JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: TOM ARTHUR

15 June 1979

JAMES GLEESON: Tom, could you begin by telling us something about your background training? You were born in Massachusetts?

TOM ARTHUR: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Whereabouts?

TOM ARTHUR: I was born in Brockton Massachusetts, which is about 20 miles south of Boston, and my actual formal training was at the Boston Museum School. Well, I received a scholarship to study graphics and while I was there studying graphics I decided I wanted to do jewellery. So I studied jewellery and silver smithing with minor subjects in sculpture and drawing.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

TOM ARTHUR: The jewellery just started getting bigger and I think drawing and graphics started appearing in the jewellery fairly early in the piece.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Any history of interest in art in your family? Do you come from a family of artists?

TOM ARTHUR: Not really. I think my backgrounds, well, I think it's fairly odd but I think it really sums up I think the way I work and go about things. My parents were from Albania.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

TOM ARTHUR: My father was about 60 when I was born and my mother died when I was six and I was kind of looked after by my father, who was more like a grandfather I think at that stage. My sister looked after me and it was a fairly protective environment, I suppose, where I spent a lot of time at home. I think my earliest memories of actually doing things was my father was a tailor and he had this old sewing machine and I used to make things on that. Not sewing with it; I used to take the thing apart and I couldn't put it back together again. So, I mean, I think one of the best things I did with that sewing machine is I converted it into a sawmill. You know, just sawing rulers up and matches and that sort of thing. So I spent a lot of time by myself.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

TOM ARTHUR: I think as far as drawing goes, just making things, somehow that became my, I suppose, point of identity, whereas other people are playing sport and that sort of thing. So then pretty soon my abilities became recognised by my
friends and so on, so whenever things needed doing they came to me to do them.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. So that at quite an early age you knew you had some sort of feeling about making things, creating something.

**TOM ARTHUR:** Yes, I think strangely enough that’s all I had. You know, so I was sort of put in that position. That became a way of not only I suppose forming myself as a person to be related to by other people. You know, it gave me a point of view largely. I’ve told the story to Peter.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Peter (inaudible)?

**TOM ARTHUR:** Yes, and I haven’t told it to very many people, but I see it as really the most significant thing in the forming of ideas and just the innate power of making things. I think it also was the starting point of my interest in primitive art and the reasons why that’s made in the first place. We used to play war and there was a vacant allotment next to the house and we used to go out and, you know, make guns out of wood and that sort of thing. One day we were digging some foxholes, and while I was digging these foxholes I found this rubber doll. It was a sort of a gift shop doll, you know, fairly erotic. I was about 12 years old or so. I found this thing and I took it home and washed it and so on. I think it was early rubber from Japan, and being buried in the ground for so long it took on this powdery white look about it. My memory has it that it was a blonde with blue eyes, you know, the whole thing. It probably wasn’t at all. My memory has it that it was about that big, but it was probably that big.

**JAMES GLEESON:** How old were you when you—

**TOM ARTHUR:** I was about 12 years old.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**TOM ARTHUR:** Of course that’s the formative time, you start getting a bit curious about things like that, and its breasts were missing. There was just this gaping cavity in the chest. I took it home and cleaned it up and I got a couple of peanuts in the shells and I put them in for the breasts. All of a sudden I had this object. I hid it, and the only place I could hide it where my father wouldn’t see it and my sister wouldn’t find it was in this big steamer chest that we had on the porch. In the steamer chest was all the, well, blankets, you know, lace wear and that sort of thing that came from Albania. I hid this thing under all these blankets. One afternoon I called my friends over and we all gathered around and I opened this chest up and I pulled this thing out. Everybody was just, you know, here’s this erotic object, you know. I mean, you know, everybody just really got off on the object. It was just at that point, you know, I made something which I had that everybody was interested in, you know, all my friends were interested in. We had regular meetings just to view this object which I’d made. Yes, and if I could ever
do that thing again I think, you know, that somehow just sums it up for me, you know. Just sums up the potentials, you know, the innate power.

JAMES GLEESON: Found objects have always played an important part in your work, haven’t they?

TOM ARTHUR: Oh yes. I think going back from that. I think also this idea is preoccupation, I think, I have with meaning of objects, you know, and just the ability to juxtapose things. I mean, like two peanuts for all intent and purposes, you know, became such an erotic thing, you know, in that context. But just the idea of the chest and everything, you know. It’s a memory which was lost for a long time and then I just found myself in the position, while I was in Australia actually. I’d forgotten about it while I was still living in America. Somehow I think the transition, you know, of coming here was a fairly shaky transition for me, you know personally. I think as far as working goes it wasn’t that much of a problem, but somehow all of a sudden all my reference points were gone.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, I see.

TOM ARTHUR: Close friends and associations were gone. Virtually I was pushed back to try, I think, to develop an equivalent; equivalent way of explaining, equivalent ways of working and so on, which you could then start relating to other people. But I think probably about two years ago was when that memory really started forming again about that time. I just realised, you know, I can just trace virtually all my thinking and everything right back.

JAMES GLEESON: Right back to that doll.

TOM ARTHUR: Right back to that.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, it’s very interesting. Did you go to another school after you left the one in Boston?

TOM ARTHUR: No. I went to the Museum School and then I went to Tufts University where I got a Bachelor of Science in Art Education.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

TOM ARTHUR: They ran a course in conjunction with the Museum School and I finished that and then I was smack dab in the middle of the Vietnam War. I think that became a very important lesson as well, this kind of the workings of things. I think basically I was faced with the option of either going or not going. It wasn’t much of an option at all. At that time I was working at a hospital, just weekends washing floors and that sort of thing. I became quite friendly with the head nurse of the cardiac unit and we had a relationship. Her husband was a surgeon in Vietnam and he was sort of about one set of values; she was about another set of values. I think when she came in contact with me and my friends, sort of the group I moved around in, it sort of clarified a lot of her points as well. I think at
that time I was under so much pressure that I’d be in the middle of a conversation and I’d just drop off to sleep. You know, my eyes would just glaze over and I’d be out cold. So she referred me to a neurosurgeon in the hospital and then the whole thing started then. The neurosurgeon said I had this mysterious ailment called narcolepsy. She couldn’t find anything pathologically wrong. So he just said, you know, ‘It’s probably this’. So then I went through about two years of continually being called before the draft board and that sort of thing. It got very weird.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I can believe it.

**TOM ARTHUR:** But I think as far as my interest goes—I’m jumping around a bit—my interest in coming to Australia goes back to 1965. It was the year after I started at the Museum School.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. Any particular reason for that interest?

**TOM ARTHUR:** Well, I think the PR that Australia was getting there was, you know, the land of opportunity, the last frontier. It was a very romantic notion, you know. My closest friend Peter—he’s coming to Australia next month to stay for a month—well, he and I were pretty discontent with just the course and that, so we were restless at that stage. The two of us just wanted to get out, you know, do something, travel around. We were seriously thinking of coming here. As soon as we started checking things out like passports and that, the word was put on us. You know, you make one step out that door you’re gone.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Really?

