

Date of interview—1 January 1978

## **JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: JUDY CASSAB**

**James Gleeson:** Judy, I wonder if you'd begin by telling us when and where you were born, and some of the biographical information that we need to know.

**Judy Cassab:** I was born on 15 August, 1920 in Vienna of Hungarian parents; we just happened to live there. I moved from Austria when I was nine. My parents divorced and I went with my mother to live with my grandmother in a small town of 12,000 inhabitants in the eastern part of Hungary, near the Polish and Russian border.

**James Gleeson:** Was there a history of an interest in art in your family?

**Judy Cassab:** There was, but not in the visual arts. My mother was a musician. My father would have written if his parents had let him, but it wasn't done. I have several cousins who are painters—one lives in London, and a sculptor cousin lives in Paris. So it is in the family. But when I was twelve I woke up with the thought, 'I am going to be a painter'. I can't explain that; I just knew that it was the only thing in life I wanted to do. So I am one of the lucky ones who knew very early what they wanted to do. I didn't have any tuition until I married—there was no one to study from where I lived.

**James Gleeson:** You were still in Hungary then?

**Judy Cassab:** Yes, in the little town. I hadn't even been to Budapest. I hadn't even seen a reproduction of an Impressionist or a modern master until after I was married—

**James Gleeson:** What year was that, Judy? Can you remember?

**Judy Cassab:** It was 1939 when I married.

**James Gleeson:** The year the war started?

**Judy Cassab:** That's right. So my studies were interrupted by the war.

**James Gleeson:** Where did you study then?

**Judy Cassab:** I studied for one year in Prague—

**James Gleeson:** You moved from this little town in Hungary to Prague?

**Judy Cassab:** For one year, to study. I was there when Germany occupied Czechoslovakia, and I had great difficulty getting back. We married after that. We had only been married one year when my husband was taken by the Germans to Russia into forced labour.

**James Gleeson:** I didn't know that.

Date of interview—1 January 1978

**Judy Cassab:** I had not seen him for almost three years. We did not know how long it would be, but we knew that we couldn't write to each other. This might sound terribly corny and sentimental, but I must say it because it probably saved his life: we gave each other a rendezvous on a certain star in a constellation, a 'W'; we chose the lower corner of the 'W' to meet on every evening. We both kept it, and he says it did help to keep him alive.

**James Gleeson:** Goodness me.

**Judy Cassab:** When he left he said, 'While I'm gone, at least take the opportunity to go to Budapest and study painting'. That was when I continued, after Prague, to study.

**James Gleeson:** Your main study was done in Budapest?

**Judy Cassab:** In Budapest, yes. Not only did I study while my husband was in forced labour, but after the war, in 1945, when it was possible to leave the ruins in Budapest and go to the country, we spent each summer in an artists' colony on the shores of the Danube, where many of the great artists of Hungary congregated each summer. It was a wonderful time—much better, from the point of view of a young painter studying, than the school system.

**James Gleeson:** This meeting of minds.

**Judy Cassab:** I'm asked how I managed, with two babies at the time, to keep painting. Life consisted of getting up at 5 am and feeding one baby, taking canvas and easel to the village square and painting till eight, coming back and giving breakfast to the other child, going for a swim in the Danube, having a siesta after lunch and spending another three hours painting in the afternoon.

**James Gleeson:** What was your painting like at that time, Judy? Can you describe it?

**Judy Cassab:** I would think of it as post-Impressionist, under the influence, perhaps, of Vuillard and Bonnard at the time. Of course, they had their Hungarian equivalents, but nobody here would know them. They were good painters.

**James Gleeson:** Had you actually seen Vuillard or Bonnard at that time?

**Judy Cassab:** No—the Hungarian equivalents.

**James Gleeson:** I see. When did you go to Vienna?

**Judy Cassab:** We left Hungary in 1949 because we wanted to immigrate. When we left we didn't know where we were going; we just stopped in Vienna and looked at the map of the world. The choice narrowed down eventually to either Canada or Australia. We did not want to go to any country where the social

Date of interview—1 January 1978

differences would have been as enormous as they used to be in Hungary, so that the same fate did not catch up with our children. America and England were closed, because the Hungarian quota was full. We wrote to both Canada and Australia for permits and waited two years to get one. It was a toss-up—where it came from first was where we would go.

