eater who's moving at an entirely different speed. Just kind of sort of contradictory factor of—look, I guess when one thinks about what we've been talking about, is that nearly all of the things that I've been speaking are somehow related to action and time. The way the Chinese explain time I think is very interesting; that the art of action is timing. It's that sort of contradiction of the way things move at different speeds or different time ratios, that is an eternal fascination in oriental art. Like looking at say Muchi's persimmons, for example.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN OLSEN: Is that one of its fascinations is not only the beautiful tonal and spatial placement, but the way that he has moved persimmons from different steps of time. That, say, their time is also the reconciliation of movement which is so different to the Western sense of time. For example, we think that when we move and we arrive we get there. Like when the Spirit of Progress leaves Sydney at 9 o'clock and arrives at Spencer Street Station at 10 o'clock, we think the train has arrived. But to the Sung Dynasty that was an absolute absurd notion, because what about the space you left behind. This is, I think, one of the bafflements we have even in diplomacy with the Chinese. That our whole system of diplomacy has been based on advantage, that when the point is gained you are there. But to the Chinese that is absolutely inexcusable because what about the thing you left behind. That's why it took such a long time for us to reconcile with the sort of Communist Chinese because the space left behind by Chiang Kai-shek hadn't been properly reconciled. It's these sort of factors. The Chinese are in reality absolutely absorbed with action and time in relationship to that action. Like even in this recent Vietnamese thing, that what the Vietnamese had violated time and action by going into Cambodia. I was really so interested in reading what the headlines of the newspapers in which they thought we were on the brink of a third world war.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: To the Chinese mind, never. But there had to be a reconciliation because the Vietnamese had violated a sense of time and action.

JAMES GLEESON: Extraordinary story, isn't it?

JOHN OLSEN: So that's what that's about.

JAMES GLEESON: The frog. The leaping frog.

JOHN OLSEN: The bird's staying there. Maybe the bird's China and the frog's Vietnam. I don't know.

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JAMES GLEESON: John, that series *Edge of the void* was complete in itself, but you did other—

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, there was a second one which wasn't called the *Edge of the void* it was called *Life in the void*.

JAMES GLEESON: *Life in the void*.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, are any of these from that, or are these independent?

JOHN OLSEN: No, this one belongs to the void, *Edge of the void*, I think.

JAMES GLEESON: Does it? Ah ha.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes. Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: That's *Boat in the billabong*.

JOHN OLSEN: *Boat in the billabong*. Hold it, 1630, no it's independent.

JAMES GLEESON: It's independent.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, it is, yes that's right.

JAMES GLEESON: *Laughing frog?*

JOHN OLSEN: Oh well, oh this one of my great things. I mean the thing's no good but I've always loved the Haiku poet Basho, and one of the great things of Haiku poetry is by Basho which says, '*Old pond, frog jumps in, the sound of water*'. Now, to a Western mind that really means nothing at all. But if one thinks about what I said before, the suspension of time, the expectancy of like first of all that it's such a concise form of poetry that you've got say old pond to the oriental mind it sort of goes laterally this way in which one imagines the stillness and the rocks around the pond, and that sort of suspended moment when the frog decides to jump.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: When he hits the water the active element and then the rings that go around the old pond. That really turns the Japanese on. They just absolutely go bananas about that, about that one. If one thinks about those sort of things, it is indeed a remarkable poem. Of course this is what is related to the Zen experience of enlightenment; that the frog is us and this mad kamikaze frog is just about to hit the water, is just about to have enlightenment. That's the idea. I've done a number on Basho's pond and it is an incredible theme and the more I've gone into it, the more that I've really learnt from it. It's only 16 syllables. It's interesting I think in this one, that the way the frog is really sort of jumping down, and the very thing that he likes to eat is the dragon fly, he's quite oblivious to because there's another force there.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes. Marvellous. John, you've mentioned today, and I've been aware of it, constantly a stream of writers who have had some sort of

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influence or effect on you, stimulated your imagination, worked on you in some way. This seems to be again relating back to that Celtic quality. Would you say that that's been a very strong element in your creative process, the literary influences or inspirations, points of departure?

