JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: JOHN COBURN

30 May 1979

JAMES GLEESON: John, as you can see, you’re not exactly well represented in our collection at the moment. We only have—what?—three paintings and two prints. But I wonder if you would at least talk about these now, and then as we get others we can come back to you for further information about them. The earliest one I think we have of yours is probably The three kings. Is that right?

JOHN COBURN: That’s right, Jim, yes. Well, I remember very clearly the date of that—it was painted in 1953—because I always associate it with the birth of my daughter. It’s a very immature work. It was painted not long after I had left the East Sydney Technical College. So that I was still, to a certain extent, a student groping around in the dark for a means of expression.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

JOHN COBURN: This is one of the paintings I did at that time. It’s a sort of a semi-abstract. It would have been inspired by the big exhibition of French painting that came to Sydney in 1953.

JAMES GLEESON: I remember that.

JOHN COBURN: Well, it’s a religious subject and I entered it in the Blake Prize of 1954, I think.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Now that’s on loan to Bonn at the moment. We acquired it 1970.

JOHN COBURN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: So that represents the starting point of your career as far as our collection goes at the moment.

JOHN COBURN: Yes. Well, it would be one the earliest paintings of mine, in any collection I would think.

JAMES GLEESON: It seems to me that although it’s not at all characteristic of what you’re doing now, there are elements in it; in the simplification of the form, the concentration on design of shapes, the arrangements of shapes come through in this, although in a perhaps more realistic way than in your later work. Is that so?

JOHN COBURN: Yes. Well, I’ve always been very interested in the quality of shapes and the distribution of the shapes all over the canvas, and the relationship of tones. A certain tonal quality has always been very important to
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me. Well, it happens to be a religious subject but I’ve never worried very much about the subject. The formal quality of the work has been always the most important aspect of it to me.

JAMES GLEESON: That’s apparent even in this very early work, I think, don’t you?

JOHN COBURN: Yes. Yes, I think so. Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: The medium was, oil was it?

JOHN COBURN: It would have been oil, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Have you always worked in oil on your major paintings, the bigger ones, or have you used a variety of media?

JOHN COBURN: I have used a variety of media. I think I used oil exclusively until about 1962 or ‘63. This other painting that the National Gallery owns, *The tower*, is painted in acrylics.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN COBURN: All through the 1960’s I used both oils and acrylics, and it’s only recently that I’ve returned to oils. Well, perhaps from 1968 until 1976 I used acrylics only, but since 1976 I’ve returned to oils.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Now, *The tower*, is that the next in sequence or would *Temple II* come first?

JOHN COBURN: No, *The tower* is next in sequence. *The tower* is a work done, I think, in 1963. It represents a break from the sort of work I was doing just a few years before that. I moved from Rose Bay to Warriewood and for the first time in my life I had a studio in which to work. I took great delight in splashing a lot of paint around and also abstract expressionism, of course, was still very much in the air at that time, although it was perhaps late for abstract expressionism. But I had always wanted to experiment more in an abstract expressionist way.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN COBURN: This particular painting would be more expressionistic in the painterly sense than my work had been previously. It’s once again a religious subject. *The tower*, well, could be a tower of Babel, I guess. But again, I think although there’s a lot more paint splashed about and it’s more abstract expressionist than my other work, it still has this concern for the formal design of the picture and the relationship of tones.

JAMES GLEESON: Would that have been developed from a preliminary study or a drawing, or would you have worked directly on to the canvas?
JOHN COBURN: At that stage I worked more directly than I normally do. Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: But I can still see your concern for the placement of shape and the repetition of form. The echoes that go through all your work seems to come through even when you’re working in this freer, more expressionistic way.

JOHN COBURN: Yes, yes. That period was fairly short lived. I think I worked in that way only during 1963 and ’64. But late ’64–65 I returned to what would have been my former style, which is more precise, clear and deliberate. Of course, it was also a period when hard-edge was becoming the thing and abstract expressionism was being left behind, sort of thing.

JAMES GLEESON: John, I remember this exhibition. There were quite a number of paintings you did.

JOHN COBURN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, was it at the Bonython Gallery?

JOHN COBURN: It was, I think. Well, it was at the Hungry Horse Gallery before it became the Bonython Gallery. There were a whole series of paintings and they were mostly on religious themes. They were essentially landscapes, I think, but they had titles such as Mount of Olives, Garden of Gethsemane, this one The tower and various other titles. In fact, they told me that a woman came to the exhibition expecting to see scenes of Jerusalem but was very disappointed when she didn’t.

JAMES GLEESON: Would you feel The tower represents this period of your work satisfactorily?

JOHN COBURN: Oh yes, yes. I would, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: I think it was an impressive painting. So that that aspect at least of your work is reasonably represented.

JOHN COBURN: Oh yes, I would think so. Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, good. Well now, after that comes the Temple II painting, and I haven’t got a photograph of that. Can you recall it?

JOHN COBURN: Yes, I can. Temple II was painted in 1966. It was a series of paintings done on this theme. Well, basically it’s a series of very simple shapes on a plain blue ground. These shapes refer to rocks, or they’re rock-like shapes. I’ve always been fascinated in certain configurations of rocks that one sees, particularly in outback Australia. I’ve also been fascinated by rock formations, such as Stonehenge in England. They have a certain quality about them that you feel that they’ve been put there by some ancient civilisation for a ritualistic purpose. One gets the same feeling just sometimes in seeing a collection of
rocks on a mountain, a rocky outcrop, or perhaps just rocks on a plain. The Temple II I think—or the title Temple—refers to photographs that I’ve seen of ancient temples, but particularly the Lion Gate at Mycenae. That Lion Gate was what I was thinking of when I did this series of paintings. I think there was a tapestry as well. There are about four paintings called Temple and a tapestry too. Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: John, in talking about this you mentioned the ritual element you found in Stonehenge and other places.

