

JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: GARETH SANSON

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JAMES GLEESON: Gareth, can we begin right at the beginning; exactly when were you born and where?

GARETH SANSON: I was born on the 19th November 1939 in Melbourne, of a parentage, father from Western Australia and mother from the Wimmera area of Victoria.

JAMES GLEESON: Any background of interest in the arts in your family?

GARETH SANSON: Well, there's a very slim, tenuous connection possibly with my father who was a journalist for many years on *The Herald* newspaper, and for some of that time he was vaguely involved in film criticism. But apart from that, I think not, not a heavy cultural link.

JAMES GLEESON: How did you become interested in art then? Was it an early awareness of it or did it—

GARETH SANSON: Probably I always drew, and I was always the person in primary school whose work was being selected for the back wall. When I got to high school it was still interesting to me but never anything more than, say, 'a hobby situation'.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

GARETH SANSON: Then in 1954 the art teacher at Essendon High School selected a batch of works for the Sun Youth Art Show in Melbourne—when I was 14 or 15—and he left me out because in his opinion he didn't think I was good enough. So I sent in a private entry and won. After that I started getting high marks in art at school. It appeared to me that there may be something in this ability, if you like, that I might pursue. So it developed from that point, I think.

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

GARETH SANSON: No. I was conscious of security and firm roots and foundations in life, like most people my age were in those days. So I, in fact, did a trained primary teachers certificate course, and began as a primary teacher in 1959 at Doodagalla Primary School, at the age of 19 or whatever, but the same year I had my first one-man exhibition. So the two sort of directions developed.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GARETH SANSON: As a primary teacher for security, and my art and exhibiting.

JAMES GLEESON: So that you really are self-trained? You didn't have a formal art—

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GARETH SANSON: Well, I started night classes at RMIT. All in the same year: '59 I started teaching, '59 first one-man show, '59 started part-time course at RMIT which developed to such an extent where I got a diploma later on. But I was always thinking of that diploma as a teaching qualification, something that would eventually lead to me perhaps becoming a tertiary. Nothing really to do with me training as an artist, and they always thought that I was a bit of an odd ball and didn't fit in to painting their Meldrum paintings or whatever. Noel Counihan, I think. Social Realism was in at the time.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

GARETH SANSON: You know, they just thought I was an oddball. They didn't quite know why I was there.

JAMES GLEESON: You're still teaching?

GARETH SANSON: Well, I'm head of painting at the Victorian College of the Arts.

JAMES GLEESON: You enjoy that?

GARETH SANSON: Well, it's got more reasonable really the longer I've taught because I've got it down to only three days teaching now. The higher you get in administration, amazingly enough, the less teaching you do and they allow you two days to do your own work.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Oh well, that's (inaudible).

GARETH SANSON: In fact, they wouldn't employ you if you weren't a practising professional artist. That's the whole idea of the school.

JAMES GLEESON: Gareth, at 19 you had your first one-man show?

GARETH SANSON: At 19, and it was just sort of an amazing sort of ego trip really because I'd just been to my first couple of exhibitions ever, I think. One was Len French and one was Barry Humphries in drag where he showed at the Vic Arts Society. There was this strange woman at the opening and I went up and said, 'Where's Barry Humphries?' and he said, 'My darling, I don't know'.

JAMES GLEESON: It was Barry.

GARETH SANSON: It was Barry Humphreys, and that had quite an impact on me, as his work did, you know, at that time, because I was quite impressionable. Over in the centre of the exhibiting gallery was a great pile of books with green stuff all over the books. In the catalogue it said, 'I read some books and then I was sick'. Then there were two rubber boots, you know, filled with yellow stuff and called 'Pus in boots'. You know, those two things had an impact on me I thought, 'Well, look, I want to show my paintings too'. So there was this little gallery called the Rickman Gallery, which was just really for people starting out. Jan Senbergs had his first show there, Asher Bilu, quite a few people all around the same time, '59, '60. I rang Arthur Boyd up because I thought he was important. He'd never heard of me. Under duress he opened the show and bought one. So that sort of gave me a bit of a lift and made me think, 'Well, perhaps there is something to it and perhaps I will push on with it'.

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JAMES GLEESON: What was your work like in those days? Was it still image?

GARETH SANSOM: Well, it was very formative. It was, I suppose, vaguely Picasso really. And strangely enough some sort of influence from Len French because he was the first person I'd ever seen painting with house paint or enamel. I still use enamel. That was an important sort of early influence; that you didn't have to paint traditionally with oil paints and pallet.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

GARETH SANSOM: Or canvas or any of those things. So I suppose some of the imagery was Picasso sort of imagery and a lot of the technique was borrowed heavily from Len French.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. You've always been a painter of images of one sort or another?

