

JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: SALI HERMAN

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JAMES GLEESON: James Gleeson talking to Sali Herman on 23 November? Twenty-third?

SALI HERMAN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Nineteen seventy-eight.

SALI HERMAN: (inaudible) 23rd.

JAMES GLEESON: Twenty-third.

SALI HERMAN: That's the anniversary of my wife's death, I'm afraid.

JAMES GLEESON: Twenty-third. Yes, I remember you saying.

SALI HERMAN: A sad day and very happy day that you're coming.

JAMES GLEESON: Thank you, Sali.

SALI HERMAN: Yes, the counter-action, the counter-point.

JAMES GLEESON: We'll talk about all that Paulette's (inaudible).

SALI HERMAN: Yes, Paulette, my wife's death.

JAMES GLEESON: We'll talk about Paulette's portrait presently.

SALI HERMAN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: But can we begin with *House on the hill*, which is one of your most famous paintings.

SALI HERMAN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, we have it as oil on board 1948. Correct date?

SALI HERMAN: It would most likely be correct, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: We bought it from Joseph Brown in '77.

SALI HERMAN: That I don't know.

JAMES GLEESON: It used to belong to Kym Bonython.

SALI HERMAN: Yes. I sold it to Kym Bonython, who came to my place in Wild Street one evening after dinner. That was a time when I was pretty hard up. He

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said, 'Sali, I've seen that painting. Would you sell it to me? I would like to have it for my private collection. I shall never sell it but I would be happy to have it'. I was glad for a hundred quid I asked him for.

JAMES GLEESON: Good lord. Where had he seen it? Where was it exhibited?

SALI HERMAN: I don't remember where he saw it. It may have been shown at the Macquarie Galleries or somewhere there. This I can't say with certainty. But anyway, he came and asked me for that specific painting, *The house on the hill*.

JAMES GLEESON: Is it Rushcutter's Bay or Paddington?

SALI HERMAN: No, no. That is just a little road behind the Edgecliff Post Office.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, is it?

SALI HERMAN: Still there.

JAMES GLEESON: Is it still there?

SALI HERMAN: Still there. For anybody who wants to see and make sure it is the right thing I painted.

JAMES GLEESON: Go on, behind the Edgecliff Post Office.

SALI HERMAN: There's a little lane going from the post office to the left, overlooking Paddington, and there it is. Not far away was the studio of Lyndon Dadswell.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SALI HERMAN: Which I also painted, you see.

JAMES GLEESON: It wasn't later on an antique shop or something?

SALI HERMAN: No, no. That was not.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

SALI HERMAN: No. It was actually, I think, a store, a general store. The bloke I painted there in the corner was sitting there. I thought it was a wonderful subject, because we had that upright, almost a gothical style painting, with the whole of Sydney as a background.

JAMES GLEESON: The bridge in the distance.

SALI HERMAN: Yes, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: The view of the city.

SALI HERMAN: I mean, I was not interested just in historical buildings or that sort of thing.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

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SALI HERMAN: My subjects I like because they make good paintings, as far as I'm concerned. My philosophy in a painting is colour, texture, design, spiritual content, emotional content. I'm not happy just with one of these particular things. I like them all together.

JAMES GLEESON: Well this, I think, is one of the classic Herman's, one of the important ones.

SALI HERMAN: Well, I'm glad to hear that because it's nice to be appreciated. I never had any people in mind when I paint a picture, except what I like to do and that's all there is. Again, one cannot think what people would like or would not like. For many of my street scenes in the beginning I've been insulted. Why paint the bloody slums and why paint all this and that when you have the harbour and beautiful gum trees? But to me a painting is a subject, a means to create. Painting, again, is only another medium to writing or music. In writing we do not only write pretty stories. If you don't like the book you get in front of you then just forget about the book. Read another one.

JAMES GLEESON: This is one of the criticisms I've sometimes heard, you did choose subjects to paint that were not the sort of things that people were used to.

SALI HERMAN: But I don't care what people use. I mean, the artist is himself and if you are not a (inaudible) you paint what you like to paint.

JAMES GLEESON: I suppose it would be true to say that you're one of the rare artists who've created a situation where people now look at a scene with different eyes, and say, 'Oh it's Herman country'. They say that about Drysdale too.

SALI HERMAN: That's right.

[pause in recording]

JAMES GLEESON: All right, we're on air again. Sorry about that.

SALI HERMAN: That's all right.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, I think in many ways you were a revolutionary in the sense that you opened people's eyes to a kind of subject matter that had an inherent beauty that they hadn't seen before.

SALI HERMAN: Yes, but I'm glad about that. I mean, so many people don't even see where they walk any more.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

SALI HERMAN: You see, that is the point. When we live in a certain place you don't see it anymore.