JOHN COBURN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, it does seem to me that in your work, all through it, you embody a sense of ritual. I don’t know whether it’s the precise placement of things, the repetition. There’s a certain inevitability of form running through it.

JOHN COBURN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Is this a conscious thing in your work? Are you really, you know, strongly aware of ritual as an element of life or art?

JOHN COBURN: No, I couldn’t say that I’m strongly aware of it. I’m interested in ritual. I read about rituals in all civilisations and, of course, I do occasionally take part in the ritual of the Mass. Although not very much these days, I’m afraid.

JAMES GLEESON: It just occurs to me that in your painting you have certain forms that are set down and repeated through the work as though it were obeying some prescribed law or pattern of ritual.

JOHN COBURN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Perhaps it’s my personal reaction to it but I get it very strongly from your work.

JOHN COBURN: Yes. Well, I’ve always felt that art is derived from nature, but it must be nature that is ordered. That in nature there is, well, I think there must be a basic order, but it’s seems chaotic. It’s always seemed to me that the artist’s task is to take this chaos and reveal some order in it. I’ve always sought an order in my work. I think that my work is successful when it arrives at that particular order. It’s not resolved until it has a certain order. It’s a purely visual thing. One knows when it’s right and when it’s wrong simply by looking.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes. In selecting the shapes that you use, I notice that you almost invariably go to nature rather than to, say, mechanical forms. You simplify the natural forms, but they are basically natural organic forms, aren’t they, that you use?
JOHN COBURN: Yes, yes. Well, I have developed a sort of language of forms, of natural forms, over many years. I think those forms are based on memories of childhood in Western Queensland and tropical North Queensland where I grew up. So that I do use plant and rock forms which are based on the vegetation of Queensland. Suns and moons, of course, which are used as symbols, or they’re used symbolically in many cases. But also I find the circle, which is sun or moon, is an ideal counterfoil to the other shapes in a work. So that one has sort of perhaps jagged plant-like forms; I need a circle to contrast with them.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Clearly, I mean, you’re very aware of the negative shapes when you’re working with these shapes. They seem to me to be as important as the positive shapes you put down.

JOHN COBURN: They are, very much so, yes. Well, I think it’s all a matter of organising the shapes on the canvas, and it worries me if a negative shape isn’t working properly. I often have to change the positive shapes in order to get the negative shapes working.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, I see.

JOHN COBURN: I’ve always found it a great satisfaction, sometimes after working in colour, to do a painting just in black and white, because in that way one can really concentrate on the positive and the negative shapes.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, of course. Well, John, so far we only have, I think, two prints in the collection, unless some are pending, I’m not sure about that. But one of them, which is Oasis, does represent an aspect of your art which came through in your painting too. I seem to remember there was a period when you did large paintings in which these undulating curvilinear shapes dominated. Am I correct in that memory?

JOHN COBURN: Yes, Jim. In the late sixties hard-edge painting was very much the thing at that time, and my work became more and more hard-edge around about 1967, ’68. It also became more geometric. Now, I don’t think that I ever really belonged to the strict hard-edge painting because my work was never completely abstract. I wasn’t only concerned with organising squares and rectangles on canvas.

JAMES GLEESON: The link with nature was always there.

JOHN COBURN: Yes, so that I always thought of these paintings of that period as referring to the urban landscape rather than the country landscape. Whereas I had used forms before from nature, such as trees and leaves and those kind of things, I was now interested in road signs and, well, urban architecture, factories, oil refineries, plans, diagrams, that sort of thing. So I thought of these paintings more or less as I had thought of the others but they reflected the urban environment.
JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes, I see. Well now, we don’t have a major work, a major painting from that period, but is this print one of a series you did, or is it a unique print?

JOHN COBURN: I think that was the only print that I did in that geometric manner.

JAMES GLEESON: When did you first start making prints?

JOHN COBURN: Well, that goes right back to very early days. My wife Barbara has always made silk screen prints for me. She started off, I think, silk screening our Christmas cards many years ago. I think the first silk screen print she did for me must have been in 1958. She has done many editions of screen prints for me since that time. This happens to be one that she didn’t do. This one was done in France when a friend of mine visited us in France.

JAMES GLEESON: This was, I think, 1970? We’ve got on this 1970.

JOHN COBURN: Yes, yes. An Australian artist, who had been very much involved in commercial art and in commercial silk screening, he visited us in France and stayed with us for about a month. While he was there he suggested that we do some screen prints. I was delighted to cooperate. So this particular print, and the other one that the gallery owns, *Fiesta*, were both printed by Jim Hayes in France, in the garage of the house that we had at that time.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, we’ll come to your visits to France presently. But now these are the only two prints, but you say that you have produced a fairly sizeable quantity of prints?

JOHN COBURN: Yes, I would think that I’ve done about 30 to 40 editions of prints.

JAMES GLEESON: So there’s a great need for us to add to this collection if we’re going to represent you in that area.

JOHN COBURN: Yes, I think so. Yes, yes. Well, Barbara has done about 25 editions of prints since these were done.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Well, John, now to more general matters. I think that that covers these very well. First of all, where were you trained?

JOHN COBURN: I was trained at East Sydney Technical College.

JAMES GLEESON: This was after the war?