GARETH SANSOM: Well—

JAMES GLEESON: You never really went completely abstract?

GARETH SANSOM: I don't think so. I think even in the paintings that people would have called abstract of mine, I would think of them as having images in them. I mean, I couldn't paint a picture that was just about paint or structure or analysis and formal things. But, on the other hand, I've never seen myself as a figurative painter who was painting narrative pictures.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

GARETH SANSOM: I mean, I don't think they're allegorical or story telling or anything like that. The images are there and they're usually to do with images out of context in the sort of surrealist way, and people can form their own connotation from the juxtaposition of images.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GARETH SANSOM: There's no intentional message. I mean, if there's a nose there and a hand there, it doesn't mean the hand's going to touch the nose. I mean, it's whatever a person draws from that strange combination of images.

JAMES GLEESON: A sort of psychological mosaic, in a way?

GARETH SANSOM: If you like. It's sort of a chaotic thing where from time to time the chaos sort of is almost touching the edge of order, and then I do something to the painting I think to disintegrate that sense of order. If you like, I'm trying to find a sort of formalism through a chaotic sort of thing without it verging on anarchy, you know, or cynicism or anti-art. Not in the sort of Dada anti-art, nihilist sense, but in a sort of a non-formal, boring—hang on. Try to get away from the rules that say a picture has to work this way.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, I see.

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GARETH SANSON: And have it work my way, in a new way of making it work, but not in the formal sense. Breaking away from the boredom, if you like, of boring symmetry or asymmetry, or whatever.

JAMES GLEESON: In a way, it reminds me of Eliot's technique in the wasteland, where he jumps from image to image, compounding them, bringing them together in apparently random fashion, and yet probably dictated by some subconscious urge or need to draw disparate images together.

GARETH SANSON: I agree completely with that. I think in my case I let the painting take me with it. It's like a voyage. I don't think, I don't sit the thing there, and say, 'Now what am I going to put there, to make that colour work with that, or this image? Now what can I put there so that people will think that's got something to do with that?'. It's purely random. It's a series of photographs around me while I work; paint, brushes, images, music, drink, whatever. The thing just sort of develops and I don't check it. Occasionally I check it if it looks like it's really self-destructing. But I try to let it flirt with that, you know, destructive thing.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, getting as close to the precipice as possible.

GARETH SANSON: I suspect that this is why a lot of people have found my pictures not very viable to look at or to get into. Most critics—well, a lot of critics in recent years—have said, well, I've lost my marbles. I'm not painting pictures that they can understand or whatever. On the other hand, a lot of people are prepared to try to get on to that sort of voyage that the picture is sort of taking itself, and the viewer along with. But as far as I'm concerned, that particular voyage depends on how the viewer wants to let it take him.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

GARETH SANSON: My voyage has ended when I painted the picture. I don't go back and look at the picture and try to go along with what's happening in the picture. It's finished then. I do another one. See. I get very cold about the paintings once they're finished. Apart from an odd few that I feel nostalgic about that I have around me from time to time.

JAMES GLEESON: Gareth, one of the problems, it seems to me, to people who work with images today is that we're the heir of an enormous amount of imagery that's come down to us from cultures from the past, and we're bombarded with it. Images everywhere, you know, the modern world, the ancient world, the in-between world, everywhere. Your way of handling this bombardment of images seems to be a totally modern one in that you just lump them all together and that they do make a statement by the fact that they are so disparate and so random, so embracing, so many areas of experience.

GARETH SANSON: Well, it's a melange or whatever.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes,

GARETH SANSON: I don't mind if it's not palatable.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no. You don't make any ethical judgements about the material.

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GARETH SANSOM: I don't make any ethical judgements at all. I from time to time will certainly make aesthetic judgements.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

GARETH SANSOM: But hopefully the aesthetic judgements are made subconsciously as I work just through the many years of me painting.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

GARETH SANSOM: I mean, I would hope that I don't make too many ridiculously crass mistakes any more aesthetically, so that I can get away with some fairly nasty sort of combinations of images if they're aesthetically right. I think if a person does something nasty and vicious or vindictive in his work and it's painted badly then it is crass.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. It's unpalatable.

GARETH SANSOM: It seems to be a sledgehammer approach.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

GARETH SANSOM: You know.

JAMES GLEESON: But aesthetic awareness, is it a conscious one that you exercise or has it now reached the stage where it is just automatic, know when the thing is right or wrong?

GARETH SANSOM: Well, I've got two sorts of aesthetic awarenesses, if you like. One is the one that has to be there as a teacher.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GARETH SANSOM: Because I teach in a way that's completely foreign to the way I work. I couldn't attempt or would want students to try to understand at their young age the sort of point I've got to in my work, which is anti all the things I teach them.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

GARETH SANSOM: You see. But they impinge on each other from time to time, where it's a sort of constant fight for me to remain pure to the realist personalist aesthetic thing that I've built up over 20 years, which is defying the normal formal things. But what was the original question with that one?

