

JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: PAUL PARTOS

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JAMES GLEESON: Paul, first of all, where were you born? Here in Melbourne?

PAUL PARTOS: No, I was born in Czechoslovakia.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, were you?

PAUL PARTOS: In 1943, January 1943.

JAMES GLEESON: January, what date?

PAUL PARTOS: First. No, wait on. January 3rd, I think, 3rd, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Nineteen forty three.

PAUL PARTOS: Forty three, in Czechoslovakia.

JAMES GLEESON: Whereabouts in Czechoslovakia?

PAUL PARTOS: A place called Bratislava.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah yes.

PAUL PARTOS: Which I think is just on the border of Austria and Czechoslovakia.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. When did you come to Australia?

PAUL PARTOS: We arrived in Australia in 1950.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, you were about seven?

PAUL PARTOS: That's right, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: You did most of your schooling here?

PAUL PARTOS: Yes. We arrived in Perth in 1950 and I spent six months with my twin brother at a boarding school in Perth. We spent six months in Perth, then we came to Melbourne and we stayed in Melbourne ever since, 1950, '51.

JAMES GLEESON: Your art training was in Melbourne?

PAUL PARTOS: Yes, it was, at RMIT, which is the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology from 1959 to '62. Four years.

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JAMES GLEESON: What made you feel that you wanted to be an artist? Was it always there? Any background in your family of interest in the arts?

PAUL PARTOS: My mother used to paint a bit. She helped my father in his business, and the business in Czechoslovakia was in the rag trade and she used to paint silk handkerchiefs.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

PAUL PARTOS: But, I mean, that's the only connection. She used to like to draw and paint.

JAMES GLEESON: But the family encouraged you to take up art, did they?

PAUL PARTOS: Well, they didn't discourage me and if they knew that I was interested in it, well, then they'd help, they'd try to help as much as possible. But my father didn't really want me to do a diploma in painting. He wanted me to do advertising or something.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

PAUL PARTOS: So originally I started at RMIT doing the first year in advertising. I was quite prepared to do that just to get into the place, because otherwise he wouldn't let me do it.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

PAUL PARTOS: I had a studentship at that time, because again they wanted me to do teaching.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

PAUL PARTOS: Finish off teaching.

JAMES GLEESON: Who were your contemporaries at RMIT, fellow students?

PAUL PARTOS: Guy Stuart, Bob Jacks, George Baldessin, John Buckley. Who else?

JAMES GLEESON: A pretty lively group apparently.

PAUL PARTOS: I beg your pardon?

JAMES GLEESON: A pretty lively group.

PAUL PARTOS: Yes, yes. It was a good. Oh, Gary Sampson as well. Ron Upton. I can't think. There's a few more but I can't think of them at the moment.

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JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Any teachers stand out in your mind as being particularly helpful.

PAUL PARTOS: No. I found the teaching was quite mediocre.

JAMES GLEESON: Was it?

PAUL PARTOS: It was a very structured course and so we had to conform. We had to do what was set for us.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes.

PAUL PARTOS: Like figure painting and head painting. I remember the last exam, the Diploma exam. We were given a little sheet with the assignment and it was three figures and a landscape.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, I see.

PAUL PARTOS: You know, we were given three hours to do it.

JAMES GLEESON: Very formal.

PAUL PARTOS: Yes, with the easel set up. I did three figures but it was semi abstract and I failed because they found two figures and three legs but they couldn't find the third figure, so on that basis they failed me.

JAMES GLEESON: Good lord. I can see why you felt it was pretty boring.

PAUL PARTOS: Well, it was, but at the same time it was quite interesting because I spent most of my time going home, after going to college there, and working on my own work. That was quite refreshing because, I mean, working at the college there, having to do those exercises, was such that it sort of built up this kind of enthusiasm for wanting to explore things at home which you couldn't do.

JAMES GLEESON: Pursue your own work.

PAUL PARTOS: Yes. So that was rewarding.

JAMES GLEESON: What interested you at that time?

PAUL PARTOS: Oh, I think painters like Dubuffet, Picasso, Gorky, de Kooning, Miro.

JAMES GLEESON: Was this *Figure in a striped dress* from your first exhibition?

PAUL PARTOS: Yes.

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JAMES GLEESON: Now, that was at Gallery A in Melbourne, and was it in '65?

