

## **JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: ALAN SUMNER**

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Alan, could you tell us, first of all, how you first became interested in screen-printing?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Well, I must give credit for this to a man, an artist named Jack Rule. He's now living in Sydney, I understand. I've lost track of him. But I met him during the war. Jack Rule is the—

**JAMES GLEESON:** How do you spell his name?

**ALAN SUMNER:** R-U-L-E.

**JAMES GLEESON:** R-U-L-E.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Jack Rule. At the time he lived in Melbourne out in the hills, Springwood. Jack drew my attention to two prints. First of all, he told me that he thought that my work and the kind of work that I was doing at the time—

**JAMES GLEESON:** You were painting then?

**ALAN SUMNER:** I was painting.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You were doing stained glass?

**ALAN SUMNER:** No, I was painting in oils.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** I was also doing some stained glass, but painting in oils. We were working for munitions at the time.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah, this is drawing.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Drawing, yes, during the war. The nature of my work, the kind of work that I was doing, Jack said lended itself to silkscreen printing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Now, I'd a little experience in silkscreen printing in a commercial way; very simple one colour printing, printing of price tickets and things like that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** So I knew the process for what it was, but never dreamt of using it as a fine art medium. But Jack thought that I could, if I applied myself to it. He also pointed out, or reminded me, that two prints that had been sent out

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from America, bought in America by Mrs Casey, R.G. Casey, now Lady Casey, were in this silkscreen medium and that they were hanging in the print gallery. So he and I went up to the print gallery, secretly almost, because this has never been done before in Australia, silkscreen printing. He persuaded me actually at least to give it a try. Well now, Jack showed me how to make a silkscreen, and I made two or three frames and stretched silk over them, special silk. In those days—it was during the war—there was nothing available. There was not one solitary thing to do with this particular art form available to us.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I know how bad it was, I remember.

**ALAN SUMNER:** So I was concerned to find out what was needed, and I had to find it the hard way. As I needed something, I made it. I made the bed to print on. I made the screen to print through. I had to then make the colours that were needed. There were no silkscreen colours either available at the time. Now you can buy anything you want.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes. They were difficult times.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes. Now, there was an immense amount of experimentation that had to be got into and now, looking back, I can't understand how I ever took the trouble to go on with it. But something seemed to egg me on. I had to find different sorts of varnishes and printers inks and mix with other things that would give me a short, sticky, and not a running kind of ink to print with.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Either you get quick drying inks, and these were hard to come by. I had to go to friends in the printing trade to get some of their glues, waxes; all sorts of things were gradually accumulated in order to produce the first print.

**JAMES GLEESON:** How did you get on for silk, because that would have been in short supply?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Well, yes, it was very short supply. I had to get that under the counter.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Coupon days.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes, yes, coupon days. It wasn't ordinary silk, of course, it was flour miller's silk.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's very fine now, isn't it?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Oh yes. Of course, you can buy a screen today, there's no problem at all. You just go and buy one already made up for you. But then there was no such thing. So we stretched, Jack and I stretched the first screen on my homemade frame, and from then on I applied myself and I made other screens and of course I began to print. Jack was at my elbow those first days all the time. I have a great deal to thank Jack Rule for.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

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**ALAN SUMNER:** I'd like this to go on record because Jack is an unknown, and to me he's the nearest to a genius that I've ever met in the art world. Yes, completely unknown.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, I've not heard the name.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Well, he's a commercial man, a commercial artist.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** So from then on I began to experiment and got more efficient at it and I was able to eliminate problems and cut corners and so on. Until at last I then produced the very first print, the very first fine art print.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What year was that, can you remember?

**ALAN SUMNER:** That would be in 1945. I was still in the air force. As a matter of fact, I did all the printing in this room we're sitting in now.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Here, sitting now, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes. There was a wall along there then and that door, the door was over there. That door was locked whenever I wasn't in it, in the room. In fact, it was locked sometimes when I was in it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Tell me, how did it get its name, Portsea House?

**ALAN SUMNER:** I don't know. I don't know, because we must have been in the middle of the bush when this house was built.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Really? Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** You see, this is 120 years old. 1858. Melbourne was nothing in 1835.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No.

**ALAN SUMNER:** So that's 13 years later, isn't it, 23 years later? Twenty-three years later.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, just let's identify it for posterity. It's on the corner of Wellington and Easy Street in?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Collingwood.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Collingwood.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes. We call it Easy Wellington.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So this is where the first silk-screens were done?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes, in this house. This room was blacked out because of possible air raids, and I worked right through the night. I was in the air force. I was stationed in Melbourne. I was working as an artist in the air force. I couldn't

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tell any of my friends what I was doing. I came home here and worked like a dog at this silkscreen process. The whole house was covered with silk-screens in various stages, even the beds. The passageways, everywhere, until I built racks to take the prints that were half printed.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** You could not even get timber, you see.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no. I remember how difficult it was.

**ALAN SUMNER:** I wanted lathes and there was no such thing as lathes made now because you had to almost get a permit to get a couple of hundred feet of inch by half-inch lathe. But, anyhow, all this was done bit by bit. The first prints were crude, you know, but we were proud of them because they were unknown, unknown and undone before, never been done before.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes. Was it a technique that had been used much in the world at all before that?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes. The Chinese used it before us. They used it way back in the time when they invented gunpowder, in fact. But their silk-screens—they were not called silk-screens—their stencils were held together with human hair. They glued stencils together and made a pattern and they printed through it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** That was the beginnings of the idea of silkscreen.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** But silkscreen had been used before the war.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, as an art medium.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Not as an art medium, as a commercial medium.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, as a commercial medium, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Simply printing lettering, especially for counter displays. Like Hoadley's chocolates, I remember, were printed with silkscreen. Hoadley's chocolates, I always remember Hoadley's chocolates.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, you were a pioneer in Australia. Were you also a pioneer in the world in the sense that you were developing this technique?

**ALAN SUMNER:** To this extent as far as I know. I've never seen anything since. I hadn't seen anything before, of course, but I've never seen anything since that even resembles the extent to which this printmaking was developed. Now, this went on for some time. I printed a number of prints, a number of designs, and showed them then to my art master and good friend George Bell, who was then dumbfounded at what he saw and urged me to go on. I got a lot of encouragement privately and secretly from George Bell and just one or two other people. But the commercial field was so hungry for ideas at the time that it was

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deemed very necessary to keep it entirely private and secret. So nobody else outside this house except George Bell and Jack Rule and just one or two other people knew that I was working on this thing at all. I did this for three years.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That was leading up to your first exhibition?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes, first exhibition. George Bell and I went to Georges then and saw Haynes, Bob Haynes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh yes, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Who later went to Brisbane.

