JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: MARTIN SHARP
7 November 1979

JAMES GLEESON: Martin, you’ve become, I suppose, identified in the general mind as the one artist in Australia who’s given the pop movement a sort of local habitation and a name. You’ve given it an Australian characteristic. How did you become interested in the pop movement, or pop art? Was it always there?

MARTIN SHARP: Well, I’ve always been interested in comics and things like that, I suppose. I learnt to read with comics. Perhaps the first thing I remember about a real figure appearing in a comic, Orson Wells made an appearance in a Superman comic, I think, doing his War of the Worlds broadcast or something like that. I was always rather puzzled. I can remember that one quite clearly from some time back, of the character, a real character appearing in—not that I really knew who Orson Wells was.

JAMES GLEESON: This goes back a long time?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: To your childhood.

MARTIN SHARP: When I was, yes, learning to read. I really learnt to read with comics rather than books.

JAMES GLEESON: Really? You were born here in Sydney?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: What date?

MARTIN SHARP: Twenty-first of January 1942.

JAMES GLEESON: Comics sort of taught you to read.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: As far as art training goes, I suppose, I assume you drew as soon as you could talk.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes. I did sort of adventures with ants, I think, as pirates and lots of drawings like this. My mother always was—

JAMES GLEESON: Encouraged you?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, and also taught me to do collages when I was in school.

JAMES GLEESON: Really?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes.
JAMES GLEESON: Oh, you were advanced. That must have been, what, back in the forties?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, school projects and things like that. She encouraged me to cut up a *Saturday Evening Post*, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: So that you had this interest in collage from a very early age?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, there’s even a Campbell’s soup tin appears in one of them.

JAMES GLEESON: Forerunner of Any Warhol. Martin, did you have any formal art training? Did you go to an art school?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, I went to East Sydney Tech, but I was lucky enough to have Justin O’Brien as an art teacher at Cranbrook. Yes. Not that I remember him teaching me much but I think he just clears—

JAMES GLEESON: Enthusiasm and his communication.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, you know, he was wonderful. I look back on it more and more. He was a terrific teacher. There’s a painting I did at the school just there. I’ll pull it out. I remember a sinister (inaudible) proprietor. So they were the sort of things I was doing.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

MARTIN SHARP: When I was at school.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. It’s quite different to your more recent works, but very interesting. Was there a sort of German expressionist sort of background to that?

MARTIN SHARP: Not really. Van Gogh if anything was sort of a person I perhaps looked at most at that time, and El Greco too. I remember Justin. That’s how I learnt to do the shading on the face, you see, from looking at El Greco.

JAMES GLEESON: Van Gogh’s played a very important role in your life, I can tell by the way you’ve looked at his work and re-interpreted and thought about it and developed it.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, I think it was probably because I got *Lust for life* as an art prize at school, I remember.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. You were hooked on Van Gogh from the beginning.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes. I thought perhaps his style was a bit sort of—the simplicity of his work was sort of, you know, accessible.

JAMES GLEESON: The direct sense.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes.
JAMES GLEESON: But you’re not really direct in your approach. It’s a very complex and complicated approach you bring to that, because mixed in with that is all sorts of Surrealist overtones and Pop-art concepts.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: So it’s a fairly sophisticated approach, isn’t it?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes. Well, I think it’s a fairly elaborate sort of maze, which I suppose I’m aware of it. But I’m glad to see you notice something of that. Most people, I think, I tend to work in very disparate fields without any relationship between them, but there is of course.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. I think it’s absolutely apparent, quite a profound knowledge of art history.

MARTIN SHARP: Well, not bad. I think, you know, I’m pretty short in some areas.

JAMES GLEESON: Did you study, did you travel abroad?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: And visit museums and galleries and looked obviously very closely at things.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes. Well, some of them looked at me. I remember walking through the Louvre once and I remember someone looking at me and I sort of turned around and there was that little John, young John the Baptist in Botticelli’s —

JAMES GLEESON: Ah, he was giving you (inaudible).

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, smiling. It was wonderful. It was a lovely experience.

JAMES GLEESON: In your art book you brought together a lot of these strands and experiences and superimposed them, you know, creating a new kind of tension. A lot of very, very amusing but at the same time based on a real appreciation and understanding of these works.

MARTIN SHARP: Oh, I hope so, you know. Yes, I became very fascinated with the, you know—perhaps with my early works I didn’t have any fear of cutting up books because of my mother sort of almost showed me—

JAMES GLEESON: Collage was in the blood.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes. I originally actually was going to do an animated film at one stage and I had a lot of transparent gels for animation around and I started tracing. I was doing some work, you know, started tracing out maybe a—the first one I did I think was Van Gogh’s head from a self portrait with a bandage.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.
MARTIN SHARP: Then I also traced out the chair, so I fitted the two together. So I originally started painting these collages but then felt really that was beating around the bush. The most direct way to do it was the—

JAMES GLEESON: The collage.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, and so use the actual image. That was very fascinating. I mean, I could tell that it was bound to happen within the history of art. As if almost the first alphabet of images had been created and now was the time that art began feeding back into self, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: More and more your art seems to concentrate on collage. Do you feel that this is a, you know, most rewarding way for you to develop.

MARTIN SHARP: Well, I love painting. It takes me a long, long time to paint. Because while I painted very freely when I was at school, as soon as I went to art school, I was going to get a lot stiffer, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. This normally happens.

MARTIN SHARP: And, in fact, lost it completely, what I’d had when I was at school, you know, and had to look at it in a whole different way. These were totally intuitive and I just pour them out, you know. So I’ve several paintings I’ve worked on, even though they’re simple ones, they seem to take me a long, long time to do it. I suppose I tend to paint just very particular things. I find galleries a bit hard to cope with in that way that one would do a painting or a whole series of paintings, unless they have a sense within the series. So I tend to paint the specific things which have significance to me, rather than a sympathetic magic sort of approach making the image real. Or painting an idea into reality, which was what I’ve done with the Tiny Tim poster which was the best way I could express what I meant about Tiny Tim was to paint. Well, it’s a painting really but I mean in a poster form. So far that’s come to pass. We’ve made the film and now he’s still working on it, you see. So one painted the event into the most—instead of writing the script, I painted it, so to speak.

JAMES GLEESON: Martin, just from a technical point of view, how did you find out about printmaking, for instance? So much of your work has been done in the form of prints, screen prints. Did you have any sort of technical training?

MARTIN SHARP: No.

JAMES GLEESON: Did you pick it up as you went along?

MARTIN SHARP: No, no. I haven’t ever really printed any of my own work.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, I see. You just make up the image?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes. I’d love to be able to and, I mean, some have been commercial posters for the Nimrod.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MARTIN SHARP: Some were done in London. I just would suggest the silver paper and do the artwork and suggest the way it should be printed. Like the Bob
Dylan one and these ones. The Bob Dylan one was I think the second poster I had printed, apart from one of the art students’ ball in Sydney.

**JAMES GLEESON**: Well, that’s a more biographical thing.

**MARTIN SHARP**: I’ll get the coffee if you like.

**JAMES GLEESON**: Martin, it seems to me that Luna Park has been a sort of central preoccupation with your life and is central to your work as an artist.

**MARTIN SHARP**: Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON**: Could you tell us now, I know that you’ve been involved with Luna Park as–what?–director of design or in charge of decoration.

**MARTIN SHARP**: Yes, on and off since 1973 when I got the commission to do the face. Re-do the entrance.

**JAMES GLEESON**: You’ve been deeply concerned with Luna Park ever since?

**MARTIN SHARP**: Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON**: Now you’ve written a number of letters and articles about it. Could you bear to read those for us on to tape so that we’ll have a record of them?

**MARTIN SHARP**: I’d like that very much.

**JAMES GLEESON**: Good.

**MARTIN SHARP**: Okay. Well, the first time I suppose I came into print about Luna Park was—and I’m no writer. I mean, it’s only in desperation I think that, you know, a visual artist really picks up a pen, you know. Peter Coleman commissioned this for *Quadrant*. He’d worked there. His first job was at Luna Park as a boy.

**JAMES GLEESON**: Is that so?

**MARTIN SHARP**: Mm.

**JAMES GLEESON**: I didn’t know.

**MARTIN SHARP**: So he had a great affection for the place. It’s also very connected with Tiny Tim as well. They’re sort of twin obsessions in a way, or twin inspirations, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON**: Yes.

**MARTIN SHARP**: This article was called *Notes from the River Caves* and dedicated for Tom, who was Tom McCormack, who was a man who’d worked there since the very opening of the park.

