

## JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: JOHN ARMSTRONG

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**JAMES GLEESON:** John, I think we won't follow a chronological sequence here, but begin rather with the last three works we got of yours, the three major works from the Twelfth Sao Paulo Biennale in 1973. Could you begin by recalling the circumstances that lead up to these works?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Vaguely, yes. Well the biggest, *Prism*, was the one that was actually commissioned by the National Gallery. Was it the National Gallery?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Was this before the Sao Paulo thing came up?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, yes, before that. That's right, yes. It's all coming back now. Yes, I was sort of paid a certain sum to sort of get me going. The good thing about the whole deal actually was that I wasn't given any limitations whatsoever. Which probably backfired a little bit, I should think, because I tended to go a little bit large after all, particularly with *Prism*. Because the whole thing is—well, I vaguely remember—oh, it's got the measurements here, 400 by 600 by 300 centimetres, and it was all out of six inch by six inch Oregon, so the whole thing weighed quite a bit. It's the biggest, still the biggest thing I've ever made: a terrific thing to actually make and work on. Actually, two of the sculptures here, *Prism* and *Bag rack* were about the only times I've actually used outside help. I sort of sub-contracted bits out, you know. I mean, I'm not a metal worker and in *Prism* I had to actually get a metal worker to make the metal corner bits. I'm not a seamstress, so in the *Bag rack* one I had to actually get the canvas bag made. I can't actually recall any other piece that I've had to get any bits specifically made for. In the other piece, *Feet*, the other one that went to Sao Paulo, the shoe last were actually found objects obviously.

**JAMES GLEESON:** How did it come about that you found so many of them? Did you come across a source of supply, an old factory or something?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** There was a friend of Neil Evans, that famous ex-artist who was working at a wine bar somewhere out near Sydney Uni, that had been a cobblerist. This bloke had died and it had become a wine bar and she found all these things out in the basement, I think it was, and told Neil and Neil told me, because we were working at the same place at the time. So I got a truckload of things. I mean, I've still got hundreds of them hanging around. You know, I've stopped using them now. The white ants are eating them at the moment. But, yes, it was a good find because it produced a lot of nice works. Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It did. It featured in quite a lot of works for a number of years.

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**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** It featured, yes, it featured.

**JAMES GLEESON:** John, I remember the exhibition in Sao Paulo. You were coming over for it and you were halted in Easter Island, weren't you, because of Lan Chile went off the air?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, that's right. On the way over there we stopped off supposedly for a week at Easter Island. But just before we were due to fly out, Allende had been murdered. So we were stuck there for another week, and this sort of aggravated things. I was feeling pretty nervous about the whole thing anyway. I mean, it was a fantastic place to be stuck, Easter Island, you know, after the trip. I mean Easter Island was the highlight of the trip. It produced a lot of works that came from that experience. But, yes, it was a bit traumatic, but we got there and managed to get everything together.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I remember we were struggling to try and get *Prism* into place.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** That's right, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And we got some things in the wrong place by the time you arrived.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** But we were pretty desperate because the judging was due to start the next day.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** It was only a couple of days I think, yes, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Anyway, it all worked out in the end because you came away with a major prize (inaudible).

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** That's right, yes. I wasn't sort of even considering, you know. Just the prize sort of thing didn't even enter my head, you know. It was enough to sort of be there and showing. But then we were wandering through on the day of the judging and we came around the corner and saw all the judges sitting, or perched on the logs of *Bag rack*, doing their annotations and things. We thought this is a good sign. So it ended up it was.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It wasn't a gold medal. It was a major cash prize, was it?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, that's right. Apparently they give a grand, grand prize and a series of first prizes as well. I got one of the first prizes.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** John, have you anything to say about the works themselves? Do they have any special meaning for you? *Prism*, for instance, does the name imply anything?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** No, not really. Actually, yes, it does. Because the three, *Prism*, *Bag rack* and *Feet*—the work I've been doing before this, a lot had sort of strange titles. I can't even remember some. Do you remember some of them?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, I remember *Cold shoulder*.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** That's right, yes, things that were sort of—