**TOM ARTHUR:** As far as the war went. So we stayed.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Until after the Vietnam War finished?

**TOM ARTHUR:** Yes. Well, it was still going on when we graduated.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**TOM ARTHUR:** But, anyway, I went through that two-year charade of trying to stay out and he ended up in the reserves. But, anyway, that interest was always there and then I finally got a teaching job for a year and saved some money and made the obligatory trip to Paris, you know, to confirm the fact that I was an artist. I was there for about three days and I met Sandra.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. Is Sandra Australian?

**TOM ARTHUR:** Yes, she is. Anyway, she ended up in Boston for a couple of years and then I won a travelling scholarship, which the main stipulation was that I had to leave the country. So I came to Australia ostensibly to look at Aboriginal
work. That was my proposal. The work that I was doing at the time seemed to align with my proposal and ideas that I was looking for.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. It wasn’t like the sort of work we know here, present day work?

TOM ARTHUR: I think origins, you’d know one piece. Particularly the work called *The night and grey*, of that ram’s head over in the glass box.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

TOM ARTHUR: That was one of the pieces that won the fellowship for me. The early drawings, there were a few in that first exhibition at the Bonython Gallery, which there were just a few that were in that exhibition as well. Then I think after I got here, as I said, I was trying to look for equivalents, it was very difficult. You know, I’d just come in being, you know, typically brash I suppose when you start talking about ideas and floating around. People just look at you like ‘What the hell are you talking about?’ So it kind of put me back and it really put me back on myself again, and I think I’m still trying to get over that thing. I spend an awful lot of time with myself and I’m not terribly public.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no.

TOM ARTHUR: I think I’m kind of getting back to those days with the sewing machine and making sawmills out of (inaudible). But yes, I think, you know, having a rethink about things, just talking to people, and sort of the values that a lot of artists and so on were putting on work at the time. When I arrived here the very strong formalistic thing was still in the air.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

TOM ARTHUR: That was something which fortunately—when I say fortunately, well, at the Museum School. There’s a very strong push in America, as you can imagine towards, Formalism.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

TOM ARTHUR: But were are a few people there that I related to very well, mainly a drawing lecturer and this guy who was head of the school. Somehow they were encouraging, constantly encouraging. Just questioning, you know, the whole mainstream thing that was going on at the time, particularly Formalism. I just couldn’t really come at that for a reason of making things, because somehow that wasn’t the reason why I’ve always made things. You know, made things that pass time largely, and largely to I guess put myself down. You know, just to see where I was at that point. Somehow plugging into a whole, you know, theory-based approach to making things just didn’t gel with me. Fortunately I had the support to keep going, whereas a lot of other schools and so on would just whip that right out of you, you know. There’s no room for questioning; that was the
way things were going. When I arrived here the Formalist thing was still very much in the air.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, of course. What year did you arrive?


JAMES GLEESON: Oh, well, it was still very powerful.

TOM ARTHUR: Yes. Sandra was here for a visit the year before we came and she was just checking out some galleries and so brought a few slides. She met Bronwyn Thomas and Bronwyn just said, ‘Well, when you arrive in Australia, you know, come and see me’.

JAMES GLEESON: She was working at Bonython’s?

TOM ARTHUR: At Bonython’s at the time. So I went to see her about the second week that I was here and she suggested that I show in the young artist exhibitions that they were running at the time. Somehow, I think it was probably just the stand that the work took, or the area that I was working in, I guess it came up as being very fresh because, you know, the reviews and just the interest in the work was certainly there.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, it did come at a time, as you say, when Formalism was absolutely, you know, the key kind of art that was being done, and yours was a personal, subjective, a quite different approach. Would you say that there’d been any kind of—well, you obviously knew all about, you know, Surrealism and, you know, the way the Surrealists were using collage techniques and so on. This awareness, was that a conscious thing, or did you just instinctively use it because that was the way you felt you wanted to?

TOM ARTHUR: Well, I think initially it was instinctive. You know, and when I discovered the Surrealists and discovered that they were—

JAMES GLEESON: (inaudible), yes.

TOM ARTHUR: You know, all of a sudden I get this other whole perspective on things as well. But I tried to reject that as much as possible, you know; that other people were doing it but for other reasons.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. You don’t feel any sort of direct link with Surrealism?

TOM ARTHUR: I find a direct interest with Surrealism, but that came later.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

TOM ARTHUR: I think the high school situation that I was in was a fairly naive closed situation. Like, for instance, I think work being done in high schools now is
probably work that was done in first year art schools, you know, 10 or 15 years ago. You know, it’s all stepping up.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

TOM ARTHUR: There wasn’t very much of a push towards a historical understanding or base. It was more, just get in there and pass time, you know, you’ve got three free periods a week so just keep your nose clean and stay out of trouble sort of thing. It was mainly that. So I didn’t really have any access, you know, and I think just the background of my parents and so on. You know, there were very few books around and that sort of thing. So once I got into the Museum School and all of sudden it just opened up this whole other world of possibilities, which I didn’t have the faintest idea even existed. But I think again, a fortunate, I guess, juncture point for me was coming across Duchamp very early. I think I was towards the tail end of my first year in art school. This was like 1964. At that point he wasn’t particularly well known, you know, his ideas, his approach to things and so on.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no.

TOM ARTHUR: Hardly anybody knew about him—even lecturers that I had. My closest friend Peter’s father has always been very interested in music particularly, and he came across Duchamp I suppose when Duchamp was working. We were having a conversation with him one day and he just said, ‘Oh, I think there’s somebody that you ought to really look at’. So we went out and tried to find some information on him. At that time the best we could come up with was a Time Life book on Duchamp, which was a fairly superficial handling of him.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

TOM ARTHUR: Then we were just talking about him and so on and we met people who knew him and that sort of thing, and we saw them, people living in Boston and that. We became very interested in him, you know, we made the trip to Philadelphia and that.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, there’s a big collection there.

TOM ARTHUR: Yes. Went to the Fogg Museum and saw the Valise and that sort of thing, and somehow just the possibilities of that were just wide open. More than ever it just confirmed a very personal approach to understanding.

JAMES GLEESON: It’s rather extraordinary that Duchamp, who was forgotten virtually for so long, has now come to seem one of the most seminal figures in the whole twentieth century art. So much that’s happening today had its suggestions at least in things that Duchamp did.

TOM ARTHUR: Sure. Yes. Largely I think his work has really been misread in recent times. I think just the directions that people have picked up on and so on. I
think he was largely against, you know, just continually redoing and so on. I mean, just these statements about ready-mades and that sort of thing. Yet, I think a lot of particularly younger people, as a seminal figure he’s sparking off things, but I think they’re going back in working against his basic reasons for working—which might not be such a bad thing. I mean, my feeling was that, if anything, what he confirmed in me was kind of the devaluation of art as this precious activity.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

TOM ARTHUR: You know, just getting it back to everybody.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Tom, in your work and I think generally, particularly the big major pieces, is there any kind of conscious symbolism intended? Or is it a purely subconscious bringing together of objects and things for reasons that you don’t define yourself?