**JAMES GLEESON**: Really?
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MARTIN SHARP: He started off as 18 years old and he was sacked, I felt rather unmercifully, by the management. But, in fact, he was someone who showed me a great deal about the inner workings of the place. The article was called Notes from the River Caves.

It started off with a quote from Orwell.

Time will say nothing, but I told you so. Time only knows the price we have to pay. If I could tell you I'd let you know. We should weep when clowns put on their show. We should stumble when musicians play. Time will say nothing but I told you so. Back in the 1890's the man who brought the first theme carousel to Australia, daredevil Alf Onzalo, crossed Sydney Harbour Bridge on a tightrope. They built the bridge over his footsteps. In 1973 Philippe Petit on another tightrope strung between the northern pylons formed the cross high above Onzalo’s path. That very moment two metal flag spray painters were increasing Luna Park’s smile. Luna Park smiled when Philippe Petit crossed the wire. Metaphysics of the tightrope, bridges within bridges, a dream within a dream. When we had finished painting the face, we wrote ha ha in huge letters on the base of Luna Park’s towers, laughing at those who chose to open the Opera House without the great Dane. That day the entrance to Luna Park became the biggest cartoon in the world. The carnival and its child, the opera, linked by the mighty Harbour Bridge. On and off since 1973 we have worked at Luna Park, Tim Lewis, Lee Hobbs, Richard Liney, Peter Kingston and I, starting at the head we worked towards the heart. It wasn’t a job one could just walk in and do. Originally purchased to be the site of a new trade centre, the siren city of the harbour, with her faded charms seduced the present owners into a change of heart and Luna Park lived on just for fun. We painters were new boys then. It took us a while to realise that Luna Park was a work of art itself, a city state of illusion, a brilliant feat of engineering with an imagination created and maintained by a unique band of men. I salute them and their great achievement. I’m proud to have worked with them. They taught me a great deal. I love Luna Park and sometimes I feel Luna Park loves me, but it’s been an arduous romance.

We first met when I was very small. Most of us met her then. She was always a treat. Luna Park, the longest running show in town. She’s been packing them in for over 40 years and still going strong. But she’s beginning to show the signs of age. The ghost train is just a skeleton of its old self. I was exploring its twisting black corridors looking for old horrors that had fallen on hard times, veterans of a million shrieks. Do you remember? One has to look through the eyes of a child to comprehend Luna Park. It took nerves of steel to step into the nightmare tunnels of hells railways armed only with a torch, its pale beam picking out the leering faces of demons and grotesque laughing skeletons. It’s very spooky in there, just me and them. I came upon a small black cupboard door. I prised it open. The torch light revealed not a forgotten skeleton but a glittering tract of water and, in a distant grotto, its saxophone raised, stood Mickey Mouse, the plaster Pablo in this magic theatre. By chance I discovered the door that links the ghost train and the river caves.

One must see through the eyes of childhood to perceive the reality of Luna Park. Many were the voyages of discovery we took down tunnels and maze-ways seeking lost souls and secrets of the carnival. Litter bearers bringing the wounded and dying back to our first aid tent. Sometimes we met with success and could help an old trooper back to drink from the fountain of youth and, restored once more, take his place on the boards of today and tomorrow. Often,
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alas, we arrived too late. The sinister trucks had already rumbled their irreversible journey to the junkyard. It’s a fine line indeed between treasure and rubbish. What and who does one choose to save from the passing parade. Many a storm crossed galley and has sunk under its horded treasure. Re-reading Prince Valiant by Hal Foster I came upon the following.

ʻThis cave is the trophy room of time which no one dare enter. I’ll dare any adventure and, drawing the singing sword, Val enters the silent gloom. A blue and sinister glow illuminates this mischancey place. It is in the far corner the bent figure of an aged man can be dimly seen. “Who are you?” falters the scared youth. “I am the ultimate conqueror of all things and my trophies are the altars of forgotten gods, the thrones of kings, splendid cities and fortresses unconquerable. None may withstand time. I vanquish them all in the end. Would you care to wrestle with me?”. The stalwart youth picks up the senile old man to fling him amongst his dusty trophies, but the ancient creature clings tenaciously with weak frail hands as Val struggles to free himself. How long they struggled in that weird dim place Val could never afterwards tell, but he grows weary, weary. The cackling laugh time hurls his skinny adversary among the discarded toys. As Val stumbles out of that fantastic cabin he hears a thin cracked voice gloating, “All contend with time and all are vanquished”. At the caves mouth the witch woman calmly waits the return of all that remains of a proud prince.’

Fortunately she restores his youth with the magic elixir. He can begin his beguine once more. We who dwell on the other side of the comic book frame must take our chances. Time will say nothing but I told you so. I find myself dangerously fascinated by the world’s discarded toys. They have such eloquence. Doorways to another world. The child who once played with this or that toy may now be a boring old man and yet that toy can be a key to a childhood he’s completely forgotten and that he could never otherwise regain. There is an eternal world of childhood. Its citizens are constantly changing, but it will never change. As I write this there is a child possum playing on my knee and I am struck by the fun he’s having, the chasing and scampering, the double takes, so like a kitten. Such humour. I once played chasings with a huge Bengal tiger in the Regents Park Zoo. We had such fun for five glorious minutes. The terrible cage of our difference had utterly vanished.

Children are the very lifeblood of Luna Park. It is they who make real the painted clowns and the crumbling plaster dreams. Luna Park is Sydney’s permanent embassy of enchantment. Every great city has such an embassy with ambassadors from the dream worlds of the carnival, the circus, the sideshow and the comic strips. Here one can touch the spirits of Ginger Megs, Mickey Mouse, Little Nemo, Crazy Cat, the Sentimental Bloke, Tiger Tim, the Phantom, Dr Strange, Captain Marvel, Grock, Santa Clause, Dame Edna, Norman Gunston, Snugglepot and Cuddlepie, Charlie Chaplin, Houdini, Mandrake, Mr Jiggs, Mo, Popeye, Punch and Judy, Boofhead, and all the others. Luna Park is their home. Great as they are, the twinkle in their eye has excluded them from those more formal clubs of the celebrated, the art galleries and the museums and the libraries. One can’t help but feel this neglect as a serious flaw, a blind spot in society’s assessment of some of its finest cultural blooms. But their time will come. Soon there will be a museum of eternal childhood and popular imagery that will enchant us all. We have a wonderful and difficult task working at Luna Park, have heard the call and are gathering what we can as the tide sweeps us ever on. May Gibbs, Arthur Bardon, Jimmy Banks, and Emile Mercier may never hang in the National Gallery but they shall be honoured.
Even a great mind like Jorge Luis Borges failed to understand the nature of images through his prejudice against popular art. In a recent interview he recalls an encounter with Garcia Lorca. 'He said to me he was very troubled about a very important character in the contemporary world. A character in whom you could see all the tragedy of American life.' I asked him who was this character, and it turned out the character was Mickey Mouse. I suppose he was trying to be clever and I thought that’s the kind of thing you might say when you are very young and you want to astonish somebody. But after all he was a grown man when he started in about Mickey Mouse being a symbol of America. There was a friend of mine there and he looked at me and I looked at him and we both walked away because we were both too old for that kind of game. No? A recent survey announced that the three most famous people in the world were Jesus Christ, Chairman Mao and Mickey Mouse. Many of us suffer the prejudice of the Borges syndrome. Perhaps some of us put away childish things rather too completely.

When I was a child I thought that grown ups were a different race. Now I’m older I find they’re really just big hairy kids with deep voices and wrinkles who often as not have lost the faculty of imagination, who’ve regressed rather than progressed and have become so much less than the child they were. A man who was once all powerful in this state told me he had wanted to pull down Luna Park and plant trees there. I love trees, but it would be a tragedy for Sydney to lose Luna Park just because one man had forgotten his childhood. The same thinness of vision lead to the destruction of the old tin shed Sydney Stadium. What other auditorium in this city could claim such a fabulous rocall of great gladiators and entertainers. I could fill pages with their names from Jack Johnson to the Beatles. It’s sandstone and marble veneer snobbery. The callousness of convenience and simple ignorance have failed to acknowledge the accumulated magic of great emotional moments, failed to realise that it was the masterpiece of corrugated iron architecture and demolish the best auditorium we ever had. Would Rome destroy its Colosseum because it’s too old? There’s a dangerous gulf between the National Trust and the present where our popular heritage is vanishing. Too many magic spaces have been lost because they are considered naive or common. It’s just too careless.