**JAMES GLEESON:** To Brisbane, yes, and now in Sydney.

**ALAN SUMNER:** He's back in Sydney?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Back in Sydney now.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Well, he took on the show but it was, you know, many months ahead you had to book a place. It was after the war by now and we booked a spot in his calendar. I was working on perfecting other designs and getting enough for an exhibition, of course. I remember that when the exhibition at last went on there was a furore about it and it was quite exciting.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This was the first time there had been an exhibition of silkscreen printing?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes, the very first time, the very first time. I remember going in there just sort of as a looker on, just as a visitor to the exhibition myself, and noticing that commercial artists whom I knew, or knew by sight, were actually trying to look behind the glass to see how it was done. It was quite amusing to see their intense interest in this technique.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Technique.

**ALAN SUMNER:** How on earth was it done? If only they'd asked me, if they had asked me I would have to tell them I didn't know. Because I myself didn't know how it was done.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Because it was a matter of experimentation.

**ALAN SUMNER:** All the time. Each print was different. Each print had a different set of problems. Each print, the problem had to be overcome in a different way.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Sometimes I overprinted and back printed it. I call it over printing and back printing now, but there was no such term.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no. Did you consciously set yourself these problems?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Later on I did.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Choose such themes that would extend the (inaudible)?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes. Oh yes, yes. Later on, as I got more control over the medium then I began to really become involved.

**JAMES GLEESON:** To expand it consciously.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Consciously expand it and to do impossible things and make them possible, you know. So that was part of the excitement of it all.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes. Well, tell me about the first exhibition? What dates were they? You've got your catalogue there, I know, and we must get a copy of that even if we have to borrow that and photograph it.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Well, the first exhibition was at Georges on the 7th May.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Nineteen forty-eight?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Ah, 1946.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Forty-six? That's only a year after you started your first—

**ALAN SUMNER:** Well, I'd been going a little while before I got into the air force.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, had you? Ah.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Jack Rule was not in the air force. We were in civilian life, in the munitions to begin with.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** So I learned from him what I could, or he taught me what I could absorb. Then I worked whenever I was in Melbourne. I then joined the air force a little later and I happened to be stationed in Melbourne, which was a godsend for my printmaking. But George Bell opened the exhibition.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Did he?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes, my first show.

**JAMES GLEESON:** How many prints did you show in that exhibition?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Thirty-four.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Thirty-four.

**ALAN SUMNER:** No, 24.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Twenty-four.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Twenty-four.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Of which we've only got one, two, three, four, five in our collection.

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**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes, you've only got five there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Is it still possible to obtain prints?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Do you have them, or are they—

**ALAN SUMNER:** Well, can I tell you that the first exhibition was, in relation to the day, a great success. I actually made a profit of 150 pounds.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Goodness me.

**ALAN SUMNER:** That was regarded as some profit, 150 pounds.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** In 1946.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** So I very carefully put all that money aside; didn't spend a penny of it in riotous living. I don't think I even had a drink on that money. But I bought better paper and, with the experience that I now had, better raw materials, inks and things.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Were they becoming more available now?

**ALAN SUMNER:** No, not really, no. But I knew more what I needed now, what I could use. If I tell you that I was mixing first quality oil paints, Windsor and Newton's oil paints, a most expensive exercise, with dry colour which I ground on a stone. In stained glass we grind our colour from dry colour.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** So that I was used to this sort of proceeding. I ground dry colour into the oil, Windsor and Newton's oil paint, and other major paints, and Frater's, young Frater, and made various tints and colours and shades and so on. Well, then I was able to use/apply other varnishes and things that I knew were on the market which I hadn't had the nerve to use before.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Or the experience to use before. Then that meant that I was able then, after the first exhibition, to get what later became known as transparencies in silkscreen printing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** And a translucency. These are terms that came into the process later on, but they weren't known at the time. I simply said to myself, 'I would like to get a transparent over ...'. What do you call it?

**JAMES GLEESON:** An opaque?

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**ALAN SUMNER:** From opaque. I was printing in opaque colours to begin with. I would like just to get it a little bit of transparency into this and that and so I then experimented and got the transparency.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So the commercial success for the first show allowed you to go on and develop new techniques?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes, so new techniques and I was able then with more confidence to work, but still secretly. Nobody ever got into this little room that we are in now.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No.

**ALAN SUMNER:** But that show was a complete disaster financially. I used up all my 150 pounds and I didn't make any money at all out of it. The costs gobbled up all the profit.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This was the second show?

**ALAN SUMNER:** The second show.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, that's surprising.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Frames and paper and inks and things. The second show was not at all financially a success. So I was rather hurt about this because they were better prints, everything was better. So I withdrew them. You asked me whether I had some copies. I took them off the market then and I sold them only when I was asked for them.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. So it would be still possible for us to complete our collection?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Oh yes, fairly complete. Some I sold out in the first go. But after the first exhibition—I'm not too sure whether it was the last, the first or the second exhibition—we stretched to Sydney and Brisbane and Adelaide with exhibitions, and Ballarat. The national collections there bought one or two for their collection. But it was rather funny in Sydney. Margaret Jaye, is Margaret Jay still in Sydney?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh yes. I think she's still alive but she doesn't have that gallery in Rowe Street, you mean, that one?

**ALAN SUMNER:** I think it might have been the one, yes. Well, Margaret Jaye put on an exhibition for me and it was a little gallery up the top of some stairs, along a terrible flight of stairs, narrow stairs that touched your shoulders on either side as you went up, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Good Lord.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Frank Medworth opened the show in Sydney.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, did he? Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** It was managed by Ann Price Jones.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh yes, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** I don't know whether Ann's still about or what happened to Ann.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What year was that?

**ALAN SUMNER:** That was still in 1946, in September 1946.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** In her gallery, Margaret Jaye's gallery, the very first exhibition that she had ever had in her own new gallery.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What was the address? Does it have it there?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Rowe Street.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Rowe Street. Ah yes, I remember it.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Now, her shop was in Rowe Street.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Well, the gallery was opposite.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah yes, upstairs.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Upstairs. I remember being up there and a very anxious and nervous exhibitor opening the cases with Margaret Jaye with the prints in them. And women coming up to see the show after it was opened by Frank Medworth, who said some very kind things about it, the women being terribly, terribly disappointed when they got up there to find that it wasn't what they thought. They were not prints; they were not material, dress material. I was completely and utterly insulted at the stupidity of these women who wanted only dress materials, printed with a silkscreen process.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Never heard of other kind of prints.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Different sort of prints. But I sold a few of there. There was enough to—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Cover expenses.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Cover expenses over there. Well, then the next thing then was to produce another show, you know, while the going was good sort of thing. In any case, I had a lot of prints on the move, even then.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Started, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Started, a lot of designs started. Now a new kind of skill, or extra skill, I was able to do the transparency that I was aiming at and the opaque over transparent and backwards and forwards and so on, and so translucency. I produced what I thought was then a better print.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** How many of your prints in both exhibitions were derived from paintings?

**ALAN SUMNER:** All of them would derive from paintings of some sort. Not necessarily from paintings. A number did, of course, because I was initially persuaded by Jack Rule to use my paintings as sources of design. But I always did a painting first. Later on with the idea of making them into a silkscreen eventually, you see. So the paintings were in a way the beginnings of a silkscreen print.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** But they were always designed, there was always a painting, sometimes a watercolour, sometimes an oil. It just depends what I was doing at the time.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, could we go back to the first exhibition and identify some of these that we have in our collection already from that first show? Catalogue number and description or anything you can remember about them.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Well, this was a small sketch that I did at Upwey.