JOHN OLSEN: Well, it just naturally came to me. I do enjoy words and I do enjoy poetry. In fact, it has taken me away from the possessiveness of the physical image per se, and allowed the imagination to quickly get into hopefully a sort of poetical state, which I view as being very important. It naturally suits me.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, I think it's significant that when you're asked to do the big mural for the Opera House and you were given free choice of the subject, you chose a poem as the basis for it.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes. This might seem like in the first place an extraordinary thing in Australian art, but I think if one examines it very closely, it isn't.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

JOHN OLSEN: That when Nolan first of all did the first Kelly series, that when he went to the Kelly country he did no paintings at all, he just wrote.

JAMES GLEESON: Wrote.

JOHN OLSEN: I know this in your own case, Jim, the way it sort of stimulated you, eternally, and I think that, you know, in the latter day Whiteley is just like the maddest Celt we've got.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: Which in a way like an enormously possessive poetic imagination, stimulated entirely by situations which are poetical situations. Arthur is not a great reader, but what Arthur has read—

JAMES GLEESON: Sticks.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, and you know the metamorphosis has played an enormous part and the bible of course to Arthur. I think that it's what our psychic naturally falls to, which I think has been an extraordinarily rich thing for Australian art. Now it's interesting that, say, someone like Fred Williams that he would be one of the few people who is not stimulated by any of those factors.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, that's true.

JOHN OLSEN: Even Passmore, you know, was interested in literature, you know, limited reading but notwithstanding what he read really sort of stuck with him.

JAMES GLEESON: No, I hadn't thought of it quite like that. But you are quite right. The other main—I call it that—pressure behind you as an artist seems to be your interest in oriental philosophy and religion.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes.

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JAMES GLEESON: And art, of course.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes. Well, I think that oriental art in the long run, it's for like very experienced and a real connoisseur's taste. I think that they were the greatest landscape painters, and most definitely the greatest painter of natural things. Like one can find sort of correlation's in Giotto and in Fra Angelico as well and one finds like a breaking from this kind of phenomenon. But notwithstanding I think that the Orientals did in fact come to terms with, you know, sort of natural things in a much better way than we have. Again it relates to their ideas that, you know, enlightenment or the understanding of the essential nature of things is not to be found in grand occasions but in small occasions. I think that, say, Buddhism is full of those kind of insights; that one doesn't look for to sort of baroque experience. I mean, when one thinks of those sort of shuddering saints and crucifixions of Rubens for example, that is unthinkable to the Chinese.

JAMES GLEESON: To the Chinese.

JOHN OLSEN: It is in a way rather vulgar, splendid but vulgar.

JAMES GLEESON: John, your approach seems to me to be quite different. Both you and Fairweather shared this immense interest in oriental art. But it seems to me that your approach has been a much more philosophical one than Fairweather's, which seem to have been arrived at through a study of the calligraphy.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: And the relationship between their writing and their painting.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Not that I think that you too have got—

JOHN OLSEN: No.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

JOHN OLSEN: There was a period. I think that Spanish encounter was definitely influenced by Chinese grass calligraphy—like using that sort of thing. I've moved a lot in the last, you know, 10 years, or since the Opera House particularly, not 10 years away from that.

JAMES GLEESON: Is it that long, good heavens.

JOHN OLSEN: No, it isn't that long, but it's a good six years.

JAMES GLEESON: Six years.

JOHN OLSEN: I've moved away from that and insofar as I'm much more interested in the Sung thing which is a moment of grace, which is the tiniest sliver of a moment that one can imagine. So looking at that drawing there, Jim, that it's an enlarging of what is nominally happening of a moment which is great and graceful.

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JAMES GLEESON: So it is a philosophical thing?