Taronga Park is getting the new look at the moment. The carousel’s gone, all the fantasy stonework’s going, with signs proudly proclaiming this ugly will soon be demolished. The Bip and Bub sea cave aquarium, the very best example of fantasy sandstone grotto architecture, will go next unless someone pulls their finger out. Art nouveau originals like that don’t come often. How many of your favourite buildings are still standing? If you want to find uranium all you have to do is shove the Abos off their land where they’ve worshipped for thousands of years. If you want to get a high rise office block up, demolish a beautiful theatre or a church. There’s a thrill akin to necrophilia in the destruction of a beautiful building and the developer satisfied leaves the site of his conquest vacant. The justification is always it’s too costly to maintain. But that reconstruction and maintenance would be a very fulfilling and illuminating practical course for art and architecture students. Such wonderful buildings were hard won by dedicated men from time and space. It’s a work of art to let the future experience their spirit and the fruit of their labours. What we put in the council garbage bins today is on the shelves of the antiques shops tomorrow. It’s only a matter of time. A lot of the small copper domes vanished from the roof of the Queen Victoria Building before someone realised it wasn’t as grotesque as they had first imagined. We always hate what our parents loved. But we find what our grandparents liked very appealing. Though it was loathsome to our parents, at least our grandchildren will
appreciate our taste. Now we know the psychology we can avoid the pitfalls of oedipal over reaction.

I admit I’m very keen on the older parts of Luna Park–Coney Island, Davey Jones locker, the ghost train, the Big Dipper, the carousel, and especially the river caves. The new rides like the zipper I haven’t got much time for and I’m not interested in doing new works. I feel it’s far more important to save what I can of the old atmosphere. The essence that we felt in the quiet times when everyone had left, just two or three of us painters there, the wind had dropped and the setting sun cast a metaphysical glow through the deserted fun fare. It was then the spirits of the carnival came shimmering from the walls and hidden corners, shades of the circus, heroes of the comic cuts, guardians of strange and esoteric secrets. A tattered and faded band of clowns and ghouls, denizens of the labyrinth of a child’s Heaven and Hell. Here inside the jaws of Hades, past the whirling wheel of Sisyphus and the white stallions that gallop their carousel course through eternity, glittering with precious gemstone to the depth of Davey Jones locker, the labyrinth of dark corridors of a disturbed mind, and the mirror maze of the self. It’s not on the walls of an art gallery that our fears lurk, but here in the endless twisting tunnel of eternal night. Past the dancing skeletons and lost souls, the eerie silence of the frozen screams. The Battersea Fun Fair died with the children when the scenic railway fell. Fun fairs are living museums. Time has made them fragile. Time can make them survive. Luna Park is far more than a demanding business enterprise, and needs support which cannot be tangibly measured. Sydney must acknowledge the importance of Luna Park. To lose her would be a tragedy and she is still in the balance, her glittering necklace of lights showing gaps that bear ominous tidings of unstrung pearls. It is the laughter of the children that keep her alive. She belongs to the children of Sydney past, present, and future and the love of the men who have built her and kept that Big Dipper rolling.

I appeal to those who realize that Luna Park is far more than the tawdry eyesore that some suspect it of being. Just see the smiling faces of the children and hear their laughter and know what joy it brings. Luna Park is in a state of flux. Its spirit is so strong it is overwhelming to work there. It teetered on the brink and now it’s coming back, but there is so very much to do. Great treasures of popular art are vanishing. It needs an eager army to answer their calls for help. Luna Park is an essential for Sydney. It is magic and fantasy and dreams. Luna Park belongs to Sydney. It is far more than a private enterprise. It is an institution with a fascinating history in folklore of its own. It is working flat out to survive, to restore and to build even more beautifully on the foundations that exist. Management continually pour the profits back in for improvements. There is so much to be done. The demands are impossible to meet. The tensions are almost unbearable. Everyone who works there from the top to the bottom feels them. No one will desert the ship. Sailing in the Stygian waters of the river caves, my fellow voyagers and I were almost capsized when our frail craft jammed in the channel in the Arctic scene. Our dream voyage was becoming a nightmare fraught with danger. Our leaky barque was righted by a uniform guard with a pole who leapt from behind a plaster walrus. We were swept away down a river of crumbling plaster dreams ever onward, past Neptune and his sagging mermaids, Tarzan and Jane and the jungle of desire, on to toy land where the great god of childhood Santa Claus, lay smashed on the floor in his palace of horrified toys. Yes, Virginia, there was a Santa Clause but he fell to the cold assassin of
neglect. The champions fall one by one, day by day, and only Buddha sits still serene amidst the decay, all knowing as the river sweeps us by.

End of article.

**JAMES GLEESON:** When was that published, Martin?

**MARTIN SHARP:** January 1977.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, it’s obvious that you love Luna Park with a passion.

**MARTIN SHARP:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Also it’s obvious that you see it as a symbol of life itself with its tragedies and gaieties, humour and disaster all mixed up.

**MARTIN SHARP:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** When did you do this drawing of *Death at the funfair*?

**MARTIN SHARP:** I can’t track the exact date but it was done around the time I was writing this article.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Long before the disaster struck at Luna Park.

**MARTIN SHARP:** Yes, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So it was a sort of strange foreglimpse of something?

**MARTIN SHARP:** Yes, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Instead of the laughing head you’ve got a great skull between the towers.

**MARTIN SHARP:** Yes, yes, which it has become, you know. I mean, certainly to the families who lost their children there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You’ve followed up after the tragedy. Did you write to Neville Wran before about the need for preserving Luna Park, or was that after?

**MARTIN SHARP:** No. Well, see, the Big Dipper accident happened.

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

**MARTIN SHARP:** If I could lead up a bit to the Big Dipper. There are various notes around.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, you tell me the story in your own way, because it’s fascinating.

**MARTIN SHARP:** Well, this is another diary note from around the time of this article. There came a turning point where we’d advised that the park should be totally gone through. You know, and everything should be assessed as to what was in the place. What could survive, what should be—
JAMES GLEESON: A sort of inventory.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes. To clean the dirt out, you know, from all the dusty corners and sort of bring it up to the surface of consciousness of today, and then assess it under those and trace its history. You know, get all the files.

JAMES GLEESON: A sort of archaeological work.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, get all the files and the information, the old photographs, and get as much information about the place and its past as possible. Put them all in albums and frame the pictures. We managed to do some of this but we, I suppose, exceeded our brief, you see. We were really meant to be making the buildings look pretty from the outside while they were rotting—

JAMES GLEESON: Underneath, yes.

MARTIN SHARP: Underneath, you know. This is from 20 December. It's either '75 or '76. I could trace that exactly.

Luna Park should be very tight. It's no use at this point describing in detail the vast amount of decay and rebuilding needed at Luna Park. One must establish what Luna Park should be and move towards that goal. I believe it can be more amazing than ever and through my art I can make something unique. It's like trying to find firm rock to build the foundations, drilling and probing, trying to fill the leaks in a sinking ship, but already the water's too deep and we can only bail it out. One must get tired trying to repair a broken clown car while it's still going. It might get there or it might go up. It would be best to pull into the garage. One is continually distracted by the so many things that need doing. A crack team equipped with the tools and expertise to do the job first faced with a thorough and excellent durable repairs. Every job excellently job done adds positive energy. Every mediocre job just piles up more problems for the future. Excellence. Gain control of the essentials, positive action by directors, communication.

Anyway, the next point in the scenario, we really had the exhibition at the Art Gallery of Fairground Arts and Novelties. Do you want me to take that phone off?

JAMES GLEESON: No, it doesn't matter.

MARTIN SHARP: Okay, of Fairground Arts and Novelties which was really we tried to bring the characters of the carnival back. This was where sort of our hands were really tied with the archaeology that we were doing because we were told that we had nothing to show for the work we'd put in there, when in fact we were going sort of below the surface and trying to grab on to what was there before it got swept away, you see.

JAMES GLEESON: I see yes.