[tape distortion]

JAMES GLEESON: Well, I think we've covered that one fairly well, Sali. Let's go on to another of your most famous ones, *The McElhone steps*.

SALI HERMAN: Yes, the *McElhone stairs*. That was my first Wynne Prize.

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JAMES GLEESON: It was? How many times did you win the Wynne?

SALI HERMAN: Four times.

JAMES GLEESON: Four times.

SALI HERMAN: Four times.

JAMES GLEESON: And that was the first one?

SALI HERMAN: That was the first one.

JAMES GLEESON: Of course it was made famous by the fact that Bernard published it in colour in his now famous book.

SALI HERMAN: Yes, that's right.

JAMES GLEESON: And it was bought by Mrs Evatt, was it?

SALI HERMAN: Dr Evatt.

JAMES GLEESON: Dr Evatt bought it.

SALI HERMAN: Dr Evatt, yes. Dr Evatt.

JAMES GLEESON: And it came—

SALI HERMAN: I was very flattered. Not for the money I got, it was very little.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

SALI HERMAN: I won't mention it because whatever these people paid me I thought it was what they could afford. That's all that mattered to me. But I was glad it went into their home. I knew Mrs Evatt from the George Bell School.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh yes, of course, you studied with George Bell.

SALI HERMAN: Yes, I studied with George Bell. When I come to Australia at that time I couldn't speak much English. She spoke a bit of French. Not better than I could in English, I have to say.

JAMES GLEESON: So you met her first in 1937?

SALI HERMAN: Nineteen thirty-seven. Like Lady Casey, the same. She was the opposition but they worked together in one studio.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SALI HERMAN: United. That's right.

JAMES GLEESON: The Evatt's bought a number of your works?

SALI HERMAN: Yes, they did. They did. Another one which they bought is I think one of the paintings I like very much. It is called *Near the docks*.

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JAMES GLEESON: Ah yes, yes.

SALI HERMAN: That hangs in the gallery here.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

SALI HERMAN: Later on I made a large version which I donated to the Commonwealth.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

SALI HERMAN: And I saw hanging in Paris a year ago in the Legation.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, that's the one we haven't got a photograph of, *Near the docks No 2*.

SALI HERMAN: Yes, No 2, that's right.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Oh, great. Sali you were living near these (inaudible) at that time.

SALI HERMAN: I was living at Potts Point and I'm like Darwin said, 'A result of my environment'.

JAMES GLEESON: And these were just below the flat where you were living?

SALI HERMAN: Yes. And from there to walk to the gallery and up, that was very very simple, you see. But I think Bernard Smith who lived in the same house like I did, partly on my own suggestion, he mentioned to me a few times, 'Sali, that would make quite a nice subject'.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

SALI HERMAN: I told him, 'Look, I'm looking at it all the time for that reason'. But our subjects I always had to study long before I painted.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SALI HERMAN: Or as I could paint at first sight. Another subject like this was the law courts. I think it took me at least a year before I started to paint it.

JAMES GLEESON: Did you make drawings beforehand for those, Sali?

SALI HERMAN: No. My drawings, they're always made in my mind. Then I made the drawings before painting. Another thing: in the law court I made only one alteration. That was in the foreground. Instead of the road being inward it is the other way around.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SALI HERMAN: For the sake of design.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, Sali, now we come to one that is perhaps sad memories for you.

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SALI HERMAN: Oh, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: The portrait of—

SALI HERMAN: That is my late wife.

JAMES GLEESON: Paulette.

SALI HERMAN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: I notice in looking at your recent portraiture, you use a different style altogether. This I remember as having a lot of glazing on it.

SALI HERMAN: That could well be so. You know, while I was painting in my youth in Switzerland at one time I interrupted my painting career, I come into dealing almost against my will. As a boy I studied art because that was my life then already.

JAMES GLEESON: In Zurich?

SALI HERMAN: In Zurich. Later on there came after World War I the inflation in France, in Germany, in Austria and Italian people bought paintings as an investment. Strangely enough, they had the money but no knowledge. I had the knowledge but no money, you see. So that is how I come in to take them and ask me questions. It became a rule they had to give me 10 per cent of what they bought. While I was sleeping on the Salvation Army one night, then the next night I slept in the best hotel with all my friends. You see, that is quite true.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Yes, yes.

SALI HERMAN: Then I become really interested so I start to buy pictures with the money. I didn't need to sell them and then when people wanted them I made big prices, thinking they would not buy but they did. Then I got into money and I felt in the end it was a shallow life and I want to get out of it. I had also a lot of trouble. There is all these dealers are fighting one another and if they can knock one down by saying this is not genuine, or not genuine, they do, even if it is genuine. You've always got a fight on your hands. This is partly one of the reasons I came to Australia. I just wanted to get out of it.