JOHN OLSEN: Very sensitive, yes, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: It's not so much just of their picture graphs.

JOHN OLSEN: No. No, it's not a phenomenology at all. But the attempt is—and I think that it's a point that, you know, one sees in a lot of say Australian contemporary art at the moment, those who are interested in it—that the landscape no longer is strange or exotic to them. I'm thinking of Juniper as well.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN OLSEN: That they can accept it as readily, in fact more readily, than they can a European landscape. I really think that perhaps the next step that one was able to take was that within that is the possibility of grace because there's no anxiety, you know, it's just a sliver of just that.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Well, John, let's finish the details. *Fish trap*

JOHN OLSEN: Well, that's a Chinese aphorism; which is a fish in a trap knows what it wants, which is just freedom thank you very much. I like this one. Actually it's just a straight hardpoint.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: But it has a kind of thing of what etching is really about.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, direct and immediate.

JOHN OLSEN: That's right. I've disliked very much certain aspects of the Melbourne school, which I think are brilliant technically but they torture the medium.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Weaning it out to get every last—

JOHN OLSEN: That's right, every last juice out of it. I've really come to the conclusion that, you know, I like some of those dry points of Matisse's better. That the fusion of image and somehow the understanding of what it is, or even Miro, you know, a simple kind of line seem to me to be more telling than the other kind of torturing the medium.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: Also I feel if I was to do this any other way that it would be belying what the aphorism is.

JAMES GLEESON: Exactly. You've used an aphoristic style to explain an aphorism.

JOHN OLSEN: That's right. I hope so.

JAMES GLEESON: Well now here we come to some difficult ones for which I haven't got photographs. *Aquarium*. Can you remember anything about it?

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JOHN OLSEN: Yes, I remember that. It's very nice. There are two lithographs which I enjoy enormously. One which is called *Summer in Queensland*, which was done last year, which I'll show you later Jim, just as an interest, and this one. It's one of the best ones technically that I did. It's really got a lot of juice in it.

JAMES GLEESON: Good.

JOHN OLSEN: It's a very very nice one and I couldn't say very much more than that really. Cheap enough.

JAMES GLEESON: What about the Albert Tucker portrait?

JOHN OLSEN: Yes. Oh well, I've known Bert for a long time and, you know, the idea of it is there's a kind of a black sort of smoke around the figure, and it's a personality on fire. Bert's never caught on to that.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN OLSEN: But it's a simple direct touché work, you know, and it's one that I

JAMES GLEESON: What were the circumstances of doing it?

JOHN OLSEN: Well, Albert used to come down to Crossley and at that time he was doing a print there. I'd known him for a long time, and he's got a very good mind in a way, a tortured sort of mind, but a very acute mind, Bert.

JAMES GLEESON: Did you draw it straight on to a plate?

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, directly onto the plate whilst he was just standing there.

JAMES GLEESON: Standing, I see.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: What about the other one *Aquarium*. That would be from a drawing?

JOHN OLSEN: That would be from a drawing. We had an aquarium bowl.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. But that's interesting that the one of Bert was drawn straight on to the stone when he was standing there.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Good. *Tree frog*.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, that's another lithograph. It's one I like. A tree frog is only tiny. It's only about, you know, two inches at the most. But I somehow think that when you enlarge these things they really have a different kind of presence about them.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

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JOHN OLSEN: I've always been amazed by these frogs being popular and I somehow think that they look like Double Bay ladies—that's why they're so popular—hanging precariously on to a bough.

JAMES GLEESON: John, we've got one here that came from that same Ray Hughes show in Brisbane in '76, *River in flood No 2* ink, watercolour, gouache, white paper.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: I haven't got a photograph of it.

JOHN OLSEN: It's Coopers Creek going into Lake Eyre.

JAMES GLEESON: Is it? Ah, well I'll make a little note of that. Or perhaps you could jot it down.

JOHN OLSEN: Where do you want it, Jim?

