JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: GUY WARREN

4 September 1979

JAMES GLEESON: Guy, before we start looking at the actual works of yours that we own, could we have a little bit of biographical material? When and where were you born, first of all?

GUY WARREN: I was born in Goulburn in 1921.

JAMES GLEESON: The exact date?

GUY WARREN: Sixteenth April 1921. But the family moved to Sydney when I was probably about six, I suppose, so most of my life I've grown up in and around Sydney, until the war when of course I spent some time overseas in New Guinea and Bougainville.

JAMES GLEESON: You were in the army?

GUY WARREN: I was in the army, yes. I was in the AIF. I was a young man and it was the first time I'd been overseas. I'd done a lot of drawing and painting as a young man.

JAMES GLEESON: What, privately or at school?

GUY WARREN: I went to a funny little art school that used to be run in Pitt Street, above an arcade in Pitt Street, run by an old Beaux Art trained gentleman named Watkins, J S Watkins.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah yes, yes.

GUY WARREN: He ran a school there which was a sort of fairly traditional drawing and painting school. I used to work at *The Bulletin* in those days. I left school very early. I left at 14 and worked at *The Bulletin* as a copy boy. My ambition then was to become a *Bulletin* artist. That was the breadth of my horizon.

JAMES GLEESON: You always knew you wanted to be involved?

GUY WARREN: I always wanted to be a musician or an artist or a writer. Both my parents were musicians, and they'd had it pretty tough and I think they probably didn't particularly want me to be a musician. I can't blame them. So I went to *The Bulletin* and worked with them as a copy boy. Tried to get drawings into *The Bulletin* and the chief cartoonist then took me around to this art school and said, 'Go and learn to draw'. So I used to spend my wages on drawing lessons with Watkins–I suppose I started about 15–and that was two days a week.

JAMES GLEESON: Thirties, late thirties?

GUY WARREN: Be the late thirties, yes. It would be ’36 probably, ’37. I went there two nights a week and Saturday mornings until the war came. Then I went into the army, volunteered for the AIF, went overseas. As I said, I was a young man, and there I was as a visually aware young man being faced with something like New Guinea for the first time. It just blew my head, you know, it was unbelievable. It was just an incredible, incredibly beautiful country.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: I used every spare minute that I had to draw and sketch. I’ve got sketchbooks there full of things that I did in New Guinea, and particularly Bougainville. I spent a couple of years in Bougainville. We were camped under a volcano, Mount Bagana, which was a big 6,000 foot high volcano. Oh, you know, the place was just unbelievably exciting; texture, colour. The local people themselves used to paint themselves and mark themselves so that they became part of the landscape, you know. I felt that they were sort of conditioned by the landscape itself.

JAMES GLEESON: Do you feel that experience, that visual experience, has had some effect on you?

GUY WARREN: I think it’s had an enormous effect. I keep thinking of it and I keep drawing on it. In fact, let me start from the point I left the army.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: I became a student after the war at East Sydney Tech. I was a—what do they call it?

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, that rehabilitation—

GUY WARREN: Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service; an ex-service grant, along with a lot of other people, of course. John Olsen was at another school, John Coburn was at tech.

JAMES GLEESON: Tom Cleghorn?

GUY WARREN: No, Tom wasn’t.

JAMES GLEESON: Wasn’t he?

GUY WARREN: Tony Tuckson was. I was very friendly with Tony. In fact, there were two students at tech who I got a great deal from, and one was Tony Tuckson. Tony was an ex air force pilot.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: Who’d married in Australia during the war and opted to get his discharge in Australia, and he ended up at East Sydney Tech. The other guy was a German boy named Klaus Friedeberger, who after we graduated went to England and he’s been there ever since.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GUY WARREN: So he's not known in Australia, but Klaus and Tony had both been abroad and obviously Klaus was a German boy from Berlin. Tony was an Englishman. They'd seen, they'd actually seen real pictures.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: I learnt a tremendous amount from both of them. They were aware of things which I certainly wasn't. So Tony and Klaus, I think, influenced me quite a bit at tech. After I graduated I worked for a year.

JAMES GLEESON: How long was that course?

GUY WARREN: It was a five year course in those days, but I skipped the first two years because they let me go straight into third year. In fact, I did three and a bit years, I think. I did the last three years there and a bit more, six months more. That must have been about '49 I suppose I graduated. Then I worked in Sydney for a year as a layout man on *Man* magazine, married during that time and then my wife and I went over in 1951, I suppose, went over to the UK.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: We hopped off the boat at Naples and hitchhiked our way across to London, and then struggled there for a year or two. My wife got a job in advertising. I tried to get work and found it very difficult. I did everything. I made frames in South Kensington with Fred Williams.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, yes.

GUY WARREN: I remember going down—

JAMES GLEESON: Was Louis James there?

GUY WARREN: Louis made frames at the same place, but it must have been either slightly before or slightly after. I think slightly before. But I do remember the first occasion I went into Robert Savage's place. It was a cold November London day. I mean, it was dark outside. I walked in and they pointed me down steps. I looked down these steps and there was a great dust bath of gesso at the bottom, and through this gesso haze were faces peering up.