JAMES GLEESON: Well, whether this aesthetic judgment was a conscious one made on the basis of rules of aesthetics that you've formalised for yourself, or whether it's a subconscious one that you instinctively know.

GARETH SANSOM: I think it's instinctively knowing. It's a feeling that this is right, that this works, you leave it. That you don't pull the tape off or cut into it or change it again. It's right, there's nothing more to do with it. It's a sort of a sense of knowing. I like what Francis Bacon says about this whole area in interviews, the book, *Interviews with Silvester* or whatever.

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JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GARETH SANSOM: Yes, where he talks about it being a trip, a dream thing where in exactly the same way he lets the picture take him and he lets the marks take him. He has a sort of a sense of rightness about it as well, although I don't link up with him any more but at one stage I might have.

JAMES GLEESON: Gareth, the way your describing your work it really is an expression of yourself, isn't it, an autobiographical statement in a way?

GARETH SANSOM: Well—

JAMES GLEESON: Not consciously perhaps. But you're letting it happen, so that you're not consciously controlling it so it must have that autobiographical character.

GARETH SANSOM: This autobiographical thing is a key issue with me because there was an article written by Graeme Sturgeon for *Art in Australia*, December 1977, which said that my work was strongly autobiographical. That it was a sort of a self-purging of the soul and almost on a sort of a therapeutic level. With all due respect to Graeme, I think I reject this.

JAMES GLEESON: Do you?

GARETH SANSOM: I think that on one level my work can be autobiographical but, on the nitty-gritty level, for me it's about making a painting work. The images may have some autobiographical connotations, but that's arbitrary.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

GARETH SANSOM: People tend to read more into those images than I do. They just happen to be the images that for me are important to help me structure the picture in this sort of chaotic way or whatever.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GARETH SANSOM: It's not me saying, 'This is me doing this'. Or 'This is me when I was that', or whatever. I will write things in my work.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GARETH SANSOM: You know, like in this painting over here called *Asylum 1977*, where there is a mesh of tape and on various tapes are written street names. Now, the significance of those street names is that over the four years before this picture was painted they were the four or five or six or seven locations where I had last had intercourse. Now to me that's a sort of a humorous thing, not desperately important. More important to me is that those words, or those tapes, or that part of the structure of the painting looks vacant without the words. The words are necessary to give some sort of agitation to the—

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. So it's a formal decision?

GARETH SANSOM: That's right, a formal decision. But I would have thought, surprisingly enough, in a fairly haphazard way in that those are the first words

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that cropped up into my head. I knew why they were cropping up in my head, so I just put them down. But as far as the autobiographical thing, no-one wants to know why those words are there until I told you.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GARETH SANSOM: So for me, people will read all sorts of things into those words, wonder if they're street names, or names of people or whatever. It's just important to me that those words went down and they were right for the tapes to make the structure of the painting work. Not that I had to desperately say something about the last places I had intercourse. I mean, that's arbitrary.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. So it is in a way autobiographical but it's not the essential point about them?

GARETH SANSOM: Well, it's not autobiographical work.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no.

GARETH SANSOM: I mean, the series of paintings round about that time which were to do with me dressing up as a woman. For instance, people read Graeme's article and people saw the works and because it was me dressed as a woman people were saying, 'Oh, this must be him saying something about him having to be a transvestite for 20 years, and running home from work, getting into drag, and then sitting there watching TV all night with his cup of tea'. Now, you know, people can read into the work whatever they like. But the point was those particular pictures, which were really only over three years or whatever, was a sort of heavy involvement I had with disguise and changing one's identity.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GARETH SANSOM: And other artists have done this, some European artists have done this in performance. Now, because the notorious works I did—or so-called notorious works—were to do with transvestism, people only associated with that one. But there were other disguise works as well where I was dressed as a pilot, where I was dressed as a cricketer, where I was dressed as a wrestler. I mean, they were to do with disguise. But because this was a sort of somewhat notorious issue, this one of a young Australian, ocker Australian, you know, or whatever in Australia, a macho country, you know, you get into drag, you know, there's something about it. That attracted a lot of attention and people read things into the work which I was quite amused about.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes.

GARETH SANSOM: You know.

JAMES GLEESON: Would you regard *Asylum* as perhaps the most important of the three works that we've got of yours?

GARETH SANSOM: By far.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

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GARETH SANSON: I mean, I'm unhappy that you have those two early works because the painting *Leaving that well-known void* was 1966 work, which was really barely scratching out of my formative days.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GARETH SANSON: Perhaps it's an interesting work to have.