PAUL PARTOS: Sixty five, yes. I finished teaching in '62 and I spent two years just doing my own work. After '65 when I went overseas—late '65, which was I think October November '65 after my shows in Melbourne and Sydney—I didn't do any more of this work so any of that earlier work exists between the period '64, '65, '63.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

PAUL PARTOS: Anything that's signed '66 is a fraud or, I mean, it wasn't done by me because I didn't do any of that work after '65.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

PAUL PARTOS: So most of this work was done '64, '65.

JAMES GLEESON: Quite clearly I think you can see some connection here with Dubuffet and perhaps de Kooning, with this sort of Abstract Expressionist feeling that comes through in it, and that was an area you were exploring at that time.

PAUL PARTOS: Yes. De Kooning and Dubuffet and Picasso, there's a kind of marriage of mixed styles there.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

PAUL PARTOS: Particularly I suppose in these configurations I think I really must have looked closely at perhaps Picasso's 1940's, 1939 paintings and the early drawings for *Guernica*.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

PAUL PARTOS: I think more Picasso than anyone else.

JAMES GLEESON: Really?

PAUL PARTOS: But at the same time a strong influence of Dubuffet with this.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, there's a certain (inaudible) quality.

PAUL PARTOS: Yes, that's right, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Very forceful and direct. It was part, I believe, of a whole series of sort of related subjects.

PAUL PARTOS: Well actually it wasn't a series, it was just a certain period that I was involved with these sort of configurations and they lasted from '63, '64, '65 and that was it. But it wasn't planned as a series or anything like that.

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JAMES GLEESON: Just the way you felt at that time.

PAUL PARTOS: That's right, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Then you went abroad and when you came back your work was changed completely.

PAUL PARTOS: Well, yes, the work had changed completely. After I finished my show in Sydney and Melbourne I felt somewhat frustrated.

JAMES GLEESON: Which was first, the Sydney one first?

PAUL PARTOS: Melbourne one first.

JAMES GLEESON: Melbourne first and then Gallery A.

PAUL PARTOS: Then Gallery A in Sydney. After the exhibition, those two exhibitions, or even prior before that, I began to feel rather a little bit apprehensive about the work. It was slightly becoming, for me anyway, repetitive and perhaps a little bit too familiar, like the excitement had gone from it and I wanted to explore new areas and new viewpoints.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

PAUL PARTOS: My trip overseas was essentially a kind of method or a way of clearing all the debris as a result of those four years. I went to London and stayed in Muswell Hill, worked in London for eight months, and met Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden there. I knew Ian in Melbourne. We were in the same building in St Kilda in the sixties, early sixties. Unfortunately, they were the only two artists that I got to know in the eight months I was there. So at the same time it was quite rewarding because they introduced me, in some way anyway, to the new ideas that were circulating in London and Europe at that time. I came under the influence of the American school which was so refreshing and so clear and pragmatic, so to speak.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. So the next one in that sequence in our collection is *Reciprocal*.

PAUL PARTOS: That's right, yes. That's upside-down.

JAMES GLEESON: That's the way, is it?

PAUL PARTOS: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, I'll just mark that. I'm sure it's probably marked in the original on the back. So it goes that way. Was that painted here or in London?

PAUL PARTOS: No, no. That was painted here.

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JAMES GLEESON: After you came back?

PAUL PARTOS: After I came back, yes. I came back in sixty, late '66 and began work here and that was painted in '67, the following year, '67.

JAMES GLEESON: It was in The Field Collection, was it?

PAUL PARTOS: No, this particular painting didn't go in The Field. No.

JAMES GLEESON: So we're incorrect about that.

PAUL PARTOS: That's right. I don't know why they put The Field Collection.

JAMES GLEESON: Because it wasn't in it.

PAUL PARTOS: It wasn't in The Field Collection. It was exhibited at Gallery A in Melbourne, in one of their group shows.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. So I think it means that we bought it from Gallery A.

PAUL PARTOS: You bought it from Gallery A.

JAMES GLEESON: But we're under the impression that it was shown in The Field Collection.

PAUL PARTOS: No, it wasn't.

JAMES GLEESON: That wasn't correct.

PAUL PARTOS: No, no. That painting, I think, probably stands as one of the best ones I did using the separate forms. Rather than dealing with a unified area, breaking it up and moving furniture around within it, I proposed in this one to keep separate entities separate, so that they did exist as a kind of identity self-contained form and at the same time holding it together by the aluminium segments there. It has a kind of sculptural feel to it.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes. At least relief.

