

## **JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: TONY COLEING**

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Tony, to begin with, could we have some biographical information, when and where you were born, that sort of thing?

**TONY COLEING:** Yes, born in Warrnambool in Victoria in 1942. Spent a small part of my time there, then we moved up, I think, the North Coast of New South Wales for a while. I spent some of my schooling, and that's primary school, then back down to Maffra in Victoria. I went through high school there, four years. Then up to Sydney when I was about 15, National Art School for a couple of years, 15 to 17. For the next three years I just moved around, went to New Zealand for a year, up and down the coast just making some money, then went to Europe for five years, then back to Australia. That's basically where I've been apart from one trip out to Europe again for six months.

**JAMES GLEESON:** How did you become interested in sculpture? Any history of interest in the arts in the family, or did it just happen that way?

**TONY COLEING:** No particular interest from my family side of it. I think if there was any it would be on my mother's side. Her sort of sisters and things like that tended to be a little musical and amateur painters, that type of thing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What made you decide to go to art school?

**TONY COLEING:** It was one of the few things I was reasonable at at school.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You liked it?

**TONY COLEING:** I liked it, yes. It was just I liked that activity.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was it from the beginning an interest in sculpture rather than painting?

**TONY COLEING:** No, no. Painting, painting and drawing. I knew nothing about sculpture whatsoever until I returned from England. That was in 1968–69, thereabouts. I made a very positive move to myself that I would get out of painting, as I'd been painting solidly for five years in London.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Have any shows there?

**TONY COLEING:** No. I showed in a couple of group shows at the Whitechapel and the Royal Institute. I was very unsure of myself. I was very, very influenced by a number of people with my painting. I think towards the end I was starting to get more of myself out than anyone else, but I still wasn't too sure of it. That's why I made a very positive stand to take on sculpture, because it was an area

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that I knew nothing about at all, apart from making one or two very small objects in London. It was just a passing interest. The things that I did see in London that I have a vague memory of, I saw a large Picasso show at the Tate. I saw a couple of Corot shows which I thought were just absolute garbage. I had no understanding of those whatsoever. The only piece of his that did impress me, I think, was called *Prairie*. That was the only one that I had any relationship to, but at that stage I had no pretensions at all to go into sculpture. I was still very involved with painting.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Who were your teachers here in Sydney? You went to the East Sydney Tech?

**TONY COLEING:** East Sydney Tech. The one that I remember strongest was Passmore, John Passmore, who was very good. As far as I was concerned, he was very encouraging and he allowed quite a lot of freedom within his teaching. For that reason I found it good. He more tended towards the surreal type of work and I related to that quite strongly.

**JAMES GLEESON:** In London, any teachers there that—

**TONY COLEING:** No, no. I approached a couple of schools when I first got there. I had to be resident in London I think for maybe two years before I could get into one, so I just gave it a miss. But I regularly would visit shows every week for the whole time I was there. So I didn't miss very much.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No. But you didn't begin sculpture until you came back to Australia?

**TONY COLEING:** No, not at all. Not on any scale. I'd made one or two pieces of sculpture which I still have in London, and again they're starting to look fairly relevant to what I'm doing now because they were social comment things. I think it's starting to show up in all the things that I do, even back to my schooldays, that that's one of the areas that I've been most interested in.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It's been a consistent thing.

**TONY COLEING:** It's been very consistent, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You're not interested in that sort of formal thing that Corot was in to at all.

**TONY COLEING:** I went through that when I first came back. I approached it from a very naive point of view in as much as I knew nothing and I thought, well, therefore maybe I will come up with something different. I was very impressed again with the landscape when I got back. It was a landscape that I'd never looked at or appreciated. I'd had that long gap of five years. I went straight up to the country when I got back and I really found it pretty exciting and I related most of the sculpture that I'd done then very much to the countryside. I got together

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one or two shows of something. Then it was at somewhere around that point, '69–70, that I met Klippel and he said in his very nice fashion, 'Would you like to come around and have a look at a few of my drawings?', which was a very gentle put-down, I think, because I got through the first 10 or so and they just bowled me over. He was dealing with—

**JAMES GLEESON:** (inaudible).

**TONY COLEING:** Oh, they were. He was dealing with problems in the 1940's that I was trying to deal in going on very close to 1970. So that was a very good lesson to me. I thought, well, it's time then I didn't pursue this naive approach. I'd better do a little bit of study and approach it from a little bit better point of view. Which I did, I think. So again I was very aware that I was getting a certain amount of influences through my work. I think I worked through those very quickly and I think, say, out of the last sculptured large steel pieces, like the *To do with blues*, I think I was getting very much into my own area. With very little apart from the use of material, being steel, that had very much relationship to what other people were doing. But I also think that I was possibly falling into—it was starting to look a little bit safe, and so consequently if one looks through my things from, say, my *Broken pipe* series and that, which were a natural follow on from when I was throwing springs on the ground and making little heaps of springs and everything. It was just solidifying those and taking them as I saw it to a logical conclusion. But once they got into maquette size and then I could see the potential for them being large, to me it didn't seem any point in pursuing it more than making maybe six or so variations on that theme. One could remain quite comfortable for the rest of your life if you cared to pursue that. But I think I'd rather leave that line to someone else and just move on to something else. I think it'd end up just getting a little bit stale.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That big one in Bligh Street, isn't it?