JOHN COBURN: Yes, it was. After the war—I was in the navy—I did an aptitude test. I told them in the aptitude test that I wanted to be an artist and after the test, they said, ‘Oh no’, I was not suited to being an artist. I was too slow or too tall or
something. They advised me to go back to the bank, which I did for a time, but I knew that it was no good. So after a few months I resigned from the bank, which was in Queensland and came to Sydney and enrolled at the East Sydney Technical College.

JAMES GLEESON: You say you knew you wanted to be an artist. Did you know it from the beginning when you were young, very young?

JOHN COBURN: Oh yes, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Any influence in your family, any other member of the family—

JOHN COBURN: No, no. It’s very strange. Where I lived in Queensland there was no art. I did come to Sydney when I was 13 and visited the art gallery and was enthralled with my visit there. But when I was 16 or 17 I owned several books on Australian art which were published at the time by Syd Ure Smith. They gave me great interest and feeling for art.

JAMES GLEESON: You knew at that time.

JOHN COBURN: I knew at that time. I greatly admired Donald Friend and Russell Drysdale.

JAMES GLEESON: I know those books that came out at that time.

JOHN COBURN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: So you came down to the tech and you did the course at the tech.

JOHN COBURN: Yes, I did the painting course there. My teachers there were, or among my teachers there were Wallace Thornton, Frank Hinder, Doug Dundas. The CRTS course only lasted three years.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN COBURN: Or the government gave you an allowance for three years. But the diploma course was five years. After I’d been there three years, Doug Dundas said to me if I could possibly stay on for another year they would consider giving me a diploma after four years. That was what actually happened, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Were any of those teachers especially relevant to your development as an artist, do you think?

JOHN COBURN: Yes. Well, I think Frank Hinder helped me a great deal as far as design was concerned, or the general concept of painting. But Wallace
Thornton was the one I think who really opened up the doors of art to me. I think up until then I had not really thought of myself as being a painter. I thought that probably I would have to go into commercial art and earn my living in that way.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Now, what followed on after that when you finished with the tech?

JOHN COBURN: Well, then came a period of about five years where I was floundering in the dark.

JAMES GLEESON: Does The three kings belong to that period?

JOHN COBURN: The three kings does belong to that period, yes. Well, after being a student came the cold reality of having to earn a living, and I got married round about that time and Barbara had her first baby. So it was a period of having to earn a living, so that I worked in various offices and various factory jobs, painting all the time. I vaguely knew what I wanted to do but I didn’t know how to do it. Of course, there were always people to talk one out of it. You know, say, ‘Why don’t you get a decent job? and that ‘And give up this nonsense of wanting to be an artist?’ and so on. But I persisted and it was that French exhibition of 1953 which gave me great encouragement and I was quite staggered by it.

JAMES GLEESON: It was a marvellous exhibition.

JOHN COBURN: It was a marvellous exhibition and here for the first time was my view of modern art.

JAMES GLEESON: You didn’t see the ’39 one which came up (inaudible).

JOHN COBURN: No, no I didn’t. No.

JAMES GLEESON: So this would have been your first real encounter with great works?

JOHN COBURN: It was, yes, yes. Of course, you know, the Picasso’s and the Matisse’s and the Miro’s were all marvellous. But then also we saw work by the younger French artists like Manessier and Soulages and those people. It was very, very exciting. Here was art that was really relevant to the time in which we were living.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, John, one of your great avenues of exploration or development has been tapestry. How did you come to be involved with tapestry? Obviously your work is so suitable to it, but what actually led you into the field of tapestry making?

JOHN COBURN: Yes, well perhaps it started at that exhibition of French art in 1953.
JAMES GLEESON: Did it? There were tapestries there?

JOHN COBURN: I remember, yes. There was a huge tapestry by John Lurçat and there were also tapestries by Gromaire and Dufy, I think.

JAMES GLEESON: Was there a little Matisse one there?

JOHN COBURN: That was later.

JAMES GLEESON: Later, yes.

JOHN COBURN: An exhibition of French tapestries came to Sydney in 1956 and with it came a weaver from the Gobelin workshops and a loom, and he actually wove that little Matisse tapestry in the gallery.

JAMES GLEESON: That’s right. I remember now.

JOHN COBURN: I watched him weaving it. Well, I was very interested in tapestry and I studied tapestry. In books, of course, the tapestries of the Lady and the Unicorn have always been great favourites of mine, and those marvellous tapestries of the Apocalypse at Angers which I later saw. So I think that my style of art was partly formed on tapestry. You know, that I did the sort of work I did partly because I liked tapestries and I wanted my paintings to be as rich as tapestries. I never thought it was possible at that time for an Australian artist to design for tapestry. But in 1966 there was a Frenchman in Australia who was a representative of a French firm called Pinton Frères. He brought an exhibition of Aubusson tapestries to Australia and he was looking for an Australian artist to design for the firm of Pinton. He asked me to do some tapestry designs. I think he had been to the Bonython Gallery and I think it was Kim Bonython who advised him to come and see me. He did, and I did three designs and the designs were sent to France and six months later the tapestries came back to Australia.

I was very surprised when I saw the tapestries at first because somehow they didn’t seem as though I had done them, you know. They seemed somewhat strange objects, although they were obviously my design.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Had they altered them in any way?

JOHN COBURN: No, no. It was simply seeing these works—

JAMES GLEESON: Something translated.

JOHN COBURN: Translated into wool that was strange. Since then I’ve done over 50 tapestries and I no longer have that feeling. In fact, now I think of the tapestries as being my work even though I didn’t actually weave them myself, you know. But those three tapestries were exhibited at the Bonython Gallery and
people seemed to like them. They were successful, so they asked me to do more, and I've been doing them ever since.