PAUL PARTOS: Relief, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: These triangular pieces are aluminium.

PAUL PARTOS: No, no. The only thing that's aluminium is the two angle iron, aluminium iron pieces here and here, which bolt on to the back of these canvases.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

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PAUL PARTOS: And keep them at that distance. But everything else here is canvas.

JAMES GLEESON: And it's duco.

PAUL PARTOS: Duco.

JAMES GLEESON: Sprayed with auto duco.

PAUL PARTOS: Yes, that's right.

JAMES GLEESON: On shaped canvas, not aluminium.

PAUL PARTOS: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Good. You don't foresee any problems in the future for conservation?

PAUL PARTOS: No.

JAMES GLEESON: They're pretty durable materials?

PAUL PARTOS: The surfaces may be a little bit fragile. One needs to be careful that you don't tear into them because of the uniformity of the surface.

JAMES GLEESON: The immaculate quality is very central to it.

PAUL PARTOS: That's right. That's right. I'm not sure. Well, they have this slight gradation here which works, it doesn't give them a flatness.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

PAUL PARTOS: But there's no problem unless it's scratched, but that goes with any work I suppose.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, that's really two separate aspects of your work and we move with *Yellow screen with yellow* into yet another dimension, another style.

PAUL PARTOS: Another style. Another year, another style.

JAMES GLEESON: This is '68, so you changed pretty quickly between '67, '68.

PAUL PARTOS: Well, actually the change there from that to those isn't as pronounced. Obviously the material changes but I think the idea here becomes essentially the same, the simplicity of form. There's the same essential problem to deal with; how to keep that integrity of the surface working at the same time as opening up an area. I think in this one here I was dealing with a kind of non-

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illusionistic space there, where the space was real, the eye could penetrate through it.

JAMES GLEESON: Right, yes.

PAUL PARTOS: Whereas here you're dealing with a kind of ambiguity of negative and positive. So there was not much of a change occurring there.

JAMES GLEESON: No, I can see the connection now that you point it out.

PAUL PARTOS: In fact, if that flows down, as it sometimes does, you do get the same sort of openness. This tends to be perhaps a little bit more lyrical in these works, whereas these tend to be more structural, these tend to be much more lyrical.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, the implication of the enclosed space is lighter here.

PAUL PARTOS: That's right, that's right.

JAMES GLEESON: One should get this torn screen that does introduce, well, a strangely personal note.

PAUL PARTOS: Right, right.

JAMES GLEESON: This is completely immaculate and here you have a feeling that nature or something has interfered with the perfection.

PAUL PARTOS: That's right.

JAMES GLEESON: So that you have this intrusion from outside.

PAUL PARTOS: Yes. Well, I think that was a period of reassessing my values and my objectives. Whereas these became almost, as I think of them now, a kind of introduction, a way of perhaps going through that American sort of idiom in order to resolve, I suppose, the problem of the context here in Melbourne. I mean, what do we do? Do we ignore it and try and assimilate it or do we just simply just go ahead and do our thing. Well I, like a lot of others, wanted to go through it, to feel the excitement of it. Then slowly there's this gradual sort of going back into that sort of subjectivity which is so prevalent in the early work.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

PAUL PARTOS: And which is now the most dominant feature in my work.

JAMES GLEESON: In your painting, yes.

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PAUL PARTOS: But still there is that balance of what I went through. There is order, there is a sense of balance between. Whereas in the very early work, one has total sort of gutsiness and unresolved (inaudible).

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes. An expressive quality, it's almost uncontrolled.

PAUL PARTOS: Yes right. There was a youthfulness there whereas of course as you get older—

JAMES GLEESON: Well, painting within a painting of course it carries that through to its absolute logical conclusion, doesn't it? Where you have complete order and yet at the same time this expressive freedom of quality.

PAUL PARTOS: Yes. Yes, it has that looseness and yet that tightness about it.

JAMES GLEESON: The bringing of those two together sets up a tension, doesn't it?

PAUL PARTOS: Yes it does.

JAMES GLEESON: You're aware of two different and normally opposing qualities.

PAUL PARTOS: Well, that's the difficult thing about this work. I mean, using that Letraset and that kind of demarcation of lines and suggestion of alphabets and numbers and what not.

JAMES GLEESON: A set of diagrammatic implications?