JAMES GLEESON: A starting point.

GARETH SANSON: A starting point work, but there are better definitive works of that period that I would have thought—

JAMES GLEESON: Are there?

GARETH SANSON: But unfortunately they're not available. The middle work, which is *Floating frame II* or something or other, was an unsatisfactory work for me. It's the only real flirtation that I've had with canvas painting, spraying the paint, delicate surfaces, aesthetic edges and so on, and it was a really difficult period for me. Finding myself after the sort of whole period of Australia where Greenberg came out, *The Field* exhibition, and a lot of figurative painters suddenly didn't know where they were. The critics were saying they shouldn't be anywhere.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

GARETH SANSON: And they were all rotten old easel painters or whatever, and you can't help but be affected by that.

JAMES GLEESON: Of course.

GARETH SANSON: I was as impressionable as anybody and I thought, 'I've got to do something about my paintings', so I bought canvases and tried out spraying. I'm pleased in a way perhaps that I was supported by somebody in that the work was purchased but it's completely non-representative of really what my oeuvre has been, you know, and where it's been about. The *Asylum* painting is obviously the most important work of the three because it's more to do with where my work's been in my sort—

JAMES GLEESON: More mature phase?

GARETH SANSON: More mature period, I think. I mean, I'm 40. That work was done when I was 37, or whatever, and hopefully what I do in the next 10 years that's a pre-cursor to.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GARETH SANSON: Whereas the others really wouldn't be, I wouldn't have thought.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, they'll only be important if we amass enough work for them to play a minor role in showing how you got to that point.

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GARETH SANSON: Yes, yes. Well, look, this picture *Floating frame* filled a role. I mean, it kept me painting. I was prepared to perhaps go and experiment with something that I really know that I despised and didn't agree with and whatever, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, I think it's interesting that it occurred at that time and was provoked by the climate of criticism and general drift of attitudes at that time.

GARETH SANSON: I was probably also afraid that I was painting myself into a corner as a so-called painter of shocking images and who was always out to shock and so forth. That that was the end of it, you know. That once you were shocked that was Gareth Sansom's painting and whatever. I was conscious of wanting to perhaps paint pictures that didn't shock and that people could sort of find agreeable and whatever. You know, I was sort of corrupting my real views in a way. It took me five years after *Floating frame* to get towards painting *Asylum* and the pictures that came before and after *Asylum* are really much more to do with what I think my work's about. Although, strangely, in relating to what I've said say five minutes ago on this tape, *Asylum* is a strangely formal picture.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes it is.

GARETH SANSON: In the way it's structured, in relationship to say the other works that were painted around that time.

JAMES GLEESON: You've mentioned violence in context of your work. The imagery is often very, well, shocking, disturbing, holding you in a grip when you look at it. Is this a conscious thing? You feel the need to strike out and achieve a very forceful image?

GARETH SANSON: Well, I suppose that I can't deny that I don't find those images shocking.

JAMES GLEESON: You can't? I see.

GARETH SANSON: I can't deny that in some ways I find images of violence, not obviously bizarre hammer movie-type violence with *Dracula* and all that sort, the cliché stuff.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

GARETH SANSON: I'm talking about, say, something from forensic medicine; a face that's been in an accident or some part of a body deformed by a disease or whatever. Now, I think people generally would find this stuff fairly unpalatable and whatever. But I'm not using it because people find it unpalatable and I know it's going to affect them emotionally. I'm using it because I find that stuff unusual and different from, say, a Morandi still life. I'm not being cynical about Morandi, but about the normal sorts of things that people find beautiful and respond to in their viewing experience. I probably am trying to find a set of things—and usually at random, I emphasise—that just happen to be there because I might be interested in these images. Putting them together that come up with, say, a juxtaposition or a combination or a melange or whatever. That once you've gone past the initial shock at whatever each particular image and its connotations are, the combination of them is an aesthetic whole or rightness that transcends the literalness of each little, you know, each little image. It's sort of a battle in a way

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to take something out of its context of horror, or whatever people usually associate it with, and put it in a new environment, the so-called aesthetic or environment of beauty that one associates art with and make it work. You know, and that's a thin line that one balances, because if you can't make it work it's going to look cheap.

JAMES GLEESON: In a way you're disassociating the image from the implications of the image, you know, a diseased deformation or something has a sort of physical connotation which you divested of by placing it in this new context.

GARETH SANSOM: Well, also I'm not conscious of that connotation.

JAMES GLEESON: You don't think about it.

GARETH SANSOM: I mean, I'm looking at that as an image.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. You're not making any judgement at all?

