

JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: WILLIAM SALMON

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JAMES GLEESON: Bill, could we begin at the beginning? When and where were you born?

WILLIAM SALMON: I was born 9th April 1928. Well, I was actually born in Geelong technically but I was brought up in the western districts of Victoria, near Camperdown. Father was a manager of a grazing property and we lived on that property.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. So your contact with the country has been there from the beginning. You're a country boy rather than an urban boy.

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, and I think you could even say that what I do as a painter is more concerned with the landscape than with art.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: In fact, art has arisen out of landscape, rather than me being interested in art and finding the landscape as a subject.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

WILLIAM SALMON: In fact, I started painting when I was about seven years old. My father was the son of a doctor in Ballarat. Another doctor in Ballarat was Dr Lindsay.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh yes, yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: When Dr Lindsay died, my grandfather looked after some of the Lindsay family. My father and Daryl became very good friends and Daryl used to come and stay with us and paint.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

WILLIAM SALMON: I think he stuck some watercolours in my hand when I was about seven years of age—probably to keep me out of the way. I started trying to make sense of the environment that I was in at that stage. Although one drifts away and goes into other things, one learns about art and goes to art schools, which are really all diversions. Because I feel I still want to do what I was trying to do when I was seven years old. Well, I wasn't conscious of it then, but certainly I was conscious by the time I was 12.

JAMES GLEESON: Your real teacher was nature itself.

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, yes exactly. The whole source of motivation was that I was in an environment which was culturally foreign, although I'd been in it all my life. Even I felt the strangeness of it and I believe today that the strangeness that

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we feel about the Australian landscape is due to the fact that we haven't culturally digested it yet. Once it becomes an element, an important element in our culture, then we'll no longer feel strange about it.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, we've had a hundred years trying to cope with that, isn't it, and we haven't really fully digested it?

WILLIAM SALMON: No, no. I mean, the most difficult thing in the period in which I've come into painting, is that we've had a very good image there. I mean, the Roberts–Streeton image was a superb image of the Australian landscape. But to say that that is the truth about the Australian landscape, is like saying that Claude Lorraine is the truth about European landscape and that there was no room for Cézanne.

JAMES GLEESON: Exactly. Anyway, the Australian landscape was so vast and so varied that no one painter specialising in one area of the continent can ever really sum up the whole.

WILLIAM SALMON: Of course. I think that it's when you become more intimate with it—

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: And it's perhaps been in this last 10 years, when I've been living constantly again in this environment in a very simple sort of way, that an affinity has really started to grow.

JAMES GLEESON: Bill, before we get onto that, you know, which is basic, an important thing that we want to talk about, just some information about your technical background. Where did you study? Where did you get the technical equipment to paint?

WILLIAM SALMON: When I left school, 1946, I went to Swinburne Tech which was largely a commercial art school. But there were some good people there. Roger James was one. I don't know if you know of him. But he was an ex-Slade student and I know May Casey has got a very lovely painting of Roger's.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

WILLIAM SALMON: You know, there are these sort of islands in one's life.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: I came from a sort of middle class family, and the difficulty in that I think is that one can't believe that it's right to be an artist.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes, I know.

WILLIAM SALMON: You've got to meet someone who is confident in that it is a good thing to be an artist, and Roger James was it. Roger James was an artist. May not have ended up being as successful as he should have been but he breathed this confidence that, you know, gave confidence to me. From there, oh, during that period I went to George Bell's classes on Saturday morning.

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JAMES GLEESON: I see. Was George Bell still—no, he wouldn't have been still teaching then?

WILLIAM SALMON: Oh yes, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Was he?

WILLIAM SALMON: He was running a class. Fred Williams was in the class. I remember distinctly the Fairweather's and the Drysdale's from student days on the wall.

JAMES GLEESON: Really? Yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: Who was the other one? Fred Williams. There was another. I just can't remember him at the minute. By the way, at Swinburne at the time I was there, Ray Crooke was a student, Norma Redpath was a student, and James Meldrum was a student. So, you know, there was a bit of life there, although it was really a commercial art school. Then I did a year industrial designing, which was what my training was supposed to take me towards, although my inclination was never in that direction. I designed textiles for a year for Prestige, and got fed up with that and then went overseas. Yes, 1950-53 I was a student at the Slade School in London.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

WILLIAM SALMON: There the two people that impressed me most were Claude Rogers—they were both my tutors; we were able to choose our tutors. Claude Rogers, who was I think one of the most honest draftsman, never a clever draftsman. I think in Australia we're inclined to look on cleverness as having something to do with draftsmanship.

JAMES GLEESON: Absolutely.

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, but Claude Rogers was a meaty draftsman, tough, and Lucian Freud. I think that Lucian had a lot to do with the sort of intense realism that I got involved in when I first came back from Europe.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: When I came back from Europe I went to Adelaide, taught in the art school there for four years. Oh, there's one thing I should say about Europe, is that I had a wonderful introduction to Italy. I met Luca (inaudible) before I went overseas, and he gave me an introduction to his family. I called there—they lived just outside Florence—thinking I might get an invitation to stay a couple of nights. I stayed for six months.