PAUL PARTOS: Well it is, but it's also kind of restructuring, a structuring, a way of enticing the viewer to read the work in a certain way. Almost like language, one reads it from left to right and one has to sort of view works—

JAMES GLEESON: Go from one to two.

PAUL PARTOS: One to two, or read it from left to right. But perhaps everyone does that anyway in some way. A kind of structuring there which perhaps becomes an additional aspect in the work. Whether it's necessary now, I don't know. Perhaps it need not have been there. But I found it visually just more interesting.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

PAUL PARTOS: That was getting back to a kind of visual logic which is probably logic anyway, or illogical or irrational but doesn't entail the kind of rationality that's simply cerebral, you know.

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JAMES GLEESON: I saw a number of works of yours related to this central problem at Pinacotheca at that time, and elsewhere. They were oil, but you mentioned mixed media. That's the Letraset.

PAUL PARTOS: Well, the mixed media is the Letraset and the elastic.

JAMES GLEESON: The rest is oil?

PAUL PARTOS: Yes. It's oil, so there's no problems there.

JAMES GLEESON: On canvas?

PAUL PARTOS: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: There's no problem of conservation. Good. Since then, just looking around, your painting has gone in another direction again.

PAUL PARTOS: My last show actually entailed—I've got photographs of them here. My problem essentially was twofold in these paintings, or well it wasn't a problem it was just an interest.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

PAUL PARTOS: One was delineation of form and I did a number of these when I went to New York in '60. Well, diagrammatic sort of works when I went back to New York 1970, '72. They really have to do with positive-negative aspects in works; duality between one and the other. I didn't do much painting there but I did a number of works which were sort of books where I cut out the contents.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh yes, yes.

PAUL PARTOS: Took the contents out and by camouflaging the contents and camouflaging and emptying out that content there which is kind of physical, and still leaving the heading, it created an interesting almost separation between the object and the content. Well, that sort of interest pursued me, I think—well, I pursued it rather—when I came back here to Melbourne. This again has got to do with the outside of it, working on the periphery of an area. I mean, you still activate that.

JAMES GLEESON: You still activate—

PAUL PARTOS: The centre part becomes the focal point. The paint actually in this sense becomes almost like you can feel—I don't know whether it's relevant in the way this is read, because I don't think it applies to it because of the oil paint, but one gets a feeling that something's been taken out of that sense.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

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PAUL PARTOS: And what is left is the kind of structure, visible structure, but not the content of it.

JAMES GLEESON: This is what you were doing with the books?

PAUL PARTOS: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: You were taking the content out and leaving—

PAUL PARTOS: Literally taking it out. In this case I'm not really taking it out, but I'm—

JAMES GLEESON: Implying.

PAUL PARTOS: Implying, that's right.

JAMES GLEESON: That this is the (inaudible).

PAUL PARTOS: That's right.

JAMES GLEESON: And leaving the form empty.

PAUL PARTOS: That's right.

JAMES GLEESON: But still the focal point.

PAUL PARTOS: That's right. Well, that was the concern with those paintings. Now moving back into the centre without that negative aspect creeping in and dealing solely with that object now, which is removing the lines, removing the alphabet and becoming essentially back into a kind of subjective—

JAMES GLEESON: So the periphery has come to the centre now?

PAUL PARTOS: Yes. It's not really a formal problem that concerns me now, it's just the problem of dealing with that area now. It's essentially an intuitive response to it now. I mean, I wanted to move away from the centre but it still comes back to my early concerns which went way back here; was how not to play around with elements like furniture.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

PAUL PARTOS: Because once you make a decision to put something here or there, you've got to balance it by something else. By having that form there and it localised there it saves me the hassle of having to make decisions about making aesthetic judgements in terms of furniture and what not. The problem is how to make that work and I've got no recipe for it. So oddly enough I can make it work some days. I've been working on a painting recently now for two weeks and I've spent almost one hundred and fifty dollars of paint on it and it's only a small area.

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I've worked on it and somehow it just doesn't work so I have to take it all off and start again and I've done that twice now. So I know what I'm searching for but, oddly enough, I can't equate it in terms of an image that I know it has to sort of come about. If it comes about and I feel right with it well then it stays. If not, it comes off.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

PAUL PARTOS: So, oddly enough, all those sort of diagrammatic, logical, rational, equations mean very little now in terms of the painting I'm doing.

JAMES GLEESON: No, well, just glancing at them it's apparent. One that isn't in our collection—I don't know how we have the photograph of it—is called *Unspecified length* but it is clearly an important work in your catalogue of works.