**TONY COLEING:** O'Connell Street, Norwich Union. That was the only large one that I had made.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That was the climax of that period?

**TONY COLEING:** Well, the one that I was most happy with, I think, would have been the idea for—what was it called?—the one that I won the Flotta Lauro Prize with to go to Europe was called something like *Sculpture for a children's playground* or something. I think that was the best. That would potentially have been the best of the pieces if that one had been built large because it could be really used by children. It was called *Hide and seek*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Where is that?

**TONY COLEING:** The Art Gallery of New South Wales now own that maquette. Flotta Lauro closed down and they put all their works up for sale and the Art Gallery bought that at that sale.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. What other important ones from that period are around?

**TONY COLEING:** They're all maquettes that are left.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. The big one, the Norfolk one, is the only big one?

**TONY COLEING:** Norwich Union is the only large one that's been built. I had that much trouble with Transfield in having it built that I very much doubt whether I could go through that exercise, certainly with Transfield again. But it was just ridiculous. That's been the story of any commissions that I've ever been involved in and probably a number of others—a bit of politicking going on.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Tony, one of the things that stands out in my mind when I think back over your work is the range of materials you use. You've never stuck, say, to just one type of medium or even a narrow range of mediums.

**TONY COLEING:** No.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You explore all sorts of materials.

**TONY COLEING:** Yes. Well, I think I'd just get awfully stale and quite comfortable if I stayed in one area. That's just not in my nature. I don't think it matters in the long term and, of course, the example to look towards I think in recent times is Picasso.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Exactly.

**TONY COLEING:** I think he's a good model for anyone, just to show his versatility. I don't think it mattered whether he'd done six things in a day or whether he'd done one thing in a year, they equally were pretty impressive. If one looks at his range of sculpture, of which there's a very good sculpture book out on nearly all his works, you can just see his versatility just in that area alone, which is pretty impressive and I think it would be an eye opener to anyone. Right up till the time he died he was making beautiful etchings still. He still had the facility with his hands. I think it would be nice if everyone had that facility or be able to use it. I think it would equally benefit certainly Australian art if a few people drop their barriers a little bit and maybe tried out a few different ones too.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Tony, I think rightly or wrongly that your work is a kind of sculptural collage. You bring together so many things that are not related in normal life in order to make your point. Is that an accurate description of your work, do you think, or some of it?

**TONY COLEING:** It could be some of it. To me it seems awfully logical what I do. To other people I can quite understand that. Again, the best recent example would have been when I had a piece in the not this past Sydney Biennale but the one previous to that, which I think was the second one. I had a piece called *Bus*

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*stop* in there which was a multimedia piece using glass and bits of paper and lino and fish net and plaster and all variety of things—photographs. To me it was a very easy piece to read. Daniel Thomas came up to me at some stage—either I'd just set it up or before I'd set it up—and he asked me to explain it to him. I thought, well, if he was having trouble interpreting it I think probably the general public would have a hell of a lot more, because he's a very informed sort of person. So maybe your comment is fair. The way I see it, what I do is quite logical.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You start out with an idea that you have in mind to—

**TONY COLEING:** Very vague, but usually most of my works are very multi-layered works. They have a number of meanings. If there's one object sitting in there, which we might say a hammer or something, it might mean a home, it might mean a workshop, it might mean a hammer, it might mean destruction, it can mean a whole range of...

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

**TONY COLEING:** Associations within that one thing, and that's where it gets a little bit confusing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Tony, what have been your major exhibitions? When was your first show?

**TONY COLEING:** Gallery A Melbourne, I think would have been the first one. Max Hutchison was very supportive certainly of sculptors, if not artists, and I think he was a tremendous asset to Australia, well, certainly through the sixties and the early part of the seventies before he went to America. He was the only one at that stage who used to really listen to what other artists used to say and he was very quick off the mark to appreciate that. I had a show in Melbourne with him which was maybe 1969, it would be fairly close to it anyway.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It would be the first major—

**TONY COLEING:** After the Field show, I think. The Field show was good. Yes, that was good, that was good for me. But as a one-man show that particular show had a lot of inflatables in it, a lot of suspended works. I worked a lot with plastics. Plus it had a range of steel works in it as well, of which I think Canberra—actually they did, they purchased out of that show, which you don't have in that photograph there. You don't have any photographs of it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What was it like?

**TONY COLEING:** It was a wind piece. It was very fine. It was pipes and stainless steel rods. It was meant to be out in the wind and moving. It related very much to my first impressions of Australia when I came back, of the Australian landscape.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. We don't have either a card for that or a photograph of it.

**TONY COLEING:** Well, you own one, unless someone's put it in their pocket and have it in their room.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No. It often happens that our records are not—

**TONY COLEING:** Maybe there is absolutely no photograph of it. I don't even have a photograph of it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** How big was it?

**TONY COLEING:** I'm only guessing but I would think maybe it took up an area of say eight feet by eight feet or something, and by maybe six feet high, six or eight feet high.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It was bought from the—

**TONY COLEING:** From Gallery A in Melbourne at that particular show.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Sixty-nine?

