

JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: DAVID WILSON

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JAMES GLEESON: David, first of all, where were you born and the exact date?

DAVID WILSON: I was born in London, England, on 16 January 1947.

JAMES GLEESON: When did you come to Australia?

DAVID WILSON: Late in 1965.

JAMES GLEESON: So you had some training in England before?

DAVID WILSON: Not very serious training, no. I attended night classes for a couple of years in painting and drawing.

JAMES GLEESON: In London?

DAVID WILSON: Harrow Art School. But these were only evening classes and I wasn't taking it with the intention of becoming an artist.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. So you didn't make up your mind that art was going to be your career until you came to Australia?

DAVID WILSON: Not really, no. When I came to Australia I worked for three years for Myers doing designs for interiors. During that time I painted more and more seriously at home. Decided in the end the only thing to do was to really go back to college and do it seriously. So I saved up some money and then I went to what was then the National Gallery Art School in the old museum buildings with the intention of studying painting, but after about six months I switched to sculpture.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Any particular reason for that, beyond the fact that you obviously were drawn to sculpture? You found the course in painting, or what painting could do for you, wasn't satisfactory?

DAVID WILSON: Well, I don't think my paintings were very good, and the more I looked at the problems in my paintings the more I thought that I was really after making a kind of object. I was really trying to make the pictures have that sort of tangibility that an object has. So I started some very muddled attempts to make the paintings into sculptures, and luckily for me my money ran out and I couldn't continue with that sort of life investigation. So I just had to make do with little bits of materials that I had left over, and began to make what I thought then was sculpture properly. I suppose they're the ancestors of the sculptures that I'm making now.

JAMES GLEESON: What medium were you working in in those early days of sculpture?

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DAVID WILSON: Well, the first sculptures that I made were pretty awful things really. They lit up and flashed, and they were using all sorts of synthetic materials like polyurethane foam, polyester resin, Perspex. Sometimes they were painted, sometimes I'd suspend metallic substances in the polyester resin to make them curious science fiction-y kinds of things. As I say, luckily I couldn't continue with that because it cost so much money. Then I was left with just sheets of plastic really, bits of Perspex. I started to cut these up into shapes, quite small, and then I found I could form the shapes by bending the Perspex in front of heaters. I could stick the stuff together quite readily with the sort of glue that's provided with it, and I began to make spatial sculptures.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes, yes.

DAVID WILSON: From those early Perspex works I got quite a good piece and Len Parr, who was the principal of the school at the time, suggested I should do it in steel. So I borrowed some money and bought some steel and did it in steel and that was the first steel sculpture that I made.

JAMES GLEESON: And you've stuck to steel pretty well ever since?

DAVID WILSON: I've included other things with the steel like wood and Perspex, plate glass, meshes, all sorts of different stuff in the search for the sort of form that I found most satisfying. In the end though, I've decided that the single material allows me the most scope rather than the least scope.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. You don't need that range of media to get what you want?

DAVID WILSON: Not at present, no. Looking back on it, I tended to find that the works that had a great agglomeration of material were, well, closer to the sort of science fiction stuff that I started off with. Rather than being objects in their own right, they were sort of strange objects, objects that seemingly were out of context, like flung up by some other civilisation or for some peculiar purpose unknown to the viewer. I don't like sculpture which has to address itself to the audience through that way.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no.

DAVID WILSON: I found I was falling into the trap of so much other sculpture that I criticise.

JAMES GLEESON: Was there any kinetic element in those early works?

DAVID WILSON: Not as far as I can remember, apart from lights inside, which I have a horror when I think back on the lights inside now. But no, I don't think I've ever made a sculpture which moved, unless it fell over.

JAMES GLEESON: Is there ever an implication of movement, of movement arrested, in those works? In other words, was kineticism at all an element in your sculptural considerations?

DAVID WILSON: Well, not actual movement. Implied movement, I suppose, takes place in any sculpture really. I suppose some of my works have been more illusory than others looking like, as you say, an arrested movement or something

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that's in this process of falling to pieces or breaking up or having its form changed.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

DAVID WILSON: There again, looking back on it, I'm not awfully keen on that kind of stuff. I try now to make objects which are as stable structurally as any other kind of object really, I suppose, like a rock or a table. But the movement has to be implied but I suppose by more subtle means than through illusion.