**James Gleeson:** That is Rudy Komon's story too. I think he had applications in to both Canada and Australia, and the Australian one came in first.

**Judy Cassab:** Isn't that strange? I didn't even know that.

**James Gleeson:** I think that's it, if I remember it correctly.

**Judy Cassab:** Yes. It really didn't matter at that time because we didn't have relations or friends anywhere. Neither did we know much English. While we were waiting in Vienna, I had permission from the Kunsthistorisches Museum to copy Bruegel's *Peasant dance*—

**James Gleeson:** There are now four outside.

**Judy Cassab:** That's right. I learned a lot from copying.

**James Gleeson:** Isn't that an incredible room, where all those Bruegels are?

**Judy Cassab:** It was such an escape too, from the memory of the war and the thought of immigration. All that was much easier to take because I spent my days between the Bruegels.

**James Gleeson:** A happy fate that must have been.

**Judy Cassab:** Yes.

**James Gleeson:** How long did it take you to make that copy, which is a very beautiful one?

**Judy Cassab:** Four months it took me, but every day. That was less time than Bruegel took, but I only had to copy it! The museum was a great help. They gave me a book to read and I learned what he used as a foundation, that the foundation was yellow, at which stage he varnished it first, and how he built up the varnish. I learned a lot from this, but mainly discipline, because it had to be done slowly and lovingly. There are so many different shades of black as a colour. I learned a lot from that.

**James Gleeson:** And eventually the Australian application came through first?

**Judy Cassab:** Yes, it did. In between, there was a little interlude as we moved from Vienna to Salzburg, which was the American zone, waiting for our permit.

Date of interview—1 January 1978

**James Gleeson:** What year was this?

**Judy Cassab:** It was 1950. We didn't stay in Salzburg, which was too expensive, but in Sankt Gilgen, which was better for the children too. I met an Englishman with his wife and three children. At that time I could not yet distinguish a Hungarian accent. We found out later that he was Micky Sekers, a Hungarian.

**James Gleeson:** Of Sekers Silk?

**Judy Cassab:** That's right. He met me returning from landscaping with a canvas, and started talking to me. He commissioned me to paint a portrait of his three children. Then he asked me how much I charged. I said something in Austrian schillings, and he said, 'That's ridiculous', and paid me double. He went back to England and telephoned me, saying that he had commissions for me if we could come over. Not having a passport, it was almost impossible to get a visa, but he got us one and we went over. That's when I started painting portraits in England.

**James Gleeson:** Before you came to Australia?

**Judy Cassab:** That's right. I painted the Gateskill children, and someone called Lord Bilmount, who was, I think, the chairman of Sekers Silk. He gave me a letter of introduction to Charles Lloyd Jones. I had no idea when we arrived what David Jones was or where it was, or who Charles Lloyd Jones was. When he saw me he asked me, 'In what way can I help you?' and I said, 'I'm an artist. I also paint portraits'. He said, 'I'm sorry, but I was just sitting for a portrait for a painter called Dobell'. I had never heard of Dobell till then. He said, 'Give me your telephone number and I will get in touch with you'—which in Hungary would mean that they would never ring again. But obviously in Sydney it was different. We were living in one room in a boarding house in Bondi. We were sleeping with the two children in one room, sitting on the staircase waiting for them to fall asleep at night. I was cooking on one gas stove with eight other women. Into this atmosphere came the telephone call of Charles Lloyd Jones, saying that he would be happy if I would paint his wife. It was lucky in a way, but perhaps it came too early.

**James Gleeson:** This is the old Sir Charles.

**Judy Cassab:** That's right; it was the first portrait I painted in Australia. Some time after that we found a flat and moved, the children settled into kindergarten and I set up a studio.

**James Gleeson:** Judy, from then on you've worked as a portrait painter, but as an artist in a completely different sense, covering a whole range of interests.