**JAMES GLEESON:** One, two, three, four—

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** That's right, yes. Things that are sort of—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Puns on puns.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Puns and jokes. It annoyed me that a lot of people were sort of looking on them purely as visual puns as well. I mean, yes, sure, that played a bit of a part. But when I was being remembered as punster rather than a sculptor it was—you know, this was a direct—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Reaction.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, a direct reaction against that. So, you know, and still now I just give things very simple titles. But I was still sort of caught up in the sort of excitement of showing, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, one of the things that has always struck me about your work, which distinguishes it from that of other sculptors certainly in Australia at that time, was your preference for using ready-made objects, objects easily obtained in all sorts of places, material that up to that time hadn't been regarded as traditional sculptural materials like bronze and marble and so on.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Have you always felt that urge to make your things from the less traditional materials?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes. Possibly when I was at art school it was brought about initially because of, you know, no money. But no, well, I've definitely got an affinity to that. I mean, Jack Lynn described me as a bush carpenter artist, and I suppose it's part of my sort of Australian heritage.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The grand media, like bronze and marble has never appealed to you?

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**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Never appealed to me because it's not something I can directly do—oh, possibly marble or something like that, you know. No, hang on, start again on that. Bronze uses a lot of technique, a lot of other people necessarily. I can't stand it. I can't stand working with anyone else. Marble is just such a time consuming thing. Even wood-carving, I mean, you know, if I can cut a piece of wood with a chain saw, well, that's swift enough. I want immediate reaction because I do sort of work immediately in the actual materials. I do a lot of preliminary sketches, more sort of blueprint, you know, carpenters drawings type things, rather than finished drawings. I've never shown any sculpture drawings. Then I play around with the bits and pieces until they look right, yes, which can be a bit strenuous, particularly with something like *Prism*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** *Prism*, well, as far as I'm concerned it's probably your masterpiece. It's the one I find the most lastingly satisfying. Not that they all aren't, but that one seems to have a character of its own. A monumentality, a precision, and a clarity and yet an ambiguity that I think is terrific.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, it's a nice piece. I've enjoyed putting it together. I put it together a few times, you know, in Sao Paulo or in Australia. In Sao Paulo, in Perth, and in Canberra, was it? Yes, it's a nice sort of feeling to reach the end of it every time, and yes. It would be nice to see it up on permanent exhibition.

**JAMES GLEESON:** When the gallery gets opened, yes, yes.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** All right, well I think that's fine about those three pieces. We'll go to the smaller, earlier pieces now.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Do you remember about those?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Anything that Jill can think of, you know, any comments. She might have an idea or memory of them. *Carry* 1972 from the Watters Gallery. Was that from your first show, or a subsequent one?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** No, that was a—

**JILL:** A third—

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Was that the one I had all the pieces in, that huge amount of pieces? I think it was.

**JILL:** Was it?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes. I had some show where I'd gone completely mad.

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**JILL:** There were about 80 pieces.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Eighty, 85 pieces or something in it. Yes, this was one. I think there's a few actually been purchased from that one, that show. Possibly all the ones with the shoe lasts would have been, except *Feet*. I'm not sure about that one. It might have been too.

**JAMES GLEESON:** *Hangers*, catalogue 145, probably the same exhibition.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Forty-two, yes. But *Carry*, that was, yes, all found objects. I mean, there was nothing sort of done to that except the little bits put together. It was a nice, nice little piece, yes. And *Hangers*—

**JAMES GLEESON:** *Hangers*. That's coat hangers—

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Coat hangers with chains and green rope and rocks hanging from them. I think that was one of those pieces that's specifically done for the gallery.

**JILL:** For the space.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, because it was hanging in the double story section of the gallery.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, yes.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** I mean, in the photograph here it's on a rail. Actually I've never seen it like that. It looks quite good.

**JAMES GLEESON:** How was it intended to be shown?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Well, the two rows with all the rope on one side, all the rocks on the other side.

**JILL:** Hanging down the wall, down the double length of the wall.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Do you think that is a proper way to show it?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, that looks all right, doesn't it? If they were alternated, wouldn't it? You don't think so?

**JILL:** No.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** You prefer it the other way.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** It just looks completely different there. I mean, it was a very, very fine sparse thing before, you know, you could hardly see it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Particularly when it was well lit, because the actual wooden bits of the hangers were right against the wall. There was no shadows. The chains were actually blending with the wall, and all you had was these sort of little spots, you know, of the rope and the rocks hanging.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. So it was a much wider thing, all spread out flat against the wall?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes. Well, instead of covering this space, which would be what, about two foot by three?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** And, what, 18 inches deep? It was about a quarter of an inch deep and what?