**TONY COLEING:** Sixty-nine. Melbourne National Gallery also purchased from that show under Brian Finamore.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So that's one we're going to have to check up and find.

**TONY COLEING:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It must be down there, but we just haven't got it recorded.

**TONY COLEING:** Yes. It wasn't one of the better ones, I know, that I was particularly happy with, but never mind.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was it anything like this one (inaudible)?

**TONY COLEING:** No. No, no, it wasn't. It moved but it didn't move with the use of propellers as the wind construction does.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**TONY COLEING:** It moved just with spring steel wires. The one in the Melbourne National Gallery that they own, I'm quite happy with that as a piece. But they will not put it outside, which I'm not quite so happy with, where it really belongs.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. The one we've got is meant to be outside too?

**TONY COLEING:** Yes, it is.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** That was the first piece we bought then?

**TONY COLEING:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Tony, after that the only major one we've got of yours is *To do with blue*.

**TONY COLEING:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** But before we go on to that we've got photographs here and I don't how they've got into this folio. One called *FronDESCENCE*.

**TONY COLEING:** Now, *FronDESCENCE* was the first show in Melbourne. That is not *FronDESCENCE*. That's called *Wind construction*. Maybe that's where the mistake is. *FronDESCENCE* is the name of the piece, or that is the name of the show that the piece you own that we we're talking about previously came from. So maybe somewhere along the line the photographs got mixed up.

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

**TONY COLEING:** Because the photograph in here is called *Wind construction* which was in Mildura, 1970.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I'll just check that too. *Wind construction*.

**TONY COLEING:** That's never been called *FronDESCENCE*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Mildura, 1970.

**TONY COLEING:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, I remember it there quite well. But the one we've got is called *FronDESCENCE*?

**TONY COLEING:** *FronDESCENCE*. Well, it's part of that series that was called that. That was named by Max Hutchison. It wasn't a name that I gave it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, well, now this could be it. We have a card for it. Purchased from Gallery A in '69.

**TONY COLEING:** That's right. That's the one.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, but it's not the right photograph.

**TONY COLEING:** That's the wrong photograph in that folder.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Good. So that clears that up a little bit more satisfactorily. This one, which belonged to the Duckers and I remember seeing in their house at one stage. You said we don't own this.

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**TONY COLEING:** No. Well, not to my knowledge, unless that was purchased. Unless that particular piece was purchased privately from the Duckers or from Clive Evatt, as I understand he had it. He showed me a photograph of it at one stage. I would be very surprised if you owned that piece.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Now, in this photograph, it's badly photographed because those two central pieces that—

**TONY COLEING:** The two central pieces have absolutely nothing to do with that whatsoever.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It's just two pieces, the broken pipe—

**TONY COLEING:** The two steel piece, the broken pipe and the cylinders going up in the air with the curly piece of steel coming out the top, or the wavy piece of steel.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Now, the Ducker collection was only broken up two or three years ago, wasn't it?

**TONY COLEING:** Yes, I think so.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So this card which says that we bought something—

**TONY COLEING:** Well, I've got a feeling that the broken pipe referred to here, and going on the price, the price difference between these two is enormous, because the front one they had some ridiculous price of I think \$6,000 on it when Clive Evatt put it up.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So we could own (inaudible)?

**TONY COLEING:** But this one of \$450, from what I understand, it's one of my maquettes for *Broken pipe* series, it's a small piece that stands no more than 18 inches high, I would say, and the pipe is four inches in diameter. The colour I can't tell you because I don't know exactly which one it is. It's part of a series of six. Again, from my memory of it, it was purchased for one of those collections that either travel or they go into lodges or they do something like that. They go into lending collection. That's what I understand about it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. It's still part of the National Collection.

**TONY COLEING:** Yes, but that's the wrong photograph for that card.

**JAMES GLEESON:** For that card. So, in fact, we do own three pieces of sculpture.

**TONY COLEING:** I believe that you do own that *Broken pipe*.



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**JAMES GLEESON:** But those are the wrong photographs.

**TONY COLEING:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So the only photograph we have that's right is the one for *To do with blue*.

**TONY COLEING:** That's right. Yes. Right. That's correct.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Now the first time I saw that was in an exhibition in—

**TONY COLEING:** Canberra, '75.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Seventy-five, across the lake.

**TONY COLEING:** That's right.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The second time I saw it was in—

**TONY COLEING:** Mildura.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Mildura.

**TONY COLEING:** The Sculpture Scape.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Did we own it by the time it went to Mildura?

**TONY COLEING:** No, I think it was purchased after Mildura, or during Mildura.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Watters in '75.

**TONY COLEING:** Well, that's possible. That's possible. I didn't know that. I thought that it was purchased in Mildura. But that could be easy my mistake. I'm pretty bad on things like that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, it could have been through the agency of Frank Watters in Mildura.

**TONY COLEING:** It could have. It could have quite easily, yes. That piece was built with the aid of a grant that I got from the Visual Arts Board. It must have been 1974, I suppose, or '75. It's only half scale. In fact, my grant money didn't allow me to build it to full scale.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You intended it to be twice that size.