**Judy Cassab:** I never considered myself a portrait painter. There was a time—a long time, really—when it was almost an insult to be introduced as a portrait painter because it sounded commercial. I never really intended to become a

Date of interview—1 January 1978

commercial portrait painter, but it was always my first love. So there were decades when I almost felt schizophrenic, because I was painting a whole body of work—maybe sixty paintings—which had nothing to do with portraiture and, parallel with whatever way I was working, the portraits also changed and developed. But they were looked down upon, as you know, at one stage, and I almost felt dishonest doing both.

**James Gleeson:** Portraiture did come into bad repute as a viable art form in this country at one stage.

**Judy Cassab:** Yes—not only in this country, I think. There were very few good artists who had an interest in portrait painting; you could count them on your two hands. But I'm glad I always pursued my interest in it, because it is a gift one is born with. Of course, one can be a very bad painter in spite of this gift.

**James Gleeson:** Yes, I know. Catching a likeness is not necessarily—

**Judy Cassab:** Not at all. But it was a very serious interest, which it still is.

**James Gleeson:** Yes. You do have an extraordinary talent, or gift, for catching likenesses of people. You can always recognise your sitters immediately. I think of marvellous ones like the Orban one, for instance.

**Judy Cassab:** I think I can express it by saying that catching the likeness, or drawing the bone structure, or using paint are almost like scales on a piano now. I am much more interested in digging deeply into the character and, as I get older, I know more about the psychology of my sitter. But I am still more intuitive and instinctive, I think, than conscious of what I'm doing.

**James Gleeson:** Judy, how do you work on a portrait? Do you work with the sitter in front of you all the time? Do you make sketches first and then do it from the sketches?

**Judy Cassab:** I never liked doing sketches because I had the feeling—maybe a mistaken feeling, but it persisted—that my excitement was going into the sketch and there would not be enough left for the original. I made little shorthand notes—just one-line drawings on paper.

**James Gleeson:** This is to get the feel of the structure, the expression and so on?

**Judy Cassab:** That's right. One can't really call it a sketch for the portrait, but it was enough for me. Then I decided on the colour I wanted the picture to be. That was rather an inner colour; it didn't mean that the person had a red face or a pale face; rather, it meant that I felt that the person is maybe a blue person or a yellow person.

Date of interview—1 January 1978

**James Gleeson:** A projection of an inner—

**Judy Cassab:** A projection of an inner colour. I don't paint the portraits on a white canvas. I make what one would almost call an abstract, on which I then superimpose the portrait on the colour which I have chosen. So that colour not only comes through the other colours, which are built on top, in layers; it also is a unifying rhythm which keeps background clothes and face together.

**James Gleeson:** I see. While we're on the subject of portraiture, Judy, who are perhaps the most interesting subjects you have painted?

**Judy Cassab:** I always thought that other painters were the most interesting subjects.

**James Gleeson:** Because you're on the same wavelength?

**Judy Cassab:** We are on the same wavelength, and that's very important. I have painted quite a number of fellow painters...

**James Gleeson:** I know—Orban, Olsen—

**Judy Cassab:** Orban I painted five times. Olsen I painted twice. Rapotec I painted twice.

**James Gleeson:** What other artists?

**Judy Cassab:** Margo Lewers, Tom Gleghorn, Marea Gazzard, Louis James, Nancy Borlase, Lloyd Rees and several others. And I keep painting them. I would like to have a much larger number of portraits of artists and have an exhibition one day.

**James Gleeson:** That would be a fascinating exhibition.

**Judy Cassab:** I think so.

**James Gleeson:** Judy, in regard to official portraiture, I remember travelling on the *Oriana* and the portrait of Princess Alexandra. It was a very beautiful portrait.