**JILL:** Oh, how high? Twenty-five feet high.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Twenty-five, 30 feet high, 15 foot wide, you know.

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

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** A much more lineal thing, you know. This is a mass.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, how were these articulated, the ones above the others.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** There was centre chain hanging. Two centre chains, yes. That sort of chandelier stuff, or bathplug stuff, you know. Not the same sort of chain. It was a brass-look interlinked thing, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I think in order to get it right, we'd better get you to make a little diagram of the work.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** I'll send you a photo of it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Will you?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** I've got one of it on show here. Yes. It's not a very good photo.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** But just so that we get it right.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, sure.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This is the problem, you know, with works like that. Unless we have some indication from the artist the way he intends it to be displayed, it can often be shown in a way that was not your intention.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So that's a good point that's come out. You like it the other way.

**JILL:** Oh, yes, definitely.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, it just looks very different there, doesn't it?

**JAMES GLEESON:** All right.

**JILL:** Actually I thought it was being stored like that.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Well, it is, I think.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, it would perhaps have been difficult in our present storage space to hang it up.

**JILL:** Oh, yes, for sure.

**JAMES GLEESON:** But I doubt if we have any kind of indication of how it should have gone on record. So if you do have a photograph we could put it into this folio.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, sure.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And when the time comes to put it up in the gallery we'll know exactly how it goes.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, because it was a much more subtle piece than that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah, ha. Good. This one doesn't have that kind of problem because it's just a compact unit.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes. What's happened to that?

**JILL:** (inaudible) chain.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Come undone, yes.

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**JILL:** Yes, come undone. They're all supposed to be up that like on the chain.

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

**JILL:** These screws eyes have come undone from the chains.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah, ha.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** So the screw eye has been opened up a little bit.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** So all he has to do is to be hooked back on. But, yes, they should all be level.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Like that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's a good point, yes. Fine.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** That was from the same show as the other two. I like the idea of having that one vaguely on eye level, that sort of thing, rather than a floor piece or, you know, waist height or anything like that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** This one. Yes, a lot of things sort of kept recurring on this, you know, like the feet, the shoe lasts, these particular boxes which I found when I was living in Surrey Hills. I was around the corner from a glass factory and they used to pack glass louvers and things in these boxes and throw them out and I'd get them. And the fur, I mean, that's sort of the three things—this piece sums up everything I was about at that particular stage.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The box, the shoe last, the fur.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes. Yes, that was just a nice piece.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It is a good piece. The title was very characteristic of the sort of punning title you gave at that time.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** That's right, yes, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I remember *Coal shovel* and *Foot stool*, *One, two, three, fur* and so on.



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**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes. There's a lot from that show.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Good. Well, I'll remember that those have to be connected to those chains and they should be more horizontal.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes. Once they're connected, yes, that will bring them up to the same level.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Good.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Because it's a left, right, left foot, this thing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** It's a stepping thing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, it's movement forward, stepping.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That of course is, I think, a feature of the Big feet, isn't it?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, for sure.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It's implied that movement is involved and the marching, and I think that photograph taken on the sand dunes caught the whole mood of it marvellously. Were you happy about the way it was displayed in Sao Paulo in a series of sort of angular movements through?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, I quite like that because it sort of followed the natural course of a spectator looking at the other bits and pieces around. But yes, I mean, I like the idea of having something like that and putting it in all different environments.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It could be changed. It's one of those flexible pieces.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes. I mean, if I had enough space, you know, I probably would have had it in circles and things too, but you know. Just a modular thing that could go anywhere, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So that there's no real fixed order about that, as long as you get this implication of movement being carried through.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes. As long as it sort of follows the movement, a natural movement that a person would make, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

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**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** So if it's on show at the gallery, you know, not an artificial movement. I wouldn't like people to actually move around it because it was moving around that way.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no, no.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** I mean, if it can be sort of be angled from a doorway towards the toilets or something like that, that would be better than, you know, in some sort of triangle or anything like that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. So it shouldn't complete a circle?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** No, no.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That would defeat its purpose.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** It should have a journey, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Good. *Foot stool*, one of the nice ones from that show. I think that's from the same exhibition.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Catalogue No 11.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes.