MARTIN SHARP: So really we were only used for a very few jobs after that disagreement, which is when I think these images came through most strongly. Then you get, well, a lease was held up by the government.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. This was back in '76, '77?
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MARTIN SHARP: Yes, ’77 I’d say. Well, they were negotiating for it and never got it and then the time passed and they were just on a weekly tenure, so the management didn’t really understand the place. Who never bridged the connection between the knowledge that the staff who’d been there for a long time had and the newcomers.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

MARTIN SHARP: It was a very difficult situation but, you know. So they tended to put in rides which were mobile, which they could pull out of the place if they lost it. One of these was called Cinema 180, which aimed at the Easter Show this year. That show was a like a Cinerama show. It had a lot of projections of fun fairs, so you experienced it second-hand, being on a Big Dipper at an American fun fair, you see.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, (inaudible) arts.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, (inaudible) arts exactly. I’ve never known how quite to pronounce that word. Even the ending of it was you’re moving along a highway very fast and you go around a very sharp bend and there’s a car across the track on the road in front of you. You are brought to a halt. The very end of the show you’re brought to a halt right before that you see.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes.

MARTIN SHARP: Before the other car. Now, when they put this on at the Easter Show within hours there was the real Big Dipper at Luna Park, jammed in the rails, another car coming around the bend had exactly the same visual experience seeing a car stopped in the track in front of it. It collided with the back of that and 13 children were injured. So you get this extraordinary—sort of the language of images is being played out in very heavy cards, but not so many people can read them. Also, the very moment that Big Dipper came off the rails at Luna Park, Morris Spatt, the manager, had taken his family to the park and they were riding on the ghost train for the first time. So you get the accident happening on the Dipper while his family are in the ghost train. Which shows, I mean, his ignorance or innocence of how dangerous the ghost train was. But he didn’t realise that he was putting the public at risk. It’s like it was very much like there’s a warning, which is very definite.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MARTIN SHARP: No fatalities, 13 injured but where it’s going to strike next is indicated I think fairly clearly. It’s not really hindsight.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no. You were aware of the possible dangers?

MARTIN SHARP: I didn’t twig to the ghost train. I mean, I’d been given a symbol of it but I didn’t really realise. I have always been very scared of the Big Dipper. I had a definite indication that that would be the first, you know, that there would be a tragedy on the Dipper, maybe because of what happened at Battersea or whatever, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.
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**MARTIN SHARP:** It seemed to be so much energy contained in it and one knew that the pylons were rotting and things like this, yes. So you got that sort of development. Then after that I wrote a letter to Neville Wran.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What did you say?

**MARTIN SHARP:** I said:

Dear Neville

In the wake of the Big Dipper accident at Luna Park, I enclose an article I wrote for *Quadrant* in February ’77. My views haven’t altered. I still feel that Luna Park is an important ingredient in the landscape of Sydney. I’ve warned people, including Paul Landa, that I believe a situation is developing at Luna Park where an accident was becoming inevitable. Indeed, my article in *Quadrant* was aimed at warning all people concerned that a dangerous gulf had developed in communications between the staff and management. That the park’s safety and future depend on a profound change in attitude by both the management and the government.

I didn’t say it quite as succinctly as that, but it was a matter of trying to stay within the par.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**MARTIN SHARP:** I can tell you now if Luna Park is to continue, and I most definitely believe it should—and should you consult the children of Sydney in this their year you would find them and many adults in unanimous agreement—very definite steps must be taken to ensure its survival and ability to continue without mortal risk to the public. Much of Luna Park’s greatness lies in its unique position; the magical juxtaposition with the Opera House. It is very much a part of the landscape, belongs to Sydney and I believe it is Sydney’s responsibility to see that this important part of its popular heritage is restored and maintained to the highest level. If one child had been killed on the Big Dipper the show would have been over. The accident which did occur was frightful enough. In the vacuum of unrealistic policy which surrounds the whole nexus of government, management and staff, the children’s squeals of joy turned to screams of horror. There is too much to be restored and repaired at Luna Park for the management to cope with. Even if they don’t know their job thoroughly, at least they have had some experience, but they have neither the financial nor intellectual strength to cope with the job. They need strong directives and a five-year plan to pull Luna Park through to safe ground. There seems to be a deadlock between the government and the management of the park and the lease is held like a carrot before a donkey who is slowly weakening. If the maintenance staff is consulted about the truth of the situation involving the Big Dipper, I think a more accurate picture of the inner workings of the park will be revealed. There are bound to be scapegoats. Blame could be laid at many doors, though I feel that no-one is consciously culpable of neglect. The problems of maintaining an amusement park to correct standards have been a task beyond the talents of the management. After all, they have little experience in the field and their managerial attitudes did little to encourage the most necessary participation of those members of the staff who did have this knowledge and experience. I cannot offer any easy solutions, but I feel that the government must assume responsibility for the future of Luna Park, and I hope that the recent near tragedy
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can throw some light on the sorry condition of what should be one of Sydney’s proud possessions. I am most willing to enter into any discussion you or your minister’s may decide.

Yours sincerely, Martin Sharp.

But I showed it to someone who I respect, opinion I respect, and he said, ‘That’s a bit strong, isn’t it? You’d better re-write it’. So I put it in my drawer and I was, you know, very busy with many other things and it was only on the night of the fire that I got it out of the drawer.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

MARTIN SHARP: I delivered it that morning because I felt I should at least show—

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes, that you had, you know, concern and thought about it.

MARTIN SHARP: Well, sort of admit that, I mean, I always felt terribly bad about it.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MARTIN SHARP: I thought that possibly the letter could have averted the tragedy and I think if it was gone into, I think there would be a lot of people who would almost just—

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, and just didn’t.

MARTIN SHARP: Ad just didn’t. So this accumulation leads to what happened. You know, just the smallest neglect just gets bigger and bigger until something as profound as what happened, happened.

JAMES GLEESON: It must have come as a dreadful shock to you, knowing your involvement, and emotional involvement with it?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, yes, it was a terrible shock. When I first went over there I thought, ‘Oh, no-one’s been killed’. I went over. I drove over when I heard it was on fire.

JAMES GLEESON: Did you?

MARTIN SHARP: I thought, ‘Well, maybe it will just get mismanagement out and now they’ll do it properly’. But then the news came through that there had been people killed. Yes. Well, it would need a lot to, you know. I’ll read this one perhaps.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. This is an article you’ve written for—

MARTIN SHARP: National Times, although I think they think it’s a bit personal or something.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.
MARTIN SHARP: It may or may not get published.

Luna Park appears to be vanishing before our eyes, fading into the almost total silence which has surrounded it since the coroner’s inquest into the ghost train fire two months ago. This tragedy exploded like a time bomb in the midst of the unsuspecting Year of the Child, and Care for Kids was faced with its antithesis when the coroner found a serious breach in the duty of care. On a balmy full moon night in June, the only train that was running in Sydney was the ghost train on Hell’s railway as Luna Park. Death donned a papier maché disguise of itself, stepped through the invisible door that separates illusion from reality and struck at our most vulnerable point, our childhood. As in a mediaeval morality play, a vengeful God demanded a sacrifice of innocence from a complacent city. Sydney’s childhood died alongside Mr Godson and the six boys. An eternity was written amongst the twisted rails. It was an event so shocking that Sydney has so far been unable to bring itself to face the significance of the ghost train fire. Yet it cannot be sidestepped. The silence surrounding the tragedy has its roots in a deep civic embarrassment. Sydney had neglected Luna Park until the inevitable happened. It literally fell to bits before our eyes. The question must be raised just how closely does this city perceive itself. Tragedy did not strike out of the blue. The Big Dipper collision of April 16th in which 13 children were injured was a warning that Luna Park had reached a crisis point. Yet the show went on to its inevitable conclusion seven weeks later. I’d worked with other artists on and off since 1973 when commissioned to repaint the famous face. It was my greatest commission and challenge. I’d always felt uncomfortable in art galleries and I shall always be grateful that I had the opportunity to actually paint the landscape of Sydney, not on canvas but in reality. Along with Peter Kingston, Richard Liney and Tim Lewis, we saw it as a mechanical and visual theatre, a real pop world containing some of the most potent painted and sculptured images in this city. Until June 9th it was the most successful longest running entertainment, and a brilliant creation of fantasy and illusionary danger, a fairy floss carousel of slippery dips and mirror mazes that enchanted millions. On the night of the fire it was my agony to re-read a letter I had drafted to the Premier one week after the Big Dipper collision, dated April 23rd. It read:

Dear Neville,

I have warned people I believe the situation is developing at Luna Park where an accident was becoming inevitable. If Luna Park is to continue very definite steps must be taken to ensure its ability to continue without mortal risk to the public. Even if one child on the Big Dipper had been killed, the show would have been over. The accident which did occur was frightful enough. In the vacuum of unrealistic policy which surrounds the whole nexus of government, management and staff, the children’s squeals of joy turned to screams of horror. There was too much to be restored and repaired at Luna Park for the management to cope with. Having drafted this letter I showed it to a friend who advised me to re-write in a less abrasive tone, but I never did. There was a series of such seemingly small neglects which lead to the deaths of seven people on the night of June 9th. There are many of us who feel a similar complicity. The whole tragedy is surrounded by a web of synchronistic events. These are the signs and endorsements of some more mysterious presence at work which sometimes becomes visible through the scheme of everyday reality, for the language of images is far older than the written word unless accessible. Consider the following. A full moon night at Luna Park, a real fire started within an imitation fire, fun and illusion became horror and actuality. Real deaths occurred in the house.
of make believe death. Every so often it seems such powerful events come and plunder our sense of security and leave us gasping at our vulnerability.