**JAMES GLEESON:** *Chicken coop with tree.*

**ALAN SUMNER:** *Chicken coop with tree.*

**JAMES GLEESON:** What number was that in the catalogue?

**ALAN SUMNER:** That's No. 3 in the catalogue. But I should tell you that these are not necessarily in order of production.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no. They're just the catalogue.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Just the catalogue.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** That's to say the way it was laid out in the gallery. But this print was a late one in this group in the first exhibition in that I was able to print sparingly on the paper, and a great deal of the paper shows through on that print. The colours are sparing, just three or four primary colours and a lot of very dark, almost black used in the tree and the chickens.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Well, it gives a great lightness, a sense of delicacy to it.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes, yes. I was able to separate the sky from the rest of the picture, the rest of the subject matter. That was sort of an experiment, a successful experiment. That was one of the first of that kind of thing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see, and the subject is in Upwey.

**ALAN SUMNER:** The original of that came from Upwey. That was a watercolour sketch which was not at the time intended. I didn't know about silkscreen at that time when I did the sketch.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** So it was an adaptation of an earlier watercolour. This was a picture that was actually painted during the war, and it's a *Windsor Street scene*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's Windsor in Victoria?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes, Windsor in Victoria. The back corner that you see there is actually the Prahran Technical School as it is today. It wasn't then. I painted this picture in the company of Newton Hedstrom, who's a Sydney artist. Do you know Newton at all?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** We were both in the air force stationed in Melbourne and we went out painting the streets of Windsor. We were stationed down in that area.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What's its catalogue number?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Its catalogue number is No. 10.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No. 10. Was that early, middle or late in the sequence?

**ALAN SUMNER:** That was a late one in the sequence, late one in the sequence. I think none of these that you have actually were early in the sequence.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Because this exhibition that you have, this collection that you have, came from one exhibition and they were selected. They were the best of both the earlier exhibitions. Best of both catalogues. So that would be a late one. That *Windsor Street scene*, there's some of the effort there, the beginnings of transparency. The sky, I've used some transparent inks in the sky to get luminosity, and opaque inks in the ground, in the street, to give a sense of solidity in the street.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. Now, *Two nudes seated*.

**ALAN SUMNER:** *Two nudes seated*. This was the very first, not the first experiment but the first in colour of figure, the use of the figure in a silkscreen. One of the things that I was emphatic about was that I would not use any photographic medium in this. They all had to be hand done, so to speak. There was in existence a photographic process in which they could use a sensitizer, and they do today of course, you sensitise silk.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah yes, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** What's the term? Sensitized protection of the silk. Paper, sensitized paper, which they adhered to the silk and washed out the parts they wanted to print. But this was all printed through apertures in the silk. Actually painted there, the part that has not been printed has been painted out by hand.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see, yes.

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**ALAN SUMNER:** The part that is printed has been left open. So it was very difficult. It was a back to front thing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's No. 11 in the catalogue?

**ALAN SUMNER:** No. 11. This was the very first print that was bought. It was bought by Clive Turnbull, *The Herald* art critic.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That must have set the seal of approval on it.

**ALAN SUMNER:** And that set the seal of approval. He was the first man to see the show, first outside—you know, the critics came first—and he bought that. Once that was bought by Clive Turnbull I knew that I was on safe ground. Now, this is No. 12, *Christmas morn*, and this proved to be a very popular print, that. Once again this is at Upwey, and once again it is an adaptation of a painting, an actual painting. But with the process of silk-screening you've got to broaden the—there was no such thing as a fine line in a silkscreen printing, for example. So the lines here, the fences and the railway track and the tree trunks and things like that, have to be broadened. Then other compensations had to be made and so the print itself had to be redesigned from the painting to suit the process.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. Yes, yes. When you say it was popular, what sort of edition would you make of these? Any limited number?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Well, I set out. Paper was very scarce.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Paper was frighteningly scarce. Some of the paper I used I cut up from a roll of paper. You know, I bought a roll of paper and cut it up. But I started off usually with around about a hundred prints.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** I eliminated as I went along and I think there are no prints more than about 36.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** But this particular one I think, oh, there are 40 in that one. Forty of *Christmas morn*. So 36 to 40 was all I—but 40 was considered a big number. But I got a bit fussier after a while, a bit more selective, and in one or two prints I got right down to about eight or ten out of a hundred to start with.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Is that so?

**ALAN SUMNER:** That would be sort of off register or where the ink was a bit tacky or it had bled a bit or something like that, you know, or I got a finger mark on it. So that was eliminated and thrown away.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Goodness me. So it did become very selective after a while.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes. This one is—

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**JAMES GLEESON:** *By South Wharf.*

**ALAN SUMNER:** *By South Wharf, No. 22* in the first catalogue. That was a picture that was painted at the beginning of the war, just before they clamped down on security of the wharves. Painters weren't allowed down at the wharves after a while. This is about the last day or two before you were forbidden anywhere near the wharves. It was painted during the war, the very early part of the war, and that was down near the loading docks of South Wharf. But that again had to be redesigned to suit silk-screening. The gradations and subtle changes of tone in a painting can't be done in silkscreen.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no. It's a different technique, so a different method.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Completely different. It's more like a large mosaic of colours.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes. Did you find that a difficult transition to work from the painting, or did it come fairly easily?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Well, none of it was easy. Nothing that I have ever done as an artist comes to me easily. But it was interesting.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** It was a challenge. That's the thing that I suppose kept me going on those things, the challenge. None of them were easy.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No.

**ALAN SUMNER:** But to make that sky recede behind the horizon line there in printmaking was a bit of a triumph, you see.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** You could do it with a brush.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes. No problem, no.

**ALAN SUMNER:** No problem.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Alan, you obviously went on straight when you'd finished the first exhibition working for your next exhibition

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Because you were clearly interested in the technique. How many years elapsed between the first and second exhibition?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Only a couple of years, two or three years.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So that the second exhibition represents your achievement in the medium over a period of two or three years.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes. I think the total number of years that I was printing would be about six years.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Is that all?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And you never went back to it after that second exhibition?

**ALAN SUMNER:** No, I got thoroughly discouraged with the end result from the public response, and I'd used up the enthusiasm. You know, it took a tremendous amount of effort to print.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, I believe it.

**ALAN SUMNER:** And the concentration and doing nothing else all the time, you know. I became almost like a hermit in the house, in my own house. If visitors came, you know, and you were in the middle of printing and you couldn't just tell them what you were doing or show what you were doing, and the ink was going to dry out while they were here. You know, it's very upset.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes. So I can see the problems.