**JILL:** It's lovely.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Doesn't it look good?

**JILL:** Oh, you know, it's going to dance across the floor.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, I was lucky. When I made these things I was living in the city and, I mean, finding a hunk of stump like that was a bit of a coup, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Where did you find it?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** I haven't got a clue. I can't remember now. I can't imagine where I would have found it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It doesn't look like a city piece at all.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** No, it doesn't. No.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It looks more like muck off (inaudible).

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**JILL:** It does, doesn't it?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** But, you know, I didn't even go to the bush then for weekend visits so, you know, it must have found it around Surrey Hills somewhere.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It looked very weathered and I suppose it had been out in the open for a long time.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** There's a contrast between what looks so natural and yet these artificial feet is one of those paradoxes that I always find fascinating in your work. Are you consciously—of course you are consciously aware of that paradox?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** In fact, I find it hard actually to remember or think what I'm consciously aware of at all, you know. Whenever I'm working it seems to be just a natural progression, you know, from one stage to another. You know, I don't sort of set out to make something, it's just something's there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You just do it until it (inaudible).

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** It demands something else to be put with it, yes, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Good.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** *Yellow.*

**JAMES GLEESON:** *Yellow.*

**JILL:** That should be that way up against a wall.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** It leans against a wall that way, so that all the bits hang down. This was the first piece I showed Frank ever.

**JILL:** That's what won him over to John.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Because I'd come down here, oh, only a couple of weeks after this and 109 Riley Street was open.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** I had a big bundle of drawings under one arm, and this under the other arm. I don't know why I brought this down because I didn't particularly think it was—I mean. I'd never seen anything like this in galleries. I thought, you know, 'They're not going to show that sort of stuff' you know. But I'd

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seen sort of vaguely the same sort of abstract expressionist drawings like I'd been doing at the time. I thought I'd try for a show of drawings and luckily I brought that, because Frank hated my drawings but gave me a show of sculpture about three weeks later.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What date was that, can you remember?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Oh, that was very early. That was when I was living in Redfern. Just after I got kicked out of art school, wasn't it?

**JILL:** Sixty-eight, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Nineteen sixty-eight?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Sixty-eight it would have been.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So that would have been by far the earliest one of yours we've got?

**JILL:** Yes. Oh, yes.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** That would be about the earliest thing in existence actually.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Is it?

**JILL:** I think so. Yes. The one before that—

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Everything else from that period is gone.

**JILL:** That little form too, that's broken. That went to the tip up at Nambucca. We took all his sculptures to the tip.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So that's virtually your first sculpture?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Virtually, yes. The only extinct—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Existing ones.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** What's the word?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Extant.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Extinct.

**JAMES GLEESON:** These little group are more or less of the same period. They'd have been, what, in '71, '72?

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**JILL:** Seventy-two, I'd say.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Seventy-two, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's when we bought them from an exhibition in Sydney.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Well, it would have been late in the year.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Did you make them in—no. [break in recording]

**JAMES GLEESON:** *Hanger* would date from early-ish, or the first half anyway, the first part of 1972?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes.

**JILL:** Yes. It was just when we came back from England and were living in Mort Street.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** That's right yes. That was my first trip away. I came back and just went berserk. I mean, I was working, producing four or five, six pieces a week sometimes. I mean, there was very little actual physical work involved with these things, you know. But, yes, it was a very productive time.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, to get back to this one. It's meant to lean against a wall?

**JILL:** Just lean up against the wall.

**JAMES GLEESON:** At a slight angle?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, just out from the wall a little so that the yellow baubles on the back sort of hang, you know. So they are obviously hanging, so they're not sort of coating the thing. It's a vaguely triangular piece. The broader piece is the base, the broader end.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, and the thinner end leans flat against the wall.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Leans against the wall, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** But just slightly out from the wall.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes. Say, what, a foot out, I suppose?

**JAMES GLEESON:** A foot out?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, a foot.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, good.

**JILL:** It's a lovely piece.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes, it is. I'd forgotten it, I must confess, until I saw (inaudible).