JAMES GLEESON: Like something out of Dickens.

GUY WARREN: That's right. Yes, it was. As I walked down the steps these people materialised and they were all expatriate Australians, of course. You know, earning a bob or two down there. One of them was Freddie Williams. Actually there's a story about that which I shouldn't put on tape, I think.

JAMES GLEESON: Why not, why not?

GUY WARREN: Well, it's probably slanderous. As I walked downstairs, Fred looked up and he said, 'Ah, we heard there was an Australian called Warren starting today', he said. 'I thought it might have been that bastard Allan Warren'. So you better take that off the tape, I think.

JAMES GLEESON: Guy, you had your first show in London?

GUY WARREN: Yes, I got various jobs in London. I worked, as I say, frame making, and that almost destroyed me. I was getting two and six an hour. I worked a four day week and got 4 pound 10 after tax. I couldn't paint, I couldn't afford materials. I was totally depressed. I did a few freelance jobs. Then I got a job on a magazine, as art director of a woman's magazine in Fleet Street. That kept me very well. I used to go to the Central School at night and Chelsea. I used to draw at Chelsea with Fred Williams and a couple of other Australians a couple of nights a week and, of course, paint every evening and every weekend. Then just before my second child was born, whenever that was–I can't remember now, about '58, I suppose, '57–I decided to chuck up my job because I knew—in fact, it was about a week before the child was born I resigned. I knew very well if I'd left it a week later I wouldn't have had the courage to do it. So, God bless her, with my wife's help and support I resigned. We'd saved a bit of money, not enough, but she was still doing a little bit of freelance work after the child was born. We lived for about 18 months just working at home, and I did all these paintings, jungle paintings, which are memories of New Guinea and my experiences in the army. It was rather odd that they should have come back; that the images should have surfaced 10 years later.

JAMES GLEESON: In England?

GUY WARREN: In England, yes, quite. But they were very powerful images and they obviously meant a lot to me, and I couldn't relate to the English landscape anyway. These things seemed to be a very personal image, I suppose, which as I say surfaced 10 years later. I did a whole series of these paintings, which I showed in England just before I came home in '59.

JAMES GLEESON: Was this at the Obelisk Gallery?

GUY WARREN: That was the Obelisk Gallery, yes. That was the first show I'd had.

JAMES GLEESON: What year?

GUY WARREN: It must have been about '59, I think, '58 or '59. It's probably in this catalogue. But I think it would have been about '58, '59. So that was the first show I had.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. What were these New Guinea works like? Were they representational or were they distilled into a kind of abstract?

GUY WARREN: I've got a lot of them here so I can show them to you. A lot of them started off, of course, being fairly representational. That, for instance–looking at this catalogue now–that's one of the early ones.

JAMES GLEESON: *Girl (inaudible).*

GUY WARREN: Which is a fairly representational painting, 1955. Then they became increasingly more abstract. In other words, the figures began to disappear into the landscape until they were almost totally absorbed by the landscape and they became a statement, I suppose, of man and his relation to the environment and so on.

JAMES GLEESON: These were the pictures that you showed in your first exhibition?

GUY WARREN: Yes. I think I sold one of them, and that was bought by the gallery director, I suspect. But I brought all of them home and I had a show in Sydney just after I came home. It must have been about 1961, I suppose.

JAMES GLEESON: Whereabouts was that?

GUY WARREN: At the old Blaxland Galleries.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh yes, yes.

GUY WARREN: Tom Cleghorn had just left. He gave me the show. But he actually left before the show came on, and I think Stan De Teliga was there. I think it was his first show. Yes, there it is, the Obelisk Gallery show was in 1959 and the Blaxland Gallery show was in 1960, surprisingly.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Now, I know from looking at your work that you've tended to work in periods.

GUY WARREN: Yes, I have, I always have.

JAMES GLEESON: Or in phases involved with a certain idea. What followed after the New Guinea ones?

GUY WARREN: I suppose the first few years back were fairly depressed, and I found it very difficult to come to terms with Australia again. I'd been away for eight or nine years and, you know, it's nearly a decade. You put roots down in another country. You get friends, you take attitudes. It's very difficult, as I'm sure you know, to come to terms again even with your own country after being away for so long. The early sixties were the days of John Olsen and his early landscape experiences. I found it very difficult to come to terms with Australia again, and the first few years back weren't good years. They were very bad years. I produced a lot of paintings, most of which I've destroyed since.

The first breakthrough I think came about the early sixties, about '63, I suppose. I spent a Christmas holiday at a place owned by Anne Von Bertouch who ran the Von Bertouch Galleries in Newcastle. She had a property at a place called Mungo Brush, which is on the Myall Lakes, about 70 miles north of Newcastle. It was a property which was overgrown with jungle and banana trees and passionfruit vines that had grown wild. It was a lovely wild place on a headland which jutted out into the lake. It had a clearing in the middle of it with a little hut and you walked across the clearing, through some rainforest, a belt of rainforest, down onto the lake. So you had this experience of walking across a clearing, through the tight textured growth of the rainforest, and then out onto a lake with all that that means in terms of atmospherics and reeds in the water and mists across the water, and all this sort of thing. If you walked the other way, you walked across sand dunes to the beach, a wide, beautiful, open, rolling, Pacific beach. It had all these things within a few yards. I had nothing up there beyond some paper and ink, I think, and I did a lot of drawings. Later when I came back I started doing watercolours. Now I hadn't done watercolours since I was a student, and I think it was a chance to simply hop back into a medium that I was unfamiliar with. It was a challenge, I suppose, and I got totally absorbed in these

watercolours and I did a whole series of things which were the Mungo Brush watercolours, which became a series of paintings. I became so absorbed in the quality of the watercolour, that this led me then into trying to do the same thing on canvas. So this led me into staining on canvas.