**ALAN SUMNER:** But anyhow it got to the point where I seemed to have done all that I could do at the time.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** You will appreciate it that when these were done there was no such thing as the abstract printmaker.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Abstract designer hadn't been thought of at that time, except by leadlight designers.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Jock Frater and myself making lead lights, you know; Mondrian did a bit. But the idea of the abstract print as is now common, hadn't even been dreamt of.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no. I see that.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Nobody was interested in the discipline that was required to make prints like this. Indeed, I haven't seen anybody do it since.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no.

**ALAN SUMNER:** I don't know of anybody that's done it. Margaret Preston did a little bit of flower print making.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, they were mainly woodcuts and linocuts, I think. Did she do silkscreen too?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Well, I thought that she did, but perhaps there were only woodcuts and linocuts.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** As far as I know they were, plus some monotypes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Oh well.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I don't think, to my knowledge, I don't recollect any.

**ALAN SUMNER:** No. Well, perhaps I was wrong there. (inaudible) second exhibition.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Second exhibition, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Nineteen forty-eight.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Again at Georges Gallery?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Back in Georges Gallery, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Robert Haynes still there then?

**ALAN SUMNER:** No, Robert Haynes had gone.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Had gone in '48, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes, and I forget who was the manager then.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What were the dates of the show? Can you remember?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes. It was the 3rd to the 12th of November 1948. I continued on from the 24th print. I called this, the first of this exhibition, No. 25, and I ended at No. 46.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** So that's 21 prints in that lot. But these, I think, were a much better bunch of prints.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, they're admirable, yes. I think that still life flower piece, is that the only one? That's the only one I've seen of yours of that kind of subject?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes. That's the only still life that I did in silkscreen. That was an exciting experiment too, but an experiment in design actually. It was quite thrilling to do it, to get the oranges and whites and off-whites just to talk to one another by means of a silkscreen, you know. It was a very difficult thing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** An enormous technical achievement.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes. All the time I was concerned with colour too. My interest in glass makes it easy to understand, having an interest in colour when it comes to painting and designing silkscreen.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Was it perhaps your interest in glass and the translucency of glass that turned you to looking for a way of getting translucency in your silkscreen printing?

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**ALAN SUMNER:** Well, I don't know. It might have been an unconscious thing, but it certainly wasn't a conscious thing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** I'm very fortunate that I'm able to cut off one from the other when I'm working. If I'm working in stain glass, that's it, I'm working in stained glass. I'm not thinking of watercolour or anything else. I'm thinking of the problems of stained glass.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** But I suppose there's an overflow would occur.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It would seem likely, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** So the idea of making colours—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Luminous.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Luminous and speak to one another, and interesting together and live together, that would become very important in every aspect of one's production, I suppose, painting and silkscreen.

**JAMES GLEESON:** *Flowers and a lamp*, what number was that in the catalogue, Alan?

**ALAN SUMNER:** That was No. 27 in the second catalogue.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** This also was at an exhibition at Georges.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It wasn't successful? That surprises me.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Oh, the exhibition was wonderfully successful from the press.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, but not financially?

**ALAN SUMNER:** But financially I didn't get the returns that made it—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Isn't that surprising?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes, it's amazing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Because they seem to be, you know, technically in every way a development on (inaudible).

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes. Well, I suppose that there were more exhibitions about at the time and so on and people were short of money. It was '48, you see, 1948.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, end of '48.

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**ALAN SUMNER:** End of '48, beginning of '49. By the way, Clive Turnbull wrote the foreword to this.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Did he? Oh well, he was committed. Yes. Good. Well, we certainly must get copies of those catalogues from you if we can.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Well, I probably will have them about.

**JAMES GLEESON:** If not, if we could perhaps borrow them and have a photograph made, because they're important for us to have such historic documents in our collection.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes. Well, it would be interesting. I hope that I have got some of these about. I kept a number of things.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Good.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Now this one, this print was painted as a picture for that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** *Macedon Church.*

**ALAN SUMNER:** Was painted at Macedon itself, up at Mount Macedon.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** The general design of that picture seemed to lend itself to a print, making of a print. Now, the picture and the print now don't resemble one another very much.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** You know, the redesign. I should have got these out in colour, I suppose. I've got copies of these in (inaudible) there; could talk about them in colour. Can you turn that off for a moment?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Well, now we've got the actual print in front of us we can look at the colour.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes, you'll see that the intention there was to get some kind of movement up into the picture from the bottom upwards through a series of reds and shades of reds and grey reds and so on. I wanted to get some kind of a silhouette against a transparent sky behind there. The next problem, of course, was to get the right kind of red in the church itself and not too blatant a red, and the right kind of grey red at the bottom for the ground, for the street, where the figure is, to sort of compensate for the brilliance of the red in the brickwork. Sort of a balance.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Tell me, how on earth do you get that gradation in the sky? Now, I know in wood print, woodblock printing you can get it by rubbing. How on earth do you get it in the sky?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Well, by putting on two lots of colour onto the screen itself at the same time and then manipulating your squeegee in a certain kind of a way, which I don't know how to describe to you.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** A manual technical—

**ALAN SUMNER:** A technical thing, yes, yes. Like some men can handle a chisel better than others.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It's an extraordinary effect and you don't expect it in a silkscreen.

**ALAN SUMNER:** No, no. Well, you see, probably all the reds were printed at the one time in that picture.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** All the actual reds. But then the overtones of greys and grey-greens and things, they would be the translucent colours over the top of it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Or perhaps they were put on first and the red over the top of it. I just forget about that now.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The sky would go in, what, at the beginning or at the end?

**ALAN SUMNER:** The beginning; in this case the beginning. But that isn't the case all the times.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No.

**ALAN SUMNER:** But in this case the sky's would be the beginning. I should say, in this case, in this particular case—I don't think we can go into every print like this—the lights in the fence and in the ground, on the floor plain, the ground plain, and in the sky behind the tree, that would be all printed at the one time, and the other would be superimposed on it. So the whole thing would be built up bit by bit.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. It is a complicated technique, isn't it?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes. There was no way that one could set out—it would be very difficult to teach anybody how to do it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes. You didn't teach?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Not this. I taught—

**JAMES GLEESON:** At the Melbourne Gallery?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Melbourne Gallery, yes, that's correct.

**JAMES GLEESON:** But you didn't teach silkscreen?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Not silkscreen, no, no, no. It wouldn't be difficult to teach silkscreens.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, but these finer points.

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**ALAN SUMNER:** But this particular process that I developed, it would be very difficult to pass it on to anybody. In fact, if I had to do some printing today I would find it very difficult. I'd have to go back myself in time.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And relearn.

**ALAN SUMNER:** And relearn, yes. Well, I notice that it's red on the front of the green in that tree there, so the red must have gone on late in that print.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Tell me, was there marked differences in printing one from another in an edition?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Not marked differences, but there are differences, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Slight differences.