**TONY COLEING:** I intended it to be twice that size. If I had the opportunity to build one again it would go to its proper height, depending on the sculpture. But that one would have been about 50 feet high, about twice the size of that. As you'll realise, this sculpture works very much better when it's viewed from below.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** As we saw it in Mildura?

**TONY COLEING:** As you saw it in Mildura. It worked to a certain degree in Canberra, but I don't think as well as I would have liked it. Again, from down by the lake was the best view that I liked of it and again that was from underneath it. By increasing its size it would obviously do the things that I wanted it to do without it going on a hill. If that gets erected in Canberra at the Canberra National Gallery I would like, if it was at all possible, to have it raised in order to give—

**JAMES GLEESON:** On a hillside?

**TONY COLEING:** Either on a hill or build an artificial stand and surround that with earth or something or other. But get it up to some sort of height so it can be viewed a bit from underneath.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Obviously those shapes that are suspended are cloud like.

**TONY COLEING:** No. The whole series called *To do with blue*, which had been going for quite a number of years. It's again one of those when I talk about multi-layered type of sculptures, when I just say to do with blue that is a very vague thing to do with blue. To do with blue could be the sky, the water, or any of those shapes related to what might come out of that but something again, very gentle, serene I suppose. not very much violence in them. Also a bit to do with man made structures entering into those environments. Again they could be wharves, they could be buildings, they could be again anything related to water, sky, but to do with blue and blue only being very loose again for the immediate colour that you relate to with sky and water.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Tony, now ideally talking about positions for displaying it, how high do you think that top of the piece should be above eye level? A hundred feet?

**TONY COLEING:** For the purposes of this particular piece?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**TONY COLEING:** No, nowhere near it. This sculpture at the moment is I think about 21, no more than 24 feet high. It covers an area of maybe 20 feet by 20 feet. Thereabouts anyway. I would like it raised maybe another 8 to 10 feet. It doesn't need to be terribly high but you do need to be able to walk up to it and look up underneath it more than bring the whole thing in at eye level. It's a very much underneath sort of piece.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Well, I think it looked absolutely at its best when you were down under the river bank at Mildura and looked up and saw it against the sky.

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**TONY COLEING:** It was silhouetted against the sky and hence the colours, they're very pale colours and I find the colour thing very hard to do on a piece like that. Or any sculpture I find it quite hard to do colour. But I wanted the whole thing just to fade off into the distance a bit, which I think it did. It did it probably better in Canberra than Mildura. But, no, I think in Mildura it worked too.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well now, suppose one could find a space in the sculpture garden that had a hillock, say, 20 feet high, and it was placed on top of that so that you could see it from above, but also close enough to the lake so that, say, from windows in the gallery you could see it against the lake.

**TONY COLEING:** I think that would probably do, yes. I mean, I would think that if it gets around to that point where one does want it erected, I personally would like to come down and maybe just have a look, if that was at all possible.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, there's no reason why you shouldn't. In fact, I suggest that you come down, talk to Jim about having a look at the layout of the garden. He's got now pretty detailed plans well advanced. It might be a good idea to talk to him now and discuss the logical place and best place for it.

**TONY COLEING:** Yes, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** One thing occurs to me, Tony. It is painted. Now, how will that paint stand up to time?

**TONY COLEING:** It's a paint that I've been using for many years. It's from Bessey Chemicals, a paint firm in Sydney here. They do specialist paint for very specialised purposes and I'm given to understand—and I have no reason to doubt it—that it will last indefinitely. I went into it in some detail at one stage, as to the fading of colour given extreme conditions of heat and cold. I can only go on what they say, but they guarantee their paint very, very thoroughly to withstand quite extreme conditions. I can only go on their recommendation. I am quite prepared to go down and repaint that piece and do all the necessary things to make it look its best.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You feel that it should be kept at that level. That if something did happen to the paint it wouldn't read as well as it does when it's properly painted.

**TONY COLEING:** No. Again, as I say, I've got a lot of faith in the paint as long as it's not badly abused. The same as anything. I have no reason to doubt that it will remain as it was painted for quite a number of years. I'd be quite prepared to come down and paint it at any stage if it needs it, repaint it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It might be a good idea for you to make a note to go into the file on what paint you did use, and with our coloured photographs, if at any time in the future, say 50 or 100 years from now, the paint does show signs of deteriorating, it could be restored using the same paint, as close as possible.

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**TONY COLEING:** Yes. I think if it was put in the hands of a restorer or under the direction of a restorer or someone who was familiar with the way I work a little bit, or they can get it off tapes, that they would be able to put their own interpretation on it probably fairly easily, and that wouldn't bother me in the slightest.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It wouldn't?

**TONY COLEING:** No. I think that someone else could do it quite successfully, because it's basically all just broken up into various patterns going from dark to pale. Well, top to bottom, yes. So it's a very gradated colour range and with very soft colours. I don't think it would be very difficult for someone to do it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No. But you do feel that it should be kept up and not allowed to sort of age.

**TONY COLEING:** I'd prefer it not to. I don't expect that it will, but I would certainly prefer it not to.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Good. Now, any other points about *To do with blue* and its exhibition that we should talk about?