JAMES GLEESON: You were fed up with the scene.

SALI HERMAN: Yes. I was not interested in the bloody cash. I wanted to do things.

JAMES GLEESON: Paint.

SALI HERMAN: But I had interrupted my career. I remember when I came to George Bell in Melbourne he asked me, 'Did you paint before?'. I said, 'Forget about it, I want to start off at the bottom again'.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SALI HERMAN: I want to have a solid foundation before I run.

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JAMES GLEESON: So, in fact, you're really George—

SALI HERMAN: That's all you can see in those paintings, a different style maybe coming here and there. That is because I was then experimenting.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, am I right in saying that I found that, say, the dress was glazed, the colour of the dress was glazed over?

SALI HERMAN: Yes, correct, completely correct. Jimmy, I can only say one thing. You know your trade.

JAMES GLEESON: But at that time you were using glazing.

SALI HERMAN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: In a way that you never did later on.

SALI HERMAN: No, I did not later on.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

SALI HERMAN: I like straight painting. Today I like the sensuousness of the colours of the paint. I would also say this painting may have been influenced by two artists. One was the Botticelli, the other one was I think Kisling.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Yes, I can see the sort of similar, the linear quality of Botticelli.

SALI HERMAN: But you can't help painting yourself just the same. They are not copies of either of them, you see.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no. Sali, when was your exhibition? Thirty-nine, did you say, was the one in Anthony Horden?

SALI HERMAN: Thirty-nine. Yes. That is when I left Melbourne, and I left Melbourne partly because I could not get used to this country. I could not. I was on the way back. When I come here I come with return tickets from Switzerland.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SALI HERMAN: I must make a correction about the book of Daniel Thomas, who describes me as a refugee, which I am not.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

SALI HERMAN: I was an immigrant, and that is a great difference.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

SALI HERMAN: You see.

JAMES GLEESON: So you had a return ticket?

SALI HERMAN: I come with return tickets for the whole family.

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JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SALI HERMAN: I was almost on the way back when there was the talk of war breaking out. This is another reason I come out here for.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SALI HERMAN: I really fought the Nazis in Switzerland and we had a big Nazi party in Switzerland.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SALI HERMAN: All ready then. I knew I would be knocked from behind. That is why I left. I thought if war breaks out Switzerland would be in it.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

SALI HERMAN: Because we had on the one hand Mussolini, on the other hand Germany.

JAMES GLEESON: Germany.

SALI HERMAN: So that is another reason why I left. I had to undergo an operation which I have been told may not be successful.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, right.

SALI HERMAN: I thought I get it done after having seen my mother in Australia. That's what made me come here.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SALI HERMAN: I had that operation while I was at the studio of George Bell in Melbourne at the Mercy Hospital and the doctor was Sir Alan Newton.

JAMES GLEESON: It was obviously successful.

SALI HERMAN: Well, otherwise I wouldn't be here, you see.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, that's marvellous, Sali.

SALI HERMAN: But that is now the explanation of why I was here.

JAMES GLEESON: And then you came to Sydney?

SALI HERMAN: When I come to Sydney I fell in love with Sydney. Because of these little roads going up and down, at the houses I saw here. They had character here. Something I could not find in Melbourne. Now it's a different way of life.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SALI HERMAN: Much more cosmopolitan. I felt more at home.

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JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SALI HERMAN: But I was still not quite sure if I would ever stay in Australia.

JAMES GLEESON: Were you at Pott's Point at that time? Did you have that flat?

SALI HERMAN: No. I started off in Bondi. From Bondi I moved to Coogee and from Coogee I moved down to Pott's Point. That was at the time when everybody was running away from Potts Point because—

JAMES GLEESON: Of the war.

SALI HERMAN: Of the war, yes. That's right.

JAMES GLEESON: That whole eastern suburb.

SALI HERMAN: War broke out. I joined the army. They make me a sapper, I become a corporal, I become a sergeant, later a captain, you see. From then on I think I got to love the country because I saw the country. I went fishing. I heard the magpies, the whip bird and whatnot, and it was a life I didn't know in Switzerland. When I went back to Switzerland 17 years later I felt claustrophobia in Switzerland.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes.

SALI HERMAN: I wouldn't like to live there anymore, although it's a beautiful country.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, in many ways you're one of the most Australian of all painters.

SALI HERMAN: Today I am Australian.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

SALI HERMAN: May I say I explored the country. I went every year to a different part, from the east coast up to Cape York, from Cape York to Darwin, from Darwin down to Albany, from Albany down to Melbourne. I made a trip right across with a gold miner. The more I saw of it, the more it grew on me.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, this comes out in your painting clearly.