**ALAN SUMNER:** It is usual in print making to give a number and a series number. Well, to be absolutely honest, if you're honest with silkscreen printing, that it is not possible, in this process anyway, because you go back, you might pick up No. 3 print and give it a little touch up here or there and so on.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** So there's no continuity at all. Not like etchings or even like modern silkscreen printing where they only have two printings, or one printing even. You don't very often see the multi printing today. So they can, they're can say this is the third print that I made out of 10 or 20.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes. In other words, the state of the print changes too as you touch up and alter as you go along?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes, yes. But they mostly come out pretty close to the same, but none of them are exactly the same as one another.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. Yes, that's interesting.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Everyone is a little different to the other. Sometimes when somebody comes to buy one or to select one, I'll give them a handful of the same print, half a dozen of the same print, to pick the one that they like the best. Sometimes the green's a little intense or a little darker than others, or the reds are or so on.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It allows that kind of fluctuation and variety that gives interest to a series.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes, yes. Now, I haven't got all these out. I just showed you what I could there. But this print, now some of these are historically interesting. This bridge is gone now and this is the bridge across the Bell Street Bridge, the Bell Street Bridge across the Darebin Creek and that was a deliberate painting made for a print.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What number was that in the catalogue?

**ALAN SUMNER:** That's *Old Bell Street Bridge*.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Thirty-one?

**ALAN SUMNER:** No. 31.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. Good.

**ALAN SUMNER:** That went into the exhibition and I'm glad that Canberra has got that because it represents a departure from the others in style. I can still put my signature on it, but there's a little bit of printmaking consciousness about that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Now, this was one, you were telling me, that you were working on on a painting expedition with George Bell.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Well, I went out with George Bell after the war, down the Strzelecki Ranges. On the way back through Tooradin we stopped and saw this scene and we decided to paint, which we did. Old George was very keen by this time to get home. He'd had me, I suppose.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You'd been away a fortnight?

**ALAN SUMNER:** We'd been away for a fortnight, more than a fortnight, and we got lost a couple of times and he was in his old car. So he went off to tell his wife that he was coming home. While he was away I was reluctant to leave this lovely spot. It was the best spot we'd had in all the fortnight. So I turned around to make another sketch looking in another direction and I heard this deep cross voice at my shoulder telling me that he'd already told his wife that we were coming home, and here I'd started another picture. So he was very annoyed with me. So I had to pack up there and then with a wet picture and shove it in the car just to get George home. He was very fond of his wife, Edith, and very anxious to get back. He'd been away longer than he intended.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This is *Low tide*.

**ALAN SUMNER:** That's called *Low tide Tooradin*, and it's No. 36 in the catalogue.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Good.

**ALAN SUMNER:** This is a painting that I made at Ferntree Gully, the little train terminus at Ferntree Gully, just a little while before all this was chopped out and the new electric train was put through up to Belgrave.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** This is as it was at the time. Now, the picture was so complicated as a picture that it had to be completely redrawn at a different size—it was a much bigger picture than this print—had to be redrawn, redesigned to suit the process of printmaking. In order to make the—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, and exaggerated light.

**ALAN SUMNER:** I had to exaggerate the lights behind the forms in order to make the forms themselves register as groups of forms.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** I see, yes. I can pick out the—

**ALAN SUMNER:** Separate masses.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** It was that aspect of this particular setting that gave me such a great deal of interest. Not the fact that it was a little train; that had nothing to do with it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No.

**ALAN SUMNER:** I didn't know then that they were going to cut it all out.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no.

**ALAN SUMNER:** It had no historic interest to me at all. But the way those Tudor-like forms reared themselves up left and right was of great interest to me, and the way the train tracks went hither and yon. So it was a problem to try and get the print to register different road levels and track levels and so on.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It's a fine print, I think.

**ALAN SUMNER:** This was the last print that I made actually.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was it?

**ALAN SUMNER:** But it wasn't the last in the catalogue.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no.

**ALAN SUMNER:** It was No. 34 in the catalogue.

**JAMES GLEESON:** But it was actually the last one you ever made?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Last one I ever made, yes. And the most complicated. It was quite a complicated exercise.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You tell me that the print we have is not as good a quality as the one that you have here?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes, I'd like to change that. I'll let Canberra have a better one.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Even if I have to give them that one up there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, that's a particularly beautiful one.

**ALAN SUMNER:** You know, I'd rather Canberra have the best.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

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**ALAN SUMNER:** The one that I sent up there went up, the whites—see, there's some handwork on this print.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** The handwork was not done with as much subtlety as I would like to have done it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. What do you mean handwork? Once the print is printed, you touch it up?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Not often, very rarely. You know, it's usually left as it comes off the press, off the screen. But in this particular case some of the whites needed just a little enhancing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** In the print that Canberra has it seems to me that the whites are a little bit raw. So that's what I want to change.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, that's very kind of you and I think we should represent you at your very best.

**ALAN SUMNER:** This was done also with George Bell at Macedon. George Bell was my art master and we were very good friends. You know, we came from master student to become good friends. I remember driving up to Macedon when he was very ill and he rested up there and I went out painting. This was painted just outside of where we lived for two or three weeks in Macedon.

**JAMES GLEESON:** *Mount Macedon garage.*

**ALAN SUMNER:** Mount Macedon, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What number was that in the catalogue?

**ALAN SUMNER:** *Mount Macedon garage, No. 37.*

**JAMES GLEESON:** Thirty-seven. And that's the colour—

**ALAN SUMNER:** Oh, they're the colours (inaudible).

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes. An orange ground, an orange foreground, with green grass coming in, and this old car seemed to be silhouetted against the very bright background at the time. That was painted as a picture which had to be redesigned for the medium of silkscreen.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Good.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Quite often the silkscreen print, these prints were made from old pictures, other pictures, but they had to be redesigned. This is the same bridge over a creek as the Bell Street Bridge. That's the same creek but from the other side of the bridge or the road. That's all gone now.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** But that was painted as a picture also and redesigned as a print. I haven't got it there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Is this taking too long?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Not a bit, no. Take your time.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Oh, there it is there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah, so it is. No, that's a different one. That's the earlier one, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** That's the picture that I did when George Bell was on the phone.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, goodness me. What's it called?

**ALAN SUMNER:** It's called *Fisherman's jetty*. I don't think it's in this lot.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's not in our collection yet, no. That's not in our collection either, I don't think.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Some of them are not.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No.

**ALAN SUMNER:** A great number of them are not. As many are not as are in it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Now this is the bloke.

**JAMES GLEESON:** *River anchorage*.

**ALAN SUMNER:** *River anchorages*. Now, this is down at Mordialloc and this was painted as a painting, as a picture. I took my students down there from the Gallery School and we painted all round there, and this was my painting for the afternoon we were there. But it had to be readapted and a lot of stuff was eliminated from the painting in order to make the print more exciting. So that all the time I was concerned with the print, not with the place.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Never with the place.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no, no. When you painted the subject, were you conscious of the fact that you really were intending it for a print?

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**ALAN SUMNER:** No, no. I didn't know, didn't. Although I had been making prints at this stage, it never occurred to me that I'd make a print of this particular picture.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** But I later did make a print of it, and again the problem there was to keep the water a flat surface, as water is, horizontal, and to make an interesting pattern of the boats going away from us, diminishing, away from us, and to make the whole thing a lively print.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Which it is. What's its number?