**JAMES GLEESON:** When they make a tapestry, it’s just one off, isn’t it? Or do they do editions?

**JOHN COBURN:** No, they’re done in editions.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Are they?

**JOHN COBURN:** Yes. First my tapestries were done in editions of three. They’re now done in editions of six. Not all of the tapestries that I have designed have actually been woven in the full edition. Because, you see, they weave the first one of the edition and that is exhibited, and if sold they weave the second one, and if that’s sold then they weave the third and so on. Some of the tapestries that I have designed have gone right to the edition of six, whereas others have only been done as one single tapestry. Then, of course, there are unique tapestries. Of course the Opera House curtains are unique and various other tapestries that I have designed on commission have been unique.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Now, you did later on go to France yourself to supervise?

**JOHN COBURN:** Yes. I wanted to go to France right from the beginning because I was fascinated with tapestry design and I wanted to go to France to meet the weavers and to see them actually weaving, and to work with them and to learn more about the techniques of tapestry.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This was the Pinton Frères?

**JOHN COBURN:** Yes, yes. So, well, the end of 1968 we were living in Canberra at the time. I resigned. I was teaching at the technical college. I resigned from the technical college and we decided to go to France to live, so that I could work with the weavers. So we went off.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Where is the weaving factory of Pinton Frères? Is it in Paris?

**JOHN COBURN:** No, at Aubusson.

**JAMES GLEESON:** At Aubusson. Oh, I see. Yes. Whereabouts is that geographically from—

**JOHN COBURN:** Well, geographically it’s right in the centre of France. It’s about 250 miles south of Paris.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, nice place to be.
JOHN COBURN: Yes. Well, we didn’t live there. We lived in Paris, or just outside of Paris. I used to go down to the workshops at Aubusson once a month for several days. It’s just a small village. You really wouldn’t want to live there, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: Big name, small village?

JOHN COBURN: Yes, it's a bit like living in a New South Wales country town. We had made this decision to go to France because of the tapestries, but it was just at that time that Peter Hall, the architect who had taken over the finishing of the Opera House, asked me to go down to the Opera House to have a look at the theatres there with the possibility of designing some tapestry curtains. I went down and Peter Hall showed me over the Opera House, which at that time was just all bare concrete. Standing in the opera theatre, right up the back looking down on to the stage, I could actually see my curtain there. You know, I had a sudden inspiration, I suppose. I don’t often have these sort of sudden inspirations, but I could actually see it there, and it was simply a matter of going home and putting it down on paper.

JAMES GLEESON: We talked a little while ago when you showed me the original drawing for the Opera House one, wasn’t it?

JOHN COBURN: Yes, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: You had to change the location of the sun to the right side because the division was not directly in the centre?

JOHN COBURN: That’s right. I thought at first that the curtain—which both parts of the curtain came in from the side, came in from the wings, and met in the centre—I thought that the join would be dead centre. But I found out later that it was not dead centre. It was somewhat to the left so that the two sections of the curtain overlapped, and the overlapping part cut through some of the rays of the sun. So I reversed the design so that the sun is now on the right section of the curtain. Subsequently, they found that it was not successful for the curtains to come in from the side, and they now have the two sections joined together and the curtain comes down from the top.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. You went to France to supervise their weaving, did you?

JOHN COBURN: Yes. Well, I just happened to be there. I really went to France because of the other tapestries that I was doing. But it was when I was in France that the commission for the Opera House curtains came through. I had left the designs with Peter Hall before I went to France thinking, well, that would be the last I’d ever hear of that. I’ve often done designs for architects who were enthusiastic about a certain project. Then when the client hears what it’s going to cost he generally loses interest. I thought that would be the case here. But after we had been in France two or three months, Barbara’s mother sent us a cutting
out of the *Sydney Sun* which said it had been announced yesterday by the Minister for Public Works that I had been asked to design two curtains for the Sydney Opera House. That was really the first we knew that it was actually definite. Then about a month after that the minister, Mr Davis Hughes, arrived in Paris and actually commissioned me to design the curtains. So, although I did the designs in Australia, I did most of the work for it in France, and then of course stayed there for another two and a half years to supervise the weaving of the curtains.

**JAMES GLEESON:** They were made at Aubusson too?

**JOHN COBURN:** Yes, yes. Well, actually they were made in a little village five miles from Aubusson. The village is called Felletin. My weaver, Pinton, has most of his workshops at Felletin. He originally had a lot of workshops in the village of Aubusson, but now he’s transferred most of his workshops to Felletin. In fact, just a few years ago he built a big new modern workshop at Felletin.

**JAMES GLEESON:** How do you spell that?

**JOHN COBURN:** F-E-L-L-E-T-I-N. Yes. The weaver’s sign that is on all my tapestries—it’s like a P F—stands for Pinton Felletin.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, I see. Are you still doing tapestry?

**JOHN COBURN:** Yes. Yes, I’ve just received a tapestry from France last week and there’s another one on the loom at the present time. I think that makes 56 tapestries I’ve done with them now over the years. I’ve also done two tapestries with the new Victorian Tapestry Workshop in Melbourne and I’ve done one tapestry with Diana Contie, who lives on Tamana Island off the Queensland coast.