**TONY COLEING:** No. The only thing, as I say, it's not a piece that I'm a 100 per cent happy about because it's not full sized. I feel it's still quite an experiment. Again, wishful thinking, given the money, the time, and all that sort of thing, at some point, although that's fast running out, I would like to at least complete one full size before the whole thing does just fade away into the distance. But whether or not that will ever be realised, I have no idea, because prices are just getting very prohibitive to do any of that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Tony, you mentioned raising it up. You didn't mean that it could go on a pedestal or a block, did you?

**TONY COLEING:** It could to all intents and purposes but that would have to be disguised as a hill. I'd prefer it to be on a piece of the natural landscape or manmade landscape but as long as it read as landscape rather than up on a block of concrete or anything.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**TONY COLEING:** Sure.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Sure, okay. Well, can we look at now at some of the drawings or prints relating *To do with blue*?

**TONY COLEING:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** There are a series of them.

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**TONY COLEING:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** We have four, three of which we have photographs for.

**TONY COLEING:** Yes. As anyone looking at them would see, they're all done quite similar. They're constructions, they're quite similar to the piece that you own, the piece of sculpture that you own. They're just a series of screen prints that I was just working out some ideas on and just getting it down as a record because I'm not too good at keeping records. They're as much for my reference as being just a pictorial record anyway. I mean, I enjoy printing, so it's just really they are just a record.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Did they precede the sculpture or come after it?

**TONY COLEING:** I don't know. Let's have a look. Nineteen seventy-five. They must have obviously been around the same time. I usually don't work from drawings. I'd only be guessing and say it's quite conceivable that they came after the sculpture.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You don't normally work from a drawing?

**TONY COLEING:** No, not at all.

**JAMES GLEESON:** But you do sometimes from maquettes?

**TONY COLEING:** Work from maquettes?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**TONY COLEING:** This particular piece that you own, yes. They very definitely have to come off, I made a rough one, and then I had to make a proper scale maquette so it could go into the steel works, where it was built in Kempsey, up the North Coast. They have to have quite detailed maquette or something that they can work off and make their engineering drawings from. Because the thing is, it's not a complex engineering job but it does require a certain amount of engineering to make the whole thing fit together and make it stand up straight.

**JAMES GLEESON:** These are timber, aren't they?

**TONY COLEING:** All steel.

**JAMES GLEESON:** All steel?

**TONY COLEING:** No timber in it at all.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. Tony, working from maquettes is not your ordinary practice, is it? Do all these things that you do come from maquettes? Or is it only

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when you have to have them engineered, someone else working on them, that you make a detailed maquette?

**TONY COLEING:** That's the only time I make a detailed maquette. Well, in the past—and I'm certainly not doing it anywhere now as near as what I used to—I would always just make small sculptures, as I would have called them. You could call them maquettes, things that I felt that could be scaled up at a later date. But the way that I work, unless you really think about it properly, you can't just scale up from any piece of steel or anything you stick together with your welder. It doesn't work engineering-wise like that. So usually it's the idea that comes up first, and it will be put together. If there's any possibility of it being built to any scale, to size, then you consult. Well, the way I've done it, I've consulted a construction engineer and he'll work out more exactly the details either from that or get me to re-build a new one. But working very closely to the one that I've just made, but just getting it into some scale so it can be scaled up. You can't go wrong if you have a scale model.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, No. Well, of course, when it goes out of your hands and someone else is involved, you have to have that precise model.

**TONY COLEING:** Oh, you have to have the precision; there's no question about that. Because once it goes into a yard, into an engineering yard, unless you have a very good relationship with that particular yard, you can't work in there because of union rules. You get yourself a little bit caught like that. So you have, to all intents and purposes, lost a lot of control over it. With this piece I was lucky. In the yard that built it for me, because they did take the time, they were quite prepared to let me play with the crane, I wasn't physically driving it, but they would lift a piece up and down if I didn't like it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This was in Kempsey?

**TONY COLEING:** In Kempsey.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What was the name of the firm?

**TONY COLEING:** I can't remember.

**JAMES GLEESON:** But it's good to have had that experience (inaudible).

**TONY COLEING:** Absolutely. I mean, I could not get that satisfaction in Sydney. I presented that maquette to one person here in Sydney, to see if that particular sculpture could be made here. It took them six weeks to tell me no, it couldn't be made for whatever price it happened to be. I took it up to Kempsey and I showed it to the particular steel works up there and he looked at it and he said, 'Hmm, hmm, when do you want it?'. I told him the particular date that I wanted it on and he had it made ready to a T. It took them six weeks, I think, of work. Well, it kept them in business and it got my sculpture. It was good.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** The multi-media ones, of course, obviously don't grow from drawings or maquettes.

**TONY COLEING:** No, no. They're very difficult. The last two pieces that I've made—well, I've made a number of them. For the Sydney Biennale piece, that took me two years in total to finish that piece and I'm not 100 per cent sure or not even anywhere near 100 per cent sure it was finished when it went into the Sydney Biennale. I think they're just the type of pieces that you could probably work on for 20 years, and maybe still not resolve them. But it got to a point where I was fairly happy to put it out and have a look at it outside of the studio and I think it worked to the degree that it was there at that particular stage. There's been a few of those type of works. They seem to take a couple of years but equally, as I say, unless I'm pushed into it, maybe they'd take 20 years, I don't know, that's difficult.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Social criticism of one sort or another has been a pretty constant factor in your work, hasn't it?