**ALAN SUMNER:** That's *Low tide*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, *River anchorage*.

**ALAN SUMNER:** *River anchorage*, No. 42.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Forty-two. Good. Now *Cabbage patch*.

**ALAN SUMNER:** This is *Cabbage patch*. I did a painting of this out at South Morang and I liked the painting and I thought I could make a print of it. So I went back to the scene, back to the place, and did another sketch. Sometimes I did this if it wasn't an inaccessible place. I made a new sketch with a print in mind, having the painting at the back of my mind also.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** So that was quite a major project.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Any particular place? Can you remember?

**ALAN SUMNER:** South Morang.

**JAMES GLEESON:** South Morang.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes, South Morang. This particular print, I think, is the best print that I produced. That's my own estimation of it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. Well, that's interesting to know that you think that. Is that a good copy of it?

**ALAN SUMNER:** You've got a good copy of it in Canberra, yes. That's a very good copy of it. But the way in which the ink has gone on and the tones and the separation, which doesn't show itself in this photograph, seem to me to be the best that I'd done. It seemed to do all that I tried to do in printmaking.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. So in a way it's a climax to the whole—

**ALAN SUMNER:** A kind of a climax, yes. Yes, I didn't do anything better than that, I don't think.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What's its number, *Cabbage patch*?

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**ALAN SUMNER:** *Cabbage patch* is No. 39.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Thirty-nine. So we do have that one? I didn't recognise it in colour. That's *Country railway station*.

**ALAN SUMNER:** *Country railway station*. That's Upwey Railway Station as it was in those days. That's the same fence that you see in *Cabbage patch*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, is it?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes, the same fence as in *Cabbage patch*. That was a painting that was made during the war, but again adapted and made much more dramatic. For example, the sky was nothing like that in the painting.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** The method I used to take the eye from the foreground, the beginning of the picture plane, up into the picture, was much more dramatic than in the picture itself, the painting itself. It's in oranges. The building is orange and yellow, I recall, and the water tank in pale blue and deep blue and black, and the old engine, which is still running up there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Goodness.

**ALAN SUMNER:** But not at Upwey (inaudible). That's the old Upwey Railway Station.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, the number. We didn't get the number of *Country railway station*.

**ALAN SUMNER:** The number of this is No. 38 *Country railway station*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah good. This one?

**ALAN SUMNER:** This is the last that you have up there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** *Man with fishing net*.

**ALAN SUMNER:** *Man with fishing net*, and it is No. 44 in the catalogue.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Good.

**ALAN SUMNER:** That also was a painting but was adapted to suit, readapted to suit the printing process.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** With the printing, of course, there's an enormous amount of simplification has to take place.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

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**ALAN SUMNER:** You would appreciate that, a balance of whites against the greys and so on. In this picture the whites are emphasised a bit more than the actual picture, actual print, as I recall it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, Alan, that seems to cover the prints very well. So far we've only got one of your paintings in the collection. There seems to be a little bit of confusion about its proper title, or the information about it. *Dunkirk beach*, is that correct?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oil on board, or would it be canvas? Can you remember? Anyway, that's something we can check.

**ALAN SUMNER:** It would not be oil on board, it would be canvas stretched on board.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** I very rarely painted just direct on to board.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** If it's so it would be rare, but it seems to me that's a canvas.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Do we have a date for that?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Well, I know when I painted that. I painted that in 1952, '53, '52. The sketch for that was actually done at Dunkirk.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The Dunkirk in France?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes. This is just all that was left of the building in Dunkirk.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** It was just like a lot of, you know, rotten teeth.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. So you went to Europe in the fifties, early fifties?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Fifty, '51, '52 I was over there, yes. I didn't do much painting but I did a lot of beginnings of paintings over there. I prefer to look around.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** It's strange. This photograph has got a little bit of shine on there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It's just a rough (inaudible).

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes. Was this taken off your painting or out of *The Herald*, because they printed it too, and they've also got a shine in there?

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, it might have been taken from that. I'm not sure. So many of our paintings get lent to different institutions, like Government House or Admiralty House or Kirribilli House or The Lodge, and they're sometimes not in the repository at a time when they can be photographed. So this could well be taken from another photograph.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes, it looks as though it might be. Yes, it doesn't matter. Oh, there it is. Oh, there's the shine there, see. No, it's not.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no.

**ALAN SUMNER:** There's the shine there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** At the other side, yes, yes. No. It's certainly not the kind of photograph that we'd use for reproduction. It's obviously just a pretty rough photograph. But can you remember where it was shown?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes. It was shown in the George Bell Group in 1951-52. The exhibition was at—I'm sorry, it was shown first at the Melbourne Contemporary Artists Exhibition at the Victorian Artists Society Galleries in Albert Street, East Melbourne, on the 14th of October 1952. It's called *Dunkirk beach scene*, by the way, not just *Dunkirk beach*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, I'll amend that.

**ALAN SUMNER:** *Dunkirk beach scene*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Good. You've mentioned it was shown first there. Was it shown again?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Oh, I showed it perhaps at a couple of, you know, Rotary shows or something like that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** But that's the only time I showed it in company with my other artist mates.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. Our note here says we bought it from you in January 1967.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes, yes. Dargie bought that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Daryl Lindsay bought it, actually.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Daryl Lindsay.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Daryl Lindsay didn't buy it, but he mentioned it to Dargie. He said that Bill Dargie should look out for it and it was hanging over there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

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**ALAN SUMNER:** And Bill came for it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Now, the other aspect of your work of course is stained glass. How did you come to be interested in that? Who did you study with?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Well, I started in stained glass as a boy of 15.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Did you?

**ALAN SUMNER:** I was William Frater's assistant, and I was his personal assistant for 14 years.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** That was the luckiest break any young fellow could have, any boy could have, to be associated with a man like Frater as his personal assistant for all those years. That introduced me to everything in the art game.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So you really entered art through stained glass, as it were?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Rather than painting, which came later when you went to the George Bell studio?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Oh yes, definitely. Well, I always painted.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** I went to only the Collingwood Technical School to night classes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Then on to the George Bell School; Melbourne Technical School to do commercial art, and other things; Victorian Artists Society to do figure drawing. But they didn't have any classes there, no instruction there, just classes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see, just model (inaudible).

**ALAN SUMNER:** People helped each other and the senior people helped us youngsters. And then to George Bell School.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And you were 14 you said?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Oh no, no. I was in my twenties when I went to George Bell.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, I see. But you were 14 years, did you say?

**ALAN SUMNER:** No, with Frater I was 14 years as his personal assistant.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah, I'm getting mixed up.

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**ALAN SUMNER:** That self-portrait up there, I had to do that to get into George Bell's School.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. What was Frater like as a man to work with?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Well, he was a very volatile man.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was he?

**ALAN SUMNER:** I was lucky enough to catch his eye in the early days, you know. We became almost a father and son relationship really in the early days. He had a son my age.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** We were in the Depression at the time together, and so much of what we did had to be a kind of survival thing. He knew that I took work home in order to keep the cost down and I knew he took work home, and we sort of had a kind of a mutual thing going like that, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. What sort of commissions were they in those days?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Oh well, a tremendous amount of leadlight work.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** People call it stained glass today but the lampshades and things like that, that's not stained glass at all.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No.