In 1977, while working at Luna Park—I then quote from the earlier article—I walked from the deserted ghost train building, exploring its twisting black corridors. It took nerves of steel to step into the nightmare tunnels of Hell’s railway armed only with a torch, its pale beam picking out the leering faces of the demons and grotesque laughing skeletons. It was very spooky in there, just me and them. I came across a small black covered door. I prized it open. The torchlight revealed not a forgotten skeleton but a glittering tract of water and in a distant grotto with saxophone raised stood Mickey Mouse, the plaster Pablo of this magic theatre. By chance I discovered the door that links the ghost train to the river caves. It was through this same door that the fire entered, destroying Mickey Mouse, Santa Clause, and Toyland. All that remains standing, singed and alone, was the White Rabbit from Alice in Wonderland, I’m late, I’m late for a very important date! One must see through the eyes of childhood to perceive the reality of Luna Park.

Luna Park holds the Opera House and its serious high culture in a balance with its cheeky popular culture. It is quite as important in its own way. Its roots are as old as the carnival itself, and as the travelling fair that settled down. As it stands it is broken and dejected on the brink of destruction. But even in this sorry condition it is still a great treasure of popular culture. If Luna Park expediently described in the Department of Services tender form, as a ‘certain land situated at Lavender Bay, Nelson’s Point, North Sydney, New South Wales’, if it goes down beneath the wrecker’s hammer, then Sydney will lose far more than it seems to realise. It will lose its collective childhood, for Luna Park belongs to the children of Sydney, past, present and future. It cannot be successfully resurrected without the deepest respect for its past. Those who died must not have died in vain. The new Luna Park must be a genuine expression from the city of Sydney to the children of the future.

That’s the end of the article.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, Martin, that’s very moving and it’s also very revealing, because in talking about Luna Park and your love and fascination with it, you are really explaining your own art. Your whole approach to art is coming through in that, I think. Your reverence for—reverence, if that’s the word—for popular art, art that involves the people, the children, everybody, came through very clearly in your written statements. That seems to be implicit in your art. Plus, of course, a sophistication that comes from your knowledge of art that gives it another dimension, but it’s all there.

MARTIN SHARP: I think pop art in a way allowed one to realise the importance of perhaps—well, it’s a bit like (inaudible), you know, the river caves and the ghost train. It has archetypal imagery. I mean, it seemed extraordinary to me that the river caves which is an endless river by definition, you know, should have the Buddha. It’s an image of Buddha but it’s not a papier maché one, it’s a real marble one from Burma.

JAMES GLEESON: Really?

MARTIN SHARP: So it’s rather like a most eloquent Buddha shrine in its way, you know. One always believed in cleaning the image, if possible, and respecting
it and sometimes putting some flowers there and things like that, you see. But this was going out of focus in the part where I think it had been a natural part of it, this sort of understanding of the images. When we did see Santa Clause smashed in his palace of horrified toys, I mean, that was a sort of very strong sign to us that all was not right because when the image is not respected then the reality isn’t respected. I mean, somehow we can only respect things through their manifestation into an image.

JAMES GLEESON: Martin, you’ve been talking about Luna Park and an approach to it that demands imagination which children normally have when they approach it. How do you react to something like Disneyland where the imaginative element is more or less taken out of it because everything is done for you? You know, the images are so concrete and so real that it doesn’t require any imaginative act to participate in. How do you feel about that?

MARTIN SHARP: I suppose it’s three-dimensional television, isn’t it? Well, I think this is part of the evolution of—

JAMES GLEESON: You don’t disapprove of that development?

MARTIN SHARP: Well, I don’t. One can’t disapprove of it, I think, one can only look at it because it’s happening so powerfully. I mean, Walt Disney’s empire is probably the largest—it’s like a city state within America, you know. No-one probably has control of more space and technology than he has. It’s fascinating, the evolution of it from—

JAMES GLEESON: The technological aspect of it is just absolutely mind boggling, isn’t it?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes. I don’t consider it’s related to Luna Park because Luna Park is pre Disneyland. Luna Park is the original fairground.

JAMES GLEESON: It goes right back to medieval times.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes. I guess this is inherent in Disneyland in a certain way that they have the haunted house and the river caves. But the fact that the river caves and the ghost trained were linked at Luna Park and side by side is a very profound (inaudible) if you like, or whatever. You know, the sort of destruction and creation next to each other. The position of Luna Park makes it extremely profound, you know. Disneyland hasn’t got that position, you see. The entrance, I believe, I mean, well, it is like the entrance to Balinese temples. I’ve seen recently a temple in that ‘abandon hope all ye who enter here’, that one in—

JAMES GLEESON: (inaudible)

MARTIN SHARP: I haven’t been there, but I’ve sent photos of it, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: It looks very much like the entrance to—

MARTIN SHARP: And possibly the inspiration for.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, possibly, a forgotten inspiration there lingering in some sort of vestigial (inaudible).
MARTIN SHARP: Yes, yes, archetypal or whatever. One must remember the terror that the ghost train evoked in one as a child.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MARTIN SHARP: To imagine what it must have been like for the children who were caught in the ghost train.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh God, yes.

MARTIN SHARP: That somehow must be imagined and faced up to, one feels, before any continuation of Luna Park can achieve on any solid footing. Otherwise one feels they’re just courting disaster yet again, as the Big Dipper accident was not understood in its true nature as being the main energy artery of Luna Park. It’s like someone having a heart attack and saying, ‘Oh well, you’ve got to go and do the next performance’ and the insistent manager pushes the ailing actor on to the stage and he dies on stage. I mean, it was something like that I’d think, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: Martin, well I think in telling us the story of Luna Park you have in a way told us so much about your own work and your own approach to art, but could we now just look at some examples of your work that we have in the national collection for, say, some more specific information.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: One of the ones—and I’ve sat opposite it at a desk for a long time—is the image of Marilyn Monroe superimposed on Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers*. It’s reproduced in your art book.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Is there any special reason why the image of Marilyn and Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers* are associated like that, or is it just an arbitrary thing?

MARTIN SHARP: No, some of these were arbitrary associate, or happen by chance but then chance was recognised. This particular one started off with a smaller head of Marilyn, you know, more the size of one of the blossoms.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah, I see.

MARTIN SHARP: But then a larger head turned up and I tried that and it fitted even more successfully. Well, I always thought there’s a relationship between Marilyn Monroe and Vincent Van Gogh. They were both very great artists. They perhaps suffered for a misunderstanding of their art and died presumably by their own hands at roughly a similar age.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. So there really is an intense psychological association between the two images.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, yes. The colours, of course, it’s a bit hard to see in this print, yes, but the green in her eye shadow was exactly—in the Andy Warhol print.
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JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MARTIN SHARP: So Andy Warhol had already taken the image and processed it. The green was exactly the same as the green in the background. So it allowed a collage to take place.

JAMES GLEESON: And the yellow of the hair and the yellow of the sunflowers.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, and she’s seen perhaps like a sunflower and the title *Still life*.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MARTIN SHARP: There was implied that, you know, they were dead, there was still light. Well, the fatality but also the legend living on.

JAMES GLEESON: Still alive.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. So that gives it a, well, profound meaning. One’s first reaction is joyfulness because the image is a very vivacious, bright, colourful one, but underneath it there is a lot of quite thoughtful association of images and ideas.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, and almost as if they’ve been chosen to die, rather like the Luna Park fire in the Year of the Child there should be such a sacrifice of innocence and there’s this sort of web, if you like, sort of things occurring. I mean, if I can interrelate this again to the Luna Park thing, although it may seem a little obscure. Like Van Gogh was a sort of Christ of painters, I think.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

MARTIN SHARP: Anyway, the extraordinary record of his written experience as well as his painted experience allowed—the image of the cross is always very fascinating in some way which I see as super reality or eternity crossing the path of everyday life. Suddenly instead of just being able to see along one track, you know, from yesterday to tomorrow, well, you can see the eternal relevance of what the event is. You can see down four corridors at once, so to speak. These collages are rather like that in one way. Also Van Gogh’s life, if his written word crosses his images somehow. I mean, this was a record that Jeannie Lewis—some of these are very intricate connections—Jeannie Lewis did a show called *Tears of Steel and the Clowning Cavaleras* which was about the Mexican Festival of Death, which is very like the ghost train and the (inaudible).