JAMES GLEESON: Goodness, a marvellous experience.

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, a wonderful experience. I read Young's *The Lives of the Medici* during that period and sort of sought Florence out from that point of view. I think that had a lot to do with setting standards. As a matter of fact, all the time I was at the art school in Melbourne, at Swinburne, I had this vague feeling they're wrong. You know, they're wrong.

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JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: Then when I hit Florence—I think that sort of standard came from the bush. You know, the bush to me is the one great authentic thing in Australia. It is the one thing that is the best of its class in the world. Sort of Grade A, you know. I thought at art school, ‘They’re not talking about Grade A, you know. We’re talking about tricking something up, being clever’, you know. Then when I got to Florence—was where I first landed in Europe—I thought, ‘Jesus, this is Grade A’. I was right all along. This is what Grade A is. I went on from there to the Slade. The Slade—definite sort of drawbacks about it in that it still was trying to deny the School of Paris at that stage.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah yes, yes, in opposition.

WILLIAM SALMON: You know, the Euston Road School was in force. Well, Claude Rogers was a member of the Euston Road Group, William Coldstream was a professor. But, in a way, it’s not a bad thing. Now, Paul Haefliger once said to me about teaching art, ‘Tell somebody what art is and he’ll never discover anything else for the rest of his life’. Now, the good thing about the Slade to me was that it developed skills, it taught me to look intensely at things, and fortunately was unable to tell me what art was. You know, so I wasn’t diseased from that point of view.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

WILLIAM SALMON: In fact, it wasn’t until I went back to Europe this year that I really discovered Matisse, you know, which is an extraordinary thing to say. You know, how naive can one be?

JAMES GLEESON: Bill, who else, any Australians at the Slade at the same time as you?

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, the same fellow that was at George Bells, Ian Armstrong.

JAMES GLEESON: Ian Armstrong.

WILLIAM SALMON: Ian Armstrong, in the later years.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: He’s the only one I can think of. There were wonderful people at the Slade, mostly in the sculpture school. Henry Moore was a visitor, Kenneth Armitage, Reg Butler, very lively people in the sculpture section, but not so much in the painting section.

JAMES GLEESON: When you came back, you came back to Adelaide, did you?

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, I taught there for four years. I did a large mural in a Capuchin Monastery, *A life of St Francis*, about 360 square feet of it, which got me over Italy, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, I see.

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WILLIAM SALMON: Because I didn't realise at the time but what I had to do was to get back to what was really me. I mean, God, who can see Quattrocento Italy without falling in love with it. If that's not your thing, somehow you've got to get it out of your system. I think this was a very lucky thing, that I got this mural and it was a sort of Quattrocento painting.

JAMES GLEESON: I don't know your figurative work in that sense. Have you done much involving figures?

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, a bit. At that time I did a portrait of Charles Jury which was exhibited in the Archibald and Jimmy Cook in a review said should have won it. It didn't. I did another portrait of ABC television producer, Frank Zappel. I did quite a few portraits in that period. In fact, I've been doing one fairly recently. But to me the human figure, I mean, it's a tremendous subject. But I find just as much tension and excitement and feeling of life in a tree as I do in a figure.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: A tree stands still for me. It's so much easier.

JAMES GLEESON: Bill, when do you come to New South Wales?

WILLIAM SALMON: Nineteen fifty-eight. I had a big blow up with the art school there in South Australia. Probably I was a bit young and naive, but I remember writing a 20-page report to the Department of Education saying what was wrong with the art school, which was not appreciated all round and I thought the best thing for me to do was resign. I came over to Sydney, took a while to get established, but I got in teaching in the National Art School, or East Sydney Tech I think is a better title. People like Doug Dundas and Lloyd Rees and people like that were terribly helpful in that period. Nineteen sixty I think I was elected a member of the Society of Artists here. I didn't do much fulltime teaching. I think '59 to '62 I think is right, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: I was a full time teacher at East Sydney Tech. I've never been a joiner. I've dodged a commitment to institutions pretty much everywhere. Even though, when I worked for the ABC, I did eight years there doing one television program and one radio program a week.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. This was?

WILLIAM SALMON: For young people's program, for children's programs mostly, although I did some adult programs. But I refused to join the ABC. I always remained as a contract artist outside which gave me time to paint, to work. I think that probably—well, these pictures were first, these pictures that you have there, were painted in the period when I first came to Sydney actually.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, so that these are New South Wales subjects?

WILLIAM SALMON: Oh no, wait a minute, that one's not, but I'll tell you about that, but it was painted after I came to Sydney. This one here which you called *Black Bob's Creek*, yes, that was painted down near Berrima on a place called Comfort Hill that Katie Palmer who's had some—

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JAMES GLEESON: Oh, yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: I went down and camped down there and did some paintings. I had no job in Sydney. I remember I brought them back and when I first met John Brackenreg, he came up to have a look at them and bought the lot. I think that was bought from the Artarmon Galleries—was it?—Artlovers Gallery.

JAMES GLEESON: We bought it in '59 and it was painted in '58.

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, '58. That would be right, yes, yes. That was when I first came to Sydney.

JAMES GLEESON: It's oil?