PAUL PARTOS: Yes, well that actually helps to understand the progression, or the change perhaps rather than the progression.

JAMES GLEESON: What, between untitled painting within a painting towards the new?

PAUL PARTOS: Well, yes, towards the new, because it has that recurrent theme, which I wasn't aware of until I went through it and realised that I'm using the same sort of motive there which is perhaps a symbol, a sign that for me signifies something. But from these works, actually these originated from these screens where I did 10 of these screens.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah yes, yes.

PAUL PARTOS: Once they had been done I looked at them and I thought, well, oddly enough they seem somewhat theatrical and I didn't want that aspect creeping into the works. So I chose the ones that were the most successful, and the ones that were the ones that had the centrefold.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes. The piece in (inaudible).

PAUL PARTOS: Yes, moving. One, like this one here, was quite—the rest of them were pastiches of these and somehow didn't work. There was five of them so I cut them up and I used the nylon organza spray into strips. It was almost like a kind of sampling of the original work where the work was non-existent. But I still somehow wanted to contain, or have a sampling of a work which no longer existed. Plus I thought, well, what the hell. I don't want to waste all that money, so I may as well make another work out of it, to be honest.

JAMES GLEESON: You mentioned the fact that these were nylon organza sprayed on.

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PAUL PARTOS: Well, that's what you call them, but it depends. I mean, every time I went to Myers I asked for my nylon organza. They said, 'Sure, yes'. That's what it's called, nylon organza.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. It's a pretty tough, I suppose, material.

PAUL PARTOS: It is very tough. It's like silk screen but silk apparently wasn't as durable as nylon, so nylon being tougher I bought the nylon.

JAMES GLEESON: Then you sprayed it. What, with a duco?

PAUL PARTOS: Well, on some of the works, some of the early works, I sprayed it with auto duco, which from material or the permanency of the thing was the wrong thing to do.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

PAUL PARTOS: Because it just rots the nylon.

JAMES GLEESON: Does it?.

PAUL PARTOS: But I don't think the Gallery has any of those. I mean, the ones that were successful were the ones that were sprayed with acrylic.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

PAUL PARTOS: The problem here is that they are very fragile.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

PAUL PARTOS: My suggestion is, if ever it's exhibited, it ought to have a screen, something around it to stop the—

JAMES GLEESON: Around it to stop the people touching it.

PAUL PARTOS: Because on two occasions now I've had to repair the screen in Geelong. On one occasion a possum tore it to pieces, got into or something. On another occasion kids just had cigarettes and they just put holes in it.

JAMES GLEESON: Good lord.

PAUL PARTOS: Oh, well, I can't blame them. It's sort of probably nice to see those little—but I kept telling them to put a screen or something around it and they didn't.

JAMES GLEESON: So that's a good tip for us when we show them, to put them somewhere that they can't be touched.

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PAUL PARTOS: Well, or where an attendant is or someone because otherwise—

JAMES GLEESON: They can be easily damaged.

PAUL PARTOS: Very easily, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Paul, when you made these two *Yellow screen with yellow* and *Lap garden* did you make them first and then spray them, or spray the material first and then assemble them afterwards.

PAUL PARTOS: No. Well, these had to be stretched first.

JAMES GLEESON: Stretched first.

PAUL PARTOS: Stretched first on either side and then sprayed. Then the middle section as well was sprayed. Then the two sections were joined together. So they had to be stretched before they were sprayed.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, good.

PAUL PARTOS: So these were as a consequence of the screens.

JAMES GLEESON: *Unspecified length*, yes. These were taken from a whole group that you judged to be not—

PAUL PARTOS: Successful, that's right.

JAMES GLEESON: Where was it shown?

PAUL PARTOS: Gallery A in Melbourne.

JAMES GLEESON: And where is it now?

PAUL PARTOS: In my spare room.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. It's not in another gallery.

PAUL PARTOS: No.

JAMES GLEESON: It doesn't belong to another gallery. Right. Well, I think that just about covers it. Is there anything else that you would like to, you know, put down on tape? You've mentioned your present, you know, situation.

PAUL PARTOS: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Anything from the past that is of interest?

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PAUL PARTOS: I don't think so. I can't think of anything at the moment.

JAMES GLEESON: All right, Paul. Well, thank you very much for that information.

PAUL PARTOS: Sure.

JAMES GLEESON: Good.