TOM ARTHUR: Well, I think with the big works, I mean, they function on so many levels for me and some of the levels I only realise after I’ve done them. But with the aeroplane piece, Drako Vülen’s, which I must admit I’ve fallen for the trap too. For the first couple of years I kept denying that it was an aeroplane, but everyone refers to it as an aeroplane so I refer to it as an aeroplane now. But I never saw it as an aeroplane when I set off doing it. The way that that work came about was a lot of the smaller works were going at the time, and I’d done that piece Basic Theological Tenant—it was in the Bonython show; the National Gallery of Victoria have it now—that skeleton flying through the planes of glass in that small room.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

TOM ARTHUR: That was really coming to terms I think with, I suppose, certain hypocrisies and so on that were kind of around in the air, plus this whole push towards eastern mysticism and so on. I suppose I’m a fairly cynical guy about things like that. I could just see the way that the whole thing was being misunderstood again.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

TOM ARTHUR: It was being, I think, used as a form of convenience for justifying certain things that were going on, rather than really coming to terms with the essence of it. Somehow that sort of set up a whole area of interest in trying to get that into another form. Possibly later I can show you some examples and slides of the development of that idea. But that work kind of signalled possibilities of going to a larger scale. Then one night we were watching a documentary on television and it was talking about this particular species of lizard—the Latin name Draco Volans. Well, Robert Lindsay used the words ‘became an evolutionary freak’. I mean, those are his words, not mine. But somehow it was that sort of area that interested me, and as the documentary went on I was just glued to the
screen, you know. This tree snake was its only natural enemy. I mean, thousands of years ago the lizard was an herbivore, the snake was a carnivore and it was its only natural enemy and the lizard was dying off. Through the process of evolution it developed flaps under its arms, and the snake would corner it in the tree and it would just jump off the tree and float to earth. Well, then again through the course of evolution, the tree snake became an herbivore and so was not a threat to the lizard. Yet, through the process of evolution, the thing was still flying off so the whole thing became a ritualised game. Somehow I related that to the courting rituals of our society. You know, the snake—I mean the phallus obviously—and the lizard and the flaps and so on. Eventually it started materialising. I started seeing the flaps almost as possibly negligees and that sort of thing. That was the sort of link that I started making with the structure of the plane.

I felt too, on I suppose a fairly pragmatic level, that in order to I guess really get a reputation going in the country and just to be able to work, I needed to make something of that scale, which I’d never done before. I’d done a lot of I suppose ephemeral things, you know, just going off into the woods and that sort of thing and just making things and leaving them there and coming back a few years later and seeing what was going on with them. But nothing of that, I guess, permanence and just actually working into it. I guess our domestic situation was such that I couldn’t get a job. There were no teaching jobs or anything going, and Sandra was working and we were living in the flat in Crown Street and I just went off and bought some wood and started making this idea. Before that I did the *Asymmetrical aviator*, which is that small pigeon and the aircraft.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**TOM ARTHUR:** That in itself, I suppose, started giving me some clues as to the structure that the idea needed to take. The lizard became this aeroplane structure and the flaps became silk and this whole idea of courting ritual and so on, the sexuality of it, became neon. The tree snake became this laminated snake-like form plugging in, fornicating really the structure. The end of it was carved into a fairly realistic phallus form.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So that there is quite a specific symbolic sort of element behind it?

**TOM ARTHUR:** Absolutely, particularly in that one. But again, it was just looking for equivalents, you know, a way of reasoning and trying to come up with structures which would embody the concepts. Now, I guess, you know, my concept itself, I just took free rein of the idea and gave it my own form.

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

**TOM ARTHUR:** I felt that rather than again going against this very formalistic approach, I mean, I became I suppose very opposed to the notion of the critic
defining the work; largely, you know, telling the public what they’re looking at and that sort of thing. I think that’s probably, I guess, sort of my offshoot upbringing of being totally unaware of the whole art that was going on, and yet making things. Just that confirmation that you can still be making things in relative isolation, without knowing what had been made before, and still get an enormous amount of information back. Plus a good way of passing time with yourself.

JAMES GLEESON: Tom, this question of informality, the opposite to the sort of formal approach, you do your big works tend to create environments, don’t you? They’re not objects as such, but groups of objects arranged in what can only be described as a sort of environmental way.

TOM ARTHUR: Particularly with the piece in the biennale.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

TOM ARTHUR: As I said earlier, my intention, my stated intention for getting that scholarship, was to come to Australia and just have a look, you know, just try to experience these things that I’d been reading about and hearing about and that.

JAMES GLEESON: Aboriginal art?

TOM ARTHUR: Yes. I became very interested in the whole concept of a totemic landscape, which isn’t unusual to the Aboriginal culture. But somehow I think when you pare everything down, you know, just the absolute I suppose minimal amount of artefact making and so on, minimal amount of baggage.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

TOM ARTHUR: Thus the importance of that totemic sense of landscape which somehow supply the Aboriginals with not only a history, a sense of history, but is just the basic sense of being, a whole belief structure. Somehow I found that extraordinary, you know, that it was even possible. Those are the sorts of things that I felt our culture and civilization was losing. So I had to come and see them, being suspicious about what I read and so on. It’s taken me this long in order just to come to terms with that. My work, my current work, is very much involved in that.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

TOM ARTHUR: The piece in the biennale is really—

JAMES GLEESON: A totemic landscape.

TOM ARTHUR: Totemic landscape, yes, of my own meanings, my own objects.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes. Or in totems, things that had a special totemic psychic or spiritual meaning.
TOM ARTHUR: Yes. But I think the other aspect about the work which went largely unnoticed—and strangely enough Klaus Rinker and Lang were the only two, I think, that really picked up the formalistic content in the work—the whole work on first glance, it just looks like a random scattering of works. But when you view the work from above you could start deciphering the formalistic placement and so on. It had a lot to do with series; it had a lot to do with colour placement. Again, I had to go back to books and I read a number of essays and so on about particularly people like Flavin and so on and the ideas that they were involved in. And tried to put that in another language, as it were, using objects that weren’t traditionally associated with that. I suppose the visual clue that I was dealing with was that structure that supported the whole work.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

TOM ARTHUR: Somehow, again, looking at it in a very narrative sense, I saw that structure as being a very formal structure, just in the way that I had to go about making it and so on. Yet the arrangement of it was such that it wouldn’t be over-poweringly formed. It was a hint more than anything else. Then you come upon this other surface which, in fact, was far more formal than that. So it was that sort of game that I was playing of yes, okay, you get these preconceived ideas of what Formalism is and what this is, try this one on.

JAMES GLEESON: So in fact, although your work is entirely anti-formal on one level, you do use formality, well, as a technical device, if you like?