WILLIAM SALMON: It's an oil.

JAMES GLEESON: On canvas?

WILLIAM SALMON: On canvas. For the sake of records, I think at that time I was still using a half oil ground that I made myself. It would be on linen canvas.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: But about that stage I started to stop using a half oil ground and I used a PVA paint as a ground for a while.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. So after this stage, are all your works, these other ones we have, would they be on a PVA ground?

WILLIAM SALMON: They'd probably be on a PVA ground, yes, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: So that's important for the conservation department to know that sort of thing.

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, yes, yes. Then in more recent years—I always used to make and stretch my own canvases.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

WILLIAM SALMON: In more recent years I've gone back to buying commercial canvas just simply because it saves times and, when you work out the hours that you spend, they can be used more profitably.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: But these would all be on linen canvas that I'd primed myself and stretched myself, I think.

JAMES GLEESON: All of the ones we have are from what you'd call your inductive period?

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, yes. This is a thing that came out of and, in a way, I'm very grateful to the Slade for. I was talking before about the sort of wonderful image that there was of Australia, the Roberts/Streeton image. I mean,

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McCubbin, Davies and people like that who had established this. Now, I think if you're going to discover a new image for it, you've got to in a way break down the old one.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: What I wanted to do was to get back and look intensely at the elements in it, study them in a sort of inductive way, so that in a way painting was a structured way of looking.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: I mean, I'm sure you realise yourself that if you draw something, or if you paint it, your knowledge of it afterwards is so much greater than if you'd just sat there and looked at it.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: I was trying to avoid making conclusions; rather trying to sort of suck it in. I remember the words that I sort of used in my inner mind at the time, 'It is the is-ness of it that I want to get at. Not what it might be'. I realise now that that philosophically is a fundamentally fallacious idea; that the idea I had then that there is some essential truth, like an absolute—

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes, yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: And that art is a variation on this. Now, I no longer accept that. To me the truth, reality, is what I feel at the moment, and I don't see that any—I mean, I think the propensity to try and be objective is just as much an attitude as the desire to be romantic, you know. That scientific truth even is, in fact, an emotional attitude.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes. I follow exactly what you mean.

WILLIAM SALMON: So in a way that's broken down. But it was a very useful inductive period, you know, and breaking down the elements, looking very, very carefully at the way in which a tree grows. You know in life classes people say to you, 'Turn that toe and there'll be a movement in the neck'. There's a connection all the way through the body.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: Now in a tree, the movement of a twig, the twist of a twig is implied in the shape of the roots. You know, I was trying to feel this connection, this tremendous feeling of growth.

JAMES GLEESON: The total organism of the thing.

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, almost as a symbol for life.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: You know, if one wanted an abstract of it, a symbol of life. Much later on—in fact, it would be about four or five years ago, four years ago—

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had an exhibition which I called Trees and Their Need to Fly, this feeling of almost bird-like quality in the top of a tree, and the anchorage of it in the ground, almost as a symbol, a moral symbol, of Heaven and Hell. Which again is a symbol of human experience that one wants to take off, one wants to fly, and yet one is horribly rooted in the ground, you know. There's the avo du poire, which is resisting this desire. I think, you know, if one's looking at it psychologically myself, I feel that this is my sort of middle class background which one is fighting against. Is going to go on fighting against all one's life, which anchors one down in the dreariness of life, and the desire to be up in the skies flying which is perhaps the poetry that one—

JAMES GLEESON: Bill, am I right in interpreting what you're saying as a kind of animism?

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Similar to the Aboriginal concept of that nature was—the spirit that was in man was also in nature.

WILLIAM SALMON: Pantheism. Pantheism really, yes, yes, yes. Yes, absolutely. Do you know, I was talking to David Moore, a curator of anthropology at the museum here, about Aboriginal art. I said, 'Has Aboriginal art ever been looked on as an interpretation of the landscape in which it was painted?', because I believe that the forms and shapes in Aboriginal painting have, in fact, come out of the landscape. That's the sort of thing that I'd like to try and lock onto. I mean, I don't want to be a phoney Aboriginal.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

WILLIAM SALMON: I don't want to be a Byron Mansell or something like this, but what I do want to do is to get that sort of immediate relationship with the landscape, which I think the only way I'm going to do it is the way I'm living now. Actually living in it, cutting the firewood out of the things, it's almost totemic, you know. The Aboriginal who had his kangaroo as his totem, killed his totem and ate it, I want that sort of intimate involvement with it.

JAMES GLEESON: So a landscape isn't something out there, it's part of your blood?

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: It's part of your mind.

WILLIAM SALMON: Right.

JAMES GLEESON: Heart, everything.

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes. I see your involvement, a total involvement.

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes. I have my studio, you know, 200 yards from the house. On the way to the studio just about every tree that I pass I have drawn at some

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stage or painted at some stage. I sort of say, 'Good morning, Fred', or 'Good morning', you know.

JAMES GLEESON: You know them as (inaudible).