**TONY COLEING:** Yes, yes. Yes, it is.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You use it sometimes very light heartedly, you know, some of it is very amusing and some of it is very biting, very bitter.

**TONY COLEING:** Yes. I think that possibly even the amusing ones probably deep down there have a little bit of sarcasm in them as well, which is probably not quite as nice as what the object might appear. But, yes, I've got a funny sense of humour sometimes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It's, I think, a fairly rare thing for a sculptor to have this sense of social criticism in his work. A few have. Someone like Daumier for instance.

**TONY COLEING:** Goya, Goya did very strongly. There's been any number. Bosch.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, yes, as painters. Yes, certainly.

**TONY COLEING:** As painters.

**JAMES GLEESON:** But in sculpture it's not a common thing, is it?

**TONY COLEING:** No, I suppose that the main movement is obviously the Dada movement that as a movement went through it very strongly. There appears to be a few sort of odd groups in America that are doing it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, fantastic realists.

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**TONY COLEING:** Fantastic realists are the group of—I don't know what you call them—architects that are pulling the sides out of supermarkets and physically making those supermarkets look as though they're falling down. I think those type of things, it's going through in a certain way and I don't see any reason why it shouldn't go through in art as it does go through in everyday life very much via newspapers and things like that where you can never get the truth.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It's the antithesis of the sort of formalist tendencies that, you know, Corot and people like that put emphasis on.

**TONY COLEING:** Yes. Well, they're on about something else.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**TONY COLEING:** It's a bit like when I did return from England and I hadn't been up to the National Art School. Well, when I was up there I remember John Bell used to model for sculptors. From memory, they cut their sculpture out of either plaster or marble or something like that. The only change I could see is that they'd moved into some steel. I've made a few suggestions around a few art schools that maybe they should just throw all the steel out one year and just give it a try with nothing and just use their own resources. Maybe we'd break a lot of this tradition of follow-on sculpture from somewhere else which has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with Australia. I believe, and I'm very strong on this, that all the movements that happen overseas, they happen because of the particular environment that they're in. It can only really make sense to that environment and to the people involved in it. It gets a lot of promotion, they've got a lot of backup. I think if people took from Australia a little bit more and from the things that were around them then we might get something worthwhile out of it. Well, I'll never waiver from that one.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no. Now, about the graphics. You say you're very interested in graphics. Where did you learn about—they're screen prints mostly, aren't they?

**TONY COLEING:** The ones that you have, you've got a number of lithographs and a number of screen prints. I also do etching and photography. I like the whole idea of mass production. I mean, that's part of the thing. I like the idea of technology. It really doesn't bother me, I don't think, a great deal to be trying to get as much of my work out to the mass of people, because I know the mass of people don't care anyway, nor do they buy. I like the activity of printing as much as creating the image. Well, silkscreen printing is quite restrictive. There's only a certain amount of things you can do with it. You don't have the freedom in silkscreen that you do, for instance, in lithography where you can put down washers or you can reproduce lines pretty near exact as you draw them. Certain printing methods have certain things, advantages over each other. I don't think anyone is better than another, they're just different.



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**JAMES GLEESON:** Where did you study these techniques?

**TONY COLEING:** I never studied them, I just picked them up myself.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Did you? Where did you work, where did you get the presses?

**TONY COLEING:** I made all me own gear for silk-screening.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Did you?

**TONY COLEING:** And printed them all on my own, apart from the ones where I've worked with people. Again, that's always been at my place when they've visited me. Apart from the gallery shed one where I was just down from the country at that stage and we borrowed someone's place to do that. The etching, I don't own an etching press. You don't own any etchings, I don't think, anyway of mine.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no, we don't.

**TONY COLEING:** But because of the equipment I do them external with people that I know who own presses. The lithography was when Max Hutchison had Gallery A print shop set up. I was about the last person through there. Bobby Brown was the master printer at that stage. I went through with Bruce Petty, I think. I think we were the last two through that place before it closed down. I think the economics of running it were just too much for Gallery A.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Janet Dawson wasn't there then?

**TONY COLEING:** No. Janet Dawson had taught what she knew, I gathered, to Bobby Brown. She was out of it, anyway.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**TONY COLEING:** To all intents and purposes. Bobby Brown was a very good printer, I might add.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The examples that you did in collaboration with other artists, Bruce Latimer and Gary Shead, they're the only two artists you've worked with?

**TONY COLEING:** No. Well, how you view Gary Catalano, I don't know, but I did a print with Gary Catalano. Robyn Wallace-Crabbe.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, of course. Yes, we've got one of those, yes.

**TONY COLEING:** Bruce Latimer, Gary Shead. I think that's all.

**JAMES GLEESON:** How does it work when you're working with (inaudible)? Is it like the Surrealists exquisite corpses, you each do (inaudible)?