TOM ARTHUR: It became, I suppose, a main source of energy just to get the work finished. That was one level that the work was about. I mean, I really feel that the work, rather than being a piece of sculpture, was really a work about sculpture. As well as the other level being about this idea of totemic landscape and so on, which is something, I suppose it haunts me in a way, just trying to come to terms with that, trying to understand it. Yet, I see it. I can relate to it just in my own studio, just the way that I go about working. Whereas I always collected objects and so on, left them around, just tried to see what they were giving me back and then tried to put them in some sort of relationship. Whereas now I’ve consciously stopped that, I don’t collect objects any more.

JAMES GLEESON: Don’t you?

TOM ARTHUR: What I want to try—well, somehow I could keep working that way forever. Somehow, I don’t know, maybe it’s sort of setting up some unnecessary pain in a way, but somehow I want to start working from idea, then going out and searching.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes. Looking forward, looking (inaudible).

TOM ARTHUR: Yes, it’s not an abandonment of object.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no.
TOM ARTHUR: It's just another way of working.

JAMES GLEESON: Starting out from a different angle of approach.

TOM ARTHUR: Yes, just to see what I can come up with. I think with that work in the biennale, it's a combination of the two. Whereas I arrived at a number of false stops with the work, and I just couldn't go any further with it. I just had to live with it and see what I needed in order to keep that idea going. Then I had to go off and find the things that I needed. Somehow that became another whole area, which got me going in another area again.

JAMES GLEESON: Tom, I've noticed that in your objects that you'd find, mostly they are natural objects; skeletons, feathers, bones, relics of the material world but transformed by time. I don't see any interest in, say, the relics of recent civilisation, man-made objects. Are you not interested in that sort of thing?

TOM ARTHUR: No, it's not so much that I'm not interested in it. I just think that the need hasn't really arisen, you know, to go after those sorts of things.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

TOM ARTHUR: I think as far as feathers and bones go, personally I think that those have been misinterpreted in many cases in that many people don't really see the transformation that I'm trying to get at, whereas with feathers, the origins of those were some very early drawings that were done in Boston. I had this very large work which had just been going for a while. That's about the time that I was making a serious break from making jewellery, you know, and small objects.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

TOM ARTHUR: Where they became just such strong sculptural objects that I didn't even concern myself with putting pin backs on them or whatever to be worn. I was just happy with what they were. Somehow there was this thing and technically I just couldn't put down the idea that I wanted to put down. I was going after this idea, I suppose, of past ideas in the air, you know; thoughts, conversations, that sort of thing. Technically I just couldn't get them down. So again I was looking for equivalents for putting them down and I had this feather around which was kind of a remnant of a piece of jewellery that I'd been working on.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes.

TOM ARTHUR: I just took the feather and plonked it down on the drawing and it did exactly what I wanted it to do. You know, it became this ethereal point of lost communication, as it were, invisible ideas in the air.
JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Then I just went off and got some other feathers and put them down and I just saw what they were doing. Somehow for me, I always lost the identification of feather, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. So they simply became an element in the drawing?

TOM ARTHUR: Yes, they became markings.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

TOM ARTHUR: Again I just realised there was no need to abandon this idea of putting objects together. You know, just finding other objects to do job that I needed to do.

JAMES GLEESON: Tell me, Tom, about your jewellery, the earlier jewellery that you made. What was it like?

TOM ARTHUR: Well, it’s very difficult to describe.

JAMES GLEESON: Is it like some other new pieces I’ve seen of yours made of bone, bits of bone and metal?

TOM ARTHUR: I’ll get some slides.

JAMES GLEESON: All right, good.

TOM ARTHUR: Then we can talk about that.

JAMES GLEESON: Tom, you still make jewellery. You haven’t abandoned it completely.

TOM ARTHUR: Well, in a funny way, I’ve never really abandoned—I don’t think, anyway—the sensibility of making jewellery.

JAMES GLEESON: Do you regard it as jewellery?

TOM ARTHUR: As far as attention to scale and so on. I mean, very flippantly I gave a lecture to some jewellery students and I started talking about the Drako Vülen’s work as a piece of jewellery and you know, they couldn’t quite make the link. Then as we talked about it they started seeing, you know, attitudes as far as scale goes; that the work has to be the right scale.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

TOM ARTHUR: As far as the ideas that I was trying to come to terms with, that scale just wouldn’t do it any more, so that’s why I had to move into another scale. The same with the drawings and so on.
JAMES GLEESON: So you don’t really draw any line of distinction between what would perhaps be called jewellery and your larger works except it in scale?

TOM ARTHUR: That’s all, yes. I think here you can start seeing, you know, origins of materials and so on—in particular in that work. This work was really the first—

JAMES GLEESON: Do they have any names or titles or identifications?

TOM ARTHUR: This one’s just called *Pearl*.

JAMES GLEESON: *Pearl*. And this one?

TOM ARTHUR: *Skull skin*.

JAMES GLEESON: *Skull skin*?

TOM ARTHUR: That one’s the *Rodents vault*. This one was done when I got back from Paris. I found this cap in the street. I made that for Sandra largely, and it was a work which incorporated words and so on.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes.

TOM ARTHUR: I think it was groping, you know, trying to move out.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

TOM ARTHUR: This one was in the works—it hadn’t been finalised yet—but then I came back home and did that one, then finished that one off. I forget which one came next. I think this one came next. They were all done in a very short period of time. Then this one was done in Australia.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, yes.

TOM ARTHUR: That was the last piece of that scale. You know, there were other things which were started and so on. But, you know, maybe my interest will be rekindled. You know, that remains to be seen.

JAMES GLEESON: You’ve got no interest in using the nominally precious metals like gold and silver and so on? Do you use silver (inaudible)? It is silver, is it?

TOM ARTHUR: Yes, I do. I’ve used silver in sculptures and so on, you know, larger scale works. There’s a work called *Noh Yugen* which you’ve seen. It’s in the glass box. It’s a silver skeleton hanging with that lobster behind it. Well, that’s silver. I mean, for all intent and purposes I suppose it could have been made out of aluminium or anything.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.
TOM ARTHUR: But it’s just that idea of the preciousness of it which was essential in order to carry that idea.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

TOM ARTHUR: It’s that concept of Yugen and the theatre of the no and so on. So on one hand it’s a very, I suppose, transitory experience that the work was trying to get to. But that’s a very precious experience if you can understand it and appreciate it.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

TOM ARTHUR: So I think as far as the usage of precious materials and so on, it’s a very conscious usage. But without any guarantees that it’s going to communicate that to whoever’s looking at the work. But it’s a reason for making it the way you make it. As far as precious stones go, I’ve used moonstones and things like that in sculpture, mainly for colour.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

TOM ARTHUR: And, I suppose, punctuation. In other words, I think some materials probably couldn’t really be seen in the way that I want them to be seen without reference points, and they could very well serve as reference points.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Tom, now could we go on to the two works we have of yours at the moment in the gallery. I suppose the most important one is Goose Bader, but that’s not its full name, is it?

