

JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: DALE HICKEY

1 May 1979

JAMES GLEESON: Dale, we don't have a great many of your works at present in the Gallery, but the ones we do have we'd like to get some information about for our catalogue and our archive. I wonder if you'd have a look at them, get them into sequence, and then we can start talking about them.

DALE HICKEY: Okay.

JAMES GLEESON: One we don't have a photograph of is called *Snugborough '76*. That would be one of the later ones.

DALE HICKEY: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: The earliest one would be this one which, if I remember correctly, was in The Field exhibition wasn't it?

DALE HICKEY: No, no. This one was in The Transfield Prize.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, was that where I saw it?

DALE HICKEY: It would have been of 1968.

JAMES GLEESON: Sixty-eight. The year of The Field wasn't it? Was that the year The Field exhibition was on?

DALE HICKEY: It is in fact, so this date here must be wrong I think. Because I don't think I painted that then. I should check my information about that, because I think—

JAMES GLEESON: All right, well we can switch off. If you've got some information you can check, we'll switch off while you do it.

DALE HICKEY: It is so long ago to me now it's hard to remember specific dates, but since it was purchased in '69 I think the correct dating of it would have to be '68, '69. I don't think you could get more exact than that.

JAMES GLEESON: You mentioned it was in The Transfield Prize.

DALE HICKEY: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: For '68 or '69?

DALE HICKEY: It would have been '69, I think.

JAMES GLEESON: We can easily check anyway on that in the Transfield catalogue. It's acrylic?

DALE HICKEY: No it's oil paint.

1 May 1979

JAMES GLEESON: It's oil, on?

DALE HICKEY: It's oil on duck.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

DALE HICKEY: Yes, it would all be oil. One or two paintings I did around this period were oil and acrylic but this one is definitely oil.

JAMES GLEESON: It's on two—

DALE HICKEY: Maybe I should have a decent look at it.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, take it out and have a—

DALE HICKEY: I need to be sure about these things. I know the painting in Melbourne is all oil paint, and they always say that it's acrylic. It would have to be oil.

JAMES GLEESON: It is oil?

DALE HICKEY: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Good. Okay, well that clears that up. Now the next one we have of yours is *Snugborough* of 1976. All the other three are 1976. Now between '68 and '76 there is a complete change in style.

DALE HICKEY: Oh, I went through many changes over that period. About 1969 I had an exhibition of fence structures at the old Pinacotheca Gallery in St Kilda. That consisted of typical suburban fences actually constructed around the walls of the Gallery. It really extended my interests in repetition.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

DALE HICKEY: And, well boredom, I guess—boring repetition.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

DALE HICKEY: And suburban type imagery. This kind of thing came from a quilt pattern on a bed.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

DALE HICKEY: And so on and so on.

JAMES GLEESON: I remember it struck me at the time that although it had superficial similarities with The Field style of work, that you didn't regard the surface with the sort of integrity, that they were very—

DALE HICKEY: No, I had quite a different attitude. I was misplaced in The Field, really. Although the sort of depth I played with was very shallow.

JAMES GLEESON: Small, yes.

1 May 1979

DALE HICKEY: It was backwards and forwards around the picture plane. I think it had its point to make in relation to *The Field* but it wasn't strictly speaking what most of the people were interested in because it made references to light and shade and things like that, which weren't allowed of course.

JAMES GLEESON: No, not strictly. But I notice most of *The Field* painters since then have explored this manipulation of the surface in precisely the way you did in that painting. Did you leave it because you felt that that was a dead end? You had no further areas to explore in that way.

DALE HICKEY: No, I don't think so. I'm actually coming back to some of the things I was interested in at that time now.

JAMES GLEESON: Are you?

DALE HICKEY: But I'd have to think about that.

JAMES GLEESON: We'll have a sip of tea while you're thinking.