JAMES GLEESON: Anywhere down at the bottom. Coopers Creek.

JOHN OLSEN: Flooding into Lake Eyre.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, good. Well that gives us a proper title for it. Good.

JOHN OLSEN: Gosh, you save a lot of trouble here, don't you? You know, it just means that the thing is going to be a kind of a document that you'd never never get.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, this is the whole aim, to try and get authenticity and detail.

JOHN OLSEN: That's right. It's like Joe Brown changing that picture of Passmore's *Young Australian's at play*. I mean, God's sake. You've got to be as mad as he is to do that.

JAMES GLEESON: *Fishing trap*. Does that ring a bell? The same one, we've got it down as an etching.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, that's it. That's it.

JAMES GLEESON: Do we own the drawing?

JOHN OLSEN: No, you don't. That's it.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, they've duplicated that card. This one of course doesn't mean anything—*January 14th 1960*.

JOHN OLSEN: Well, I'd never call a thing that.

JAMES GLEESON: But it came from that Ray Hughes show.

JOHN OLSEN: Nothing to be said. I mean it's just impossible.

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JAMES GLEESON: Yes. No.

JOHN OLSEN: There's not a clue in it, is there?

JAMES GLEESON: Well, we can easily do it by process of elimination.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Because we've identified all the other ones.

JOHN OLSEN: If I could just see a small photograph.

JAMES GLEESON: A photograph. Trouble is, so many of these are probably lent to Prime Minister's Lodges or things of that sort. This is part of the function of the Gallery at the moment.

JOHN OLSEN: Oh, is it? They're into that in a big way.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: We have a lot of problem with them in Sydney. I mean, you know, as far as some of them are concerned they ought to have bailed up.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

JOHN OLSEN: Truly. Talk about egos.

JAMES GLEESON: John, tell me about the pottery you did.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: How did that come about?

JOHN OLSEN: Well, it was when I lived in Dunmoochin and there were a lot of potteries there and there was a young man, Robert Mayor, who lived there. He was trained by Les Blakebrough. He was doing a lot of things in the oriental manner.

JAMES GLEESON: We've got down as 1971.

JOHN OLSEN: That would be right, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Right.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, it would be right. Yes, '71 would be right.

JAMES GLEESON: We have four of those.

JOHN OLSEN: It was like a kind of free flowing thing.

JAMES GLEESON: Did you do the pots yourself?

JOHN OLSEN: No, no.

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JAMES GLEESON: You painted them?

JOHN OLSEN: I participated in the kind of pots that I'd like to do. I don't have one myself but I did some marvellous tea service.

JAMES GLEESON: Did you?

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, the teapot and cups and things. I did one lot which was a complete dinner set for a man called Terry Whelan, over a hundred pieces.

JAMES GLEESON: Goodness.

JOHN OLSEN: You know, but it was just really—

JAMES GLEESON: So it was quite a prolific period?

JOHN OLSEN: Oh yes, there are a number of them, and I did a lot. Like Barry Jones has a number, you know, the MP.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes, yes.

JOHN OLSEN: He's a nice chap, Barry.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, I've met him. Well, we got these from the Australia Gallery, collection of Tom Sanders. Ex collection, I suppose.

JOHN OLSEN: Tom Sanders never had it.

JAMES GLEESON: Didn't he?

JOHN OLSEN: He might have bought it but not from me.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah ha.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: So you don't know how they came into Sanders collection?

JOHN OLSEN: No idea, no. He would have bought them from the Australian Galleries.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, ah ha.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, that's right.

JAMES GLEESON: Good.

JOHN OLSEN: What was the price of it, do you know?

JAMES GLEESON: They varied.

JOHN OLSEN: Two fifty?

JAMES GLEESON: Two fifty, 450, 270 and 65.

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JOHN OLSEN: Which would be that.

JAMES GLEESON: Pot, is it? Twenty four inches tall, vase, jug. Could be that one.