SALI HERMAN: And today I sell Australia. But I wouldn't sell it.

JAMES GLEESON: Sali, how did you manage your first show at the Anthony Horden Gallery?

SALI HERMAN: Forty-two quid. Forty-two quid I made there.

JAMES GLEESON: How did you meet Marsden who ran the gallery?

SALI HERMAN: I didn't meet him. I mean, I just went to see if I could have an exhibition.

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JAMES GLEESON: I see, and he liked the work enough to put it on?

SALI HERMAN: He wanted, yes, he was very advanced in his outlook.

JAMES GLEESON: He was. Yes, I remember Marsden.

SALI HERMAN: He was a fine man. He had a sister who was a teacher.

JAMES GLEESON: A marvellous teacher.

SALI HERMAN: A wonderful woman.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, May Marsden.

SALI HERMAN: Highly, highly intellectual.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. She taught at the Teachers College at the Sydney University.

SALI HERMAN: Well, these were the people I loved very much.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

SALI HERMAN: Very much.

JAMES GLEESON: She was a remarkable woman.

SALI HERMAN: But I also remember having had a painting there called *The day of Christ*.

JAMES GLEESON: I remember that. A long figure stretched out, a little bit like the Holbein one.

SALI HERMAN: It was very different from Holbein.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

SALI HERMAN: If you ask me why I painted it, I could tell you the story. I painted it in the studio of George Bell. I come along with a model put him on the floor and the big canvas. I thought I make a big masterpiece. George took his hat and walked out. He couldn't see, it you see. Thought I was mad. Then he come back four hours later, and he says, 'How did you do it?'. All you got to do is now paint the background a bit better there'. When I brought it to Sydney there was a man come up and looked at it and said, 'Mr Herman, in Australia must not paint pictures like this'. I said, 'Why not?'. He says, 'You must paint a harbour scene or the gum tree, otherwise you won't be able to make a living here'. That was the director of the National Gallery in Sydney.

JAMES GLEESON: McDonald?

SALI HERMAN: No. Will Ashton.

JAMES GLEESON: Will Ashton. Oh, in the time of Will Ashton.

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SALI HERMAN: I said, 'You got your wages and I haven't. I paint what I like'. From then on we were deadly enemies almost.

JAMES GLEESON: I liked that exhibition. It made a great impression. I was a student at that time and I remember it very well indeed. I was a student of May Marsden, as a matter of fact, at that time.

SALI HERMAN: Yes. Well, let me tell you one thing. Whenever I put on an exhibition, I'm always very self-critical. I'm not too sure of myself. I never think and praise myself too much. I never pat myself on the back. Whenever I had a praise or kind of encouragement, I always thought, 'Be careful, you got to do better next time'.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, *House on the hill*, *McElhone steps*, and the *Portrait of Paulette*.

SALI HERMAN: Paulette. The *Portrait of Paulette*, may I say one thing? I think it was—what's his name?—the director now in Canberra?

JAMES GLEESON: Jim Mollison.

SALI HERMAN: Mollison. He come to my studio here for one reason or another. I had it hanging there and he said, 'We should have that for the gallery'. He asked me to submit it to the council. They were about to buy it. I said, 'No, you can't have it for any money. I'm not selling my wife but I give it to you', you see. And that's the truth.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, we're very happy to have it because I regard it as one of your most—

SALI HERMAN: I told Paulette, 'You couldn't be in a better place'. You see.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, I hope she's appreciating that now.

SALI HERMAN: But I thought you should know that.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Do you remember that one? *Paddington neighbours*.

SALI HERMAN: Oh yes. Oh yes, I tell you who. Enid Stokes bought that picture.

JAMES GLEESON: Enid Stokes.

SALI HERMAN: Enid Stokes. I was flattered. She was one of the artists of George Bell's.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes.

SALI HERMAN: In Melbourne.

JAMES GLEESON: Not Constance Stokes?

SALI HERMAN: Oh yes, Constance Stokes.

JAMES GLEESON: Constance Stokes.

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SALI HERMAN: Constance Stokes. Oh yes. Constance Stokes. I'm sorry. Enid Stokes lives here. She's the nurse. Yes, and I think that this called *Saturday morning*, something like that.

JAMES GLEESON: Not *Paddington neighbours*. I notice we've got a question mark after—

SALI HERMAN: No, no. *Saturday morning*.

JAMES GLEESON: *Saturday morning*.

SALI HERMAN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: So we'll correct that.

SALI HERMAN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Some of our titles are not exactly right.

SALI HERMAN: Doesn't matter. It's not the titles that matter really.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, we've got to get it right for our catalogue.