JAMES GLEESON: The nature of the forms you used in those earlier works, were they mechanical forms, mechanical shapes, or were they organic? Any suggestion of the organic form in them?

DAVID WILSON: Yes. Well, the first steel sculptures that I made—and we'll confine ourselves to the early steel works now rather than those plastic numbers.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

DAVID WILSON: The first steel sculptures that I made I suppose did have an organic kind of outline. There were lots of curves. The things kind of wriggled along. But the material was light gauge steel plate and that in itself is rather mechanical, and then they were sprayed in a pretty precise sort of way. So there was this combination of the mechanical and the organic. Later works tended to be much more mechanical. I reached a point where I thought that, okay, if you're using lumps of iron like I-beams girders, industrial off-cuts and things, your sculpture's either going to look mechanical because of the nature of the material, or it's going to look architectonic because of the size which you can get with those kinds of things. With that realisation I then tried to—if the sculpture was going to have a sort of a human aspect or a personality, I tried to do it through the kinds of relationships of the mechanical bits and pieces. But, as I've said, I wasn't happy with that because that normally ended up to look like a sort of bit of frozen machinery. And it had a presence, a theatrical presence I think, which I try to avoid now.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. You do your own welding?

DAVID WILSON: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Did you study that at a technical college?

DAVID WILSON: To a degree. Lenton Parr showed me the rudiments of how to do it.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

DAVID WILSON: Then it was just a question of making so many mistakes.

JAMES GLEESON: So you really found your own way through on that technique of welding?

DAVID WILSON: Yes, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: And you've got your own equipment?

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DAVID WILSON: Yes, that's right. I've built it up steadily over the years.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Now, the first one we have of yours is one from 1972. It's untitled, a painted metal sculpture, bought from the Powell Street Gallery in Melbourne.

DAVID WILSON: That's right.

JAMES GLEESON: Can you tell us something about that work?

DAVID WILSON: Well, it's such a long time ago. But the work came from really the first batch of sculptures which I made after I completed the diploma at what's now the Victorian College of the Arts. I then went to study to be a teacher, which was very dull and so I spent most of the evenings and weekends working on sculptures using this metal plate. It came from that run of sculptures there. I worked pretty fast for a few months, and probably worked on two or three at a time on occasions, and just destroyed the ones which I didn't think were very good. It comes from one of the ones that I had in my first exhibition, first one-man exhibition.

JAMES GLEESON: (inaudible)

DAVID WILSON: Yes, at Powell Street Gallery. Apart from that, I can't really remember a great deal about it.

JAMES GLEESON: It was painted steel?

DAVID WILSON: It was, yes, bright red.

JAMES GLEESON: Bright red. Good. Large in scale?

DAVID WILSON: Well, not relatively large. I suppose, given the size of work that I was capable of working on then, it was as big as I could get. I suppose it was probably about seven feet long and about three feet high. It was in a couple of portions.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

DAVID WILSON: You had two elements, I think, which were then placed together—fairly crucial sort of placing—and the elements then interlocked somehow, not actually touching but interlocked in space.

JAMES GLEESON: Those two elements exist quite separately?

DAVID WILSON: They do, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: So when we put it up in the gallery, we're going to have the problem of placing them critically, as you say.

DAVID WILSON: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Do you have any diagram or any drawing to give us an idea of how they should be related to one another?

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DAVID WILSON: No, I don't. I don't.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, you'll certainly be around when we're putting it up.

DAVID WILSON: Yes. I suppose the only thing I can do really is to come to have a look at it. Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, that seems to be the only solution to that.

DAVID WILSON: Right.

JAMES GLEESON: You haven't got a photograph?

DAVID WILSON: The only photograph I've got of it is the one that I've just shown you which is not a particularly informative slide, is it, really?

JAMES GLEESON: No, no.