**ALAN SUMNER:** That's only leadlight work. The doors that you see in people's houses, the windows, bedroom windows, Transom lights and along the tops of shops and things like that, they're all leadlight.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Even though they've been made in coloured glass. Stained glass is only when it's been painted on by an artist with a ceramic paint, and using stain. But the colour is already there in the glass. So Frater was the stained glass artist of Yencken & Co, and I became his personal assistant, ultimately.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** It's a long story but ultimately I became his personal assistant. When he left I took over his job as manager of the department of Yencken & Co. for a very short while, and later on came out here and worked myself.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Just talk about the stained glass. Were there any commissions or any jobs that you did in the stained glass field that stand out in your mind as being—

**ALAN SUMNER:** In those days?

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**JAMES GLEESON:** At any time. You know, what do you think are your best works?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Oh well, I've done a lot of glass since. But that's, you know, almost another life.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Another lifetime now. But in glass here, I've got a list of it in this catalogue, this latest catalogue. I think that you have a copy of this catalogue up there in Canberra.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** That's the Oliver Plunkett Church. I think he's Saint Oliver now.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** In Gaffney Street, Pascoe Vale. That's an enormous project. That's 1800 square feet of stained glass there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Good Lord.

**ALAN SUMNER:** The whole of the church. You know, the whole place is covered with stained glass. That was quite a project. Took about six years on and off to do that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And you're still working on it, because you mentioned to me when I arrived that you're working on a project at the moment.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Oh yes, I'm still working on the stained glass. Now, St Brigid's Church in Mordialloc, main street of Mordialloc, that's another important bit of glass, I think.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** And St Luke's Church of England in McMahon's Road in East Frankston, that's a window in memory of Dallas Brooks, Sir Dallas Brooks.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** The Governor of Victoria. That's the big window there. All the rest of the glass I did also. St Bede's Church in Severn Street in North Balwyn has also got a lot of stained glass that I've done. North Balwyn Methodist Church is that heavy, inch thick, chunk glass.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah yes, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Now that was done before the ceiling of the National Gallery was done in chunk glass.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was it?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes. The ceiling always gets the credit.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Did you teach at all in stained glass?

**ALAN SUMNER:** No, no, I didn't. I simply didn't want to teach anybody stained glass. It was difficult not to get a commission at all, without having a lot of competitors, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** In any case, to tell you the truth—and I'm serious about this—the youngsters that I was teaching, it was enough to get them to be disciplined artists at all. I was lucky enough to be brought up and tutored in a discipline, the idea of discipline. It was terribly important in my day that every job that you did was done as near as you could to perfection.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Now, there was a change after the war and young people began to find short cuts. Today, of course, we call it modern art. You know, so much of it—you'll agree, I'm sure—has got nothing to do with it at all. Empty, absolutely empty, and certainly empty of any discipline.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. You're quite right.

**ALAN SUMNER:** And that's just a personal thing. So, for example, my very first lecture at the Gallery School when I went there to assist Dargie—

**JAMES GLEESON:** When was that?

**ALAN SUMNER:** That was in 1947. I took over one third, roughly one third of the school. There was Murray Griffin and Bill Dargie and myself.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** I was a very raw and nervous teacher, I can tell you. I had in my class a great bunch of fellows that were ex-commandos and mostly ex-servicemen, see.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** You know, they were very strong and glad to get out of the services. I had been in air force but I was glad to get out of it also. But they were there. My very first lecture I made the fatal mistake of entitling it Disciplines in Art. When I started to talk about this problem of producing a work of art and what was really behind it all and behind the great masters works and so on, a chap came in late. Gerry Dube came in late. I recall saying, 'Are you right there now?'. This is right back in 1947. He came in late and he opened the door, stepped in through the doorway in this room I was in, the big studio lecturing to these people, and he just got the tail end of my preamble which was about discipline. I heard Gerry scream out in a wailing kind of a voice, he says, 'Discipline, discipline. Jeez', he said, 'I thought I was an open slather'. That's what I had to beat down, you see. So as for teaching them stained glass—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. No way.

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**ALAN SUMNER:** There was no way really. In any case, it would have been necessary to set up a great—

**JAMES GLEESON:** School, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** A different sort of studio entirely.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** I just simply was not interested in that extent. But after I left the school—

**JAMES GLEESON:** You went on to become head of the school, didn't you?

**ALAN SUMNER:** I was director of the school for nine years, yes, after William Dargie left. That was in 1953 to '62, I think, I was director of the school. But meanwhile I'd gone to England for a couple of years.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** England and the continent for a couple of years and did a lot of study over there. There was these churches that I've mentioned to you, I did those when I came back, you see.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. That's all work done since you came back?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Here, yes. Well, actually, when I came back I bought out my old department that I'd started in as a boy with Frater.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah yes, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** I first of all brought it out here, because they couldn't be bothered with it in this great glass firm, Yencken & Co., it was a nuisance.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So you set it up here in this office?

**ALAN SUMNER:** I set it up here. I set it up here, and then I bought it. I bought it from them, you see. Bought the kiln and the benches and all the glass and so on and set myself up then.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Giving them a percentage of the orders, which later on I had to cut out.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, Alan, I think that about covers it, unless you can think of anything else that you'd like to put on tape?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Well, such a varied—well, you know, when you come to this sort of thing, one just carries on just—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Talking?

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**ALAN SUMNER:** No, but one had one's life doing whatever has to be done without thinking about it really. But when it comes to put it on tape there's portraiture and silkscreen and landscape.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It's a wide variety.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Stained glass, mosaic.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Mosaic too?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes. Really it's quite—

**JAMES GLEESON:** You've continued so many of the areas. It just does surprise me that you've never continued the silk-screening after that second show. Because it seems to me to be, you know, a major achievement, and you've never felt the urge to go back?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Oh, I've felt the urge, yes, every now and again. But the setup, the setup to re-build the studio that I had at the time. See, I dismantled everything.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Now, to re-establish it all I would need space. Now, I've got space in this building, and it would need for me to subtract myself from other things.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Now, I tell you that in doing the silkscreen that was my total life, except for air force. I had to go to work as an artist in the air force. But from the minute I left the place to come home, I was thinking what I was going to do in half an hour's time, as soon as the bus got me here, you know. I would work sometimes all night and go bleary-eyed back into my section the next day, or nearly all night. So that it was a total kind of contribution.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Commitment during that time.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Commitment, yes. Well, that was what I couldn't sort of get going on again, you see.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no. When you dismantled the studio, was that to set it up as a glass studio?

**ALAN SUMNER:** No, no, it was so we could live in this room.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, I see. Oh, this was the actual room, of course.

**ALAN SUMNER:** This was the actual room, yes, yes. There were all racks along there, shelves along there and racks in here. I pulled down the wall. I had to make the house liveable.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, of course.