JAMES GLEESON: When you say 'staining', what sort of technique is that? Just diluting the pigment down till it becomes like a watercolour?

GUY WARREN: Yes. In other words it's exactly the same technique as watercolour.

JAMES GLEESON: And use an unprimed canvas?

GUY WARREN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GUY WARREN: I was using an unprimed cotton duck because it was the only one that was reasonably white, obviously, although I would have preferred to have used proper canvas flax. You know, it's yellow or buff coloured and one doesn't get the same quality. So I used unprimed cotton duck. I stained into it with acrylic paint because that's water soluble and the water disappears and just leaves the image. I did a whole series of paintings which were again extensions of the Mungo Brush paintings but on canvas.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GUY WARREN: Now this led me into suddenly becoming aware of the canvas itself as a material, as a beautiful material in its own right. This led me to the thought that it seems silly to put paintings—at least it suddenly appeared to me to be making less sense to paint opaquely. Because, in fact, all I was doing was putting an opaque painting on to canvas, which might as well have been on anything else. I argued to myself, rightly or wrongly, that if all I was doing was using the canvas as a support, then it might as well be board or plaster or anything.

JAMES GLEESON: Anything.

GUY WARREN: So I thought: well, why not let the canvas play a part in the actual control or final structure of the picture? That's when I started doing some of these very pale paintings, one of which the National Gallery has. The big simple stained paintings, these things.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, the grid ones?

GUY WARREN: Yes, the grid ones. They were an attempt to come to terms with the canvas as a medium. What I was aiming for was some amalgam of me, the painter, the material which is the paint and the other material which is the canvas.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: I wanted a sort of amalgam of those three things all working together to produce the finished result. I think the best of them–and I think that one that the gallery has is a good one–I think the best of them worked very well

because at times you can't tell where the canvas ends and the paint begins. So the canvas begins to play an enormously important part in the painting.

JAMES GLEESON: You always brush them on?

GUY WARREN: Always.

JAMES GLEESON: You never use an airbrush?

GUY WARREN: No, no, they were always brushed. They were always very wet and brushed.

JAMES GLEESON: The canvas was wet first?

GUY WARREN: Yes, the canvas was saturated. I evolved a table, which is around there now, which is a frame of metal which I could stretch the canvas over and tack it around the sides, so it was tight as a drum. I could wet the thing and then work over it flat, so that it didn't touch the ground.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GUY WARREN: So I didn't get any mark through back from the ground.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

GUY WARREN: It worked very well indeed. Then I could simply—

JAMES GLEESON: And you've used that since?

GUY WARREN: I've used it since. I could simply rip that off, hang it up and put another one down. It was a quick and easy way of doing a lot of canvases fairly quickly. Where was I? Yes, so this was an attempt to come to terms with the canvas as a medium. The technical snags are that (a*)* it's cotton duck.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: (b) the pigment, because it's diluted, may at times be over-diluted and there's always the danger that something may happen to it.

JAMES GLEESON: Like fade?

GUY WARREN: Like fade or fall off the canvas or do something like that.

JAMES GLEESON: Could it fall off the canvas?

GUY WARREN: I don't think so, no.

JAMES GLEESON: It would really dye into the canvas?

GUY WARREN: It dyes into the canvas. I've had people say that it will fall off the canvas. I don't really see how it can, frankly. But what I've tried to do to make it safe is to put a wash of an acrylic binder over the surface when I've finished. So most of them—I don't know about this one, but I should think that one has a cover on it as well.

JAMES GLEESON: The grid one, yes.

GUY WARREN: Yes. Most of them I've put a wash of acrylic binder on top. I've diluted acrylic binder which dries totally transparent so one can't see it, but it does preserve the surface. It also hopefully makes it a little easier to clean, I hope.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

GUY WARREN: One of the limitations of working like that with those very pale colours was that it limited you to always working in a very high key.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes. You can't get tonal variations.

GUY WARREN: You can't get tonal variations. This seemed to me to be a limitation that I wanted to break through. So I searched around for other ways of exploring the possibilities and potential of canvas itself. Then I hit on the notion of actually folding the canvas because, after all, this is one of the characteristics of canvas. This came about from a very large canvas that I did at Bonython's. I did it about 1972. Excuse me, I'll get a photograph of it. That was a very long canvas that I had at Bonython's in 19—

JAMES GLEESON: Which hung along the wall.

GUY WARREN: It was hung along the wall, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: It wasn't stretched, I remember.