JOHN OLSEN: It's that one.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, well that's quite a good price for that actually. That's good.

JAMES GLEESON: There's another jug, but I don't think we've got a photograph.

JOHN OLSEN: No. Yes, well that's interesting. I'm pleased about those.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, John, that's our holdings at the moment.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: We'll develop it in the future.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: But now could we go back and tell me something biographical? You know, where you were born, when, where you studied, training, anything of that sort that would be useful to us.

JOHN OLSEN: Well, I was born in Newcastle just on the edge of the Depression years, and they really were awful years.

JAMES GLEESON: What '29?

JOHN OLSEN: Twenty eight.

JAMES GLEESON: Twenty eight. Any background of interest in art?

JOHN OLSEN: No, not at all. In fact, there was no interest at all in art.

JAMES GLEESON: Was Newcastle as bad then for studying artists?

JOHN OLSEN: Oh well, there was nothing. But I came to Sydney when I was seven, so the impact of that wasn't—I was always interested in drawing. But like there weren't any real pictures in the house at all. So my early beginnings after being at school were, I mean, I just didn't really know what pictures were. It was in cartooning—it was pretty well the same as the way Charles Blackman started. So I did things like that until I was about 17 and then I decided I'd like to draw properly. I went to Rubbo's school in Pitt Street.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah ha.

JOHN OLSEN: Well, Francis Ellis was there.

JAMES GLEESON: Any other students at that time?

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JOHN OLSEN: Ah yes. There was Earle Backen.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh yes, yes.

JOHN OLSEN: Earle Backen. Nobody else that we know, and then I went to Ashton's.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: There was a number of students there. There was Peter Upwood and Bill Rose were there.

JAMES GLEESON: What year would that be?

JOHN OLSEN: You'd be looking at, say, 1949.

JAMES GLEESON: Forty nine. Just after the war.

JOHN OLSEN: Just after the war. Then Passmore came there.

JAMES GLEESON: He'd been there before, hadn't he?

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, Passmore had been there in the thirties, early thirties.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN OLSEN: Passmore was away in England for about 17 years.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: But Passmore was a very sort of germinal and very strong influence on all of us. In fact, he demanded absolute obedience which, not knowing anything, we were pleased to give. The troubles arised later. Then I did some classes with Orban and one or two with Balson.

JAMES GLEESON: So you had a sort of Catholic background.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes. Which these days I think the kids are a bit disadvantaged because it seems to me they have to have that higher school education, which I think is ridiculous, for most.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN OLSEN: If they're going to be teachers it's not, and then the diploma thing becomes an important thing. Well, I think we were much more gypsy-like in the old times, and it just somehow suited the flavour very well.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, you were able to move around and pick up what you wanted from wherever you could find it.

JOHN OLSEN: We did read enormously. I mean there was no doubt. I'm sure that our group would be one of the few sort of people in the world that have ever read *Das Capital* from the front pages to the last. That's one way of punishing yourself. You know, I look on it as being a very good training. It perhaps wouldn't

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be adequate enough now. But looking on all those years, for all the limitations of that sort of education, you learnt how to paint and draw. These days I don't think they learn how to paint and draw.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no.

JOHN OLSEN: They're very conceptual but they're not really very good at that. So, you know, I was there and then I sort of left and went on my own and had a studio with Peter Upward in Woolloomooloo for a while and then I had a shed exhibition at Macquarie Galleries in about 1954.

JAMES GLEESON: Was this before you went to Europe for the first time?

JOHN OLSEN: Yes before, yes. Then there was the influence on abstract things and my interest in like Soulages and Hartung and Motherwell, de Kooning—and it's funny to look back on these things—was that I was interested in the animistic quality of it.

JAMES GLEESON: When did you first encounter those works?

JOHN OLSEN: Oh, about '55.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN OLSEN: As late as that. Of course Bob Klippel and I were very close friends in those times and of course Bob was much more advanced in that sort of thinking.