GARETH SANSOM: Not at all.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

GARETH SANSOM: Not at all. I mean, in '66, round about the time I was painting *Leaving that well known void*, that whole exhibition at Gallery A in Melbourne and Gallery A in Sydney, was generally an exhibition about First World War fighter planes and Manfred von Richthofen and Werner Voss and fighter aces and so on. Not because I wanted to make a statement about war or violence or whatever, but it was a sort of a boyhood worship, *Boys Own Annuals* thing about having a crush on that whole sort of magic of men flying. I liked those images. You know, but once I use the images, or when I was using the images, it was the significance of the image for the work, not the literalness of 'Oh, he's a flyer, he's in the First World War' or whatever.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, you've mentioned, you know, several phases of your work where a certain kind of imagery or concern has dominated. Do you find that things do tend to work for you in cycles like that, the interest in the flying machines and flying men of the First World War, the transvestism and so on. Have there been other phases where certain imagery has dominated?

GARETH SANSOM: Probably I could sort of roughly split it this way. That the transvestism thing was an early interest and that is beyond my involvement, dressing up and so forth. It was an early interest in as far back as, say, Lee Gordon Sound Lounge and the Jewel Box in Sydney and the Purple Onion and all that sort of stuff was just a fascinating and strange thing that I was interested in and it tended to rub off in the work a bit. The sort of interest after that was the flying machines and the men and the flyers and so forth. But again I emphasise not in a literal sense.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no.

GARETH SANSOM: I was interested in those images in the work beyond their literalness. Then after that it was probably an interest for a year or two in disease and cancer especially because it was something that is still not mentioned. I

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mean, people still don't want to talk about it. But in '66 you certainly didn't ever want to talk about it. I seem to remember that one critic unnamed walked out of a South Yarra gallery of a show of mine when he saw what he thought it was about. But that is he was side tracked by that image. He didn't look beyond the image to the painting the image was in. Perhaps I'm being a bit perverse in using some of these images but I think the person has to get past certain problems he has to enjoy the work.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, you're using images without making judgments based on moral or aesthetic or other kinds of grounds

GARETH SANSOM: Absolutely. Absolutely. Then after that it was this sort of void of abstract expressionism and trying to sort of work out where I was, in fact. Then after that, leading up until the last five years, was a re-exploration of transvestism but rather than use borrowed photographs I thought to myself, 'Why not do it myself?'. Then it has an extra sort of significance in that the person dressed as a woman in the work looking out at the viewer is the artist himself.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GARETH SANSOM: And they know it's the artist. Well, they think it's the artist, so it has another connotation itself.

JAMES GLEESON: These were collages?

GARETH SANSOM: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GARETH SANSOM: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Collages come through a lot of your work. Not in these two earlier ones.

GARETH SANSOM: No.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

GARETH SANSOM: But not that much in this work, although there's some.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GARETH SANSOM: Then after that, it sort of exhausted me really putting on makeup for an hour knowing I was only taking photographs for 10 minutes.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GARETH SANSOM: Very boring. But, I mean, it served its purpose.

JAMES GLEESON: The other disguise themes that you used?

GARETH SANSOM: Well, cricket was a strong one. Getting dressed up as a cricketer and having some shots taken of me bowling. Because I used to play cricket, so it was a sort of important thing to me. But those pictures didn't end up

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looking or seeming important because they didn't have the so-called or presumed emotional charge that the transvestite once did because of the strong repulsion that a lot of people have, you know, to that. I mean, my mother, you know, saw those works for the first time and thought, 'What's happened to my son?', you know. You know, or 'My god, is this what he's been like all his life?', you know, and so on. Then after that, leading through the transvestite thing I suppose the last thing and that's from, say, '77 up until currently the exploration of the images and the use of the images is to do with my family and my mother and my father. A sort of a nostalgic thing, pictures of me as a baby and so on. Juxtaposed again in a non-literal way into this sort of melange of paint and so on, to still try to make a picture that shouldn't work yet it does. So what I'm on about at the moment are those things.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. You're still using collage very strongly?

GARETH SANSON: I'm still using collage. I mean, I feel uncomfortable with collage and that's why I use it. I mean, I've always felt comfortable with paint and brushes and so on, and am probably quite good technically and could paint in a very formal way if I wanted to, would be totally bored doing it. I make a lot of mistakes with collage because it's such a fugitive sort of area to work in and everyone says to me. I mean, Daniel Thomas saw my last show. It was in my own studio on top of a greengrocers. He said, 'These works are going to fall apart in five years'. I said, 'No, they're not. I've used special covering techniques, and they're just definitely not going to fall apart', but he didn't believe it. You know, I mean they look as though they shouldn't exist because they just look as though they're going to collapse, or fall apart, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

GARETH SANSON: What's interesting though, of course, is that there are a couple of artists around, some who show with Watters and so on, who use materials that are definitely not going to fall apart, and no one seems to mind about that.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no. Do you deliberately make them to look as though they've more or less happened haphazardly and that they could fall apart? Is that part of the technically.