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** I didn't know it was in the collection. I didn't know what had happened to it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, it's good to have your first work that's extant and we've got that little group from the middle and then the culminating big group from Sao Paulo.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Well, there's still more. Do you want some more?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Eventually. Well, could we go now to—oh, we'll clean up. We have a drawing, 71 feet, pencil and blue felt pen on white paper. It's a drawing for sculpture *Feet*.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** No, that was done afterwards actually.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was it?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** When I was figuring out the way it would actually be put. I'd sent that down to—what was her name? McKeen.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Margaret McKeen.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Margaret McKeen. Yes. She was putting together a show somewhere and asked me did I have any drawings of feet, and that was the only drawing I had around so I sent that down.

**JAMES GLEESON:** But it was actually done after the piece was made.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** To give an idea of how it should go.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, good. So it's not a preliminary drawing?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** No, no.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, now we come to the sketchbook, 18 drawings, 1976, ideas for sculpture. I've got those here, the photographs.

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**JILL:** Yes, the (inaudible).

**JAMES GLEESON:** So if you'd like to go through.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Oh, isn't this nice?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Bringing it all back to you.

**JILL:** Oh, these are beautiful.

**JAMES GLEESON:** These are the only ones we have from (inaudible).

**JILL:** Yes.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, that's right.

**JILL:** They're just beautiful. That sums John up completely, that drawing. The tarsier is a prosimian and nice. That sums John up. That's beautiful.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Actually I disagree with your cataloguing there. They're not ideas for sculptures.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Aren't they?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** No.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah, good.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** No, they're just drawings.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's exactly what we should know. I'll change that. Not ideas for sculpture.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** No. It was the first time for what, four, five, six years that I actually worked just on drawings, you know, as drawings.

**JAMES GLEESON:** They were just intended as drawings and that's all?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes. Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** But you must say that does have a sculptural look.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Oh, yes. For sure, yes. I mean, yes, a lot of them are probably drawings of imaginary sculptures but, you know, they weren't done with the idea of ever producing the sculptures.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No.

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**JILL:** That's beautiful. Unless goats are fenced properly they will eat trees and sculptures. That's because we own two goats who used to eat all the trees and all the sculptures.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So this is real autobiographical.

**JILL:** It really is, yes.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Very much so, yes. This actually, yes, I started doing these drawings before I started doing a lot of the smaller sculptures, yes. So this is the first lot of animal bits that I'd done. Because we moved up the farm and, you know, found out this great sort of thing about animals. I started buying little animals to use them—

**JILL:** Toy ones.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Toy ones, you know, plastic ones from toy shops, to use in the drawings. That sort of lead on then to the sculptures which were, you know, using the gold leafed animals.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So that, although they're not drawings for any particular sculptures, they did in fact lead towards a whole sequence of sculptures.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, for sure. I'd forgotten all these.

**JILL:** Oh, they're really nice.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Kangaroos and tortoises climbing a ladder.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, they're nice things. Yes, they're direct sort of autobiographical things actually.

**JAMES GLEESON:** These really arose out of your feelings and your experiences up around the country there.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, yes.

**JILL:** Yes.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, it was good actually to work on drawings again because, I mean, my stuff had been getting—you know, like *Prism* and all that sort of stuff—had been getting large and I was starting to lose that sort of spontaneity. Working in drawings, because I was working on these drawings just in pencil and then erasing, in very soft pencil and then erasing them, you know, the unnecessary bits, and then going over what was going to stay with Indian ink and pen. So it was a very quick way to work and a very quick way to change things around. So, you know, I was doing a couple of drawings a day. I think now that



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we are off to Europe, I think I'll probably be doing some more drawings over there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, it's a very useful way of working when you're travelling.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You haven't got much space to (inaudible).

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** That's right, yes.

**JILL:** That's beautiful.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's a lovely one, isn't it? Kangaroos.

**JILL:** Sometimes jump over the top of my sculptures.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Did they in fact?

**JILL:** Yes, they did all the time.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's a marvellous one.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** I'd forgotten all about these actually.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The arc up on top, is it?

**JILL:** Yes.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And two animals pulling a tree.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, draught horses.

**JILL:** In opposite directions.

**JAMES GLEESON:** In opposite directions.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes. Because I became very conscious up there of sort of sighting of sculptures, you know, because I had a lot of sculptures sort of dotted throughout the bush. So it was nice to place them in different places. And chooks.