SALI HERMAN: Yes, but even so. Look, I'll tell you one thing quite honestly speaking, that's the hardest part ever for me.

JAMES GLEESON: To give the title.

SALI HERMAN: To give the title.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, it was exhibited, I assume, as *Saturday morning* somewhere.

SALI HERMAN: Well, I think so. I think that was sold. I had it in the exhibition at Georges in Melbourne at one time and that's when it was sold.

JAMES GLEESON: And Constance Stokes bought it?

SALI HERMAN: I was very, very flattered to hear it was she who bought it. I didn't know then.

JAMES GLEESON: And then we bought it from Joseph Brown about six years ago.

SALI HERMAN: Well, I mean, people when they can make a quid it seems to me they make a quid.

JAMES GLEESON: But it's a nice one and a characteristic one of that time.

SALI HERMAN: Well, I take the blame for it.

JAMES GLEESON: All right. Now, Sali, one for which we have very little information. We bought it in 1949. We've only got a photocopy of it. It's called *Parramatta*—

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SALI HERMAN: Oh, I saw that back again in Paris.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

SALI HERMAN: I was there last year and the ambassador asked me and my girlfriend, or my friend, or my de facto wife I should say, to come and have a look. We had a lunch there. I saw it again and it gave me great pleasure. This is a painting I did when I was at one time teaching at the Kings School in Parramatta.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, I see. The date is right, '49?

SALI HERMAN: Yes, it would be. Yes. But I didn't last long as a teacher.

JAMES GLEESON: Why not?

SALI HERMAN: Because I didn't like the ties on my neck.

JAMES GLEESON: But it's a good painting.

SALI HERMAN: *Parramatta*. Yes. I saw it again and I was quite happy with it.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, good. Fine. Well, that clarifies that one. We haven't got a proper photograph of it because it is away at the moment and we just couldn't get it.

SALI HERMAN: It's in Paris, in the Legation.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, good. Now, I'll just turn off for a moment. Copy mean anything to you. We've got it called 1950 *Elizabeth Bay Park*.

SALI HERMAN: That is *Elizabeth Bay Park*, yes. Down there I played chess very often with Wallace Thornton. Yes. But I went down there very often also with my late wife. It was a time. I thought it was a lovely subject but one that grew on me while I went down there, and whenever I go I always look for what I can get out of a subject. I thought it was a very lovely subject. I think it is called *Bare Bare Place*.

JAMES GLEESON: What place?

SALI HERMAN: Bare.

JAMES GLEESON: B-E-A-R?

SALI HERMAN: B-A-R-E.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SALI HERMAN: Bare Place. But it's down at Elizabeth Bay. I sold it to—what was his name?—a liquor merchant. I sold him two paintings. I had an exhibition at David Jones and he went, this was hanging there with another one, I think it was *Laying at the cross*. He come up and asked me how much I wanted for them. I sold them I think together for about 700 quid.

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JAMES GLEESON: Well, we bought them from the Gordon Galleries in Sydney, oh, about 11 years ago. That one. You can't think of who it was who bought it?

SALI HERMAN: Yes, yes. I know. But I won't mention the name for certain reasons. I think he bought those pictures with black money, you see.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SALI HERMAN: So I don't want to disclose his name.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SALI HERMAN: It wouldn't be loyal, wouldn't it?

JAMES GLEESON: I see. So it comes from the artist through the Gordon Galleries.

SALI HERMAN: No. It doesn't come from the artist to the Gordon Galleries. It comes through the artist via somebody else to the Gordon Galleries.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, but you authenticate it as—

SALI HERMAN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, I do.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. There's no question that it is yours?

SALI HERMAN: No, although that is a very bad reproduction.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, of course. Well, that's just a photocopy.

SALI HERMAN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: No, we just want to get the provenance right.

SALI HERMAN: Yes, but I'm quite sure the man bought it with black money.

JAMES GLEESON: Aha, I see.

SALI HERMAN: It was one of those exhibitions, by the way, which sold out before the opening. I had two like that. Then I become afraid that I may be a pot-boiler, and that decided me to go to London and find out how I fared there.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. When was that?

SALI HERMAN: About '53. Fifty-two, '53. In London I had one or two good notices but no bloody cash. You see. Then they asked me would I send here and they would handle my work. Oliver Brown told me you need three or four exhibitions to go down in London. You can never go down with the first one.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no. Never.

SALI HERMAN: There was a nice girl told me, 'You go back to Australia'.

JAMES GLEESON: Well now, *Derelict house*.

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SALI HERMAN: Yes, *Derelict house*. I remember the young man who come to me, called me up from External Affairs. I buy a picture for my office. I didn't know it was the government who paid. I would've asked for more money.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, most of the things that went into External Affairs came to us eventually.