GARETH SANSON: Well, they won't fall apart.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no, I know.

GARETH SANSON: They definitely won't. But I quite like the way that they look as though they might. That people can't be too sure if they buy one of these things it's going last.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GARETH SANSON: I like that sort of feeling about the work because I think it's consistent with the whole way they're made and what works.

JAMES GLEESON: The concept of quality.

GARETH SANSON: That's right. That's right. I think they have to look transitory.

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JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GARETH SANSON: Because I think that's the whole sort of feeling that is generated by these works. Even this more formal one *Asylum* has this belt on it that's not glued on or anything, it's just hanging there. A leather belt up here on a hook.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

GARETH SANSON: Now, people can just take that away. I can see the National Gallery of Australia buying belts every six months.

JAMES GLEESON: Gareth, a word about technique while we're on that subject. You mentioned that you preferred enamels to oils.

GARETH SANSON: There's a typical reason for that.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GARETH SANSON: I like the covering opaque power of an enamel so as you can go straight over the top of something, covering it quickly. Now, the way I work, I like to make changes, severe structural changes. If the thing is looking like it's working in a too normal symmetrical way, I change, it gets a great scythe of paint through it. That enamel has that covering power and it dries in half an hour and I can do it again. You know, with oil paint, I mean, it can take six months to paint. Now, if I was going to use oils the way I use enamels it would take a year to dry.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

GARETH SANSON: Look, I've tried to use acrylics the way I use enamels, but I find them dead, industrial, dry and just sort of empty, devoid of intensity. Mind you, I think enamels are quite hard to work with. I've seen a lot of people work with enamels and I think they just look cheap and nasty. I'd like to think that, although there's a certain flirtation with the cheap and the nasty in my work, the enamels look technically right for what I'm trying to do.

JAMES GLEESON: How did you find out about enamels? You mentioned Len French as a possible source.

GARETH SANSON: Well, it was Melbourne Teachers College where I was doing this TPTC course and some sort of excursion or whatever to the Beaurepaire Centre Melbourne University. There's a large mural there by Len French at the swimming pool or the recreation area or whatever, a curving thing was done in Dulux high gloss enamel. That was good enough for me. I went and bought 10 tins and tried them out for about, I don't know, six months, painting terrible things but just finding out about the medium, finding out the things you can't do with it. Finding out eventually in the last five years that the best results with enamel I use very expensive sable brushes, not hardware brushes.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GARETH SANSON: Because you just don't get hairs or things floating around. You know, so those are the sort of technical thoughts that I have had—that I

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shouldn't admit—to get the things to work the way I want them to work. But Len French was the first technical influence on me. Before that it was a box of oil paints that I bought, you know, in Dean's of all places in Melbourne, and it was a pallet with a hole in it and two little tins, one with linseed oil and one with turps. I didn't know what the linseed oil was for so I just used to fiddle around. I mean, I had no idea, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, is there any special kind of enamel that you use now, or is it still Dulux?

GARETH SANSON: Well, I think there are two types of enamels and I use both for different purposes. I use a Dulux for covering power, because of its opacity, and I use permaglaze because it's the opposite. It hasn't got covering power, so that you can see the paint come through underneath it. Also they've got a nice range of exotic lollypop type colours. Like in this painting over here on the wall *Untitled 1975*, all those lollypop type colours you can't get in Dulux enamel.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GARETH SANSON: Whereas every other colour in that is Dulux enamel. But that painting—it's a bit hard for the tape recording because the people who are going to hear this tape can't see the painting.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

GARETH SANSON: But it's interesting, that painting is all-acrylic under painting.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GARETH SANSON: So it's technically quite secure.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GARETH SANSON: You know, I wouldn't ever put enamel straight on to canvas. I won't do things in layers that are technically not viable. I mean, that is sound acrylic underneath with enamel on top.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GARETH SANSON: And in my collages everything is set down with PVA, then enamel and whatever. I mean, the layers are right. I mean, it's not water on top of oil; it's always oil or enamel on top of water, and so on.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GARETH SANSON: I mean, I don't make those sort of mistakes.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no, no. Gareth, do you work with your enamels on canvas usually, or hardboard?

GARETH SANSON: Since the painting *Asylum*, which was the last major painting on hardboard, I've been working exclusively on cardboard.

JAMES GLEESON: Cardboard?

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GARETH SANSON: Which is a veneered layered cardboard called crescent board. It's veneered or layered. I'm not quite sure how to describe it technically. But I use it because it's the most permanent cardboard you can use. I mean, it's just not going to fall apart like cheap cardboard or strawboard or whatever.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. It won't chip or break.