WILLIAM SALMON: It's coming like that. It's developing into an extraordinary richness which I didn't ever anticipate, you know. I was always confronted by this strangeness of the bush, and I suppose one hoped for something but I didn't realise what a richness it was going to become. I suppose, you know, that I have to say that—I mean, I say it willingly—a lot of this has been due to my second marriage with Rosemary, who is a sort of earth person, who loves the bush.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. She loves it too.

WILLIAM SALMON: She grows the vegetables and is a very calm person, is a landscape person, you know. Well, a little bit like Carol Foote in a way, although Carol's a sort of exuberant earth mother. Rosemary is much quieter. When we went up there to live, which was—

JAMES GLEESON: How did you find the place, first of all?

WILLIAM SALMON: Oh, interesting story. I went up there in the sixties, early sixty, I think in '61.

JAMES GLEESON: This is the in Kanimbla Valley.

WILLIAM SALMON: In the Kanimbla Valley. David Strachan and I had been painting at Hill End a lot. You know, it's five hours drive up and back. David was interested in the buildings and things in Hill End. I was not so much. In fact, I like to exclude buildings from my paintings. I thought I could find something that was just as good for me that was a bit nearer to Sydney. So one Christmas I went up there and I was looking for a place. Oh, a farmer came down and moved me on, you know, I was camped in the bush and he moved me on. I said, 'Is there anywhere I can camp?'. He said, 'Yes, there's an old PC cottage down there. You can camp in that if you like'. Well, at the end of that summer I went back to him and I said, 'Look, I'll give you 50 quid for that cottage'. He said, 'Look, it's on a bit of lease, I can't sell it to you. But call it yours. Do it up'. There are paintings of it, by the way, that I did. Also various other people have done paintings of it. David Strachan did a painting of it.

JAMES GLEESON: What year was this, Bill?

WILLIAM SALMON: This would be '61.

JAMES GLEESON: Sixty-one.

WILLIAM SALMON: Then he said, 'If I ever sell up, I'll see you're right for any improvements that you do to the place', you see. So I put windows in it and floors in it and things. Then, oh, in about '65 a group of solicitors tried to buy up the whole valley.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

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WILLIAM SALMON: He came to me and he said, 'Look, I'm selling up. I've got a good price. What do you want me to do about the house?'. I said, 'Oh gee', you know, 'I hate the thought of that'. He said, 'Well look, there's a 200 acre block in the middle of it. Now they haven't bought that yet, they're dickering about it'. He said, 'I'll sell it to you for what I bought it for in 1934, would that make us square?'. I said, 'Make us square!'.

JAMES GLEESON: Bill, isn't that fantastic?

WILLIAM SALMON: I think it cost me about a thousand pounds.

JAMES GLEESON: As Tas Drysdale said, 'You got your own landscape'.

WILLIAM SALMON: I bought my own landscape, yes. I don't think I've done a painting off that landscape since '65.

JAMES GLEESON: Is that so?

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, the big one we've got, the last one—

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, that's on that landscape. That is on the landscape. That's in fact the other side of the creek. Now, since then there has been quite a bit of development and we've seen all sorts of nasty things happen to the valley. Suburban houses have been built there and people have broken up into 25 acre blocks, and people are running their sort of phoney Arab horse studs and so on, all rather nasty. One of the things I feel rather pleased about is that I made some sort of a statement about that before it happened to the valley.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: But, as far as my area is concerned, I've cleared a part of it because I run cattle. It has to be in a way supporting. But I've cleared it sort of like a gardener, in a way. It's still over half bush and all the clearings have done is allowed you to see more of the bush.

JAMES GLEESON: You've got your model before you all the time.

WILLIAM SALMON: That's right. Yes. Well, I live with her, you know. I think most artists have, as a matter of fact.

JAMES GLEESON: Exactly.

WILLIAM SALMON: I don't know if Rosie's jealous. This one was in fact not painted there. It's '62. It was a trip I did down to Victoria. It's a place called Steiglitz, which is not far from Ballarat. Bacchus Marsh.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

WILLIAM SALMON: It's between Bacchus Marsh and Geelong. It was an old gold mining thing and, as I said earlier, I'd been to Hill End and that sort of landscape had been appealing to me. When I was down in Victoria I camped

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there and did three or four paintings there. I think that one was called *The tall tree*.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, it's got a specific name?

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: We've just got it listed as *Landscape*.

WILLIAM SALMON: *Landscape* yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, let's correct that.

WILLIAM SALMON: No, *The big one*. That's what it was called, *The big one*.

JAMES GLEESON: *The big one*.

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, a great big (inaudible).

JAMES GLEESON: Good, let's make that change.

WILLIAM SALMON: It's on my records as that.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, that's a logical title for it, I think.

WILLIAM SALMON: Well, you see, even at this stage, although it's a pretty objective sort of painting, you've got this sort of struggle, almost labyrinth going on here.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: And this is getting clear.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, rising above.

WILLIAM SALMON: You know, I wasn't even conscious at all at that stage that that's what I was talking about. Well, David Strachan used to say, you know, 'You go on painting the same picture all your life'.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, I know.

WILLIAM SALMON: That was very much what I was saying, I think, at that stage.

JAMES GLEESON: Now that one, we've got it listed as coming into the collection as purchased by Sir Will Ashton in August '62.