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**ALAN SUMNER:** We didn't own it when I was doing the printmaking. We didn't own it. But soon as we got to own it, I had to expand some of the rooms a bit by cutting out some walls, chopping out some walls. So then I dismantled what to me at that time was the least important of my interests.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Activities, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Activities. But I'm still very interested in it. But I just felt I'd done enough, to tell you the truth.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Fair enough, fair enough, yes. You did seem to have explored all possibilities that were open at that time.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Up to the time. Now, I dare say if I went back into it again now, what has been done in printmaking today, well, quite honestly it's a bit empty, isn't it?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Printmaking today. You know, there's no—what is there really? Is there anything emotional in it? There certainly isn't much design about it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Alan, do you see any technical developments in modern silkscreen printmaking?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Nothing that I hadn't done before.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Not a thing. Except that they nowadays use the photographic process.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** See, that doesn't mean a thing to me.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Also I notice artists are using other artists to do their printing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh yes, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** See David Strachan, for example, when he was in Paris, wasn't using the silkscreen process but he was printing other people's work.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** You know, I visited David there and I was astounded that artists had left their work with him to be reproduced as a print.

**JAMES GLEESON:** He'd do the conversion?

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**ALAN SUMNER:** He'd do the conversions. Well, it all became kind of false somehow. It was no longer fair dinkum. Now, that's not a terribly deadly thing, but it's just a bit off putting.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes. I know in etching, oh well, it's a pretty common practice lithography. Picasso didn't do his own much, did he?

**ALAN SUMNER:** No, no, no. All that pottery stuff that he turned out, you know. A plate by Picasso was something that was done by an assistant, you know, using his technique. It's lost. I suppose I'm a bit of purist in that. A puritan, I suppose, in that sort of thing. I prefer to do it myself.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Technically there've been no new discoveries or no great improvements on the techniques that you have.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Not that I've noticed, not that I've noticed; except, of course, to say that all the things that I did by trial and error have been ironed out.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** There are now books printed about it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** By the way, I should tell you that there were two books printed, on the market at the time I was silkscreen printing. They were the only two books in Melbourne and I bought them so that nobody else would see them.

**JAMES GLEESON:** A trade secret.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Trade secret. But they were for the commercial side of silkscreen printing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. Not as an art form?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Not as an art form. I never saw anything, nor have I since seen anything printed on that one. But then, you know, it's become really easy now. You can put a beautiful circle, hand-made circle of red, next to a hand-made ellipse of black with a little bit of touch of green somewhere, and that's a print. You know, well, what does it mean?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Doesn't mean anything to me. I don't know whether it means anything to you. I just simply can't get anything out of it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no.

**ALAN SUMNER:** You know, you ask the printmakers. I mean, I've asked a couple of them when they've had print exhibitions here. I say, 'Now tell me, please teach me, what is there about that particular print that is so important?'. The answer invariably is, 'Now, if you can't see it, there's no good me telling you'.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** So none of the contemporary users of the technique are your spiritual heirs? You didn't teach them?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Oh no, I don't think so. No, I don't think so. I don't see anything like that about it at all.

**JAMES GLEESON:** They didn't learn, or if they learnt they learnt (inaudible)?

**ALAN SUMNER:** No, there was a kind of a generation gap between.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** That is a fact, it really is a fact. From the time these were finished in 1948 there was a sort of an art learning turmoil that was going on. The rehabilitation students were all at art schools.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Back from the war, you know, students, ex-servicemen. A new generation had cropped up after the war and everybody was busy, busy, busy trying to be an artist. Now, a thing like silkscreen printing was a nuisance really, and not much printing was done at all.

**JAMES GLEESON:** For how long was that?

**ALAN SUMNER:** I would say for perhaps six or seven years.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Is that so?

**ALAN SUMNER:** I would think that would be so, except for odd people like Murray Griffin and perhaps a little bit of Eric Thake.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** You know, and that's when they got so well known because they were the only ones doing it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I can't think of anything being done in Sydney at that time in that area.

**ALAN SUMNER:** No, you try and think of it. I can't. There was a real gap. It might have been longer than that. Now, when people then started to be interested again, this kind of printing and this kind of approach to art had changed.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** That was old hat all of a sudden. When I started as a young artist with George Bell we were the avant-garde.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** We were the moderns. We were called the Melbourne contemporary artists, you see.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. So there is that real gap, that generation gap. It's strange that there is that hiatus between, you know, when you finished work and when anything new happened.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes. Then suddenly they started to print and they started to use the silkscreen medium.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Where did that start, in the art school? Was it taught?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Yes. Not so much in the art school but the technical school.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Technical school.

**ALAN SUMNER:** The Institute of Technology.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** In Melbourne we have the Victorian Institute of Technology, The Victorian Institutes of Technology. They set up art schools and amongst their teaching was a lot of printmaking.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. But basically oriented towards commercial work, or as a fine arts course?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Well, the art schools became competitive as art schools and not so much as commercial art schools.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** The teachers were interested in establishing a kind of hierarchy of arts school teaching in technical schools. I remember when I was at the Gallery School teaching, near the end of my time, they were empire building, putting on great numbers of staff in the arts schools.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh yes, yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** So printmaking became part of the course, but it was always a secondary subject. I was an examiner for a long time with the Diplomates and their secondary subject would be printmaking. Once or twice it was stained glass, to my horror.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Were there any later day printmakers, particularly silkscreen printmakers, that you admired, you felt had some qualities that made it worthwhile?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Well, Janet Dawson, she was a student of mine. She won the scholarship when I was at the Gallery School. She went away as an eager young student with the scholarship under her belt. She came back as a printmaker. Now, she did some very lovely—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Silk?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Not silkscreen, no.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Lithography?

**ALAN SUMNER:** Lithography.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, I thought she was mainly lithography.

**ALAN SUMNER:** But she produced some very lovely prints which were aped by the silkscreen printers because they could do it much easily, you see.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** You cut out a stencil. Then later on after I left the Gallery School, the new head of the school, Lenton Parr—not the immediate new head but there was Brack first, then Lenton Parr. Now, Lenton Parr set up a print department at the school. I started on it with a borrowed printing press, which was recovered. It was taken back by the owners back to Melbourne Tech.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ALAN SUMNER:** So there was a lapse of time when the printmaking—we were doing etching at the time at the Gallery School. Just a little bit. You know, one or two printmakers. But the idea of printmaking began to grow as an alternative to painting. Also I think it must be appreciated that there was a dollar in it. You know, you could make money out of printmaking in the early days. They don't make much money today, I don't think.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No.

**ALAN SUMNER:** But the early ones, after perhaps 10 years, they began to cash in on cheap prints, you see. But nowadays, of course, an artist isn't an artist unless he makes prints. It's a part of his trade.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALAN SUMNER:** So there's really is quite a (inaudible), a complete change taken place.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, Alan, thank you very much indeed for that. That's helped us a lot and I'm sure that information will be great value to the future.

**ALAN SUMNER:** Thank you very much. It's been a pleasure.