TOM ARTHUR: The full name is Goose Bader pissed on his wing. One of these wings, I went to great pains of trying to stain it with this yellow stain, without making it such an obvious yellow stain. It almost appears as a nicotine stain or something on the wing.

JAMES GLEESON: I first saw this in your studio down in Woolloomooloo. It seemed to fill the whole place. I don’t know how you got in and around it to make it.

TOM ARTHUR: Well, that one was easy, you should have been there when I was doing the plane. We had the wing over our bed, just hanging over the bed, and every time we went to the toilet we had to crawl under the fuselage and that. But this one was mainly stepping over.

JAMES GLEESON: Then I saw it finished at an exhibition you had at the College of (inaudible).

TOM ARTHUR: At the college right, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: That’s when we acquired it from you.
TOM ARTHUR: That’s right. Yes. It’s a work which very few people have seen.

JAMES GLEESON: No, of course, because it went straight from there down to us and it hasn’t been seen.

TOM ARTHUR: It hasn’t been seen, no.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, and probably won’t until we get into the gallery.

TOM ARTHUR: Right. I’m still doing the base for it as well. I think Robert Lindsay’s going to ask permission to show that in the survey show in August.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, is he? Well, it will be good to have it up and we should then get it properly photographed from every angle, so that we all know how it should be assembled, you know, to have that record.

TOM ARTHUR: Right. I think the origins of the work was I acquired this goose. The goose just sat around in the house for a while and then I took it off its base that it came with and just drilled two holes in the floor and it just sat on the floor. The taxidermist that did the job, I mean, he just had no sense of paint. The feet on it and the beak were fluorescent orange and that. Then one day I just couldn’t stand it anymore and I just started working on it. Stripped it all back, repainted it. Then I had a whale bone. I went to an auction, it was out in Parramatta, and I was after some primitive artefacts and so on and I ended up spending all my budget on bones. There’s some whale bones and a dolphin skull and bits and pieces of things. I had this whalebone. As soon as I walked in the house I just put it on the goose’s back and then I just saw that it was beginning to get there, you know—again, this idea of just kind of wait. So I saw the bone as an idea and there’s the weight of carrying around an idea. It was a very corny way, the beginnings of it. But then the work just started growing. You know, the glove went on its head and then I had these old machiner’s goggles which I used to use when I was doing jewellery and just stripped the wire guards off and put them on. It was really, I suppose, a growth from the Asymmetrical aviator.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Where is that?

TOM ARTHUR: Robert Lindsay has that. Then the fertilisation of Drako Vülen’s Cheese Pizza was getting into areas of eroticism and so on. There were a few ideas around that I still wanted to capitalise on, particularly with neon, which I’d worked a fair bit with neon before I came to Australia. But I was doing, with my friend Peter, we’d have neon made and we’d go out in the woods and just put it out there, you know, just leave it there.

JAMES GLEESON: Really?

TOM ARTHUR: The most extraordinary things. At that time we were—

JAMES GLEESON: Did you make the neon?
TOM ARTHUR: No, I’d have it made. We found this marvellous guy who was into making signs for the breweries.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

TOM ARTHUR: We just met him through a friend and he was just so fascinated in sort of the things we were doing with it, and he was involved in making blown glass animals and things. I mean, that was his thing which he used to do after hours. Somehow we started doing these other things and we’d come back with photographs and show them to him and he just couldn’t comprehend what we were doing. But he found it interesting. Pretty soon everybody, you know, that started working in neon would go to this guy and we virtually shut ourselves out. He couldn’t do any work for us any more. He was so busy, you know, just making work for artists and so on.

JAMES GLEESON: (inaudible) work with him?

TOM ARTHUR: No, no. This was just a guy in the corner of Charleston, you know, just on the other side of Boston he was working.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, I see. Who made the ones in the New South Wales Gallery?

TOM ARTHUR: I had A Church Signs make them.

JAMES GLEESON: Here in Sydney? Yes, of course.

TOM ARTHUR: Yes. I mean, that was another—I mean, this is an incredible side story with those guys too. Because at the time I didn’t have very much money—I still don’t. But I had to have all this neon made and I approached them with a small piece, just to try to get a feel of how they worked and whether or not it would be good enough and that sort of thing. The price they asked was just astronomical really. So I paid it for the small piece and then I went back to them. I had this idea for the plane and I had to have the neon made. So they wouldn’t do it. They said it was just too complicated and that, so I kept pestering them and finally I convinced them that they ought to do it, that they need to do it. I produced these full-scale drawings for the work and then their technician couldn’t make them. So I had to go in a work with him, and we virtually fabricated each piece of glass and I made this temporary support structure which we moved into their workshop.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

TOM ARTHUR: We’d make one piece of glass and then we’d bend the next piece, because all the pieces fit. You know, they intertwine with each other. So then it came time, he said, ‘You know this is going to cost you a fortune’. I said, ‘Well, I don’t have a fortune’. ‘Well, how much do you think it’s going to cost?’.
couldn’t really pay him more than $300 for them, you know. He said ‘$300, you must be joking’. They were talking about $1500 for the job.

JAMES GLEESON: Goodness me.

TOM ARTHUR: So anyway, finally they became so interested and then I started swapping some trade secrets with them. We were doing some experiments with the guy in Boston about how to get a whole other range of colours. It was fairly simple. Where you’re just using different coloured tubes which you normally pump neon through, which is a red gas. I was showing them how they could graft different coloured tubes with different powders, phosphorescent powders. So that for instance if you wanted to, say, get a bright orange, you’d use a yellow tube with phosphorescence in it. But then instead of pumping red neon through it, if you pump argon through it you get the most extraordinary shade of green. You know, it’s a green that had never been seen here before.

JAMES GLEESON: Really?

TOM ARTHUR: So we made a deal and I was just swapping some things. I showed them how to get a beautiful lavender colour, and this sort of thing. And so we did it.

JAMES GLEESON: Tom, do you have any special problems with Goose Bader. I know from the nucleus of the goose and the whalebone and the glove and so on, it seemed to expand out into space, to be an articulation in space until it occupied quite a considerable amount of area.