**JAMES GLEESON:** How does the quality of the work in Melbourne and the Queensland one compare?

**JOHN COBURN:** Well, Diana Contie’s weaving is completely different in that her weaving is very coarse. She uses very coarse wools, and I try to design for that particular style and I think it has a quality of its own. The Victorian Tapestry Workshop is again a little more coarse than the weaving of Aubusson. Aubusson, of course, have always been known since the middle ages for their fine weave. So that they deliberately achieve this particular type of weave which is characteristic of Aubusson. Aubusson tapestries of today look very much the same in texture as those of the Middle Ages. The workshops in Victoria, in Melbourne, their weave is a little more coarse, but it’s the same kind of weave and they do very excellent work there. Their weavers are highly trained and I’ve been delighted with the quality of work in Victoria. They’ve just done a big tapestry that I designed for the Queensland Parliament. That came off beautifully.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. Well, that’s good to know.
JOHN COBURN: Yes. I think the quality of weaving in Victoria is comparable with that of Aubusson. It’s different, that’s all.

JAMES GLEESON: How would you rate that one in Portugal (inaudible)?

JOHN COBURN: Well, there again, they did some marvellous weaving too. In quality it’s superb. It’s just it has a slightly different look to the weaving of Aubusson.

JAMES GLEESON: Is that due to different kinds of wool, different grades of wool?

JOHN COBURN: I think different kinds of wool and the different ways of weaving.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, I see.

JOHN COBURN: Although I don’t think that makes a great deal of difference. For instance, in France the Gobelin Tapestries are woven on vertical looms, whereas the looms at Aubusson are horizontal. I don’t know why but that’s just been the tradition.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN COBURN: But it’s almost impossible to tell the difference just by looking at the weave.

JAMES GLEESON: John, are there any other Australian artists who’ve worked at Pinton Frères or Aubusson?

JOHN COBURN: Yes. During the 1960’s there was a competition. I’ve forgotten who actually sponsored it. But they wove tapestries of Carl Plate, and I think Rollin Schlicht did a tapestry that was woven there by Pinton. I know Margot Lewers did a number of tapestries with them and more recently they’ve done tapestries for Brett Whiteley.

JAMES GLEESON: To my knowledge I’ve not seen any of those. Were they ever shown in Australia?

JOHN COBURN: Yes, I think they were. Yes, yes. The Brett Whiteley was shown, oh, last year at the Robin Gibson Gallery.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, that I do remember, yes. Yes, I do remember.

JOHN COBURN: It was mainly a dark blue design on a white ground, I think.

JAMES GLEESON: Then, John, you came back to Australia and became head of the college where you’d studied as a student.
JOHN COBURN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: How did that come about? You went back to work as a teacher there?

JOHN COBURN: Yes, well, I had been teaching all through the 1960’s at East Sydney and then in Canberra later. Well I was very much involved with art education and very interested in it. Of course, one had to earn a living. We did have three marvellous years in France where I was just painting. That was great, but it became more and more necessary for me to get a job. I applied for the position as head of the art school at East Sydney Tech and I got it and came back to do that job. For two and a half years there I was very involved in art education. I suppose I felt that I could revolutionise the place; that I felt it was becoming moribund and that I could bring a contribution to it. I had many great ideas which unfortunately didn't eventuate. I found that, well, I came back to a spirit of fighting the Department of Technical Education and turning the East Sydney Technical College into a marvellous art centre. But I found that there was great resistance to it and, in fact, it simply wasn’t possible because there wasn’t the money to do it.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. John, we were talking about your days at the technical college and really wasn’t possible because of lack of funds to realise the dream you had for transforming it into an arts centre.

JOHN COBURN: Yes, that's right. It was at that time that the whole system of art education in New South Wales was changing. The diploma courses at the East Sydney Technical College went into the colleges of advanced education. So that, well, half the courses went to the Alexander Mackie College of Advanced Education and the other half went to form the new Sydney College of the Arts. I thought that that was a good opportunity for me to get out. I wanted to get on with my painting anyhow. I've always thought of myself as a painter first and foremost and being a teacher was only secondary to me.

JAMES GLEESON: John, you showed me some of your sketch books which I think are astonishing, the way you develop your ideas in pencil, page after page of them. Is this your normal procedure--obviously--over a long period of time?

JOHN COBURN: Yes, it is. Yes. I find this a great relaxation, to sit down with a sketchbook and simply cover pages and pages of the sketchbook with drawings. I think it's also my most creative thing too because it is from those drawings that all my work comes. Some of the drawings don't have any great significance but others do and they suggest various things. I have tried from time to time to add colour to them.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN COBURN: I invariably feel when I do that, I lose interest in them because I've realised the whole thing. I've done it and no longer does it have any great
interest for me. So the ones that I’ve done in colour, I generally don’t make paintings of. But the pencil drawings do suggest colour to me and I usually don’t bring the colour into it until I’m doing the painting on canvas.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

JOHN COBURN: But recently I have been doing lots of water colours. I’m finding that, from the pencil sketch, I do a water colour and then I’m using the water colour as a study for the larger painting in oil.

JAMES GLEESON: How many sketchbooks would you say you’d compiled?

JOHN COBURN: Well, not a great many Jim, because it takes me three or four years to fill one book.

JAMES GLEESON: I notice you do many drawings on a single page.

JOHN COBURN: Yes, yes. Well, I suppose there are about a dozen sketchbooks in all. I have, over the past 10 years or so, always been getting my sketchbooks from Paris. That’s an excuse for me to go to Paris; that I need more sketchbooks.

JAMES GLEESON: What do you propose to do with the sketchbooks eventually? I’ll tell you why I ask this question. Because in Canberra we’re building up what we call the repository collection, which largely consists of collections of artists’ sketchbooks. The motive behind it is that we’ve always felt that sketchbooks tend to be dispersed after a while, or broken up and drawings sold separately. We’ve always felt that there is great value in keeping them together as a collection for study—for exhibition too from time to time. But also for someone who’s studying an artist’s work, the whole concentrated mass of drawings in the sketchbooks is in one place.