**Judy Cassab:** Thank you. This was one of those things where people say—and I also say—how lucky I was. What led to that was when I went back to England. I had my first one-man show in 1959 at the Crane Kalman gallery, and one of the paintings, the contemporary head of a woman, was bought by one of the directors of the Orient Line. He took it to the office and showed it to Sir Colin Anderson, who was the chairman of the Orient Line, but also of the Tate Gallery. He said, 'I like this. If this girl could get a likeness, she would be right to paint Princess Alexandra for the ship'. They took the trouble to go back to the Crane Kalman gallery, where I had a scrapbook with reproductions of portraits I had

Date of interview—1 January 1978

done in England. They saw that I could get a likeness and they gave me the commission. I wasn't allowed to talk about it for six months, so when I came back to Australia and almost choked on it. Then I had a very strange letter, which said, 'Her Majesty The Queen has given you the yellow drawing room in Buckingham Palace as your studio'. It was ridiculous—they asked me how many sittings, and whether I was I sure I would be out of there by 22 April. I said, 'Yes, I hope so.' They said, 'Because on the 23rd General de Gaulle is moving in'. Looking at it from the little town in Hungary at this whole scene with the palace—

**James Gleeson:** This was in Buckingham Palace?

**Judy Cassab:** That was in Buckingham Palace. Princess Alexandra came every day and changed and posed for me. She was infinitely patient and full of good will, saying, 'Don't worry if you don't finish it. I will come up to the office of Orient Line and continue sitting for you'. But I did finish it.

**James Gleeson:** Good. That was a very important portrait. What other major portraits can you remember?

**Judy Cassab:** The other interesting commission was a year later, when the government commissioned me to paint the portrait of Queen Sirikit of Thailand. That was also a very intimidating experience. At that time I think it took 15 hours to fly to Bangkok—still too fast—to find oneself in a palace where they brought the tea in on their knees and they opened the door for her on their knees. The master of the household was there, and I asked to see my studio before I started the portrait, so he took me. I saw that the dais was on the wrong spot and I said, 'Could we please push it?' He said, 'Of course'. I started toward the dais, and he said, 'No, no', and he clapped and the servants came in and pushed it. I asked him to sit down in the chair, where my canvas would not cast a shadow on Her Majesty. He said, 'No, no', and the servants came in and took the chair off and put another chair on—because, although he was a prince, he was not supposed to sit in the same chair. I found that very intimidating.

**James Gleeson:** I can imagine.

**Judy Cassab:** The next day she came in, really beautiful, and she said, 'Miss Cassab, can I listen to the radio?' and I said, 'No, Your Majesty'. It was quite strange.

**James Gleeson:** What happened to that portrait? Is it in Bangkok?

**Judy Cassab:** The portrait was first flown back to Sydney for me to finish, which was lucky because I got the idea while I was painting it that I would like to cover it with gold leaf, because there is so much gold leaf in her surroundings and also in Bangkok. The stone rubbings from the temple are, hardly noticeably, in my background, which I then finished in Sydney. I brought home a lot of gold leaf

Date of interview—1 January 1978

and, after I pasted it on, I used sandpaper and a knife to get it off so that the picture would look like an old icon. It was then flown to Canberra and exhibited in King's Hall for one day because Mr Menzies gave me the commission and he wanted to exhibit it. It is now hanging in the Royal Palace in Bangkok.

**James Gleeson:** That's a marvellous story. But, Judy, your main fame is your other work. I know that portraiture is something you have made a wide reputation from; you've won the Archibald how many times?

**Judy Cassab:** Twice.

**James Gleeson:** With?

**Judy Cassab:** Rapotec and Margo Lewers. Altogether I won eleven prizes with portraits. But, as interested as I am in portraits, I don't want to do too many. I would like it to remain fresh and a new experience whenever I start one. I am a very compulsive worker; I always have guilt feelings if I don't work. I start the day by going into the studio and scratching the palette, smelling turpentine, and having six paintings out because I always work on about twelve in different stages. I wait until one starts talking to me. The older I get the more I realise that the painting has to take over and it's only right if it tells me what to do.

**James Gleeson:** Judy, let us go from portraiture to your other work, which has undergone a series of changes, as I recall. Your techniques have changed, your interests have changed. Can you tell us something about that?