DALE HICKEY: The answer to that last question, there was a moratorium of a kind around that period of time which took place in the minds of a lot of painters. I was very, very heavily involved with that. It seemed that the arguments being put up against painting were fairly well grounded. In retrospect they don't seem to be. At the time they did. I thought because of the undermining of my faith in painting at the time, that it would be an interesting project for me to see if I could evoke the same kind of feeling—feelings in myself and feeling responses in other people by perhaps doing three dimensionally some of the things that I had been doing two dimensionally. It was quite interesting, the reaction to the *Fences* exhibition in that most people saw those, or that whole project, as being grossly surreal as opposed to the work prior to that as being perhaps a little more decorative and so forth than the *Fences* exhibition. So it was really interesting from that point of view. The public response was really quite amazing. But it was the sort of exhibition which lasted the duration of the exhibition.

JAMES GLEESON: Was this at Pinacotheca?

DALE HICKEY: At the old Pinacotheca. But when they pulled the fences down, they also pulled the walls down. That was very fortunate that it happened at a time when in fact the gallery was going to be pulled down. It would have created a lot of damage otherwise. But I had a fence contractor do all of the work on it, just from my specifications. As I said before, it did carry through some of the imagery which I'd taken from the environment. I saw myself very much at that time as being in the spooky sort of area of painting as the early Blackman and maybe Laurence Hope and a few of those sort of people at the time, but a kind of modern version of it if you like. Enough said?

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, fine. Could we go back to that early painting that we have in our collection? I notice you have some photographs of other ones.

1 May 1979

DALE HICKEY: Here it is.

JAMES GLEESON: Which are the important ones in your opinion from that period, and where are they?

DALE HICKEY: Well I like this one very much.

JAMES GLEESON: None of them have titles, I take it?

DALE HICKEY: No.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

DALE HICKEY: That one's in the Bendigo Teachers College. That's a painting of the kind of weatherboard, decorative weatherboard structures you get on suburban houses around places like Malvern.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh yes, I know, yes.

DALE HICKEY: Well I don't know, you could take your pick from any of them. I have my own preferences. People have their others. I like the one at the National Gallery.

JAMES GLEESON: In Melbourne, yes?

DALE HICKEY: But Bruce Pollard doesn't like that one. He deliberately didn't buy that one himself because he thought that was too decorative and he's always pushed me as being a very—how should I say it?—well not an entertaining artist.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no.

DALE HICKEY: Not a charm artist.

JAMES GLEESON: Well I think he's right.

DALE HICKEY: Well I'm out to prove him wrong.

JAMES GLEESON: Now in between this period and the Fence exhibition, what came between that and *Snugborough*?

DALE HICKEY: Well I had an exhibition after the Fences exhibition and that took place in '69, the Fence show. I went from that to another exhibition at the new Pinacotheca in Richmond the following year. That exhibition consisted of—well it was called 90 white walls. They were photographs of white walls, 90 of them in different locations throughout the Melbourne suburbs specifically places that I visited often. Again it was a repetition of similar elements and allowing the spectator very, very little to get into. I should also say that before the Fences I did a number of paintings which would have to be called minimal in the strict sense of the term. Unfortunately this slide here, you won't really see that without a slide viewer. But I did a number of those sorts of paintings. Now it seemed to me with that kind of work that the visual impact was one

1 May 1979

thing, but the verbal support was of tremendous importance and again that's one of the reasons why I really began to question what I was doing and that kind of art. I felt that it was becoming much too philosophical and, since it was, maybe it was time to move on to another medium.

JAMES GLEESON: That element of repetition—you use the word monotony in it—is obviously something that interests you because it did come through a whole period, several periods of your work. Is there a sort of philosophical—

DALE HICKEY: Well I think it comes more from a cantankerousness towards what I see as a fairly—oh, how should I put it?—to an audience that really prefers charming sort of things. I wanted to produce the kind of painting which had everything going for it except that charming aspect, and done repetition seemed to be something that was an affront. It seemed to me that it would be an affront to that kind of audience. I wanted to make my paintings as hostile as I could on one level, but as powerful as I could on another level. I mean it's a silly, arrogant kind of thing to say, but I really wanted to feel reassured that anyone who really did respond to my paintings was responding to something that was really there and not something that was just very superficial.