SALI HERMAN: I didn't know that. You see. But in the meantime, that's not the point.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no.

SALI HERMAN: But I remember I painted that and you bought it and I think it's—naturally I can't judge it from this.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no. What is the subject? Is it a Sydney subject?

SALI HERMAN: It was a Sydney subject. Wait a minute. How do I describe that district? Later on I painted a painting there which hangs in the South Australian Gallery called *Reconstruction*. It was an area there all pulled down to build new houses. That's down there.

JAMES GLEESON: One of the inner city areas.

SALI HERMAN: Yes. But all these paintings are done from sketches I made on the spot.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes.

SALI HERMAN: There are maybe tiny alternations for the sake of the painting but usually it is as near as possible to the subject I saw. Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, good.

SALI HERMAN: He was a nice young man. I hope he will be Prime Minister.

JAMES GLEESON: *Old hop kiln*.

SALI HERMAN: Oh yes. Show me that. That's Tasmania.

JAMES GLEESON: Nineteen fifty-one.

SALI HERMAN: That's Tasmania.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, it's Tasmania?

SALI HERMAN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Whereabouts in Tasmania?

SALI HERMAN: Well, it would be up in the New Norfolk district. I think that this one painting I sold to—what's his name? He become the judge of the international court.

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JAMES GLEESON: Evatt?

SALI HERMAN: No, no, no, no, no. It's not Evatt. He made the judgement there in favour of white Africa and become very unpopular when he come back here. Sir Percy Spender.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, Percy Spender.

SALI HERMAN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SALI HERMAN: Sir Percy Spender.

JAMES GLEESON: So it was in his collection at one stage?

SALI HERMAN: It was. And again he didn't tell me it's the government who pays.

JAMES GLEESON: He bought it from you.

SALI HERMAN: Yes. Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, where do we say we got it from? No details available.

SALI HERMAN: He went then to Washington as the—

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, ambassador.

SALI HERMAN: Ambassador of Australia.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

SALI HERMAN: You see.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. So it's a Tasmanian—

SALI HERMAN: Actually I criticise some of the paintings he had in his home then. This is beside the point, I should tell you that. But I told him being the ambassador, I'm an Australian, I don't like you to go there with all your rubbish.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, I hope he took your advice to heart.

SALI HERMAN: I must say this. Two weeks later he opened the exhibition at the Contemporary Art Society, of all things. When he saw me there he started off, 'This is not my cup of tea', you see.

JAMES GLEESON: Well now, Sali, what (inaudible).

SALI HERMAN: Ah, this.

JAMES GLEESON: This is?

SALI HERMAN: That is when I was—

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JAMES GLEESON: *The drover.*

SALI HERMAN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: *Drovers.*

SALI HERMAN: I was giving talks on behalf of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and that is how I got to know the country without having to pay the tickets at the hotel. There I was in Nyngan.

JAMES GLEESON: Nyngan.

SALI HERMAN: Nyngan. While I was sitting there, up there on the hotel deck during the day, that coach come up, a little horse at the back, one underneath. I thought that is just too good to miss. I made a quick drawing. While I was drawing away a chap come right through the room up on the deck and slapped me on my back and says, 'Are you making my picture?'. I looked at him and I say, 'Is that your coach down there?'. He says, 'Yes. Can I see it?'. I say, 'Yes, you can'. He saw the drawing. He asked me, 'How much you want? I give you a tenner'. I say, 'Young man, I want to make a painting from this so I'm not selling it. But if you give me your name and address I will send it to you afterwards as a present', you see. They hung that painting in the exhibition. Actually, it was in the Sulman competition.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, was it?

SALI HERMAN: It got the second Sulman Prize for me.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, was that your second one?

SALI HERMAN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: So we've got the first and the second.

SALI HERMAN: Yes. I don't know. I don't know if you got the first one.

JAMES GLEESON: Didn't you say that the *House on the hill* was the first one?

SALI HERMAN: That was Wynne.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, the Wynne, the Wynne.

SALI HERMAN: That is the Sulman.

JAMES GLEESON: This is the Sulman, of course, yes.

SALI HERMAN: Yes, that's the Sulman.

JAMES GLEESON: How many times did you win the Sulman?

SALI HERMAN: Twice.

JAMES GLEESON: Twice.

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SALI HERMAN: I didn't enter any more. The Wynne has changed.

JAMES GLEESON: So it's a hotel in Nyngan. Outside the hotel at Nyngan.

SALI HERMAN: Yes. Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, we bought that in '49. What date was it painted?

SALI HERMAN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Forty-nine?

SALI HERMAN: It was about then, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Good. *Kapooka Camp*.