TOM ARTHUR: Well, I think moving towards this area of eroticism again that the plane was trying to get to. I think that was probably looking at it in a larger scale; not only the scale of the work but just the point of focus of the idea. This one started becoming much more specific in that, if you recall, there were two frames and there was this structure which was attached to the goose.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

TOM ARTHUR: There were three pieces of wire which were imbedded with asbestos. They’re used in laboratories for heating. Somehow this whole business of the astronauts and so on was another thing which I had going. You know, we were kind of looking at it in terms of metaphor and so on, you know, as an erotic metaphor—a space capsule and then the heat shield and that sort of thing coming through. The work gradually started building into a narrative of its own, so you have these heat shields, you know, for re-entry. There’s this structure moving into this frame, which has a piece of purple neon with a grafting of pink neon on the tip. As it’s moving through, I saw that as a clitoris, moving through and it’s moving towards this other frame which had more neon in it. Then with the upright poles there was this neon escaping, there’s this shape and of escaping through the structure of it. Then there was this wire network on pulleys which came back and was attached to the goose’s behind.
JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

TOM ARTHUR: The implied movement was, as the goose moved in, it started moving this— it was a bone again—and had this piece of metal with pink rubber on it. Go with the pink rubber again. It had this shape, it was a wire gauge, a wire gauge used in jewellery, you know, just for getting the proper dimensions of wire. That was laid on top of the bone covering the marrow, as it were. The implied movement was, as goose moved in it started pulling this weight. Again, I saw that as an idea. But the juxtapositioning of this bone, just the shape of the bone became very genital-like, you know, with this pink appendage on the back of it, and that wire gauge. As the goose moved in, it kind of moved this thing; I saw that as memory again, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. It doesn’t actually move, does it?

TOM ARTHUR: No.

JAMES GLEESON: The movement is implied.

TOM ARTHUR: This is frozen.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

TOM ARTHUR: As you look at the work, just the flow of the neon gas, you know, it moves at such a high cycle.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

TOM ARTHUR: You barely can perceive it at all, but as you start looking at the work it seems as though it’s just edging in.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. The same people make the neon thing?

TOM ARTHUR: That’s right, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: So you must have found them satisfactory after you’ve alerted them to the possibilities.

TOM ARTHUR: Oh, they were good. Well, they were stunned when I sent them to the gallery to see the work. They couldn’t make any sense of it. Wonder why I’d go to all that trouble.

JAMES GLEESON: You haven’t used neon since? You didn’t use it in the last one?

TOM ARTHUR: No. The last one originally was going to have gas jets in the work, and we ran into all sorts of problems with the fire authorities and this was fairly early. I mean, I was very disappointed to the point where I wasn’t going to
put the work in. Then somehow it became another obstacle to get around and it pushed it into other areas.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

TOM ARTHUR: I was mainly interested in the colour of the gas but I was also interested in the idea, because the works were triptych, you know, the aeroplane, the piece at the sculpture centre, that installation, and then this final piece.

JAMES GLEESON: You think of them as a triptych, do you?

TOM ARTHUR: Well, they became a triptych. After I did the first work and then I started thinking about the installation and the sculpture centre. Then that idea, direction it was moving in somehow needed kind of finalising. And so it went from this huge scale again that the aeroplane was dealing with–huge scale of idea, I suppose. Then it became internalised and then somehow I wanted it back out again.

JAMES GLEESON: Tom, talking about the way to display Goose Bader, now you’re working on a base for it. You mentioned that this base is in three parts because of the size of the difference. But are there any other special problems that will be encountered in putting it up, setting it up?

TOM ARTHUR: I can’t really foresee any problems with it. I think the most complicated part was the actual rigging, you know, which was done with a hollow core fly fishing line.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

TOM ARTHUR: The rigging will remain intact when it’s in storage. The only option which I’m entertaining at the moment as far as the packing case goes, is whether the uprights remain in position. The problem with that is you end up with a huge packing crate.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

TOM ARTHUR: Or putting the uprights on swivels so that they’ll collapse down, and then building porcelain insulators into the upright for that piece of neon that sits on top. Then you just tension the uprights and drop the neon in place. I think that’s the way it will go.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, you said it’s going to Melbourne for your exhibition.

TOM ARTHUR: Well, Robert’s seeking permission for that.

JAMES GLEESON: Will you go to Canberra to supervise it’s packing to go to Melbourne?
TOM ARTHUR: Well, the work is still here.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, it’s still here!

TOM ARTHUR: Yes, with the base.

JAMES GLEESON: It hasn’t come down to Canberra?

TOM ARTHUR: No, it’s not in Canberra yet.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, well, so that there’s no problem.

TOM ARTHUR: So it will go from there to Canberra.

JAMES GLEESON: I had the feeling that it was in Canberra. Good. Well, the only other work that we have of yours to date is this triptych *Breeding chamber*. Is that the full title?

TOM ARTHUR: *Rapid evolution of the breeding chamber.*

JAMES GLEESON: *Rapid evolution of the breeding chamber.* Have we got that one? *Rapid evolution of the breeding chamber.* Have I got that in the right order?

TOM ARTHUR: Let’s see. There’s one, there’s two and that’s three.

JAMES GLEESON: So this is part one?

TOM ARTHUR: Right.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, I’ll just pause for a moment. Tom, now we’ve got them into sequence; one, two, three, except I’ve got it upside down, haven’t I?

TOM ARTHUR: There’s one.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, first of all the medium, it’s paper?

TOM ARTHUR: Right.

JAMES GLEESON: Inks?

TOM ARTHUR: Paper, pencil.

JAMES GLEESON: Pencil.

TOM ARTHUR: There’s eraser, rubber. I needed eraser fragments, which have been fixed down, and copper wire.

JAMES GLEESON: Copper wire.
TOM ARTHUR: And thread.

JAMES GLEESON: And thread. I see, so it's a sort of mixed media thing.

TOM ARTHUR: Well, what I was trying to get at with that, that was the second work using the squirrel. The first work was In quest of not now which the Art Gallery of New South Wales has, which was a work about this size. It had a whole—

JAMES GLEESON: What, two feet, three feet?

TOM ARTHUR: Probably about—I can't remember now—it's just over two feet, I think, by about nine inches or so in height.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Yes, I think I remember.

TOM ARTHUR: Well, you know, one of things with Australia and so on, you know, the kangaroo and that sort of thing—it occurred to me when I was in Hyde Park shortly after I arrived here. I was walking through and something seemed to be missing and it just dawned on me one day; it was the squirrels. You know, in Boston we used to go to this main park and we just used to sit down there and watch them going. They just became a part of everything.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

TOM ARTHUR: I realised that there weren't any. You know, there aren't any kangaroos in America either, you know, running around. Somehow that link, you know, 'I'll use this guy and see what I can do'. There's also concern kind of about the rise of the social sciences, you know, psychology and this sort of thing. You know, not concerned so much from a point of view of, say, animal experimentation and that, but just really concerned about the changes that the social sciences were beginning to effectively evoke in people's perception of things. Somehow I think, you know, man has become almost over-defined and somehow I can relate that to Formalism, in a way.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

TOM ARTHUR: That became an area, you know, which was open to some possibilities. So with this one, I just started thinking about this whole idea of experimentation and so on was going on. Also it was very closely linked to this Eastern thing that was going on about sexuality and this sort of thing. Of course, the sexual revolution, if you want to call it that, was really in full steam at that point.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. What year was that?

TOM ARTHUR: When was that? Seventy-four, late '74, late '74 or early '75.
JAMES GLEESON: We bought it in ’76, in October ’76. Now, it would have been done, say, within the year?