**Judy Cassab:** Jimmy, I have always envied those painters who have, let us say, a narrow field. They don't waver and they get more and more excellent in what they are doing. But I seem to have a different temperament. I'm an adventurer. Once I have an idea that I have worked on for three or four years, I get tired of it and I want to experiment. I love new materials. I consider the material as a vehicle that takes you into the unknown. I just follow what I feel like doing. One of the important changes in my painting was when I discovered, firstly, acrylics. I then proceeded to work on unprimed canvas, making my own foundation. I always had a leaning towards the mysterious, the ambiguous. I liked transparent layers, which became perhaps gooey when you did it with varnish and oil. They became crisp and like veils when I started doing them with acrylic. The other thing was that, as I didn't want to stretch the canvas and work on the vertical because the acrylic was too liquid, I didn't stretch it; I just put it down on the studio floor. Suddenly it started to form rivulets and pools, and then it dried. I wouldn't even say that I worked with accidents—I used them. I like that mottled surface and the layers of it. That also coincided with a phase when I was more interested in, let us say, the non-representational, simply because I thought one cannot live in the twentieth century and not have that experience.



Date of interview—1 January 1978

**James Gleeson:** Judy, in these two paintings that we have in our collection at the moment, one dated 1961 called *Corroboree cave* and one called *Retreat*, dated 1967, we can see the difference in medium and technique that you have just been talking about.

**Judy Cassab:** Yes. With the first one, perhaps I will start with a little story. This was when I started painting abstract or, let us say, not quite representational things—

**James Gleeson:** So it was the beginning of that—

**Judy Cassab:** It was the beginning of that period. Paul Haefliger told me, ‘If you are keen to explore this world in painting, why don’t you read *Zen and the art of archery*?’ I thought he was pulling my leg, but I read the book. It was written by Professor Herrigel, who was Swiss and, therefore, easier to understand than Suzuki. I read in the book how he went to Japan and how his Zen master told him where to put his right leg and his left leg, what to do with his right arm, how to aim and how to shoot. When he mastered it all, his Zen master said, ‘Now, don’t shoot; let it shoot’. The penny dropped, and I understood ‘let it paint’ for the first time. At that time I went to Alice Springs. The rocks fascinated me and became a constant subject to which I still return. The geological formations themselves were like abstracts. This painting is from that time.

**James Gleeson:** And it is based on an experience of Ayers Rock?

**Judy Cassab:** Of somewhere around Alice Springs.

**James Gleeson:** This is oil, and you’re still using a medium that you were brought up with, as it were.

**Judy Cassab:** Yes. The other painting is from the period where I was already painting with acrylics. Another discovery I made in the other painting was the juxtaposition of the textured surface and, beside it, the dense, plain, smooth area. That fascinated me for many years.

**James Gleeson:** Yes. This one, *Retreat*, is entirely abstract, isn’t it?

**Judy Cassab:** Yes.

**James Gleeson:** In your more recent work you’ve used a fairly similar technique, yet the figurative element is coming back into it.

**Judy Cassab:** Yes, the figurative element came back on its own. I was not consciously trying to get it back into the painting. It was just that I felt I had said enough of what I could say. I had my Hungarian upbringing, and the figures which came back. I found it a challenge to try and perhaps combine the

Date of interview—1 January 1978

experience of those years in abstract with figurative, which is very difficult. I don't know whether I have mastered it, but perhaps I will one day.

**James Gleeson:** This is painting with acrylic, using chance as an element, with the unprimed canvas flat on the ground. The more recent figurative ones you've used—

**Judy Cassab:** They are also always started on a horizontal, with very liquid water colour, which is the acrylic. When I think that I can't do more on it with acrylics, then I stretch it and put it up on the easel. I usually finish with oil paint, because I feel that I can mix more subtle colours with oil than I could with acrylic.