**JILL:** My chooks. Yes, they were our three white chooks. They were lovely.

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**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Because, you know, we were very naive when we went up there. We got all overwhelmed that something as marvellous as a chook could exist, being city people.

**JILL:** When our first chook laid an egg, oh dear, we ran around the farm for days saying, 'Our chook laid an egg'.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Now that's very like some of the sculpture that developed a little after.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, yes. Yes, the little farm scene on a pedestal.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, that's right.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** But it was a rough-hewn pedestal.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes. Looking at them now, I mean there's just so much relationship between the drawings and the sculptures. Actually, when I left the farm I packed up all the sketches and bits and pieces and rubbish that I'd been keeping for about 10 years. All the sculpture drawings because I'd just sort of finish a sketch book and then toss it aside and then start another one. So I put them all together and given them to Geoffrey Legge for him to go through, because I was finding things there, sculptures I'd actually figured out, you know, 1969, with very few changes. I'd done the drawing then, forgotten about them completely and made pretty much exactly the same sculpture in 1975 or '76, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It stayed subconsciously in your mind.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, which really surprised me.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I think that happens to sculptures. I know Klippel found drawings that he'd done six or eight years before and then has done a sculpture and had no recollection that he'd done the drawing years before.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** I mean, I'm sure in, you know, another 10 years time someone's going to be able to do a brisk trade in forgeries because I'm not going to be able to remember what I did. Hopefully it'll be worth something to forge. Yes. These are nice. Yes. Well, these are sort of particularly Australian looking, aren't they?

**JILL:** What's that? One goose is better than three tortoises. They are too. Oh, lovely. Because we only left the farm two days ago and we're feeling sort of a bit sad.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Feeling a bit homesick.

**JILL:** Yes.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes. Well, they were nice to have a look at.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah, good. Well, thanks, John.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Are they going to stay as a book?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Yes. Well, at least I think so, although it would be nice to mount them as a little exhibition.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Keeping them together as a unit. Anyway, that's perhaps for the curator to decide sometime in the future. But at the moment they're still in book form. But they would make a lovely show just in themselves.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And they can often be preserved better at their individual—

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes. Well, you only get the sort of edges reacting to the age then, don't you really?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, John, now you are off to Europe.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes. What's today? Wednesday. I go on Saturday.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What are your plans, or don't you have any specific plans?

**JILL:** Oh, not to come back again really.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You're going for good?

**JILL:** Yes. Well see, we're taking our dog and if we come back she has to go into quarantine, so we're not going to come back again.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And where are you heading for first?

**JILL:** Paris.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** We'll go to Paris and see what happens there. Have a look around.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Are you thinking of showing there?

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**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Oh, yes. Yes, that's the main thing, is going away.

**JILL:** (inaudible) Australia really.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** I had a sort of a bit of a dilemma last year. Was it last year?

**JILL:** Yes.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Whether to give up showing, being an exhibiting artist, or get into it in a big way. I felt that I'd sort of gone as far as I could go in Australia, and I wasn't making anything at all from sales because, you know, the National Gallery got enough and other galleries got enough. So our recent dilemma is to whether to become a full time farmer, which seemed like a lot of bloody hard work, or actually become a career artist, I suppose. It's not as awful sounding as that because the only way I can keep producing work is by selling work.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Of course.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** So I have to virtually, you know, explore a new market. I mean, I know I work very badly when I'm in debt and depression.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Of course.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** You know, I don't do anything at all.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** The way I'm working at the moment, the materials I'm using at the moment, are very expensive to do—you know, even a small piece costs quite a lot of money and gold leaf and velvet and this sort of thing. So it's something that's probably been working up to this point for the past three or four years. I think it will be exciting. I particularly want to show in Germany, and probably in London, I'm not too sure yet. I'll give myself a couple of years in Europe and then either get tied up with a gallery over there and let them show me in New York or go across and do it myself in New York. But I do want to sort of concentrate on showing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, I can see the point. You had reached a sort of crisis point here.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Those who, you know, really like to work in the galleries—

**JILL:** Well, they all have them.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** All have their work and the public have not yet really woken up to it.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** That's right. Well, the last show actually, every review mentioned, you know, John Armstrong has a show at Watters. You may remember he won first prize in Sao Paulo. I thought, God, you know, I'm going to be 60, I'm going to be 75 and they're going to say 'John Armstrong won a prize in Sao Paulo', and that's going to be it. It's nearly the highlight of my life, you know.