TOM ARTHUR: Oh yes. It would have been probably early ’75, I would think, you know, late ’74, something like that. But most likely it would have been started late ’74. Well anyway, the work started getting into this area of kind of the social sciences and so on, the prescribing, the experiments and so on. And along with the sexual revolution and so on, a lot of attachments were being put to, I suppose, just physical sexuality.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

TOM ARTHUR: It was being looked at under the microscope, as it were, and talked about, written about, and this sort of thing. The work largely started moving into that area. You have this squirrel form and this box with a vagina.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

TOM ARTHUR: And two copper wires with a buzzer. There’s this squirrel suspended in this harness moving across on the pulley again and, you know, kind of moving forward. You ring the buzzer, you know, you get the reward sort of thing. But as it was moving towards this vagina-shaped box, when it pressed the buzzer, the whole thing I suppose short of short-circuited and the squirrel began dematerialising. The head just started losing, well, its squirrel qualities and became phallic like. Then with these bits of eraser moving up, it was that dematerialising of the squirrel itself, just kind of evaporating, you know, when you press the buzzer. Until it finally gets in, the harness breaks away and the squirrel’s well on its way for entering that box. You know, end of the experiment.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. So it is a sort of a narrative again?

TOM ARTHUR: Again. Yes, very much so. Then the work that followed this one was *The birth of brahma* Disney, which you would have seen.

JAMES GLEESON: I remember that one, yes. It had a sort of cow form?

TOM ARTHUR: That’s right, yes, and the squirrels moving in.

JAMES GLEESON: That’s right, yes.

TOM ARTHUR: In that case the cow actually became a phallus. You know, and there’s the squirrel kind of looking in the opening, standing on the top masturbating, on the top of it.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

TOM ARTHUR: So, you know, there were three works, and there’s a fourth work which has never been shown of this. It’s kind of, in a way, a summing up again,
but it fits in the corner of a room, so you have about three feet of drawing running down here and then there’s about five feet of drawing running down the other wall. In that work, the squirrels are busy again but then you see this human form, you know, from the waist down. Then there’s this arm which is hanging on the other side of a wall, a partition, which has this same structure on it. So it just starts taking that analogy using the squirrel and just moving it right back into where it’s actually happening.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Just a technical point for the conservator, how did you fix the fragments of the razor? What sort of fixative did you use?

**TOM ARTHUR:** I think it was just Reeve’s standard matt fixative, just an aerosol fixative. Then there was smoke on it, you know, soot, in order to try to get that atmosphere. You can’t really pick it up in the photographs, but yes, you can in here. You start seeing the smoke and so on, kind of getting back to that short circuit. The buzzer’s burnt out.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. Did you actually use smoke?

**TOM ARTHUR:** Yes, candle smoke.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Candle smoke. And you fixed that too?

**TOM ARTHUR:** That’s right.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So that there are really four distinct works for that phase of interest.

**TOM ARTHUR:** Yes. It was just, as you say, it was a phase. You know, it was kind of working out, working through a problem which we set up. Well, that fourth one, I can show you one of the sections.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Tom, what do you call this yet unfinished and climactic work to that series? No title yet?

**TOM ARTHUR:** No title at all. I don’t know, there’s too much in it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** To pick the right title.

**TOM ARTHUR:** Yes. Somehow I think with the work, possibly the title might just start leading it astray too much. It could quite possibly with the other works, you know, if it were shown with the other works, it might just assume its own title.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. For the purpose of identification, it really is in two parts, meant to be hung at right angles (inaudible).

**TOM ARTHUR:** Right. Yes.
JAMES GLEESON: So that one is on one wall, it goes around the corner and the other part is on the other wall. So that identifies it for us in the future. It still has to do with—the squirrels again as a motive, and the human figure?

TOM ARTHUR: Yes, the human figure comes in. This one, to a certain extent, starts linking this series with that other work that you saw when you were in Crown Street.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

TOM ARTHUR: That big work with the figure in the room, and the bed, and the skull lying on the bed again and then the foot coming up from under the bed and, you know, starts picking this up again. It’s the same foot, and the same handling of the foot coming out.

JAMES GLEESON: Tom, you obviously draw very well. Draftsmanship, drawing from life, was part of the course you did at the Austin Museum School?

TOM ARTHUR: Yes, the Museum School. Yes, I think I probably went through the same crisis that just about every student that I’ve come across in the last three years goes through, where you just, you know, you say, ‘I can’t draw’. You know, and it’s just largely, when you have a great block of time on your hands and you set out to do something, you can draw. So you just do it.

JAMES GLEESON: You did study life drawing?

TOM ARTHUR: Yes, I did. But as, I said, I ended up at the Museum School to study graphics, graphic design and then I went into jewellery, so I always drew. I mean, that was part and parcel of staying home all the time.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

TOM ARTHUR: But, yes, I mean it would be very difficult to say that I didn’t learn anything from the classes at the Museum School. But you know, again, I think when the need’s there then you just have to work around it. I mean, I’d never really drawn in this way before I came here. You know, I think, well, many of the drawings, I guess the more mature drawings were those things with more atmospheres, more environments again, rather than going for specifics. Somehow I felt that a lot of the ideas that I was coming in to after I arrived in Australia really needed to be put forward in a very straightforward way. You know, they say that you know these are about people and so on; they’re not particularly about art. Somehow I thought that a lot of those works in the Bonython show were being seen as being about things other than what they might have been about.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.
TOM ARTHUR: Plus I think my ideas changed, they firmed up a bit. I think mainly because of the fact of just being put in the situation where you virtually have to almost account for your own thinking, you know your own ideas. I think that happens when you have a lot of time to spend.

JAMES GLEESON: You work with very concrete images, don’t you? You know, the things that you use are very specific. Yet the purpose, the ends to which you put them are often very intangible, philosophical perhaps. So that you are using very recognisable objects and forms to create something that is often quite intangible; states of mind, feelings.

TOM ARTHUR: Yes, somehow I think it’s the best that I have to work with largely. I think once you start going after, say, kind of the look of the content, the look of the idea, if you try to make it look exactly as the idea is in your head, you’ll fail miserably.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

TOM ARTHUR: So again I think this idea of equivalence is a very strong thing which I recognise more so now than I ever have in the past.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes.

TOM ARTHUR: Just looking for things, you know, trying to set them up. I think too if you move too far away from the tangible object then possibilities of the idea getting through become more obscure as well.

JAMES GLEESON: Could it be that your interest in primitive art totem, that you in effect are endowing your chosen object with a kind of totemic quality, totemic significance. Do they become totems of meaning or ideas or psychic states?

TOM ARTHUR: I think they become summatisations, you know, where again you’re looking for an equivalent idea, you know, and then somehow the thing has it. I mean, that gets very deceptive too. You know, you have something around you and you’re thinking about it and all of a sudden you become attached to this object. It can kind of lead you down the garden path, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: You build into the object, you project into it (inaudible).

TOM ARTHUR: That’s right, you invest it with meaning largely.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, exactly.