GARETH SANSON: It's going to last probably, it's going to last longer than masonite is going to last. I mean, masonite was probably invented in the forties or whatever, so we don't know how long masonite is going to last.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

GARETH SANSON: And a lot of paintings in Australia have been painted on Masonite.

JAMES GLEESON: I know.

GARETH SANSON: So I'm conscious of my pictures wanting to be around, although I want them to have this look of falling apart. I'm conscious of them wanting to be here in 500 years time.

JAMES GLEESON: Good.

GARETH SANSON: Now, that's important to me.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, it is. Of these three then, you mentioned that *Asylum* is painted on hardboard.

GARETH SANSON: Yes, that's on masonite.

JAMES GLEESON: What about the other two?

GARETH SANSON: The middle painting, *Floating frame*, is on glue sized linen. It was not gessoed and the brown linen comes through quite frequently. The *Leaving that well known void* was a mixture of oil paint acrylic and just some enamel. That's mainly oil, that painting.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GARETH SANSON: On acrylic prepared masonite. So masonite, masonite, and linen.

JAMES GLEESON: Linen.

GARETH SANSON: But the vast majority of my work since 1959 would be on masonite, some canvas and in recent years, say, the last five years, last four years, a lot of cardboard.

JAMES GLEESON: Crescent board.

GARETH SANSON: Crescent board it's called, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Good. We've got one lithograph of yours, 1969 *Untitled*.

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GARETH SANSOM: Yes, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: (inaudible) with hat.

GARETH SANSOM: Sorry?

JAMES GLEESON: A man with hat.

GARETH SANSOM: Man with hat, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: That's only a descriptive thing. You didn't give it a title?

GARETH SANSOM: No, I think I didn't title that work. Look, it was an opportunity to do my first lithograph and it was with Janet Dawson at a workshop that Gallery A set up I think in '66 or seven or eight. I'm not sure when they did that but it was at a storeroom or something about 100 yards from Gallery A. Powditch was working there and Janet was working there and they had a couple of technicians. It was mainly for Gallery A artists and I was a Gallery A artist then. I think Guy Stewart and I went up and did a lithograph each. It really was a finding out experience for me.

JAMES GLEESON: Your only lithograph?

GARETH SANSOM: No, I've done some since. I've done some since, now that I've really in the last couple of years done several editions of lithographs, printed by John Robinson who prints Fred Williams' lithographs. They're more serious. I don't want to be cynical about this work, because I'm pleased that it's part of the collection or whatever, but it really was a finding out lithograph. It was my first.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GARETH SANSOM: I didn't know anything about the medium at all. So as far as I was concerned then it was drawing on a prepared plate with a crayon. That was it, a drawing, and it really was a very strong, surprisingly enough antipodean image. You know, a Blackman, Boyd, Perceval image with a Baldessin hand.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GARETH SANSOM: I think back about it nostalgically but I don't think it's very important work.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. It was drawn directly on to the plate? Stone or zinc?

GARETH SANSOM: No, a plate. A zinc plate. A prepared plate.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GARETH SANSOM: The only, I think, technical experimentation with that print was we printed it on gloss paper, which is not usual. You usually print any print on an opaque surface. This was printed on some very glossy almost cardboard thickness paper, which gave a surprising feel to it, because all the white areas were shining.

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JAMES GLEESON: I see. Now, you've mentioned several editions you've done since. Where were they done?

GARETH SANSON: Well, John Robertson was working with Technisearch, RMIT and Technisearch worked with Olsen and Blackman and Fred Williams and several other people in 1976, '77. Then John Robinson, George Baldessin and Less Kossatz then started Dracma Press in West Melbourne. My prints were done with Technisearch.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GARETH SANSON: My next press, 1980, will be done with Dracma press.

JAMES GLEESON: Dracma Press.

GARETH SANSON: Probably in February. But printmaking's not my medium.

JAMES GLEESON: It isn't?

GARETH SANSON: I think, to be honest, it's a way of probably letting some young people especially have access to, say, purchasing my work who couldn't afford to pay what I think the major works are worth.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

GARETH SANSON: I always liked the idea of someone like a student, who really does respond to the work, who could never afford to buy a painting, having something like a lithograph or whatever. That's the reason. I'm not doing it for the money.

JAMES GLEESON: So you're not really a—

GARETH SANSON: I'm not a printmaker. I'm not a printmaker.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

GARETH SANSON: There's an etching behind me that I did, and I enjoyed doing it. But I like to have—

JAMES GLEESON: Is that your only etching?

GARETH SANSON: Yes, that's the only edition of etching since art school. Seventy-five, that one.

JAMES GLEESON: Any screen printing?