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, that would be right. That would be right. It would be '62. Early '62 I went down to Steiglitz, I think. Christmas, '61. That was it, Christmas '61, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: And this would be painted early '62?

WILLIAM SALMON: In, yes, early '62, very early '62, I think. Yes.

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JAMES GLEESON: Was it bought directly from you or from a gallery?

WILLIAM SALMON: I would think it was probably bought through—ah now, wait a minute. No. I had my first one-man show about that time. Where's the thing? Now, where is it? Here we are, first one-man show '61.

JAMES GLEESON: At Macquarie?

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Sixty-two we've had another one in Geelong.

WILLIAM SALMON: Geelong. Look, I can't tell you offhand, James. I can look it up.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: I've got a funny feeling that was in my first one-man show though, which would make my dates out a little bit. It might have been painted in fact in '61.

JAMES GLEESON: In '61.

WILLIAM SALMON: In '60, '61. That's more likely. In '60, '61. Because I went, I think, to the valley for the first time in the '61-62 Christmas vacation. I was still teaching then at East Sydney Tech. That's right, it would be the '60-61 vacation and I'm fairly sure that it was in the first one-man show at the Macquarie.

JAMES GLEESON: So if we called it 1961 we'd be pretty close.

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, pretty close to the mark.

JAMES GLEESON: Nineteen sixty-one.

WILLIAM SALMON: But I keep reasonably good records.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: Not much before that. But I keep a card index on all paintings now and I can check that up.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, I tell you what. If '61 isn't the right date you then let me know.

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: But don't worry if it's turned out to be right.

WILLIAM SALMON: No, no, no. I think that's pretty right.

JAMES GLEESON: Good. Now, the last in the sequence is *Quiet gully* and that, of course, is on your property up at—

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WILLIAM SALMON: In the Kanimbla Valley, yes. I was still struggling with it a bit then, wasn't I? But at that stage, when I first went to camp there, there was some country which was about three miles away down towards the Cox's River. Although I was camped in the area that I am now, I used to go down there to paint. It was rather Grunerish, Gruner-esque?

JAMES GLEESON: You were still looking for a pictorial subject?

WILLIAM SALMON: I was looking for a pictorial subject. You know, I used to come back at night to my camp and then I thought, my God you know, suddenly the surroundings around me came alive. They were strange. There was a sort of weirdness about them which I think is the thing that everybody feels about the Australian landscape, a slightly forbidding sort of quality.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: At that time I was trying to avoid that. I was looking for things that were—

JAMES GLEESON: Had a sanction in earlier art?

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, that's right, yes. Not consciously but, you know, I was looking for the thing that would make a good picture.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes. Your idea of what made a good picture would be based on your experience of other paintings.

WILLIAM SALMON: Well, I think it always is, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, of course.

WILLIAM SALMON: Now, the things that I'm painting now are the things that I thought were strange then.

JAMES GLEESON: Unpictorial.

WILLIAM SALMON: Unpictorial, and now of course they're the things that I think are lovely, that I've become more or less one with.

JAMES GLEESON: You've come to terms with this forbidding element.

WILLIAM SALMON: No longer is it forbidding.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

WILLIAM SALMON: Even on a physical level. I mean, I know it's a sort of psychological hang up. But walking at night, I used to be worried about snakes and things like that, you know. Now, nothing at all, I feel absolutely—even, you know, a brown snake in the courtyard.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: I usually go out. We've got a five-year-old child so I don't like brown snakes in the courtyard and I say, 'Buzz off, mate', you know. I mean,

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I'm aware there's a possible danger on a logical level, but I don't feel that psychological terror any more. The patterns and forms, the shapes that the thing —

JAMES GLEESON: You're really getting into the landscape?

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, yes. Yes, I feel I belong to it now. I can't see me ever moving away from it. Because whereas before I used to have to look for subjects, now I have to ration, you know. I haven't got time to do that one yet, do a little sketch and put it aside, you know. I've got lots and lots of them put aside that one day I must get on to, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, Bill, although we haven't got in our permanent collection anything of yours later than '65, could you talk to us about what has happened since then? What sort of developments have occurred in both your approach and the way you handle the subject?

WILLIAM SALMON: Well, let's talk first of all on a purely technical level.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: Whereas once paintings were nearly always worked en plein air, from beginning to end—

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: Maybe a bit of cleaning up in the studio.

JAMES GLEESON: No studies, preliminary studies?

WILLIAM SALMON: Oh, I'd do sketches, you know, comp sketch and sort of organise it a little bit perhaps. Now, incidentally, I try to do that much less because I think to myself, if you've been attracted to this, there's an inherent form here, if you bosh that about, you won't get it out. You'll fall back into a European-type composition. Much better to let the design that is inherently in the landscape —

JAMES GLEESON: That you've felt and it's attracted you to it.

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, let it come out. But now, although blithely I go out and think, yes I can do that, right on the spot, I know exactly what I want, I'm getting slower and slower. Very seldom does an exhibitable painting come from, oh, until about the fourth or fifth try at it.

JAMES GLEESON: Really? Still en plein air.