DAVID WILSON: It's the only one I have of it.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, that is a point we're going to have to settle at the time because you'll need to be there to show us just how they should relate to one another.

DAVID WILSON: Sure.

JAMES GLEESON: As you say, it is critical.

DAVID WILSON: Well, it is in that particular piece, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: The next one that may come to us is *Grid I*. I think it's now in the Philip Morris Collection.

DAVID WILSON: Right.

JAMES GLEESON: But, you know, it would be a good idea to talk about it anyway.

DAVID WILSON: Okay.

JAMES GLEESON: That was purchased from the Solander, from a show you had there in '76.

DAVID WILSON: That's right, and the sculpture dates from 1976 too.

JAMES GLEESON: Does it?

DAVID WILSON: It was part of a range of small works that I made and it was the first time I really felt happy with small works, the range of little works that I put into that gallery. I'd always found pieces such as pedestal pieces or table pieces a problem given the material. The material is so used to being used in large industrial ways and having obviously so much weight and strength it didn't seem right somehow having little bibelots hanging around made of the stuff. It was probably the best of the small works that I made then and it started me off on the

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idea of basing a simple sculptural form on something which I could see outside, like a grid in the road.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

DAVID WILSON: Or an air vent in a wall. I made it up in a pretty mechanical sort of way just joining together bits of steel, perhaps the way in which a chap in a factory might do it. With subtle variations, of course, but letting the initial idea, the idea of something that already exists, be a sort of disciplining point. Something that could limit the possibilities for the sculpture. It was also the first sculpture that I made that was a pretty closed sort of form that didn't address itself so much to its spatial concerns and the movement was held in by the outlines somehow. Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: It was steel?

DAVID WILSON: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Painted?

DAVID WILSON: Well, it had a sort of patina on it really, a mixture of varnish and a rust inhibiting paint.

JAMES GLEESON: It's *Grid I*, so I take it it was part of a series relating to the same idea?

DAVID WILSON: Yes, that's right. There are no *Grid II's* and *III's* though because they didn't work.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, I see. So *Grid I* is actually—

DAVID WILSON: Yes, the only *Grid* that came out.

JAMES GLEESON: Survived.

DAVID WILSON: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Did *Ramp III* come from that same show?

DAVID WILSON: It did, yes. I made a series of *Ramps*. They were like sort of—well, they weren't as successful as the *Grid* sculpture. *Ramp III* is the only *Ramp*, I think. No, I think there's one other *Ramp* that exists. But I tried to work with the idea of a normal sort of structure like for a jetty or a floor or something.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

DAVID WILSON: And make a sculpture that had a similar sort of structural logic to it. *Ramp III* was the best of the *Ramps*, I think, but it still isn't a very successful sculpture. Because in order to give the sculpture some sort of life, I was forced back on to the old thing of making it dance about somehow, the movement, the implied movement, like the floor was breaking up.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

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DAVID WILSON: So I sort of abandoned trying to include process as an obvious visual thing in the sculpture after that.

JAMES GLEESON: So that was the final stage where you were really concerned with this?

DAVID WILSON: Well, I don't know whether it was the final stage, but somewhere around that time I realised that that sort of approach wasn't really part of what I could do. So I went on to something else.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, of course, the large work we have of yours is *Shelter V*.

DAVID WILSON: *Shelter V*, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, that's one piece, isn't it? It's not several pieces?

DAVID WILSON: Yes, it is several pieces all joined together. It has to be to be moved about.

JAMES GLEESON: I remember it as being a very big piece.

DAVID WILSON: It is a large piece and it's also pretty spatial. I suppose if you tried to make a thing like that in one lump, moving it would become virtually impossible.

JAMES GLEESON: At least we've got three photographs here that will give us a pretty clear idea of how the separate parts should be related to one another.

DAVID WILSON: Yes, but it's much more self-evident when you come to put up the sculpture than, say, the early piece which is just something in space.

JAMES GLEESON: This was exhibited in?

DAVID WILSON: In Sydney, at the Sydney Biennale.

JAMES GLEESON: Sydney Biennale, the first one?