GUY WARREN: What I did, in fact, was like a lot of people, I suppose, at that time. I was beginning to doubt the validity of doing relational painting, you know. It seemed to me that painting had to be more than just putting things in the right relationship, you know. There had to be more meaning to it than that because otherwise it was just a game. In other words, formal relationships ceased to have a total satisfaction for me. I thought, well, I'll try and do a painting that is not relational. What I did was to use this large frame and get a 50 metre roll of canvas, and I had it rolled on a pipe at one side of the table. I rolled it down over the table and worked on it and up onto the other roll on the other side. As I worked, I rolled it up.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: So after a while I couldn't see what I'd done, so it ceased to be relational. It simply became something which existed from day to day, rather like a scroll.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, a Chinese/Japanese scroll.

GUY WARREN: Like a Chinese scroll, yes. So I called it *Summer diary* because I did it over this entire summer, every day, including New Year and Christmas. I made a statement on it every day. So it became a graphic record, if you like, of my attitudes, my feelings and my lifestyle over that entire summer. I wanted to put it up just to see what the hell it looked like.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

GUY WARREN: So I hung it along that great long wall at Bonython's. I think parts of it were bad, and those were my bad days, and parts of it were interesting and those were my good days, I guess. But to get it into the show I had to fold part of it, you see, because it was a bit too long for the wall. Suddenly I thought, well hell, you know, why not use this possibility of folding? I then started folding canvas onto stretchers, not dropping them as curtain drops, but actually stapling them onto the stretcher so that I still maintained the sort of traditional flat on the wall look of the canvas of a painting without it being a curtain.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: But still exploited the possibilities of folding it. That gave me more flexibility because I then could go to much stronger colours and I didn't have to work within this very high key all the time.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: I could go to much stronger colours like these. I did those for a couple of years and they were a series. That's the one the Newcastle Gallery has, which is nice. A good one, I think.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: Certain other things sprang from this investigation which I hadn't anticipated and which interested me too. One of them was the fact that when you put a stain on a canvas like this, the stain actually travels through the canvas, as you know, rather like watercolour does. But when you do it on a vast scale it travels a hell of a long way, and in this particular painting which is the centrefold one that Newcastle Gallery has, the stain would have travelled probably that far and more.

JAMES GLEESON: A metre or more, yes.

GUY WARREN: Oh yes, you know, really a long way. So you could put paint there and over a period of five or six hours it would travel a metre or more.

JAMES GLEESON: It took as long as that?

GUY WARREN: Oh yes, indeed.

JAMES GLEESON: To seep through.

GUY WARREN: To seep through. It's rather like a process–I found out later–which chemists use called chromatology, with which they separate chemicals. They separate chemicals by putting them on damp paper. Now, what happens is that the pigment in this case separates at different rates. You can put two or three colours on in one brush stroke.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: In other words, mix your colours together and put them on in one brushstroke, and the component pigments will move at different rates and different directions.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes.

GUY WARREN: Now, this means that what you're left with at the end of five or six hours is a graphic representation of the time that it's taken for the image to occur. So you've got a record of the process and a record of the time. This seemed to me to be another dimension which I hadn't anticipated, and that was fun to play with. So that's where I was at that stage.

JAMES GLEESON: What year was that now?

GUY WARREN: That was—

JAMES GLEESON: Seventy-four?

GUY WARREN: Yes, it was probably about '72–73, around that sort of period. Then for a long time I'd been toying with the idea of getting back to the figure image. Well, for various reasons. I think the figure is probably the most basic image that man has ever used. I would like to have got back to it because it has such a basic connotation and basic communication with everybody. But I didn't want to get back to the figure doing the same old nudes again, you know, that everybody had done. Then I hit on the idea of doing these sprayed paintings whereby I wrapped the canvas around a figure and sprayed it. Now this meant that a) I was getting back to the figure image and b) I was still doing it within my self-imposed parameters of making the canvas contribute to the final image.

JAMES GLEESON: So the accidental affects of the folds in the canvas contributed to the final image?

GUY WARREN: Contributed to the final image. In other words, the final painting is like that only because of the nature of the canvas.

JAMES GLEESON: The nature of the canvas.

GUY WARREN: Yes, exactly, the nature of the canvas and me and the paint working together.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. When you say you sprayed it on, with an airbrush?

GUY WARREN: With an airbrush, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: And it's acrylic?

GUY WARREN: And it's acrylic paint, yes. You can do it with oil obviously, but oil is messy and it has a habit of staining at the edges with an oil halation around the edge of the stain.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

GUY WARREN: Acrylic works better in this way, I think. So this was where these —

JAMES GLEESON: Was the canvas dampened?

GUY WARREN: No, it wasn't. It was quite dry.

JAMES GLEESON: It wasn't.