SALI HERMAN: Yes, that is when I got sick of being an instructor. Camouflage. I send a message to my commander, Colonel McGillicuddy, 'Give me my discharge, please'. I never thought he would take note (inaudible) under cover. He asked me, 'Why do you want to leave?'. I said, 'Look, I'm sick hanging around here. I didn't enter the army for that'. 'Oh well, what are you doing in your life?'. I say, 'I'm a painter'. 'Oh, I understand. I give you a place up there at the YMCA for the time being, until such time that I might be able to get you out'. That's when I painted this.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. What happened after that?

SALI HERMAN: That was a very, very hard picture, I tell you, a hard place. I wanted to show it in the painting. I liked it very much for the colours. Then later on when I got my discharge, a few weeks later I showed some of the paintings I did during that time in my spare time at (inaudible). In the papers they say that I should have been an official war artist. I got the letter from Melbourne, 'Your name has been mentioned. We would like to ask you if you want to be an artist, a war artist'. I went down there and they gave me the commission. Then I had a bit of a guilty conscience. I thought I may not live up to what I took on. I offered them that particular painting as a present, to make my job easier. I thought I give them a bit of their money's worth. But I make the condition it should be hung when they accept it.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

SALI HERMAN: Because I know from experience how many paintings are in the cellars. They wrote to me, 'We might not be able to hang them all the time, so we can't accept it'. A few weeks later I showed it in the Society of Artists at the Education Department. Down came a questionnaire from External Affairs, which says, 'How much you want for the picture?'. So I got some money for it.

JAMES GLEESON: So they bought it after all.

SALI HERMAN: Yes, they did.

JAMES GLEESON: That's how it came to us.

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SALI HERMAN: Yes. Well, it's in good hands. I must say this. All those paintings you got there, I didn't get too much out of it.

JAMES GLEESON: I bet.

SALI HERMAN: All the people did.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

SALI HERMAN: But not me.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

SALI HERMAN: So don't think I got rich out of it. But I had the pleasure of doing it.

JAMES GLEESON: Sali, this one we've got listed as *Overtured boat*, oil on canvas 1950. But it came to us from the McClure Smith collection. Is it the same one called *The wreck*?

SALI HERMAN: It could well be. Nineteen fifty, it would be one of those.

JAMES GLEESON: Fifty-one, it was shown in '51.

SALI HERMAN: But it would be one of the war time pictures most likely. That's the only way I can think of. But again I cannot make it a true statement unless I see the photograph of the picture.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. That's one of the four we haven't got photographs of.

SALI HERMAN: I don't like to say something that is not too certain.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no.

SALI HERMAN: I mean, if I would see a photo of the painting, I can say yes or no and what.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, I'll try and get a photograph.

SALI HERMAN: Please, I can't comment.

JAMES GLEESON: No. Unfortunately, it's out at (inaudible).

SALI HERMAN: Not only I can't, but I won't. But by the title of it I think it is one of the war time paintings after I was an official war artist.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SALI HERMAN: They were quite a few wrecks up there, Japanese wrecks, I made use of.

JAMES GLEESON: So we'd really have to see a photograph of that?

SALI HERMAN: Yes, you must.

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JAMES GLEESON: Again, another one we haven't got a photograph of, also from the McClure Smith collection *New Guinea scene*. Does that ring any sort of bell to you? I know you did a lot of—

SALI HERMAN: Yes, well that would again be wartime. I couldn't tell you what it was because I painted many New Guinea scenes, like I painted many Woolloomooloo and Paddington.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, exactly. Yes. So until you see it you can't—

SALI HERMAN: No, I cannot.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, there's one here of *Palm Beach* which we've got dated '59 that belonged to Mr and Mrs John D Lewis.

SALI HERMAN: Yes, I have an (inaudible).

JAMES GLEESON: Well, I don't know it, but in Daniel's book there's one called *Beach scene* from that year. No, it's the earlier Daniel book.

SALI HERMAN: Oh, the earlier, I got the earlier one here too.

JAMES GLEESON: Good. We'll switch off for a moment.

SALI HERMAN: Because it would be silly to make the wrong statement.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Yes. The only thing that made me—

SALI HERMAN: I can't tell you she's a nice girl if I don't know which one.

JAMES GLEESON: The only reason why I thought it might be the one that Daniel mentions in there as *Beach scene*, from the John D Lewis collection 1959 —

SALI HERMAN: Yes, but I painted two or three at that time.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Why I thought it might have been one, Mrs John D Lewis is Annie Lewis, isn't it?

SALI HERMAN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: And we bought it from Gallery A. That's not conclusive proof but it just means that it could have—

SALI HERMAN: No, but I wouldn't know what people do with the paintings once they got them. I didn't know it changed hands or anything else.