JOHN COBURN: Yes. Well, that’s quite fascinating. It must be a fascinating collection.

JAMES GLEESON: It is. It is unique in Australia.

JOHN COBURN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: So I was just wondering if, at some future time when you feel they’ve outlived their purpose, you might consider letting us acquire them.

JOHN COBURN: Yes. That’s very possible, yes. At the present time, of course, I couldn’t do that because I continually refer to them.

JAMES GLEESON: Of course.
JOHN COBURN: Even sketchbooks that I’ve done 15 years ago I sometimes go through them and I find that there were sketches that I did 15 years ago that didn’t at the time have much significance. Suddenly now I see new things in them and can use them in certain ways because they perhaps relate to what I’m doing now, rather than what I could see in them then.

JAMES GLEESON: This has been our experience generally with artists and their sketchbooks; that they won’t part with them during their lifetime because they are working reference material.

JOHN COBURN: They are, yes, yes. That’s right, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: The big collections that we have now are of artists like Dobell and Eric Wilson and people like that. But it would be nice if you made some provision for them to be kept together afterwards, you know.

JOHN COBURN: Yes, yes. Well, I always think of the story of I think it was Gauguin. When somebody asked to see his sketchbook, or his sketchbooks, he said, ‘No, never, they are my secrets’.

JAMES GLEESON: I know. I know exactly how he feels.

JOHN COBURN: Yes, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Well John, I think that, you know, covers it very well unless you have anything more you would like to add?

JOHN COBURN: No, I think that seems to cover it very adequately, Jim.

JAMES GLEESON: I would like to talk to Barbara because she’s been involved in the printing techniques and programs and I think she’d have something very interesting to say.

JOHN COBURN: Yes. Well, you know, we were students together.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes.

JOHN COBURN: Over the years Barbara has done less and less of her own work, although she still for her own enjoyment will sit down and do some painting, and she does a lot of embroidery. Her embroideries are quite marvellous. But more and more she has concentrated on printmaking and making prints particularly for me, although she has printed for other artists. It’s only in the last six or seven years that she has really concentrated on printmaking and has become an excellent silkscreen printer. In fact, she’s very expert at it now.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, I’m most impressed by that print workshop you have next door to where we’re sitting.
JOHN COBURN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: It seems to me that the quality of the print is first rate.

JOHN COBURN: Yes. Well, Barbara enjoys the technical side of printing. She is happiest when she has something to print that people say, ‘Oh, that’s impossible’. Barbara will find a way of doing it.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, perhaps we ought to now talk to Barbara and let her tell her story.

JOHN COBURN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Thank you John, very much.
JAMES GLEESON: Barbara, John’s told us a bit about your studying as an artist and then concentrating in later years on printing. It’s always interested you, has it?

BARBARA COBURN: Yes, it has really, Jim. I think it’s one of these things where the interest grew from very small beginnings. I think at the time I started I was doing sculpture with Lyndon Dadswell actually.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, were you?

BARBARA COBURN: I went back to tech after the children were born and then we were living in a very tiny flat at Rose Bay and I used to print Christmas cards.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah yes, John mentioned that.

BARBARA COBURN: Yes. You know, then I started feeling I liked printing and I used to print in the morning, print on our only table, and I used to lay all the prints out all over the floor at night when the children were asleep and I used to get up very early in the morning so they wouldn’t crawl all over them and ruin them.

JAMES GLEESON: It’s a long way from that to this marvellous set-up you’ve got next door here.

BARBARA COBURN: Yes. Well, that really just came, you know. One thing led to another. I think printing is a very technical thing. So that really, you know, I’ve never really trusted the saying that a bad artist blames his tools, you know. I think in this case good tools really help you to get better results. So that you constantly—I’ve never actually been taught printing, Jim.

JAMES GLEESON: Really?

BARBARA COBURN: Never. I’ve never ever, although I went to tech and I did painting courses, they weren’t—

JAMES GLEESON: You never did printing courses there?

BARBARA COBURN: Never, no. You know, I sometimes feel if I went to tech and learnt printing I’d learn an awful lot.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, judging by the results you’re getting I don’t think you’ve got much to learn.

BARBARA COBURN: Well, I’ve sort of made up my own solutions to problems, you know. I often feel that probably there’d be quicker ones and probably simpler ones. But it’s very hard, you know. Silk screen printing is a very interesting medium and it is a rather commercial one, so a lot of the things are geared for commercial practices.
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JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes, of course. Well, it's been taught as a commercial thing for many years. Jan Senbergs started his career as a commercial silk screen printer.

BARBARA COBURN: That's right, yes. And, of course, he's a brilliant printer.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh yes, marvellous. Now, I think it's very interesting that you've started this print shop here in Sydney. Sydney for a long time has lagged behind Melbourne as a printing centre. Is that your feeling?

BARBARA COBURN: Yes, it is really. You know, a lot of the artists I'm working with now used to go down to Melbourne to print. I used to wonder why, and then I sort of started to be aware of other printers. Because I've always been very much involved with the family and not terribly aware of what was going on in the print world. That came slowly too. Then I realised that there really wasn't very much people printing in Sydney.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no. Very, very poor.

BARBARA COBURN: Very poor. Now the response from artists is incredible. You know, I feel that there's no—it would be very easy for me to put another table in there and another person.

JAMES GLEESON: You have two now?

BARBARA COBURN: I have two now.

JAMES GLEESON: And your daughter's working with you.