GUY WARREN: In fact, I had to do a hell of a lot of experimenting and canvas as such didn't work. It was too heavy. I had to get eventually to a cotton sheeting, and so I actually used cotton sheeting on these–a very good high quality cotton. This would wrap around the figure in such a way that it tucked into the figure and gave me the figure image. But it also had sufficient–what–strength, surface tension to fold nicely and give me these folds. Now, once again certain things happened which I hadn't expected. The image came out much more–what–aggressive. It's a very aggressive image, I think, at times. A very powerful image; much more aggressive than I'd expected. Secondly, although I'd expected it to be as strongly three dimensional as it was, there were certain ambiguities there which I liked. Like the figure is really quite extraordinarily three-dimensional.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: Yet the folds on top of the figure are themselves three-dimensional. Then when you get up and touch them, of course the whole thing is two-dimensional. This ambiguity I rather like. I deliberately left the folds of the canvas too.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, how is it that in some places you get what is virtually a negative affect where the highest parts are the darkest and the recessed parts are the lightest? But here you get—

GUY WARREN: I think in most cases the recessed parts are the lightest because they're the areas that are tucked around the figure.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GUY WARREN: So the high areas on the whole catch the paint.

JAMES GLEESON: So it is a kind of negative, tonal negative?

GUY WARREN: Yes, yes. Now, this is interesting as far as it goes, but I'd like to take it further, and this is what I'm trying to do now. I'm trying to paint into these using opaque paint on top of some of these, or at least with some of them, to see what happens. Something else is happening at the moment which is interesting. Because I wanted to plan some of these, I started to do some drawings to try and plan them in advance. Now, the trouble is of course you can't draw these images, because they only exist because of the process.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: So I had to use some symbol which represented them in the drawing. Then, of course, I started to get interested in the symbols that were coming out as part of the drawing process, and another image began appearing which was appropriate to the activity of drawing. Now I find myself with two or three images. One is the sprayed image; one is the sprayed image with opaque work into it, and one is the drawn image, linear image, which is another representation of the same sort of figure. So at the moment I'm playing around with these three images and seeing what happens when I put the three together.

Perhaps one can achieve different aspects, you know, of a figure, of a reality of a figure by putting these images in some sort of juxtaposition. So this is what the area of investigation is at the moment.

JAMES GLEESON: Could you tell us something about the drawings, the watercolour works that I've seen on paper where you've torn or indented the paper to give a texture, a rhythmic affect?

GUY WARREN: A lot of the watercolours that you have in the collection, in the desk there now, have been done since I've been in this studio. I've been here for about 18 months or two years.

JAMES GLEESON: It's an old boat shed?

GUY WARREN: It's an old boat shed. It's right on the waterfront at East Balmain. The doors open right onto the water. It is a fantastic place. But for the first six months or twelve months that I was here, I found it too positive. I know that's a funny thing to say, but I'd always worked privately in an inside room before.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: I'd never had to cope with the environment pressing in on top of me. Now here, it just doesn't press in on top of you, it floods in the door.

JAMES GLEESON: You're working in the middle of it.

GUY WARREN: You're working in the middle of it and it's fantastic, you know. I'd forgotten how beautiful the skies were. I'd forgotten what the water was like. It just floods in the doorway. Now, for the first few months I tried to turn my back on it, and this was simply impossible. So I thought, well, what the hell, you know, let's come to terms with it. So I've done 400 or 500 works on paper there, which are simply about this environment. They're about the things that happen outside the door there. They're about Balmain waterfront; they're about sky and water and so on. They're also about the materials that I'm using. They're also about the watercolour and about the paper that I'm using. Now, once again, the material is beautiful. Watercolour paper is a beautiful thing. What I've tried to do with the watercolours is not to describe what happens out there, out the door, but to make metaphors which are right within their own boundaries for watercolour and paper. In other words, you know, if you look out the door here you see a boat going across which literally tears up the surface that is out there. So it seems appropriate to me, I thought, to tear the surface of the material that I'm working with, which happens to be paper. It also explores the potential of paper as such. You know, once again, like I work with a canvas, it's working and exploring the possibilities of paper.

JAMES GLEESON: Emphasises the nature of paper.

GUY WARREN: Emphasises the nature of the material itself.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: Yes, quite. So I've been scoring the paper and tearing it and cutting into it and poking it and doing all sorts of things. Now this has led me to

an interest in paper. I'm going down to work with a paper mill in Hobart in two or three week's time.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GUY WARREN: There's an American guy working at the Hobart College of Art. He's actually started a paper mill down there, and they're producing very good papers. He's asked me to go down to work with him for a week or two just to explore paper and see what can be done with paper as a material, so I'm looking forward to that. That should be fun.

JAMES GLEESON: The paper you have been using, is that not Australian paper?

GUY WARREN: No. The paper I've been using is a French paper, it's Arches. It's a very good paper, lovely paper. But suddenly it seemed to me limiting to get the paper already in finite sheets, flat at a certain size, you know. What could be done if one could have some control over what the paper is going to look like, like the size and shape and texture and thickness. You know, I don't know until I get down there, but maybe one can do something with it. It seems like an exciting idea anyway.

JAMES GLEESON: It does indeed.

GUY WARREN: So that's where it is.

JAMES GLEESON: The potential for making top quality paper exists then?

GUY WARREN: Yes, yes. There are two mills now. There's one this American guy started with the Hobart College and I believe there's a bloke, an Australian down the South Coast of New South Wales, who's also started a paper mill and I'd like to go down and see what he's doing too.