JAMES GLEESON: No. So that's something we'll have to check on.

SALI HERMAN: No, I can't give you the information.

JAMES GLEESON: No. And this again is the one that you gave us, the second version of the docks.

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SALI HERMAN: Oh yes. No, I gave you the first. Oh no, I gave you the second, the big one.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

SALI HERMAN: The large one. I must say when I saw it again I was happy with it. I had questions in my mind. I mean, I wasn't too sure, when you know, but I saw it again and I was very happy with it.

JAMES GLEESON: What date was it?

SALI HERMAN: And, what's more, it fits the staircase.

JAMES GLEESON: Sali, can you remember the date you painted that, the second version?

SALI HERMAN: Well, all the paintings got the date on it.

JAMES GLEESON: Have they? Oh well. We just haven't checked.

SALI HERMAN: All my paintings are dated. You can say they are really dated. You see.

JAMES GLEESON: Of course. Well, that covers all the ones that we've got of you at the moment.

SALI HERMAN: Yes. Well, it's time you get a few more.

JAMES GLEESON: I think so too. I certainly want to look at those drawings next time I come up.

SALI HERMAN: Yes. Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, Sali, is there anything biographical that you want to add. I know that Daniel has recorded you in both those books.

SALI HERMAN: But look, I should have read it a bit better what Daniel wrote. Something (inaudible) and he wanted to introduce things which had no bearing at all on those. I mean, I'm not a refugee.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no. I think you made that quite clear.

SALI HERMAN: That's the point. That's a very important point. I am not a refugee.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

SALI HERMAN: I came on my free will with my own ticket, and a return ticket at that.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes, yes. Are there any other—

SALI HERMAN: I've been back to Switzerland since then three or four times. So it's not that I can't.

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JAMES GLEESON: You're a committed Australian now.

SALI HERMAN: I am. I am. And so is my son. Here I must say even this. My late wife was French, and they are very hard to—

JAMES GLEESON: To transplant.

SALI HERMAN: To transplant. But my wife never wanted to really leave Australia again. Maybe for a trip, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Never to live.

SALI HERMAN: No. No, she loved it here.

JAMES GLEESON: Sali, any other information, biographical information to add to what Daniel has said in your books?

SALI HERMAN: I don't know. Look, I mean—

JAMES GLEESON: It's so long since you've read them, I suppose.

SALI HERMAN: Look, the point is this. I would have to give you dinner, breakfast and lunch again before we finish.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

SALI HERMAN: So I can't afford that. No, I mean, there's always something we can talk about and this and that.

JAMES GLEESON: You mentioned one thing to me earlier today, that you had met Emile Bernard at one stage.

SALI HERMAN: Yes, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Now how did that come about?

SALI HERMAN: Because when I was in Switzerland, I mean, I got to know many artists that came from France. That's very simple.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, I see.

SALI HERMAN: I was introduced to him. Me speaking French, my wife speaking French, actually I'm almost French, I should say, because I was living in France and studying there when I was 16.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

SALI HERMAN: By heart I'm really French. Also spiritually I'm French.

JAMES GLEESON: Bernard was an old man at that time?

SALI HERMAN: Well, he was quite an aged man. White. I must bring you the card I showed him from the picture of Toulouse-Lautrec.

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JAMES GLEESON: All right.

SALI HERMAN: I told him, 'But you got it from Gauguin'. He say, 'No, Gauguin got it from me'.

JAMES GLEESON: Really?

SALI HERMAN: And so it is. I've seen that later on in the Musée Chaillot in Paris. There he had a room of his own, Emile Bernard's. There I can recognise the man here in his youth. He died in 1934.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, I see. I wouldn't have recognised that as a Toulouse-Lautrec.

SALI HERMAN: You wouldn't. Neither would I. But it gave me great pleasure to see it.

JAMES GLEESON: That's a lovely painting.

SALI HERMAN: Yes. But, you know, it gives me hope, you see. There you are.

JAMES GLEESON: Goodness me. I wonder how old Toulouse-Lautrec would have been at that? In 1885 he'd have been quite a young man.

SALI HERMAN: Yes, sure, sure. But it's a lovely picture.

JAMES GLEESON: It's a beautiful painting.

SALI HERMAN: Look, in that exhibition that is right now at the Tate, it is called Twentieth Century English and French. Starts off with Signac, who looks rather black in the whole show, I must say. But there were three surprises to me. One was this Toulouse-Lautrec. I never knew he painted a straight portrait. Furthermore, of a man I had the pleasure to meet, you see. The others were the Gwen John—

JAMES GLEESON: Oh yes.

SALI HERMAN: Gwen John. The sister of Augustus John, I never knew he had —

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