**JILL:** Yes, that result.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, it can be traumatic.

**JILL:** Yes.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** So I'll get away somewhere else and see what happens. But I'm very confident. Long as I've got me wife and me dog we'll be right.

**JAMES GLEESON:** John, I don't think we'll need anything more. We know the background. Most of the biographical material we've got in the catalogue which fills that in. I don't think there's anything else we need. You've given us a good coverage of things we owned.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Good. Yes, it's good to see those photos and make sure their sort of going to be shown the right way too.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Yes. So it's very important that we've had this talk because now we know that some of these things should be shown in a different way to the way they've been photographed.

**JILL:** Yes, yes.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Actually, go back to something else that you might be interested in is on *Bag rack*. I had a bit of a run in with Adelaide Gallery about *Bag rack*—or Jill did on my behalf. It was shown in Perth, sent across to Adelaide and then was to Canberra, right. Now, I set it up in Perth and I set it up in Canberra but the gallery people set it up in Adelaide. Now, when they packed it, they put the bag, the deflated bag, on the bottom of one box and then laid the creosoted beams on top. So there's creosote marks on the canvas. The canvas should be white. Oh, well, you know, canvas, a natural colour.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** So there's a few marks there. I think in Canberra I managed to turn it around in some way, the marks weren't visible. You know, I

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think they were on the bottom. But another thing I did which was worse than that was that on Prism I'd put identification numbers in yellow paint.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes, I remember those.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Which became part of the thing because you got inside and you were confounded by this seemingly useless numbering system, you know, which only I understood I think, or Jill understood.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Partly. I was beginning to get the hang of it when you arrived from Easter Island.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes. But it sort of became part of the thing. So someone in Adelaide thought this was a good idea and they proceeded to number *Bag rack* themselves.

**JILL:** With yellow paint.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** With yellow paint, but numbers about three and a half inches tall.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Good lord.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** And they also put it together with a hammer rather than anything else.

**JILL:** And broke it all.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** So there's a few chips and bits out of it. Now, I patched it up in Canberra, but I didn't have time to get rid of the numbers, did I?

**JILL:** I don't think so, I can't remember.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So those numbers shouldn't be there?

**JILL:** No.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** The numbers shouldn't be there, no.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What can we do to get rid of them?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Oh, I suppose just—

**JILL:** They can be scraped off and re creosoted, I suppose.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, scrape it off and put a bit of black creosote on it.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Put creosote on it. Yes. Was it a sort of enamel paint, or something?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, I think it was enamel. Yes. It didn't go into the wood. It was sort of on top of the wood.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I remember the ones on *Prism* were a sort of enamel paint.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes, that's right.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, they should be able to be scraped off.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** But I imagine if ever you do get around to putting these up I'll probably have to help you, wouldn't I? One of my trips back.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, we do have photographs of them now, which is helpful. You remember in Sao Paulo we didn't have photographs of them.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** That's right yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I had to work from memory and that was really very difficult.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** That's right, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Now at least we do have photographs of them, which should prevent us from making too many mistakes. But by 1981 you'd better be back here to keep an eye on us to see we're doing the right thing.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Oh, we'll come back for a visit, so there you go. You know, come to the opening.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Well, it is important we get them the way you intended them to be.

**JILL:** Oh, for sure.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I suppose in some things there's a certain latitude where they can be shown in a variety of ways, but clearly in most of your things they're meant to be shown in one specific way.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Yes. I find it very hard to describe how to put things together for other people to do. Actually, Geoffrey is the only person that's ever been able to get things exactly. He thinks sort of about my stuff the same way as I do.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So Geoffrey's a good one to call on if we're in doubt and you're not here.

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**JILL:** Yes, for sure. Yes.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** He knows what's sort of typically me and not.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, good.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** That's good.

**JAMES GLEESON:** All right, John. Anything else you've got to tell me?

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** No, nothing I can think of.

**JAMES GLEESON:** All right. Well, just good luck and I hope everything goes marvellously well for you.

**JOHN ARMSTRONG:** Thank you.