JAMES GLEESON: They have the skulls and icing sugar and that sort of thing.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes. Now, she’d asked me to do a cover for her record, which was life and death in the one image, a skull and a smiling face, half and half, which is Abraxas or whatever which is, you know, Abraxas, a God of destruction and creation in the same instant, you know. Also I was painting a picture of Luna Park at the same time for the cover of *Quadrant*, which I never succeeded in finishing either of these images. They were both too powerful for me to cope with.
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One was Luna Park with a—well, it’s rather similar to that actually, which I did succeed in, with a smiling face and the tragic face in one, and three eyes.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

MARTIN SHARP: Well, the cover for Jeannie Lewis was very similar to that. But neither of these images, I worked on them for months but could not successfully part with them, or whatever. So I tore them both up in absolute depression at some stage. But in this show, which happened in 1976, she used costumes which we’d brought from Luna Park. I did the sets for the show and asked some of the people, the staff of Luna Park, to the show and complimentary tickets to show them perhaps that the spirit of Luna Park was inspiring other things. Now, the first song she sang was The putting on of the mask, glitter and be gay for the part I play is, you know, not what it appears to be. She went on to a song called The rising of the tide and the sort of the crucial lines I think from it were:

The full moon that keeps rising on a city
the sun keeps moving on the other side
the night will rule for quite a while longer
before we see the rising of the tide.

The law that rules the land is getting harder
and lawless are the ones who make the rules
and no-one seems to know just how it started
and no-one ever really seems to care.

Again a child has had to be the victim
it’s just another sign it seems
the visions we were given of the future
where they see in nightmares or in dreams.

JAMES GLEESON: Did you write these words?

MARTIN SHARP: No. This was written by Graham Lownes. Then it went on to another song called The Crucifixion.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MARTIN SHARP: The various lines cropped up in this. I’ll stop as I go along.

And the night comes again to the circle studded sky
the stars settle slowly in loaning us their light
till the universe explodes as the falling star is raised
planets are paralysed, the mountains are amazed
but they all glow brighter from the brilliance of the blaze
with the speed of insanity then he dies.

It goes on in bits.

Images of innocence charge him to go on
with the decadence of destiny is looking for a pawn
to the nightmare of knowledge he opens up the gate
blinding revelations laid upon his plate
beneath the greatest love there’s a hurricane of hate
and God help the critic of the dawn.

So he stands on the sea and he shouts to the shore
but the louder that he screams the longer he’s ignored
for the wine of oblivion is drunk to the dregs
and the merchants of the masses almost have to be begged
though the giant is aware someone’s pulling at his leg
and someone is tapping at the door.

And:

Then the overflow of life is crushed into a lyre
the gentle soul is ripped apart and cast into the fire
the first to smile at dejection at the nearness of the night
truth becomes a tragedy limping from the light
all the heavens are horrified, they stagger from the sight
as the cross is trembling with desire.

They say they can’t mean it, it’s a sacrilegious shame
now who’d want to hurt such a hero of the game
but you know I predicted it, I knew he had to fall
how did it happen, hope his suffering was small
tell me every detail for I’ve got to know it all
and do you have a picture of the pain.

Time takes its toll, the memories fade
but his glory has grown in the magic that he made
reality has ruined it’s the freeing from the fear
drama is distorted to what they want to hear
swimming in their sorrows and the twisting of a tear
as they wait for the new thrill parade.

Yes, the eyes of the rebel are branded by the blind
the safety of sterility a thread has been refined
the child was created, to the slaughter house he’s lead
so good to be alive when the eulogies are read
the climax of emotion the worship of the dead
as the cycle of the sacrifice unwinds.

Somehow this all seemed to lock very strongly in, and then the next song was
*The moon’s a harsh mistress*, which one’s always related to Luna Park.

**JAMES GLEESON**: Yes, that’s true.

**MARTIN SHARP**: *The moon’s a harsh mistress, the moon can be so cold*. So
back to Marilyn Monroe again. So that’s just another part of the jigsaw which sort
of slowly begins to emerge.

**JAMES GLEESON**: So in all your work there does seem to be this ambivalence
of feeling, a gaiety of childlike response to vitality and imaginative quality of life,
and underneath it this dark thread of awareness of death and disaster and
calamity.
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**MARTIN SHARP:** Yes, yes. I always feel disaster is pretty close, you know. The Luna Park thing should show that, you know, you have to be pessimistic to possibly cope with what’s happening. But Marilyn, you see, so it started off from the printed media which then really allows the combination of images. I mean, you can’t go and cut up the originals and put them together.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no.

**MARTIN SHARP:** But the printed image radiates from the source of the original image. So the image becomes cheap, accessible, part of the common consciousness, therefore can be cut up, so to speak.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Collage becomes for you a kind of method of bringing together different kinds of experience into the one composite image.

**MARTIN SHARP:** Yes, like a verbal poem or whatever.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**MARTIN SHARP:** Also like the walls between the different painters which have always been—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Strictly divided.

**MARTIN SHARP:** Yes. Now—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Are broken down.

**MARTIN SHARP:** Yes, and now the characters from one painting walk on to the stage of another and through the landscapes of another, so you get a whole world of—

**JAMES GLEESON:** So art’s become your theatre.

**MARTIN SHARP:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You bring together the actors and put them into new roles?

**MARTIN SHARP:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Roles that reflect you and your feelings.

**MARTIN SHARP:** Yes, I suppose so, and some which one feels like this which just belong so at home together in a strange way.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**MARTIN SHARP:** That time has added to the possibility of the image having yet another part. Of course, I suppose the shift from printed image to releasing the image from its background, the collage, and then returning it to painting again, back to the original source. This one of course has gone right on target, you see—it’s probably the only one—because it gets on the wall of an art gallery where previously only the separate worlds have been.
JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MARTIN SHARP: But if someone seeing this, a strange, disturbing—it’s like seeing a child, you know. They look like the mother and the father but they’re themselves, you see, so you get the most dramatic—it’s using the art gallery as a theatre, in fact, or a theatrical setting, or using the whole context of the gallery.

JAMES GLEESON: I can see that. Martin, to go from the collage, now Normal Norman is a painting, isn’t it?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes. Well, parts of it are collage. This is collage and these were initially collage. The lips were initially collage but then I began painting them over and you of course see a sort of similarity to the Luna Park.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, of course, that image again.

MARTIN SHARP: The mouth in there. This was when I’d started working on Oz after my art school days, or during it, and it started developing images.

JAMES GLEESON: Have we a date for that? We haven’t any date at all.

MARTIN SHARP: Oh, that’s ’65.

JAMES GLEESON: Nineteen sixty-five.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Can you remember how we got that? I’ve got no information.

MARTIN SHARP: Sixty-six. I can give you the more exact date. I think it was ’65, possibly ’66. No, it would be more likely December, January, February, sorry, November or December ’66.

JAMES GLEESON: Sixty-six?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Where was it shown?

MARTIN SHARP: At the Clune Galleries. It was my first exhibition.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, we didn’t buy it until October ’75.

MARTIN SHARP: Right.

JAMES GLEESON: That was from the Coventry Gallery.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: You had it since the exhibition, the first exhibition?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes. Oh well, Sweeney Reed had actually had it for a while.
JAMES GLEESON: Did he?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes. He sort of borrowed it and it eventually came back.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, I see they’ve got a note here, enamel, ink and collage.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Is that right?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes. This had originally been a big mouth from a Vogue magazine, I think.

JAMES GLEESON: Had it?

MARTIN SHARP: This as well from lipstick adds.

JAMES GLEESON: Is that right?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes. The eyes as well. This was from a book, an old book I found of dental tools, which I had photographed and blown up.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. So the collage element is still implicit in it.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Really is in it, even though the basic thing is painted now.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, and all this is a sort of cross hatch pen work which I’d done.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MARTIN SHARP: Through Oz I’d had to create images very quickly to meet deadlines and I’d been using a lot of collage. Then I sort of got to the stage where I felt the images, they demanded a more, you know, solid treatment. So I sort of really just stayed at home for six months and painted and had an exhibition. Norman Normal was, you know, ironic, its title, I think. But it’s possibly to do with, you know, this is rather a mechanical sexual image.