DAVID WILSON: No, the second one.

JAMES GLEESON: The second one.

DAVID WILSON: The one that was held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

JAMES GLEESON: That's right, yes.

DAVID WILSON: Late in '76.

JAMES GLEESON: We acquired it through Powell Street. David, since then how have you been working and what direction has your work taken?

DAVID WILSON: Well, aspects of this sculpture, *Shelter V*, became more important in the latest sculpture and that's the aspect of modelling really and carving and bending and making the steel more fluid. What is in *Shelter V* which

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I've abandoned is the dramatic use of space, the clustering together of industrialised sections. In fact, I don't think I use industrialised sections at all any more. If I do it's just for support and, if they're visible at all, they're sort of submerged into the total form of the sculpture. The *Shelter* idea though has continued and I've made a *Shelter VI* which was a disaster and a *Shelter VII* which is now in the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Much more I've been concentrating on this thing of making a fluid sort of sculpture, making the steel much more pliable, being less restricted by the kinds of forms that you either find or are made for you.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, anything else that you feel that would be important for us to know at this stage about your work? Anything we've missed? Any stages of your development that we haven't touched on? What particular artists, other sculptors, have been important for you or have revealed something that you could use?

DAVID WILSON: Well, obviously Caro has.

JAMES GLEESON: You never studied with Caro?

DAVID WILSON: No, I didn't. No. Philip King in England, for different reasons really because I don't think Philip has taken so easily to the kind of rather glossy St Martin's thing that we find in the sixties. But perhaps it's something about the difference in the chap's approaches. Philip King seems a much more intense sculptor when it comes to wrestling out the content somehow.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

DAVID WILSON: That's why he interests me. David Smith, of course.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

DAVID WILSON: But in the last couple of years, probably since this piece in the Biennale, the sort of sculptors that I've been particularly interested in haven't been steel or assembled or sculptors apart from Gonzalez. They've been Brancusi, Gaudier-Brzeska, people like this.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

DAVID WILSON: And even further back.

JAMES GLEESON: Does that indicate a really dramatic change in your outlook?

DAVID WILSON: I don't think so because the funny thing is, as you work along, well, I find myself making something, then thinking about it and deciding or finding that it's rather similar to something which I struggled around with years ago.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes, yes.

DAVID WILSON: I think really it's a process of maturing and you go through an apprenticeship, I suppose. Nobody can do it without a 10 year apprenticeship somehow, even if they're apprenticed to themselves and all the other chaps who

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made sculpture. You just get clearer, your ideas become clearer. Of course there's input, there's new sculpture being made.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

DAVID WILSON: You come across new things which you either like or dislike but in some way informs the decisions that you're going to make. But it's really just getting things, peeling away the nonsense, the rubbish, and just finding yourself stuck with the thing that you really care about.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, I think that covers it very well.

DAVID WILSON: Okay.

JAMES GLEESON: Thank you very much.

DAVID WILSON: Thanks very much.

JAMES GLEESON: Good. David, since we've finished, you've brought up this point that some time ago you said that you weren't really happy with that first piece of yours that we have, and that you'd like to swap it if it would be possible for another work.

DAVID WILSON: Yes. I've thought about it, and it was very encouraging of the gallery to approach me so early in my career. But for a collection like the Commonwealth Collection I think I'd prefer the red piece not to be in it somehow.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

DAVID WILSON: Because I might have some affection for it but I don't think it really does justice to the work that I'm doing now. So I'd be much happier to exchange the piece, if it could be possible, for a newer piece, something from the last two years of my work. The gallery's got no—

JAMES GLEESON: Nothing but '76.

DAVID WILSON: No, nothing of the last two or three years of work.

JAMES GLEESON: You don't see any value in having an early sort of seminal work, simply as a sort of marker to show how your work changes?

DAVID WILSON: Well, I suppose I can see a value in that, sure. But I just don't think the piece is good enough.

JAMES GLEESON: (inaudible) starting point.

DAVID WILSON: Is good enough. No. Anyway, it's up to you blokes to make up your mind about that.