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**TONY COLEING:** It's very difficult. Yes, we do. Three of those prints I think were done up in the country. They were done very soon after the people arrived, so they still had the city very strongly in their mind. I tried to just suggest that maybe they relate themselves to the city or the experience that they've just arrived at and I would work from my known experience of the city and my country thing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Tony, we were talking about the works that you did in collaboration with other artists. Could you tell us a bit more about how that worked?

**TONY COLEING:** Yes. Just to recap what I was saying. It was done in the country when I was living on the North Coast of New South Wales for three years or so. It was trying to relate their experience of the country, a very direct one. There was no guidelines really set down, it was just a suggestion. I found Gary Catalano, who really has no experience at all really of working with anyone, I found that quite difficult. Bruce Latimer's one we had quite a job with. For a number of reasons, it's quite a difficult thing to do, to work with someone else.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It must be.

**TONY COLEING:** As you'll appreciate. But still, I think for those reasons that you stand a chance of maybe getting out something that you may never normally get out. That's part of the reason that I persevere. I do all the printing on those things, usually if the person has to go very quickly I work off a drawing that they've done, or something like that. Or in the case of Bruce Latimer, he helped me print them. Robin Wallace-Crabbe didn't. I printed all those myself. The Gary Shead one we both worked together very hard on that. The one with Gary Shead there was very little problem with. No, we done the drawings. I printed that myself up the coast. That was very much as a result of a trip to a Greek restaurant. It's called *What's on at the Greeks tonight*, I think. It was just as a result of visiting that particular Greek restaurant and a few of the impressions that were given.

**JAMES GLEESON:** We've got a title *Something strange at the Greek restaurant*.

**TONY COLEING:** Ah, right, that's right. That would be correct, yes. I've been working for a while with Geoff Proud trying to get out a print, but so far we haven't succeeded. But we'll persevere, we'll get something out. I've still been doing a number of prints but not in collaboration with anyone in the last couple of years.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It's not a technique that the Surrealists use where you don't know what the other artist has done?

**TONY COLEING:** No, not at all.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, it's not that technique.

**TONY COLEING:** No.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** You work in real collaboration?

**TONY COLEING:** In as much as the two artists work are down on the one piece of paper. Quite often the suggestions that have been given, as those little guidelines that I mentioned before, have not been particularly adhered to. In the case of Gary Shead's one, the majority of the work on the Gary Shead one is mine. He just put in, from memory, a pink woman sitting, who looked quite ghost-like, just sitting maybe at one of the tables or something. I think apart from that, I think I done the majority of the work on that. I'm trying to recall the events that happened. Maybe I sent down, or he saw my drawing and he sent up as much as he felt he was going to do on it. So I didn't know really what was coming out of that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. But he actually did the drawing on to the—was it a screen or plate?

**TONY COLEING:** A screen-print?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Screen print.

**TONY COLEING:** Yes, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So it's an actual factual two hands job.

**TONY COLEING:** Yes, it is. Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Good. Well, now I think that pretty well takes us to the end of it. The other Gary Shead one is *May I have your money now please, as I may be busy later*.

**TONY COLEING:** Yes. That's right. That's again a visit to a restaurant and everything that went on around that particular time.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**TONY COLEING:** That was a Chinese restaurant though.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, while we're still on the joint ones—

**TONY COLEING:** The one with Robin Wallace-Crabbe, if they look at it and they know Robin Wallace-Crabbe's paintings, they'll see that there is a colour key on here which is very difficult to do with a screen. It's numbered, I think, 1 through till 10, with hands or fingers coming in onto that colour key. If anyone knows Robin's particular paintings, that colour key thing relates very strongly to his paintings. It's fairly unmistakable as to who would have done it, you know, if one knows his work.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** His work. Yes. *You never need to sail alone with your surf cat class.*

**TONY COLEING:** That's right. That's Robin's title, he titled that. That also relates, the parts that I did on that or some parts of that. We caught—well, we didn't pull it out of the water—this big oar-fish that we found on the beach, which was a very deep sea fish and quite a strange one to find. It's flat, just about flat, silver, and it was eight to ten feet long by about a foot deep, I think.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Good lord!

**TONY COLEING:** Very peculiar looking fish that we found.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Is this it?

**TONY COLEING:** That's it, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This wriggling shape that goes across the (inaudible).

**TONY COLEING:** Yes. We quite often have a little joke about Mr Whiteley, and Robin has got a lovely sense of humour. It says something like, 'This person has just fallen off a boat', and it goes through something saying 'I'm not bitter', and it's got the big W somewhere written there, which means about Mr Whiteley and so on. There's a little bit of humour in there as well.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Now, we'll (inaudible).

**TONY COLEING:** Bruce Latimer print.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**TONY COLEING:** That was done at Christmas time. Hence there's a Father Christmas sinking on the horizon there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah yes, yes. Going down in stages.

**TONY COLEING:** He's going down into the water. On the right hand side of the print is a drawing of my studio that I had up the coast with Trial Bay Jail in the background. It has Sydney Harbour Bridge on the left-hand side of the print with a snake shape coming out of it, going towards the studio which is again a road. On that road, it's not very noticeable in this photograph but there are a whole lot of caravans, cars. Bruce Latimer rode his motorbike up to South West Rocks and he's coming out of the snake's mouth.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The snake's mouth.