JAMES GLEESON: Martin, there are a group now of silkscreens. Boo zoom, ’59. That would have been an earlier one.

MARTIN SHARP: It would have been ’69, yes ’69. It says on the—

JAMES GLEESON: It’s ’69. Oh, we’ve got it in ’59 here. Sixty-nine, of course.

MARTIN SHARP: These were done when I’d come back. I’d been in London for a while and been doing a lot of this painting on plastic.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

MARTIN SHARP: Gallery A, I think, commissioned some silkscreens.
JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MARTIN SHARP: I did these at their workshop in Merry Place.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. They were printed on plastic?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: The whole of this group Wot!?

MARTIN SHARP: That one as well, yes. And the other one, yes, they were all in the same series.

JAMES GLEESON: Nineteen sixty-nine.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: So Boo-zoom, Wot!, Bloom.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Are all ’69. Somehow we’ve got ’59 on there.

MARTIN SHARP: They’re actually a mixture of lithograph and silk screen.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, are they?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, which wasn’t really necessary but, I mean, for the lithographs, the black line is lithographed on from the front and the colours are silk screened on the back.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, I see. So that it’s printed on both surfaces?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: That’s an unusual technique.

MARTIN SHARP: It is. I don’t think that it was—it could have been done the other way really.

JAMES GLEESON: Now a series of posters, Martin. Now, these came from—

MARTIN SHARP: That was the one I did for the Sydney Festival.

JAMES GLEESON: That’s right, Eternity.

MARTIN SHARP: When they had the Haymarket buildings.

JAMES GLEESON: (inaudible).

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, ’77. I think it was January ’77.

JAMES GLEESON: Eternity, of course, is a reference to the gentleman who used to write eternity on our pavements.
MARTIN SHARP: Yes, I remember seeing that as a young boy and being very puzzled by it. I suppose he’s one of our great conceptual artists.

JAMES GLEESON: Do I see a reference to Van Gogh’s *Sky* in the background?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, yes. Yes, Van Gogh’s *Starry night*.

JAMES GLEESON: The great swirling, moving heavens he painted.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes. Painting has always inspired me very much and the sort of ying yang of his, you know, stars.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Again, the Luna Park mouth.

MARTIN SHARP: Rather, yes. And all the comic characters

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, yes.

MARTIN SHARP: Some of them aren’t too well drawn. There’s Popeye and Andy Capp and The Phantom, Crazy Cat, Tiger Tim, Mrs Bear, you know, the Snugglepot and Cuddlepie, Ragged Blossom, Boofhead, Ginger Meggs, Barney Google, Henry, Sadsack, Mickey and Minnie, Wimpy, Dame Edna, Norman Gunston.

JAMES GLEESON: Goodness.

MARTIN SHARP: Mr Natural. A few of them are there anyway.

JAMES GLEESON: Dame Edna’s wearing the opera house (inaudible).

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: *Sunshine superman*.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, that followed the Bob Dylan one.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MARTIN SHARP: Which is, I think, this one here. Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: That came first?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes. He was, well, you know, a Bob Dylan.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Master tambourine man.

MARTIN SHARP: *Mr Tambourine man* was a song which I actually painted and I was very inspired by his. It’s a rather carnival song and I painted this first exhibition, you know, which *Norman Normal* came from.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, I see.

MARTIN SHARP: To a particular record of his. It was my musical accompaniment, so to speak.
JAMES GLEESON: I see.

MARTIN SHARP: I suppose I’d always admired him and there came a chance. The publisher of Oz in London was interested in doing posters, so I started. This was a collage, a blow up of a photograph.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MARTIN SHARP: This is some of Leonardo’s knot work, I think.

JAMES GLEESON: Of course, yes. So it is.

MARTIN SHARP: These were done, some by me, but made by a very patient friend who with a compass. This was in the psychedelic period when everyone was sort of coming under the influence of drugs, marijuana and things like this, and very prevalent in London at the time.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

MARTIN SHARP: Which one had first come in contact with in one’s journey through Asia, especially Angkor Wat was a big inspiration in that area, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: I’ve always wanted to and never went. It must be absolutely (inaudible).

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, I was very lucky because now it’s impossible to get there.

JAMES GLEESON: What about the Bayon with its great mouths opening like Luna Park?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes. Yes, the heads, the four-faced heads with the trees growing out of the top were incredibly inspirational as to a thought. I mean, I had unconsciously even again been moving in that direction because this exhibition, which had quite a few what I call psychedelic images, you know, were later to be described as psychedelic. I had no inkling of, you know, those sort of experiences at all. But they seemed to be echoed.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MARTIN SHARP: You know, when one got to Asia and very much helped one to understand a lot more, I think.

JAMES GLEESON: It’s strange when you find something new and yet it seems familiar.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: You’ve thought of it and it’s all been in your mind before you discover it.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, yes. Yes, the shadow of the future or whatever, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, that was the first of those paintings.
MARTIN SHARP: Yes, that was probably the most successful, actually. I didn’t think very much here and I just pasted this little bottom figure over, which I needed to do because it almost looks like (inaudible). A bit strong there because I covered up the BA, you see.

JAMES GLEESON: Of course, I see what you mean.

MARTIN SHARP: Well, I’m glad you didn’t see it before because I was a bit worried that people would—you know, interweaved in it are various quotes from his songs which you can’t quite see the lyrics of *Tambourine man* and other things.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

MARTIN SHARP: Donovan, who’s a sort of English equivalent to Dylan in a way, though not nearly as important, (inaudible) sort of fairy type of philosophy.

JAMES GLEESON: (inaudible)

MARTIN SHARP: Yes. Again I used a lot of figures from old sketch magazines and the old theatrical figures and printed on foil because it gave this lovely illusion, mythical. You know, the surface, you know, the mirror through the surface is filled with quotes from his songs.

JAMES GLEESON: So these are really very autobiographical, aren’t they? You know, they’ve come out of your own experiences and feelings and they make statements about what you think about these.

MARTIN SHARP: Well, I suppose, yes. There’s this sort of line which this very (inaudible), you know. It was, I imagine, as the initial movement of art nouveau was influenced by sort of hashish coming from Morocco and you got, you know, the sort of colonial influence of these Arab countries. Then you had a sort of resurgence of the influence of marijuana on our Western culture again and you got again this sinuous lines based on—

JAMES GLEESON: The arabesque.

MARTIN SHARP: The arabesque, yes, coming through again.

JAMES GLEESON: Fascinating. Now, of the posters we’ve got two more photographs and one we don’t have a photograph of. I don’t know whether you can recall the fifth one.

MARTIN SHARP: No I can’t actually.

JAMES GLEESON: Anyway, we’ve got two. One *Vincent*?

MARTIN SHARP: It might be the most mysterious one of all.

JAMES GLEESON: It’s bound to be. And one called *Cream*.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes. This one, of course, this was an excellent reproduction of Van Gogh’s *Self portrait* which came from a medical magazine which my father had given me. He’s a doctor. It was very strong, of course. This is the *Self*
portrait which has since been slashed, which I think it looks even stronger now because it doesn’t go over his eyes, it just goes between them like that. It was slashed in Amsterdam about last year.

JAMES GLEESON: I didn’t know.

MARTIN SHARP: Someone was so—

JAMES GLEESON: Upset.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, or, you know. Yes. So it’s sort of like the stigmata or something too to me, you know. It’s a strange evolution of the image through time.

JAMES GLEESON: This actual painting?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes. That particular Self portrait which, well, I mean, I can imagine upsetting people. They’re very—

JAMES GLEESON: Very disturbing.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, very powerful. I always loved sort of quotes of his. This one was ‘I have a terrible lucidity at moments when nature is so glorious in those days I am hardly conscious of myself and the picture comes to me like in a dream’. I made a spelling mistake there somewhere, as I often did. But that was a later one. The Cream one was in a similar technique although I wasn’t at all happy with this one. This is a clay here.

JAMES GLEESON: Is it?

MARTIN SHARP: Forming the lettering.

JAMES GLEESON: Forming the letters Cream.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes. I don’t think it’s a very good poster. Though it was interesting that I’d met, it was a sort of chance meeting with this person here, Eric Clapton, who became—

JAMES GLEESON: This is the portrait?