BARBARA COBURN: My daughter's working with me. But all the time we're asked by other people to come and work. You know, I get letters from people all over Australia asking if they'd come and print with me.

JAMES GLEESON: Who have you printed so far?

BARBARA COBURN: Well, I myself have only printed really for John and Charles Blackman and John Olsen, and that's all.

JAMES GLEESON: Martin Sharp?

BARBARA COBURN: No. My daughter printed for Martin Sharp by herself. I collaborated with Kristen in a print for John Firth-Smith.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, that's a beautiful print.

BARBARA COBURN: But, you know, John's kept me busy over the years. I've been really full time printing for John, particularly *The seven days of creation* which took a year and a half to print.
JAMES GLEESON: Really? And you cut each—

BARBARA COBURN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: You don’t use a photographic process?

BARBARA COBURN: No, not at all, Jim, no.

JAMES GLEESON: Jan does, I think.

BARBARA COBURN: Yes, Jan does, and he uses it superbly, you know. I think when there’s reason for photographic image, then I will. But up till now I have had no actual reason.

JAMES GLEESON: It’s all stencil.

BARBARA COBURN: It’s all hand stencils so far.

JAMES GLEESON: That must be enormously time consuming?

BARBARA COBURN: Well, it is time consuming. But actually, you know, there’s a lot of things you can’t do photographically that you can only do hand cut.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, quite, yes.

BARBARA COBURN: You know, for instance, those creation prints, the registration on those. You know, when you’re printing, when you’re doing this sort of printing, in general you leave a sort of little overlap so that the next colour will be bang on. Of course, if there’s any little bits of white showing in John’s prints, or for instance Alun Leach Jones’ prints, they stand out. You know, you can’t make any mistakes whatsoever. I used to think it was impossible to get really perfect registration. I went to America and I saw a marvellous exhibition in Brooklyn of Thirty Years of American Printmaking. I saw Kenneth Tyler’s prints, you know, where he was—

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, a marvellous printmaker, marvellous.

BARBARA COBURN: Unbelievable. You know, he was laying on colours edge to edge where there was no overlaps, you know. So I came home and I thought if it’s possible, well, it can be done, you know, and I did it. You see, you couldn’t do that photographically because what you need for a photographic stencil is a line drawing, a key drawing, which means an overlap.

JAMES GLEESON: Of course.

BARBARA COBURN: Actually, if you look at those designs, a lot of them you can’t overlap because they were just sort of circles joining circles and edges of shapes joining edges of shapes. So you just had to sort of place these colours
on. You know, to get 62 pieces of paper under that screen and 62 bang on, it’s very difficult.

JAMES GLEESON: Tell me about the one, Is *Tree of redemption*, you did with John, with gold round it?

BARBARA COBURN: Oh, *Tree of life*.

JAMES GLEESON: *Tree of life*.

BARBARA COBURN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, how was that gold put on? Is that laminated on to the paper or printed on?

BARBARA COBURN: Well, no no, it’s not printed on because it is actual gold leaf. What I did was printed the background red first, because it’s very traditional to have gold leaf over a red. Then I put (inaudible) on by hand, you know. I let that dry and then I lay the gold leaf over and sort of burnish it on, you know, by hand.

JAMES GLEESON: Is this what John’s doing in this one behind us?

BARBARA COBURN: Exactly the same. The only difference is he only did one, I did 80.

JAMES GLEESON: Then do you print the colour over the—did you put the whole gold over or do you cut a stencil only for the gold areas?

BARBARA COBURN: Well, no, I didn’t like to print over the gold for technical reasons because printing ink, I feel—you know, this is just a feeling I have, I don’t really know if it’s ever been tested—needs a sort of absorbent surface to sink into. I have a feeling it may crack off the gold.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

BARBARA COBURN: Because, you know, gold is actually a metal.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

BARBARA COBURN: I think if I were going to print on the gold I’d need different sorts of inks. You know, technically they’ve built up inks that will take on plastic and metal and so forth and I would probably have to use those sort of inks.

JAMES GLEESON: I noticed in the John Purves-Smith’s you did, which was a beautiful print, a remarkable quality of texture. Now, how do you get that, through density of ink?
BARBARA COBURN: Well, yes. Actually, this is something I started when I first started printing. I was really interested in texture. It really goes back to may be 25 years ago. I’ve got one of John’s really old prints out there and the texture’s still on it, you know. I remember—this is diverging a bit—one night I was printing and I ran out of white. So I grabbed some—John was using lead white at that stage and I mixed up—

JAMES GLEESON: Oil white?

BARBARA COBURN: Yes. I mixed it up into the silkscreen ink, you know, not being very good at inks and so forth. He was doing rather Gottlieb sort of shapes, you know, this was a huge white shape on a blue background. The next morning I woke up and it had all cracked. You know, but it looked fantastic.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, it would.

BARBARA COBURN: So I took it into Bill Burstead, you know, in those days when he was first at the gallery. We looked at it through the microscope and it looked like craters on a moon, you know, it was incredible. So he called the print *Blue moon*. Bill mixed me up something to sort of spray on that print which kept the surface on.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

BARBARA COBURN: It always looked marvellous. So I’ve always really been interested in this idea of texture in prints. I’ve been experimenting with very wide mesh silks. I could show you other prints later where I’ve put masking tape under the stencils and I’ve dropped the ink through and let it sort of settle. But there are other ways that I’d like to go into, you know. For instance, some American artists have used metal screens, metal meshes, and they have heated the mesh up electrically and they’ve printed with wax which would melt, you see, when it touched the hot mesh. Then, of course, it would dry very quickly so you could build up marvellous sort of textures which would be very interesting. For some artists, you know, it all depends on the artist.