**James Gleeson:** I see. This one is purely acrylic, is it?

**Judy Cassab:** No. I always use oil on each one, eventually.

**James Gleeson:** I notice that we have described *Retreat* as an oil painting, but it is, in fact, acrylic and oil?

**Judy Cassab:** Acrylic and oil.

**James Gleeson:** That is important for us to know. It is a combination of technique, out of medium.

**Judy Cassab:** Yes. One never knows the balance. Sometimes there is more acrylic on it and just touches of oil paint, and sometimes the oil paint runs away with me and there is more oil on it. It is mottled, also, because as I prime it myself I do not put the primer on evenly. I leave bits of canvas out, which helps me to achieve this mottled surface that I aim at.

**James Gleeson:** What sort of priming do you use?

**Judy Cassab:** Gesso. It keeps the oil paint looking flat as well, and not shiny.

**James Gleeson:** Judy, is there anything else that we should talk about while we are here? You're still working on portraits?

**Judy Cassab:** I always work on portraits...

**James Gleeson:** You enjoy working—

**Judy Cassab:** I enjoy working on portraits. At the moment I am painting a portrait of Charles Blackman, which I'm going to show you. I am planning to paint more portraits of painters this year.

**James Gleeson:** You've also been very impressed by your experiences in the centre of Australia.

Date of interview—1 January 1978

**Judy Cassab:** Very much. The last exhibition was after an excursion to the Devil's Marbles; I do not think I can repeat that. Actually, I do not think I can repeat anything that I have done once. What I would like to do in the near future is a landscape with figures, because more and more figures creep in. They suddenly appear.

**James Gleeson:** Didn't you work for some time on themes from Bali or Indonesia?

**Judy Cassab:** Yes. Also we had a trip to New Guinea, where we were driving and hundreds of figures appeared on the road. I was just sitting there sketching quickly. At the end of the trip there were so many figures who were not sitting in chairs and wearing shoes but squatting on the ground and either nude or in some flowing robe, which made the figure something that could be part of the landscape. At least up till now it is not a rural figure at all, but just a human creature in the painting.

**James Gleeson:** Related in rhythms to the landscape?

**Judy Cassab:** Yes, to hills and to the landscape. I found that I could paint figures in Bali too, although what fascinated me in the beginning I had to get rid of in the end—like women carrying baskets, because it becomes illustrative and then you can't use it. Still, they move gracefully. There are models in abundance.

**James Gleeson:** I noticed in these works how the textures that you gave the figures themselves and the textures of their surroundings were closely related to one another, so that there seemed to be very little difference between the actual texture of flesh, figure or rock.

**Judy Cassab:** Yes, I aim to do that, and I'm glad it's coming through.

**James Gleeson:** Yes. It does. It gives a uniformity, a unity, to the surface of the painting and relates figure and landscape in a very intimate sort of way.

**Judy Cassab:** Yes. As one works, of course, sometimes the figure disappears, or almost disappears, and I can't force my will upon it. I just leave it as it happens, or as it wants to be.

**James Gleeson:** Judy, having seen some of your recent drawings, I think we ought to talk about those. In particular, the charcoal ones that you are doing on canvas and on paper seem to me to be quite original, and yet stemming out of your past work in a very interesting way.

**Judy Cassab:** I feel that it does. They really pour out. It is almost as if it is the result of a lot of groundwork which I have done, which may have been tortured or smelling of perspiration, which these don't. They can't because they have to be quick and fluid.

Date of interview—1 January 1978

**James Gleeson:** What fascinated me in those drawings was that they seem to combine a study of nature, obviously drawn from a visual experience, but were taken over the surface in a way that was quite abstract—they would read just as beautifully upside down or sideways because of the touch. The way in which the mark had been made on the surface was just beautiful in itself.

**Judy Cassab:** I am so glad, very happy about that.

**James Gleeson:** I hope you will continue to do some more of those because I think they are very exciting.

**Judy Cassab:** Yes, because I love to do them. The drawings you have seen are not the first version. I have to have at least two or three on smaller paper before them, in order to be able to make them as fluid and quick. They are not the first version; they are the last.

**James Gleeson:** I hope one day to see something on a really big scale—four by six feet, or something.

**Judy Cassab:** I haven't tried that yet but it may happen.

**James Gleeson:** Judy, I think they're very beautiful indeed.

**Judy Cassab:** Thank you.