TOM ARTHUR: I think as far as a totemic landscape goes, that too is invested with me. I mean, largely it becomes a signpost, a reference file largely. A reference of ideas to hang things on, you know, particularly in say using the Aborigines as an example. I mean, it’s a way of constantly having your history. You know, it’s there, it’s tangible, you know, it’s not words. It’s there.
JAMES GLEESON: Yes. The image becomes a key to a whole sort of racial memory of beliefs and ideas.

TOM ARTHUR: Yes, yes, very much so, just the power of it, the power of the object over the word. I think too that’s an area of concern. As I said before, like particularly with social sciences and that sort of thing, they’re leading people in directions which aren’t necessarily the right directions.

JAMES GLEESON: So in a way this is a kind of criticism the triptych of those experiments, that kind of—

TOM ARTHUR: That kind of way of, I think, governing your idea of reality or of life or whatever. It’s too easy. When I say ‘it’s too easy’, it’s too easy because ultimately you get very little back except for second hand information.

JAMES GLEESON: (inaudible)

TOM ARTHUR: Yes, I mean the thing that I think most people are frightened of more than anything else is spending time with themselves, alone. That’s a pretty frightening thing. It’s getting in-built into this society; I mean, when you look at our forms of entertainment and that sort of thing, it’s always moving away. We did a seminar last year in the Visual Communications Department. I did a paper which was really in two parts. I was asked to submit a proposal to the NCDC for a sculpture for the Belconnen development, and again I learned a very valuable lesson about what the NCDC is looking for as far as sculpture goes. Somehow, what I was going after, what I was trying to get going in public sculpture—which in my feelings anyway, it’s gone beyond that. I see, you know, the formalistic work, you know, these steel things and so on. It’s having very little to do with anything other than themselves, you know, and their own search for formal elements. I was trying to come up with something that was more about the user of the building, you know, which was a work that was not just a work of sculpture in that pure sense, but it was going back to a more, say, animistic approach to images and so on where the images weren’t representations of things, they were the thing.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

TOM ARTHUR: So I was trying to seat the work into the architecture. Again using very formal devices with, you know, proportions, colour, that sort of thing. But also producing a work which I hoped would reflect the inner state of the user of the building as they approached it. Somehow I was seen as being too threatening. Again it had a skeleton in it, cast in aluminium with this other structure around it. It was passing through sheets of glass on a trestle structure. But yes, it’s very complicated, very involved, considering the siting and placement of that. But anyway, somehow I saw the reasons for the rejection of the work as confirming my reasons for making the work in the first place. So in a funny way I think I came out the winner again. But those are the sort of battles
that you don’t like to win because they keep confirming more suspicion and
cynicism largely. But Peter Powditch did a paper as well.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

TOM ARTHUR: One of the points he made, because I think we were going
through a very difficult period where, you know, administration and so on was
largely taking over and governing. You know, the strongest thrust that the
department had to offer was really sapping it just by catching it into another, say,
more social science orientated stream. Our feelings—we still have those feelings—
is that its moving away from the individuals, you know, the individuals right
basically to perceive things and put things down as they feel. You know, rather
than plugging into a formal structure which becomes anachronistic the day after,
largely. One of the points that Peter made was that if you continue looking
outside and being dissatisfied with what goes on, then you largely fall for the trap.
And that and instead of being dissatisfied with what goes on, be dissatisfied with
what goes on with yourself. That’s really the only way you get anywhere. I think
that’s very, very true.

JAMES GLEESON: You are a determined individualist?

TOM ARTHUR: Yes, as soon as you put it that way, you know, it catches all
these other connotations which the social scientists invented. But, no, I think
rather than being determined as an individualist on that level, I think if anything
I’m determined that people should still understand themselves, largely. Live with
themselves and trust their own ideas.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, to me, I’ve always thought of art as a means of
investigating who you are and what you are.

TOM ARTHUR: Where you are.

JAMES GLEESON: It’s a search for yourself.

TOM ARTHUR: Yes. Well, exactly, and I think you’d relate that to what I was
saying before. If you become dissatisfied with what goes on, say, with what other
people are doing and that sort of thing, that’s the trap. All your energy goes out
there rather than in the work. You know, I think if anything, these start getting into
that area.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, Tom, I think that's been very good. Anything more
you’d like to add?

TOM ARTHUR: I don’t know. I guess this is an arbitrary stopping point, you
know.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, it is. I could go on talking for a long, long time. Have
we missed any technical, practical things for our catalogue? I don’t think so.
TOM ARTHUR: No. No, I don’t think so. I think if anything—it’s probably another conversation—it’s kind of the work that I’m involved in now. You know, where that’s going. Again, that might be another conversation because it’s still going.

JAMES GLEESON: One point you did want to bring up which is interesting is that now you don’t find the object and build around it; you begin with the concept or an idea and then go looking for the object.

TOM ARTHUR: Yes, pretty much so. Yes. I mean, I’m madly trying to get rid of my inventory of objects so I can start.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. You feel they might be a trap to lead you into using them for their own sake?

TOM ARTHUR: Oh, it’s a very seductive trap.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes. I’m sure it is.

TOM ARTHUR: You become so conversant, I mean, just so confident in working that way too. I just feel that, you know, just for my own growth, that I may very well have to abandon this attitude just in order to keep working. But I’ve found it an interesting way to cut it short. I think, like with the Drako Vuilen’s work, particularly that work.

JAMES GLEESON: Where is that?

TOM ARTHUR: Art Gallery of New South Wales.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, that’s right, yes.

TOM ARTHUR: But, I mean that in itself, I think it was a successful work on a private scale as well as on a public scale. When I say ‘public scale’ I’ll move that right across from the art community to just the Joe average that comes into the gallery and looks at work. I think it was accessible on a lot of levels. I mean, the main point of seduction with that work was I probably could have kept working in that way. But then you’re working for other reasons. It’s a hard one to reconcile, you know. But, yes, I think I’m very protective about work. You can’t be protective about ideas.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

TOM ARTHUR: But you can be protective about yourself, I suppose. To the point where it’s almost an obsession, I think.

JAMES GLEESON: You have this Duchamp-ian idea; one shouldn’t go on repeating things too much, however attractive and seductive they are. That to grow you must change, you should move to (inaudible).
TOM ARTHUR: Well, you know, getting back to what I was saying earlier about how I think Duchamp was largely misunderstood, particularly by the current generation working. That's one of the ideas which really registered to me, you know, and it constantly keeps you in touch with why you're doing this stuff in the first place. I think the other thing of Duchamp's which interests me—maybe because basically I'm lazy, I don't know—is that you do as little as possible. I think, looking at that seriously from say a professional level, by doing as little as possible I think it gives you the opportunity of producing a work which is definitive of all these ideas that are floating around, rather than producing a number of fragments. I think the work in the biennale was largely about that. That it was, you know, a number of smaller works and so on which went into this larger idea, which quite possibly might have been overloaded. Too many ideas, you know, too many levels. But I don't know about that.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, Tom, thank you very much indeed.

TOM ARTHUR: Thank you.