JAMES GLEESON: Especially for art quality?

GUY WARREN: I think so, for good art quality paper. It's an interesting development.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, it is. Well, Guy, now can we turn to the actual works that we hold of yours and go through those specifically one by one? I think the first one we own is a print of yours, a lithograph?

GUY WARREN: I think it's a litho. I would have done it at the Central School in London in the fifties. I was doing lithography two or three nights a week with an English lithographer called John Watson at the Central School. I would have drawn it and printed it there. I would guess it was probably done on stone, but it just could have been a plate, but I think those were on stone. I remember doing an edition of them and I think I sold a few when I came back to Australia in the early sixties, and I think that's one of them.

JAMES GLEESON: *Cornwall* it's called.

GUY WARREN: Yes. Cornwall was one of the few places in England that I related to. I think, you know, my prejudices as a visual artist are obviously

conditioned by my Australian background and I need some sort of rugged landscape, I guess, to relate to. I found England much too sweet and pretty and beautiful, beautiful as it is.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: But Cornwall and Scotland and Wales were places I could relate to, and I did a lot of drawings around Cornwall and those prints are the result of them.

JAMES GLEESON: Did you do many lithographs?

GUY WARREN: Not a lot, no. I did probably half a dozen, no more. Interestingly enough, I'm just getting back into it again now.

JAMES GLEESON: The one you have there, *Cornwall*, that's actually dated, is it?

GUY WARREN: Yes, that's dated 1959, I think.

JAMES GLEESON: Could you check the date?

GUY WARREN: I'll check for you. Yes, they're all dated about '59. These are all old prints of them.

JAMES GLEESON: So it is '59?

GUY WARREN: It would have been done in 1959 without any doubt at all, and it's probably one of those prints. It's either that one or the other one I showed you.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Good. Well, that's our first one of yours purchased in April 1964. That's for the Commonwealth Art Prize Awards.

GUY WARREN: Where was it purchased from?

JAMES GLEESON: No detail on file. I don't know. I just don't know how we came to buy it.

GUY WARREN: I don't remember selling it.

JAMES GLEESON: Don't you?

GUY WARREN: No. Twelve guineas, that's a long time ago.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, is this the next one?

GUY WARREN: Yes. No, chronologically I think it would be these.

JAMES GLEESON: This one.

GUY WARREN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: *The Estuary.*

GUY WARREN: Yes. These two paintings were done after a holiday spent down at the mouth of the Shoalhaven River when the kids were young. Now, I can't remember what year it would be but it would be the early sixties. It was purchased in '64, so it must have been probably '61 or '62, I should think. It was probably just after I came back from England. We came back in Christmas '59–'60. It was probably a couple of years after that, so it probably would have been about '62. We had a holiday for a week or two at a little cottage down there. It was grey and misty the whole time. It's a very grey landscape.

JAMES GLEESON: What was the river, the estuary?

GUY WARREN: The Shoalhaven.

JAMES GLEESON: The Shoalhaven.

GUY WARREN: Lots of sand flats there.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: I remember being enormously impressed by these shallow sand flats and the water lying in great pools and reflecting the sky. Everything was grey. The sand was a sort of yellow grey and the sky above was grey and the water in the pools were grey, so you couldn't see where the sky ended and the earth began.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GUY WARREN: It was just a beautiful mass of space, and then in the middle of this space these great white, clean, brilliant white birds–seagulls, I suppose–were carving great spaces out of the sky. It was very exciting and I did a lot of drawings there, and some of these paintings I think came from that period.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GUY WARREN: It doesn't look like it here but I suspect they're all sort of grey. I've forgotten this painting, I'm afraid, but I think it's—

JAMES GLEESON: That's the same one.

GUY WARREN: Yes. It's fairly grey; it's muted colours.

JAMES GLEESON: It's not representational so much as again as a summation.

GUY WARREN: Yes. I've always been obviously influenced, my imagery has been influenced by landscape.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: Although my concerns may be separate from the imagery, but the imagery is certainly frequently landscape-based, I think. Even in these investigations into materials and colour and pigment, the actual images I use are frequently—

JAMES GLEESON: Nature.

GUY WARREN: Landscape. Yes, naturally environmentally involved. Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Guy, are we right here? We say oil on masonite. Now, you gave questioned—

GUY WARREN: I questioned that, yes, without checking it. But I've an idea that it's acrylic.

JAMES GLEESON: Acrylic.

GUY WARREN: Yes. Looking at the black and white photograph here, that quality there looks to me like the way acrylic paint goes on hardboard.

JAMES GLEESON: Did you ever do much work in oil?

GUY WARREN: It just could be both of course. It just could be both. Yes, I did. I did a lot of work in the—all the early jungle paintings are oil paintings.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GUY WARREN: I'm just thinking of getting back into oil painting again now.

JAMES GLEESON: Are you using oil for the opaque part of these new works?

GUY WARREN: No, I'm using acrylic for the opaque. I've been staining with acrylic for a long time because it's superb as a stainer. It works much better than oil. Oil gives you a halation around the edge; acrylic paint doesn't. But now that I'm getting back into opaque painting, I wonder in fact whether oil wouldn't be better. One of the things that acrylic does, which I don't like, is that it dries very much darker than when you put it on. It drives me mad, you know. You've got to wait for 20 minutes while the damn thing dries before you can put another colour beside it. So I might get back to oil. I'm thinking of that at the moment.