GARETH SANSON: No. No. The thing about my work is that I want a direct response to me picking up the implement and drawing, and that's going to be the mark. I don't like working on a plate and then having to have the plate printed. You know, second-hand as far as I'm concerned. I want to have direct response. I want to cut into it, or pull off or whatever, and that what I'm doing is going to be the end result on the work.

JAMES GLEESON: Immediacy is important.

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GARETH SANSOM: That's right, absolutely. I don't want to have to come back a day later and print it or whatever. I want to see how it's going to look now. If it doesn't work, try something else, you know, which you can't do with a plate if you make a mistake.

JAMES GLEESON: No, of course.

GARETH SANSOM: That's it. My paintings, or my collages, tend to be the result of many mistakes. The whole thing about those mistakes give the picture its feel.

JAMES GLEESON: Density.

GARETH SANSOM: You know, a certain feel of over-painting, correcting and so on, I could never design a work that went from A to B.

JAMES GLEESON: So that the work happens as you go along?

GARETH SANSOM: That's right. I've got no idea—

JAMES GLEESON: You never start with drawings, a preliminary sketch?

GARETH SANSOM: No, never. Never, never.

JAMES GLEESON: It all happens on the canvas or on the board.

GARETH SANSOM: Yes. Sometimes I draw on the thing.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh yes, yes. But a preliminary study?

GARETH SANSOM: No, never. It's a blank surface and I go in there cold.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GARETH SANSOM: Sometimes drunk, but cold, and have no idea what's going to happen.

JAMES GLEESON: So it all happens on the surface as it goes along.

GARETH SANSOM: Sometimes the work goes back 15 years in imagery.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GARETH SANSOM: But I don't mind, I let it happen. But generally, when I see 10 or 15 works or whatever, I can get the gist of what's happened with it. You know, stylistically.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GARETH SANSOM: But I can't tell that just with one work. I have the works around me but I don't try to make the work consciously like the others so there's a conscious style or stream, it just happens. If I'm hot, I'm hot, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

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GARETH SANSON: At the moment I'm not hot in the studio.

JAMES GLEESON: You're not working at the moment?

GARETH SANSON: I'm working in the studio but it's very hard.

JAMES GLEESON: Is it?

GARETH SANSON: It's very hard. I painted, in the last two years up until May this year, something like 60 works.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh well, yes. I can understand that. It's a big let down.

GARETH SANSON: I was on my knees at the end of that and drained. Because the work did flow, it really was strong and volatile and it kept me going and I wanted to get back into the studio all the time. Now I'm happy to sit in front of the TV with a can, you know, and go into the studio when I dare to, which is most nights but the thing is it's very hard and we all have that.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, of course, that's a normal thing.

GARETH SANSON: I think I'll paint my way out of it, but it's a slow period right now.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes. Well, that happens, I think, to every artist, particularly following a real burst of creative energy. Well Gareth, thanks very much. Is there anything else you'd like to add to the tape?

GARETH SANSON: Anything else I'd like to add to the tape?

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GARETH SANSON: Oh.

JAMES GLEESON: I think it covers the examples we've got.

GARETH SANSON: Only that at age 40 with, I suppose, some sort of reputation and a lot of people knowing my work and my work in a lot of collections, I suspect that when I'm 50 those works won't be the works that people associate with me.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GARETH SANSON: I'm not sure about that. I'm not sure about that.

JAMES GLEESON: Not even *Asylum*?

GARETH SANSON: *Asylum* may still be. Well, I think it's a good work in its own right. I think it stands up as a work. But I suspect—and I may be wrong, because you know, I never plan what's happening—I suspect that the imagery is going to become more anonymous in the literalness of what's been happening with my work. I think that people will—there'll still be photographs, I'm sure.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

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GARETH SANSOM: But the photographs won't be anywhere nearer as emotionally charged.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GARETH SANSOM: They will look quite anonymous, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: Less personal?

GARETH SANSOM: Far less personal, I suspect. That's not a conscious decision.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

GARETH SANSOM: But it's just in what's been attempting, I've been trying to get to work in the studio right now. I can see this happening; that I'm using images that I've never ever used before that I've always found boring.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GARETH SANSOM: Now I'm using images in various combinations that I just would never have considered before. I would have been bored by them before because I haven't got a charge. So, you know, there are going to be different things happening, I suspect, with my work. Positive things, I suspect. Not the winter of my discontent as most, or not most but a lot of Australian painters tend to hit when they turn 40.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

GARETH SANSOM: They tend to rehash their old art for the next 20 years until they die. And sell it all, of course. But, you know, I just don't want to be in the situation where I'm constantly painting pictures that easily sell or become clichés, or whatever.

JAMES GLEESON: Good.

GARETH SANSOM: Okay.

JAMES GLEESON: Thank you very much.

GARETH SANSOM: All right.