MARTIN SHARP: Photographic, yes. I think this is him again here, which may be interesting in the evolution of what happened to him. He became a heroin addict but has since managed to throw it off.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

MARTIN SHARP: But he was considered, and is probably still considered, the world’s greatest or master of the electric guitar.

JAMES GLEESON: Really?

MARTIN SHARP: I’d met him purely by chance in a nightclub. I’d just written a song, or a poem, which I thought would make a nice song, being a bit sentimental about Sydney. Sydney’s summers all longing for the summer, and
cold London. I went to a club and he was sitting with a girl I knew and I just joined
them and discovering he was a musician I said, ‘Oh, I’d just written a song’, and
he said, ‘I’ve just written some music’. I gave him the lyrics and a couple of
weeks later he turned up with a record.

JAMES GLEESON: Really?

MARTIN SHARP: We later went on to share a place with him and Philippe Mora
and the peasantry in London, which was a very important place for me. So the
story behind the poster, I think, is more interesting than the—

JAMES GLEESON: The poster itself.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: These shapes, were they influenced at all by Matisse’s cut-
outs, or not?

MARTIN SHARP: Not really. They were sort of more sort of like—

JAMES GLEESON: Clouds?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, sort of very highly—

JAMES GLEESON: Starry.

MARTIN SHARP: All the light shows in London at that stage were done by Mark
Boyle, who did those marvellous casts of pavements and things which we saw
recently.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh yes, yes, yes.

MARTIN SHARP: There was a club called UFO which a lot of people used to go
to on LSD. It was a totally enchanted world. The light shows would be exploding,
they’d have slides with these sort of fluid shapes sort of changing because of the
heat on them and the different pressures on the slides. So you had many layers
of different colours moving in this molten sort of way with quite universal images
at times. You had this extraordinary disorientation of the senses plus the music
adding to this. Pink Floyd was one of the groups that was there. Sort of the
beginnings of that scene, in a way, which was a sort of evolution of the American
scene from San Francisco. A lot of these shapes were inspired by those light
shows.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

MARTIN SHARP: Which were like moving abstract paintings. I mean, really
fascinating.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, Martin, I think that’s marvellous. Thank you. I think
you’ve covered it very well indeed. The only one we can’t talk about is the one
we haven’t got the photograph for. So we’ve no way of recalling that. Anyway,
thank you very much indeed, unless there’s something else you would like to
add.
7 November 1979

MARTIN SHARP: I’d like to talk a bit about Tiny Tim if possible.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, marvellous, yes.

MARTIN SHARP: I’ve got another article I wrote again for Quadrant.

JAMES GLEESON: Please.

MARTIN SHARP: It sort of ties into, so I wrote this article while I was working on the Luna Park one because I could understand this one better. But

JAMES GLEESON: What magazine was this in?

MARTIN SHARP: Quadrant.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, it was in Quadrant.

MARTIN SHARP: January ’77, I think. The Luna Park one was February ’77. I’d heard of Tiny Tim and again Eric Clapton, who’d seen him in America, said ‘You must go and see him, you’ll love him’. So I went along to the Albert Hall where he was giving a charity show. I’ll just read.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MARTIN SHARP: I spent hours listening to Tiny Tim sing and talk about music. I’ve been fascinated ever since I first heard and saw him at the Royal Albert Hall in 1968, backed by a 58-piece orchestra conducted by Richard Perry, his then record producer. At the time I wrote: He sang me the songs that my grandparents were turned on by when they were my age, and he sang me the songs my parents loved, and he made me love them too. He destroyed my prejudice and created the link between all music and showed me there’s one river of soul and sound and love and pain. He gave and gave, mutating before one’s eyes from the immortal innocent Tiny Tim to Al Jolson to Will Rogers to Rudi Vallee to Bob Dylan, dissolving and reforming, splitting in half, male and female, each singing a love song to the other. Merging again to Elvis Presley to Russ Colombo to Bing Crosby, the one singer who is all singers, the spirit of popular music made flesh.

It’s hard to describe an artist without precedent. It’s difficult to define in prose a musical experience which explodes all existing frontiers of popular song. No-one like Tiny Tim has ever happened before and no-one like Tiny Tim will ever happen again. Every other singer exists in their own time and space but he exists beyond time and space. As each genre of song is a chapter in the history of popular music and each singer a sentence in that chapter, and each song a word, we have now reached the point where there is one interpreter who can read the whole book. The closest analogy is the lyre bird, not only the most beautiful song bird in its own right but composing concert collages of all other bird songs woven together. I see Tiny Tim as a human lyrebird and the man with a thousand voices. The eternal troubadour, a tin pan alley Orpheus singing for the return of his lost Eurydice, Miss Vicky, the last seen go-go dancing to a juke box, you know, in the underworld of a New Jersey nightclub.

Then I sort of go on to a bit more which relates it to the collages. Yes, this is it.
From the very first hearing at the Albert Hall, Tiny Tim has been the most influential artist in my life. At that time I was working on my collages of famous paintings, fascinated by the migration of images, the evolution from painting to print in an art book, from creation through the artist via media into a common language, to be rearranged by curious people like myself with a pair of scissors and a pot of glue. Strange new relationships were formed. The stones which had built our culture were dissolving into grains of sand, mingling and reforming into strange new structures. What was described by some commentators as the nostalgia boom was in reality the birth of a new age for all that has ever been transformed, that a mass media exists in the eternal present of our common consciousness. Our vocabulary was liberated to encompass not just the art being created now, but all art. I happen to love Al Bolly singing, not because it made me homesick for an earlier time. How could it? He was gone before I was born. He expressed the mood, he defined a space which was not being defined or held by any other singers so well. There were many records being re-released becoming available on cheap LP’s which were being heard for the first time by a generation. Many paintings being published in books were being seen for the first time though painted years ago. Many films from the past lived again on TV and were seen by virgin eyes. The past mingled with the present and held its own. Magritte swept the world with his democratic surrealism. The popular became classic. Everyone was in on the act. Cross pollination was the rage. Man landed on the moon and the world looked at itself. A living encyclopaedia of song stepped onto the stage of the Royal Albert Hall and strung the pearls of the past from powerless song to rock ‘n’ roll on the living thread of his own genius into a great step for mankind.

That was really how I feel about Tiny Tim.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. I can see its relevance to your (inaudible).

MARTIN SHARP: Yes. Somehow scientifically, you know, through my work I could understand what he was doing with song, which is in many ways a, you know, much more publicly potent language. No-one else seemed to see this, though, you know. They seemed to think that I was a bit crazy being interested in him. But I persevered because it seemed, like Luna Park, a genuine inspiration. I mean, you know, just seemed like a job I had to do. So I persevered and have shot the film now of him at Luna Park singing, which I can give you a look at if you like. I’ve got it here.

JAMES GLEESON: Have you?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, if you’d like to see half an hour. Half an hour of it may sort of explain more still. But this was sort of collage film being, you know, a collage in time and space.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Well, thank you very much, Martin. That’s marvellous. Good. Martin, some final words.

MARTIN SHARP: To bring Tiny Tim and Luna Park together was again like a collage perhaps, in a way, you know. He sang with the world non-stop singing record, that was the hook for it, you see. He sang his way through the whole history of popular music without stopping, for two hours and 20 minutes from the very first song ever written for the phonograph right through to today’s most popular song. We did a scene after that of him as Pierrot singing a song called
Lonely Troubadour, which is one of his favourites. Perhaps what comes out of the collage, the mysterious thing which emerges from the combination of the two, again a bit perhaps like the child or whatever, was he’d never been Pierrot before, he’d never put on a Pierrot costume. I don’t think he really knew much about Pierrot perhaps. But it was a true manifestation of Pierrot, so that Pierrot should appear at Luna Park was for me the sort of magical thing that happened, apart from everything was very magical with him performing. But this was the sort of quintessence of it, the combination of Luna Park and Tiny Tim produced Pierrot in his true spirit.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. This film you’ve been working on, is it completed?

MARTIN SHARP: No, it’s not completed yet.

JAMES GLEESON: So this is your new work of art.

MARTIN SHARP: Yes, yes. I never consider the medium. I just try to move, you know, more laterally through whatever medium I can keep the idea mobile in. Whether it be cartoon or fine art.

JAMES GLEESON: So this is your work in progress?

MARTIN SHARP: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, I look forward to seeing it.

MARTIN SHARP: I hope you will. I hope you will.

JAMES GLEESON: Thank you, Martin.

MARTIN SHARP: Thank you.