WILLIAM SALMON: No, no. I start off en plein air. Then I'll probably take that to the studio. Then I'll go back and do study drawings and things from it. Perhaps even more work, little oil sketches and things. But the painting evolves entirely in the studio now. They just haven't worked out. It's an infuriating thing. You know, I feel like the Chinese man who learnt how to cook pork by burning his house down, you know. It seems like an incredibly attenuated process to get there, but I just can't get there any quicker. Incidentally, this was worrying me a great deal emotionally. You know, I was feeling very depressed about this until I went to

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Europe last year. I was down in the Matisse Museum in Nice, and I saw over a hundred studies for the dancers that was in the—

JAMES GLEESON: So you had trouble too.

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes. I thought, you know, God, what am I worrying about? I'm probably stopping too soon. Since I've come back I've been taking even more time. Fortunately, a lot of the financial worries that one has in early years have passed, not because I'm selling paintings all that well but, you know, the land's turned out to be profitable and, you know, a few other investments have turned out to be profitable. Anyway, I think as you get older you really don't care so much about making money or even being a successful artist. The thing is that bloody painting is so damned hard and you feel, look if I could just get this one right, I'd die happy, you know. So I said when I came back from Europe that I was not going to exhibit for at least two years. And that even then, if the paintings don't come right, well, I can extend that further. I'm having the greatest period of luxury that one could possibly have at the moment. I'm painting all the time, fulltime. Are you interested in the routine, you know, the working routine?

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes indeed.

WILLIAM SALMON: Well, I'm an early morning person and my wife isn't, which is a happy thing because I think a lot comes out of your sleep. So I get up in the morning, have my breakfast on my own and go to my studio, which is 200 yards, as I said, away from the house. I work there usually straight through until about one o'clock, from about seven in the morning through till about one o'clock. That's usually my painting day. Obviously, if something's still on the go I'll go back after lunch and have another crack at it. But usually the afternoons I go and do the farm work, you know, and a bit of physical thing. I find it gets rid of the frustrations and again is involvement in a sense, you know, which I think is healthy. I don't know whether I said this at the beginning but it's something that I want to say. I think I did actually, when I was talking about my youth. But for me, I mean, some people seem to me to approach their painting from art and find their subject. To me the whole process has been, despite the diversions when I went to the Slade and Art School and this sort of thing, has been that art has been a way of making sense of what to me as a child was a mysterious environment. I think if it weren't for that environment I wouldn't be an artist. I'm not interested in art per se.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: I'm interested in art as an extension of a normal man. I mean, to me it's a great tragedy that it's become so specialised. To me art is a normal thing for every man to do, and in primitive societies most men do it.

JAMES GLEESON: (inaudible) in one way or another, I mean, dance or painting or whatever. Yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes. People say to me, you know, 'Isn't it a bit butch for an artist to go chopping down trees and things like this?'. I say, 'No, you know, to me that is a normal part of being a man as being a painter is'. I don't really want to deny one side or the other. Although obviously, you know, I spend a lot more of my life and time painting.

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JAMES GLEESON: So art then is a kind of way of linking yourself into your whole ambience, your whole landscape, environment, everything.

WILLIAM SALMON: I'd like you to repeat what you've said, you know, because to me that is the definition of what art is. Art is what makes sense of the whole of life.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: You know, to me it's a sort of tautology. Art either is fundamental to man or else what the Hell are we worrying about it for, you know?

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. ...

WILLIAM SALMON: If we're preserving it because it's an elaborate game of chess, well then, you know, I think we're spending far too much time and money on it. To me it is exactly that. It's a fundamental sort of part of human life.

JAMES GLEESON: I absolutely agree with that.

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes. Now, the later paintings, well—

JAMES GLEESON: First of all, Bill, has the scale changed? Are you still working approximately to the same scale, which are never enormous?

WILLIAM SALMON: Never enormous, no. My large paintings now are sort of a metre by a metre, roughly. Strangely, I'm going more for the square.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: Just off the square actually, because the square is somehow dictatorial, a dictatorial shape.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: But so is an obvious proportion. That thing that I was saying about composition, of not wanting to design the picture so much but letting it design itself, seems to me to be more free in a shape which hasn't got a quality of its own. Do you know what I mean?

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: It's somehow amorphous as—

JAMES GLEESON: Well, the square is absolutely without a character, except its squareness.

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: So that you can bring into it whatever you want.

WILLIAM SALMON: That's right, that's right.

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JAMES GLEESON: Whereas the landscape, the traditional landscape shape, imposes a kind of pictorial approach.

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, you have this 1.618 square on the end sort of golden mean. Where shall I put me brown tree, sort of thing? But, incidentally, I am working on a—I don't know whether I should talk about this.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, please do.