JAMES GLEESON: Good. Now *Into the trees* I think is the next one.

GUY WARREN: Yes, that's probably the next one, and I think both these things, that watercolour is a mungo brush watercolour, and that would have been done after this.

JAMES GLEESON: This one of the scrub.

GUY WARREN: Yes, after this holiday at Mungo Brush on Myall Lakes. I think that painting would have been done at the same time. So they're probably done again '63 or '64, I should think. They're a year or two after that previous one we spoke about.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: When was it bought? Purchased in '66.

JAMES GLEESON: From the Macquarie Galleries.

GUY WARREN: I think in this catalogue there's some mention of Mungo Brush. I think I went up there in about '63.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GUY WARREN: Never mind, but it must have been about ’63. Yes, Mungo Brush.

JAMES GLEESON: You did just drawings there and all the works, all the watercolours and oils were done after you—

GUY WARREN: Done afterwards when I came back.

JAMES GLEESON: Guy, you mentioned *Into the trees* that you found it in your catalogue and you’ve got measurements and details.

GUY WARREN: Yes, I have, it’s in the catalogue book here at $400, 48 x 48, oil on hardboard.

JAMES GLEESON: Inches?

GUY WARREN: That’s inches, yes. It was shown at the Skinner Gallery in Perth. It was sent out there on 28 January ’66.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: Then it subsequently went to the Macquarie Galleries in Canberra in July ’66, from which it was bought by the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board.

JAMES GLEESON: In August ‘66. Ah, fine. So that gives us—and there’s no question about this one being oil?

GUY WARREN: In the catalogue book it has oil on hardboard, so I guess that’s it.

JAMES GLEESON: Good.

GUY WARREN: Again, without seeing, it I wouldn’t be sure of that. But I see no reason to doubt the information in the book here.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no. Now the other one *Across the scrub*, another Mungo Brush?

GUY WARREN: That’s a watercolour.

JAMES GLEESON: That’s a watercolour?

GUY WARREN: Yes. That would have been an imperial size watercolour and it would have been the first show I had at Macquarie, which was about ’65 or ’66. It was just after I’d been to Mungo Brush.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GUY WARREN: What’s it called? *Across the scrub*. It will probably be in here too. I can’t put my finger on the entry in the book here, but it’s bound to be here somewhere. Yes. Never mind.

JAMES GLEESON: No. Good. Now we come to a whole group of later works of yours. This, I think, *Soft grid II* 1972–73. Now, acrylic on cotton duck, 170.7 x 240.7 centimetres. Guy, one question, '72–72, did you re-work it?

GUY WARREN: No, I would have worked it over the Christmas period.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GUY WARREN: That's all that that means, I think. I'm surprised that it's March '72–73. That's rather odd. I suppose I could have re-worked it, but it's unlikely. They're so direct that normally they're done in one go.

JAMES GLEESON: Your describing the techniques seems to indicate that it was all done in one go.

GUY WARREN: Yes, it is. It's a very direct medium. Terrifyingly direct.

JAMES GLEESON: So that's why I wondered about the date.

GUY WARREN: I find that odd too, frankly, yes. Look, I really don't know.

JAMES GLEESON: Signed Guy Warren '72–73 upper right in pen.

GUY WARREN: Here it is here.

JAMES GLEESON: What have you got it listed there as?

GUY WARREN: I've got sent to the Llewellyn Gallery, that's in Adelaide, in August '73. Returned in studio in February '74. Sent to Canberra for consideration by the National Gallery in June '76.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: Oh, and the National Gallery lent it for my survey show in Canberra. It's probably reproduced in this book here.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, is that it? No.

GUY WARREN: I'm not sure if that's it or not. But it's one of those.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

GUY WARREN: I can't answer your question. I don't know why it had two dates on it, '72–73. I might have done it over the Christmas period and couldn't remember whether it was '72 or '73. But I should think that's what it is.

JAMES GLEESON: It doesn't necessarily indicate that it was worked over.

GUY WARREN: It doesn't necessarily mean that it was worked over a year later. No, no.

JAMES GLEESON: Good.

GUY WARREN: By its nature it would almost certainly have been done in one go.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Good.

GUY WARREN: All these paintings, that one and these watercolours that you're about to look at, were all done when I was working at Sydney University as Director of the Art Workshop there.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah yes. How long were you working there?

GUY WARREN: I was there for about five or six years altogether. The last three years full time, and the previous two or three years on a part time basis. I had a space in the old sheds there that I used as a studio. All these I think probably would have been done there.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Are you doing any teaching now?

GUY WARREN: Yes, I am. I'm working for the Sydney College of the Arts. Although a lot of the work is administration, I still do a bit of teaching there.

JAMES GLEESON: Good. Well, now this last group of drawings. I think we'll turn the tape over before we come onto those, Guy. Guy, there was something you wanted to say before we start on these last watercolours.