JAMES GLEESON: Well he'd been in Europe and had seen a little.

JOHN OLSEN: That's right, yes. It was a new thing to me but not to Bob.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: But I could never really conceive anything in the nature of total abstraction, ever.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: It was just beyond my—

JAMES GLEESON: Foreign to your nature.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, my idealistic form nature.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: It never really meant anything to me and I had a big crisis with it after I left even though I think at a certain time at Direction One had an influence in Sydney. But I had a very big crisis with it after I left Australia because I could see that the world was broader, and that this sort of didactic thing of abstract forms wasn't really the thing that was for me. ...

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Now, Direction One was '56.

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JOHN OLSEN: Fifty six, December '56. Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: When did you go to Europe?

JOHN OLSEN: Well, I left December, directly after the show.

JAMES GLEESON: Immediately after the show?

JOHN OLSEN: About a week after.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah ha.

JOHN OLSEN: Then I lived in Spain for a while.

JAMES GLEESON: That's when I met you there.

JOHN OLSEN: And worked in Paris. That's right, you came to the house.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN OLSEN: Which I learnt a lot. I learnt a lot about sort of cultural drift, which I didn't really understand at all. I think it's a very important factor because that means that right from that point onwards you're not a victim of only contemporary circumstance, that you can sort of look at the past with a beginning of intelligence. So that was important. Then of course I came back to Australia in 1960, and I was doing rather Spanish things whilst I was in Spain, still quite young.

JAMES GLEESON: I suppose the key work there would be *Spanish encounter*, would it?

JOHN OLSEN: Well, it was in and out at the same time. It was both Spanish and —but then I'd never done such sort of calligraphic work in Spain. It was very strange, isn't it? From then on it was like the *You beaut country* came in which was my own involvement with a new kind of contradictory beauty that is latent in Australia.

JAMES GLEESON: Where did the Harbour ones come? Now, were they before the *You beaut* series?

JOHN OLSEN: The harbour ones happened when we went to live in Watsons Bay, about 1963 I think that happened.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes. Harbour's been a great thing for me.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, they were a great potent series.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes. I liked it.

JAMES GLEESON: In a way it culminated in *Five bells*.

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JOHN OLSEN: Yes, well I think that that was one of the great opportunities that I had, was to have the opportunity of such an incredible culmination. I mean, I don't think that any singular masterwork could have had such a total summation as that.

JAMES GLEESON: No. No, it all came together, everything over a period of what, how many years? Five, six?

JOHN OLSEN: Well, five years and one couldn't really—no it's more, it's 10 years.

JAMES GLEESON: Was it really? Since you first began the Harbour.

JOHN OLSEN: Sixty three and then the Opera House is about 1973. Something like that.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: But it came at just at the right point and I was really ready for it too, which was another good happening.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN OLSEN: You know, I think that it's very important in one's life or any artist's life to get the right job at the right time, because if you don't get the right job at the right time very often that opportunity can be missed.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Oh, I think that's absolutely important.

JOHN OLSEN: Absolutely. I mean in Tolstoy's case there was no fear of doing the epic because he only needed pieces of paper. But in a painter's case he needs that kind of space and something that can really fill his imagination. So, you know, in a painter's time I think that's very important to get that opportunities. Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, that was very lucky, it worked out perfectly. It did allow you to make that final definitive statement of all that you've been thinking about for those years.

JOHN OLSEN: It was the end of it you know, Jimmy. After that I felt that I had nothing more to say.

JAMES GLEESON: No. Well you left the harbour then and you moved to the void.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, that's right, moved to the bottom of the saucer.

JAMES GLEESON: All right, well thanks John. I think that's been very very informative and gives all the information that we want, and I can come back to you at some future time if other things come in.

JOHN OLSEN: Yes, you mean that I can now get on and cook a Quiche Lorraine, Jimmy, do you?

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JAMES GLEESON: Thank you very much John.

JOHN OLSEN: Okay.