WILLIAM SALMON: A large thing. Now, it just happens that I've done a painting which I think is the epitome of spring, as I feel spring is. A lot of people say there's no seasons in Australia. Well, that's nonsense because they just haven't lived in it enough to know what the changes are. They're enormous changes. I did a painting which I called *Spring* which I'm quite happy with. It is an exhibitable painting. Then I've been struggling with another one and I was thinking about the quality of it and I said, you know, essentially this is winter. I thought, gee, there's a relationship between these two. Now, they as paintings will remain separate, but I've started working on a four seasons, a double diptych.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: Which these paintings are the sort of key things to. I mean, I'm being a bit hopeful with summer coming up. I'm sort of hoping there's a summer, a summer will fall in my lap. I think it will because I've done some paintings that are very summer too. The *Jewellers casket* paintings and some of those ones where at noon—these are some of the recent paintings—there's a funny sort of spatial thing that happens around about noon. The direct sunlight goes off everything. It's lit from the ground, the hot ground, and it glows for about an hour. You get this tremendous sort of glowing coming up through the bush, and I've painted a number of paintings. One was called *Noon, Jewellers casket, In light*, the painting which went with the exhibition to Indonesia. I think that was a Commonwealth Art organised thing.

JAMES GLEESON: I think it was; it was.

WILLIAM SALMON: There'd been a number of these because there's a sort of spatial ambiguity about Australian landscape. The trees don't sit neatly in the landscape in space the way they do in Europe. I mean, the way Hobbema would have them, you know. To me that seems to me an element that one ought to play with. I think Fred Williams has played with this very successfully.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes, yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: (inaudible) latest things that have been going on. There was that exhibition that I spoke about before of trees and their need to fly. In fact, I was making a sort of ambiguous symbol. Well, I called them tree birds and in some stage wooden birds. The idea of a wooden bird appeals to me enormously. You know, this contradiction between the ability to fly and being heavy. This is part of the element that trees have. But I did quite a number of allegorical paintings in that last exhibition where they became more birds than trees. I think one of the ones that won one of the prizes, I think it was Grafton, the Grafton Prize, a couple of years ago, was one of those. John Henshaw was the judge, as I remember. Now I spoke before—I won't go into it again—about the realisation of this as sort of psychological symbolism. I think once one has realised that,

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consciously it's finished. You can't go on with that any more. I mean, after all painting is a sort of form of hang up on canvas, isn't it? Once you become conscious of what you're about, then you've got to get on with something else. Now the trip to Europe last year and I said you know the awakening of me about Matisse. I mean, my painters before had been people like Piero della Francesca, who, you know, I still think he and Bach, Father Bach and the Australian landscape as still the three great archetypes in my life. But I think Matisse is another one, you know, the awakening to Matisse. Now, this has brought me back and bugged up my painting, you know; just put me into awful trouble aiming to try and get the simplicity, the candor of statement. I mean, these early paintings that you've got I think were tremendously useful, but you've got to get rid of the dead wood. You've got to start to really get rid of the unnecessary anecdote, the unnecessary decorativeness, and get back and, you know, the ambition now is to make the statement as simple and as candid as I can. Now, simplicity is just the hardest thing in all the world, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: As I remember your more recent ones, they've become much freer in a technical sense, much more calligraphic.

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: They're written in a way which is less close to actual visual experience and closer perhaps to some inner experience of your own with some involvement and express a rhythm, a kind of—

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, I guess so. I'm not quite conscious of that, but I'd like to make another point about that. The writing is to some extent related to Aboriginal painting. I look on them as sort of written paintings in a way and to feelings that I have. I mean, I'm not a historian, James, and I'm not an art intellectual in that sense. But Aboriginal painting has always excited me, particularly the sort of Mimi paintings. Now, one of the Aboriginal ideas about those paintings was that they were painted in pre-time by the Mimi people and that they merely add to them. I feel that they are fundamentally associated with the marks that occur on nature. I'm thinking of the sort of marks that scribbly barks on scribbly bark tree.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: The natural marks in rock formations and things like this. I think that, you know, just as one sees a cloud and says, 'Well, that could be a camel', it seems to me conceivable that the Aborigines came into a cave, they saw this mark and said, 'That can be a Mimi man'. Now, they had the idea that it was their responsibility to renew these paintings every year. I guess the thing has got slightly varied and slightly more developed as time went on, became more like the subject matter as time came on, but the theory that they were originally done in pre-time not by man—

JAMES GLEESON: They were natural forms.

WILLIAM SALMON: Well, I think this is perhaps what they were. Now, getting back to the painting and the relationship to that, I think when you're painting a landscape one is not just aware of the vista, one is aware of these elements. Now, I don't know how to state the scribbly bark, except this is what I mean by

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allowing the rhythms which are inherent in the landscape to become the compositional element of the picture, you see.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: So the flow of a tree may in fact be a sort of extension of what in fact might be written on that tree. Writing is so perceptive, you know, because this is a word; you know the words one uses in the back of one's mind all the time?

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes, yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: 'I must write that tree', I say to myself, you know. How must it be written? In fact, I think I called a couple of paintings in the early seventies *Written hill* and *Hieroglyphic hill*, feeling that the forms of the landscape were written there.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Well, I've always felt in those more recent ones this quality of writing.