GUY WARREN: Yes, how the hell I can I put it? It's difficult to put into words but it seems to me the older I get that one has to come to terms with the sort of person one is, the sort of person you are yourself. Now, after living in Europe for several years and in England, having been in America and having been in other parts of the world, you know, one realises after a while that one isn't English, whatever one's background is. I always felt alien in England. One isn't American. I'm clearly not Asian. So whatever I am, I'm some strange amorphous creature called Australian. Now, I'm not quite sure what that thing is. But it clearly isn't European. It clearly isn't American. It clearly isn't Indonesian or Japanese or whatever. It is something quite different from. I'm a product of my environment, my physical environment, my sociological environment, my cultural environment. I'm a product of all these things.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: I don't see why I have to produce paintings which look like the paintings produced in answer to other people's pressures. New York painting is produced because of the pressures in New York, because of their sociological, historical, cultural, environmental pressures. It was valid, perfectly valid, and it was great painting. To take that and do a regional variation of that in Australia seems to me to be questionable. I think what one has to do is to find concerns which are valid to oneself as a working artist in this country. Now, that doesn't mean doing gum trees, clearly. It doesn't mean doing thatched cottages in England for the English artist. It does mean making honest responses in ones imagery to ones own pressures. Honest answers to the pressures that make me what I am. The difficult thing, of course, is to do these things and still then make them universally understandable. This is one reason why I'm playing around with the human figure, because it seems to me that of all things the human figure is the one image which is universal to mankind. But it has to be done, I think, in

such a way that it doesn't look like a regional variation of something that's been done in London or Bonn or Berlin or New York or Paris; but something that is an honest response on my part as an Australian painter working in Sydney. Does that make sense?

JAMES GLEESON: It does. Yes, it does indeed. I think it's very sound reasoning.

GUY WARREN: Well, we'll see what happens.

JAMES GLEESON: Guy, well the last group of works we have of yours all, I think, come from the same period; that is they're dated '75. This one is called *Swivel* watercolour on Arches paper.

GUY WARREN: Yes, all these things, the whole four of them, probably are all about the same date. They'd all be '74 to five, I should think.

JAMES GLEESON: Seventy-five. Yes, they're all '75.

GUY WARREN: Some of them were bought, three of them I think were bought from–two or three anyway–from the last show I had at Bonython's just before he closed in '75. They would have been done probably the year before that.

JAMES GLEESON: *Untitled* was from Ray Hughes Gallery Brisbane. *Sun curtain II* was Bonython in '76. Yes. *Sun trap II,* Bonython Gallery '76, and *Swivel* Bonython Gallery '76.

GUY WARREN: Yes. They'd all been done round about the same time. Like the other things, they're all explorations into the specific qualities of the materials themselves. In this case watercolour paper which is beautiful, sensual, lovely material and the watercolour medium itself, which is also a lovely material. It's done on wet paper, as you can see. The paper's been left totally wet and the watercolour's been allowed to stain into the paper in the same way of course that the acrylic stained into the canvas. So it is an exploration into materials. The actual imagery comes, I suspect–and I'm never quite sure of where the images come from–I suspect in this case it comes from the South Coast of New South Wales. My wife and I own a block of land which is mostly rainforest at a place called Jamberoo, which is inland on the side of the escarpment five or six miles inland from Kiama. Bert Flugelman owns a block next to me. It's just lovely, lush rainforest country and I think a lot of the imagery probably comes from that sort of thing.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

GUY WARREN: But I'm never quite sure with some of these watercolours. The imagery is a fairly subjective mark which tends to come out. Sometimes I think I know where it comes from; other times I'm not quite sure.

JAMES GLEESON: In none of the ones that we have of these watercolours have you punched or torn—

GUY WARREN: No.

JAMES GLEESON: That's a later development?

GUY WARREN: That's a later development, yes. That's something I've only been doing since I've been in this studio here.

JAMES GLEESON: That's a response to—

GUY WARREN: That's a response to what happens. Yes, quite.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: Yes, absolutely. It's a response both to what happens and to the material itself.

JAMES GLEESON: A deeper understanding?

GUY WARREN: A deeper understanding of the material, yes. A sudden realisation that the material had dimensions, possibilities that hadn't occurred to me before.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Well, those edges that you get when you tear the paper do play a very important role, I think, in these new developments.

GUY WARREN: Yes, I think so, you know. Even in these drawings they do the same thing.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

GUY WARREN: It's just given me an extra dimension, a possibility of using the paper in a way that I hadn't thought of before. It's great, it just gives another possibility, extends it a bit more.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, Guy, I think that covers it very well and thank you very much indeed.

GUY WARREN: It's been fun. I've enjoyed.

JAMES GLEESON: Have you anything else you'd like to add?

GUY WARREN: I can't think of anything at the moment, James. If I think of anything later maybe we can have a cup of coffee.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, if any other works come in we'll be coming back to you because the plan is to keep it up-to-date with new works coming in.

GUY WARREN: It sounds a great idea. I'd love to listen to the tapes sometime. They're going to be great fun.

JAMES GLEESON: Good. Thank you very much, Guy.

GUY WARREN: Okay, pleased to do it.