JAMES GLEESON: Tell me about the Dickerson print in there. You said that wasn’t done by a stencil?

BARBARA COBURN: No.

JAMES GLEESON: That was drawn—

BARBARA COBURN: On the screen.

JAMES GLEESON: On the screen, in crayon?

BARBARA COBURN: Yes. Well, you know, it’s very much like lithography, you know, the silk—
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JAMES GLEESON: Yes, very similar I think.

BARBARA COBURN: Very similar. It is exactly the same in that you’re putting on a grease.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

BARBARA COBURN: In that instance, because he drew—

JAMES GLEESON: It’s a greasy crayon?

BARBARA COBURN: Yes. Well, he drew in pastels, the design he gave me in pastels. So I actually used Cray-Pas, greasy pastels, just because it had a sympathy with the drawing, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

BARBARA COBURN: You draw on, then you cover the surface with a glue which resists the grease in the crayon, and then you rub out the crayon with turps. So that actually it’s a very direct method of printing. What you draw on the screen, prints.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes. But it becomes complicated when there’s layer upon layer.

BARBARA COBURN: Oh yes, that had about 20 colours.

JAMES GLEESON: Did it?

BARBARA COBURN: Twenty or may be 25 colours.

JAMES GLEESON: Goodness.

BARBARA COBURN: You know, I often use this method of building up.

JAMES GLEESON: Now I believe you’ve got line up of artists waiting to have their work printed.

BARBARA COBURN: Yes. I have. Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: And John keeps you busy, of course.

BARBARA COBURN: Yes. Although, well, I was complaining, you know. He said, ‘You must keep a diary’. So I started writing in the people that wanted prints and he was six months ahead. He wasn’t too happy about that.

JAMES GLEESON: Barbara, do you have any feelings of one day you might move into other areas of printing like lithography or etching?
BARBARA COBURN: Jim, you know, I have often felt I’d love to go and do a course, and I’m all in favour of youth doing as much as they can. But somehow age creeps up on you and you feel as though you’d like to do one thing well. I feel there’s so many infinite things in silk screen printing that I haven’t even begun to explore.

JAMES GLEESON: No, it’s a world in itself. It is a lifetime occupation.

BARBARA COBURN: You know, that I feel it would be silly to diversify at this stage, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, I’m glad to hear it.

BARBARA COBURN: There’s so many things. It’s so incredible, you know. I mean, just little things like people probably aren’t aware but if you draw on the screen with a pencil in graphite and print, you know, the colours you saw me mixing up today I mixed with a clear medium. You print that pencil with a clear medium, you can get 10 or 12 prints of a drawing. You know, so that you could actually sit there and draw on the silk and run off 10 very quite beautiful pencil drawings, and things like that. Also I’ve been having a lot of talks lately with a man in Melbourne who makes paints. He’s got a chemist and he’s been creating his own oil paints for some years.

JAMES GLEESON: What is his name? David Keys.

BARBARA COBURN: David Keys.

JAMES GLEESON: I’ve heard of him. Yes. I think someone else spoke to me about him.

BARBARA COBURN: He has a shop called Art Stretchers. He would be very interested. We’re trying to collaborate in producing silkscreen inks. You know, I’m very keen on the idea of working on maybe a clear medium that you could drop in artist’s quality pigments. Where artists could use oil paints and then you could get the exact colours, you know, and they would last. We don’t know really the quality of these inks that we use. I mean, I always try and get the best quality. And then, you know, this medium we talk about is beeswax medium, and you could sort of use it texturally too, you know. You could expand it from thin to thick texture, and in quality of colour you could have almost water colour quality and very thick pigmentation, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, I noticed in the ones that I saw you doing today, which are part of a triptych—is it?—by John Olsen, that you were getting a great transparency, a luminosity of pigment, that almost had the quality of a thin oil glaze.

BARBARA COBURN: Yes. Well, I’m very interested in doing this, you know. I think it’s marvellous because, well, those sort of greens that I was printing, I
started with a very very pale green and built up to quite a black, almost a black. But each colour I printed was, in fact, a very pale colour and it was only the build-up—

**JAMES GLEESON:** The accumulation.

**BARBARA COBURN:** The accumulation, so that one colour is shown through another colour and you’re sort of exploiting stencils. So that in the end you get maybe seven or eight tones, or maybe I’ve got nine or ten tones when I’ve just printed six colours.

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

**BARBARA COBURN:** You can also do it in a colour way. You know, you can print pale yellows over blues and achieve greens, sort of thing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes. How do you work it all out before you start cutting your stencils?

**BARBARA COBURN:** Oh, that’s very interesting, Jim. I often take them up to bed with me and I pop them in front of me and I look at them and I feel it’s—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Study them.

**BARBARA COBURN:** Study them, you know, it’s almost like reading a map for a new country. You know, the way to print something, you know, whether it’s better to do this colour first and the other colour first, and whether this sort of stencil is better. I usually plan it all out in my mind before I actually do the print.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. You’d really have to, wouldn’t you, because you could get into an awful mess if you lay down the wrong colour first?

**BARBARA COBURN:** Yes, that’s right. Yes. Well, you know, it can be quite vital and often it will change during the course of the printing. I also feel, if I’m printing from an image, you know, that I must lose that image. You know, that at a certain time in the printing, the image must go and only the print stands. Otherwise it hasn’t succeeded as a print.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, Barbara, that’s most marvellous for you to tell us all that and I think you’re doing wonderful work.

**BARBARA COBURN:** Thank you very much.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Thank you very much indeed.