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**TONY COLEING:** I'm sitting up in the gum tree. My studio I built around the gum-tree, in fact, it's growing up through the veranda. I'm sitting up in the tree with a fishing rod.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And what looks like a shark.

**TONY COLEING:** Yes. That's just being more or less the sort of symbol of me and the country greeting, I suppose, the bloke from the city with his motorbike.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Now, these are by yourself.

**TONY COLEING:** Yes, they're myself. That's a little series.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The deflower machine.

**TONY COLEING:** The deflower, it's a play on words, a play on sexual themes. It was taken from a photograph that I found somewhere, I can't remember where. This man either propagated or found this enormous flower from Sumatra, I think. The flower stands about five or six feet high. I used that in a variety of ways and related it very much to, oh, just everyday things, just deflowering and words that are—just put it into a sexual thing with this funny, using his image—

**JAMES GLEESON:** As part of the—

**TONY COLEING:** As part of the whole thing. Him looking over it. It was just maybe a little bit of a fantasy as to what this man thought and why he went into worrying about flowers like this, and I just made little machines out of it and things like that. That follows through the series, I think. You'll probably find on this particular print, I left all the details of this particular flower and who the man was is on that print.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. Oh, yes. This central part is—

**TONY COLEING:** That's in fact the size of the flower with him standing next to it, and it's called the gigantic Arum. Yes, it does, it comes from Sumatra, it's a native to Sumatra. But, anyway, it reads on this particular print.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You have some of your *To do with blue* shapes.

**TONY COLEING:** Yes, there's some *To do with blue* shapes tied up with it, and that's partly to do with me, which is fairly unmistakable Coleing shapes. In fact, you can't see it on this photograph, but there's a figure sitting on top of that phallic shape there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, yes, just vaguely.

**TONY COLEING:** It's only vaguely there with that photograph. No, I don't think there's much more I can say.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Good. Now, there's some lithographs, are these?

**TONY COLEING:** Early lithographs, again done with Gallery A in the Gallery A print shop. They were four little studies for sculpture using springs

**JAMES GLEESON:** Springs.

**TONY COLEING:** Springs set in steel. They were the sort of very early ones of, well, before the *Broken pipe* themes. So this is what the *Broken pipe* themes grew out of. The one that has obviously a block of concrete with some springs coming out of it and some spring steel wire. That spring steel wire again related to the early sculptures using the wind and they were outside things and tying the springs up. any movement that were given by the wind, a natural movement to a man-made material.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You never did those on a big scale?

**TONY COLEING:** No I never did. Apart from, well, the one that you own which sort of comes into this one more, but with spring steel coming out of it. So I don't know what you relate that to, maybe creepers or plant shapes or anything. You can relate it to any number of things. So that does relate quite strongly to the sculpture that was purchased from Gallery A in 1969.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That one seems to be different again.

**TONY COLEING:** Oh, yes. Again, the four prints were done on the one plate. It was printed on one piece of paper and cut into four. They were very separate.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**TONY COLEING:** They were very separate ideas, but they were ideas that were probably all drawn in the one day on the one plate and printed on one piece of paper and the paper was then cut.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So all those were all from the one block?

**TONY COLEING:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What sort of block did you use?

**TONY COLEING:** It was a zinc plate.

**JAMES GLEESON:** A zinc plate.

**TONY COLEING:** Yes, it wasn't on the stone. That's not used very much now at all.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no. Well, Tony, I think that covers it pretty well. Anything else you would like to add?

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**TONY COLEING:** Oh, my God. No, I'd probably be libellous. No, apart from I would like to add that the couple of experiences that I've had, the very strong ones, and I think they're good lessons for anyone if one can ever get someone like Klippel, who was a very good influence for me, inasmuch as it's always well worth while taking notice of someone who does happen to know a bit more than you or has studied a particular thing that you might be working on, if you can find that person. That was a very, very good lesson to me. There was one previous to that when I first went to London. I knew nothing about—well, I knew nothing about nothing hardly. I thought I knew about painting until I started to look what was up on the walls in London. I couldn't understand it. I thought it was all pretty rat-shit. I started to paint as soon as I got there. There was quite a group of people there at that stage. Amongst them Whiteley, McGillick, Rollin Schlicht, Roy Harper, Vernon Treweeke, Mick Johnson, Noel Dunn. There was quite a group all living in the Ladbroke Grove area. We used to visit each other quite regularly and give each other some fairly savage criticism of each other's work. At that stage Vernon Treweeke, well, he was again—just as an instance of a lesson that can happen to someone. I was doing these particular paintings and I thought I'd done a pretty good days work. Vernon Treweeke came around for a criticism session and he just walked straight into me and he picked up a paint brush and put it right through the work that I'd just been working.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's pretty savage criticism.

**TONY COLEING:** It was a very good lesson. He just said, 'You've got to loosen up a little bit'. Luckily I could take it. I was a little obviously disappointed to begin with. But it opened my eyes. I got out then and really looked and tried to understand. It took me a year or two to even begin to understand what people in Europe were on about at that particular time. I think if that sort of criticism can possibly go on still, I think it can be of benefit to a lot of people. That's about all I could say.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Thank you very much, Tony.