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes. Mind you, I think that again, I mean, whereas I say I'm tremendously involved in landscape, one doesn't deny the other things of being a human being. I do write. I write letters and things. I don't see how you can get your whole person out of your paintings. In fact, they must come in. I think that this—I was talking about the painters that I respond to—you know, this is one of the elements which people are talking about. Someone said to me recently that they thought my paintings were influenced by Fred Williams. I said, 'Well, obviously, you know, no one could be painting landscape in the seventies and not be influenced by Fred Williams'. I don't apologise for that one bit. Or John Olsen. I mean, John Olsen's got that written quality. He abstracted it to a much greater extent, of course.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: You know, it's impossible to paint landscape in the seventies and not be influenced by John Olsen. I wish myself, you know, I'm not a prophet but I wish more artists would be influenced by the stream that comes through from our environment, rather than the stream that comes through from the environment of New York or somewhere else. But, you know, I'm not against anybody's painting for God's sake. Everybody's got to do what they want to do.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: As long as I'm left alone to do what I want to do. I think it's a terrible thing amongst painters that we become anti.

JAMES GLEESON: I know.

WILLIAM SALMON: In fact, it's one of the things that—the only group that I've ever belonged to was the Society of Artists, which I was elected to in '61 and I think disbanded in '62 or '63. Because I think when people get together in groups they forget what they're for and start to think about what they're against. I think that's a terrible thing really.

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JAMES GLEESON: I think it's always dangerous when artists begin to feel they've got the truth, the whole truth.

WILLIAM SALMON: Absolutely.

JAMES GLEESON: And anyone who differs from them is basically wrong.

WILLIAM SALMON: Mind you, we've got to believe that. I mean, the hell of our lives, and the excitement of our lives, is something that I said about David Strachan at the opening of his Retrospective Exhibition in Ballarat. David was a man of tremendous sensitivity and imagination. But the hell of having these qualities is that not only have you the imagination to conceive of what might be, but you also have the imagination to conceive that you might be wrong. There you lie on the horns of a dilemma. Anyone who is sure that he is right seems to me to be almost ipso facto certainly wrong.

JAMES GLEESON: I think the great artists are those who feel that they are on the right track and spend their life trying to find out if they are.

WILLIAM SALMON: That's right. That's right. You've certainly got to have faith.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: Every painting you do is a statement of that faith. Some of them are a statement that maybe you didn't have quite as much faith as you ought to have had. But that's what it's about, I'm sure.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, Bill, is there anything else now we should have on this tape?

WILLIAM SALMON: Not really. Unless you want to talk about the broadcasting days which, I mean, are not fundamental to me as a painter, except that I did learn something.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: I learnt something from kid's painting. Because, you see, all this training from the Slade and from Swinburne Tech was professional skills stuff.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes, yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: I think I was beginning to learn that the answer didn't lie that way anyway. But to see constantly the impact of kids paintings—

JAMES GLEESON: What, the directness?

WILLIAM SALMON: The directness of it and the fact that without skill it could be brilliant. Also, of course, it gave me the opportunity to interview and meet a lot of painters. Now, I think that one meets painters socially, but the thing that you don't do is the sort of thing that you're doing now. You don't get down and say, 'Now, really tell me what makes you tick?'. Now, when you're interviewing people professionally you do ask these questions. You know, I learnt so much. I remember along these lines talking to Roland Wakelin. Wake said to me, you

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know, 'I believed, until I went to Europe, until I went to Paris'. This was in his pre-colour days, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: He said, 'I believed that art was a matter of cleverness and skill. Then when I saw Cézanne I realised that cleverness had nothing to do with it'.

JAMES GLEESON: It's a great lesson to learn. It's a very difficult one for a lot of people to learn.

WILLIAM SALMON: I think we've all got to go through both things, mind you. I think you've got to develop the skills, but then you've got to learn to forget them. That sort of thing, you know, my first interview I ever did was with Bill Dobell. You know, I interviewed Drysdale, Nolan, lots and lots of painters, and to ask them the sort of questions that really if I'd asked at a cocktail party would be somewhat impertinent.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: I think I learnt a lot from it. The other thing I learnt was this thing of confidence. I've spoken about it before, the fact of meeting Roger James. Lucian Freud gave it to me too, the right that one had to be an artist. Now, if you're broadcasting, and particularly if you're telecasting, you've got to learn to stand up, face that camera and say what you bloody well mean.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: Now, I think all these early paintings I was being terribly tentative, and I hadn't learnt that lesson in painting. I think perhaps I learnt it in broadcasting before I learnt it in painting; to stand up, face the bloody canvas, and say what you mean.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, with enough conviction and authority.

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, I can see how that could really have an effect on your painting.

WILLIAM SALMON: Mind you, I met wonderful people like Carol Foot, John Champ, talking about music and things like this. It was a very enriching experience really.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

WILLIAM SALMON: When I left after eight years, people said to me, 'Why do you want to leave?', you know. There was no kerfuffle. I just said, 'Well, if you haven't said everything you've got to say after eight years, you haven't been very intelligent about it'.

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JAMES GLEESON: But you're quite right, everything you do learn as a human being does come out and affect your work an artist, because that is a manifestation of your humanity.

WILLIAM SALMON: Yes, exactly. Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Bill, thank you very much indeed.

WILLIAM SALMON: Thank you James, I've enjoyed doing it actually.

JAMES GLEESON: Marvellous. Thank you.

WILLIAM SALMON: Good.

JAMES GLEESON: Thank you.