JAMES GLEESON: It wasn't a sort of conscious symbol, if you like, of the way life is often.

DALE HICKEY: Well that comes into it, yes. That comes into it. It was a convenient thing from a psychological viewpoint certainly, but also it was a form which was against the kind of artifice—

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, I understand.

DALE HICKEY: That was really in Boyd and Nolan and Blackman and all of those people who were still people to react against at that time.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, it was a revolutionary approach at that time.

DALE HICKEY: I guess so. I guess so.

JAMES GLEESON: It did have an enormous effect, and for some years, in your work.

DALE HICKEY: Yes, yes. Well it still goes, the same sort of repetition ran through a lot of the landscape paintings I did much later. But you asked me the question what I did between those years. I did minimal paintings through 1969 then getting into the Fences in 19—

JAMES GLEESON: Seventy.

DALE HICKEY: Seventy.

JAMES GLEESON: The wall?

DALE HICKEY: The white walls—well, I'm getting my dates confused. It was '69 and it was '70 with the white, I did the white walls.

1 May 1979

JAMES GLEESON: Was this element of monotony of repetition again a—

DALE HICKEY: Well it was definitely taken to an extreme that I didn't want to carry any further with the white walls.

JAMES GLEESON: That was a sort of climatic thing, the repetition?

DALE HICKEY: I'd say so, very definitely. Then the philosophical climate of the time was really very doer I thought, and the advent of art language and so forth really had me thinking very hard.

JAMES GLEESON: The whole question of art as an object—

DALE HICKEY: Oh yes that was all part of it and I must say that I really did stop making artworks for a period of possibly 12 to 18 months, during which time I travelled to America and to England and various other places. Coming out of the end of that period, I found that my love for painting had been restored to some extent but I didn't quite know what to do. In 1972 I started painting again, but it was as an outcome of something that I was in the process of working on with both Robert Rooney and Simon Close, two Melbourne artists. We had decided that what we would like to do was create an art work which completely eradicated personality involvements and which was based on Wittgenstein's idea that all philosophy was really all about was description and mostly it could be brought down to mere description. This is putting it very simply. Subsequently we decided that we'd take something like, well a very ordinary object and do an interminable and indeterminate art work around the idea of describing that in as many ways as possible. I even had a work which indicated that kind of direction that I might go into. I put it in a Transfield Prize at one stage and it was called *Any Hanging Object*. That set up a number of descriptions about any kind of object that might be hanging in a particular place and it was a bit jokey and everything else. But it was again around a very dumb idea of repetition and a sort of pedestrian's viewpoint of art, if you like—nothing terribly splendid in the way of manipulating forms or anything like that or even ideas. Anyway, we found that working on this idea of presenting an object through descriptions was going to be such a lifelong task and probably a pretty pointless one finally, that we began to question whether we'd do it or not. I began to think well really painting is another kind of description anyway and I'm really interested in painting still, so I'm going to paint. We decided that we were going to use a cup. I decided I'd paint a cup. So I painted one cup and then I painted another cup and I finished up painting about nine, I think. I also should say about that, that I began painting again in a climate that was very hostile to painting amongst all of my acquaintances in Melbourne, and I kept it very quiet. I was a bit self-conscious about it all.

JAMES GLEESON: Can we go back to the work you were doing just before the cups?

DALE HICKEY: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: The description of the object. Were the French writers like Robbe-Grillet and people like that any influence on you?

1 May 1979

DALE HICKEY: Very much so, very much so. Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: It sounded as though that fitted into their concept. Oh well, that's very interesting. I didn't see any of that work, so I wasn't aware that you were doing it.

DALE HICKEY: Well they're the cups there. If you hold them out to the light you'll probably see them better.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh yes.

DALE HICKEY: Now they're anti-compositional, as you can see. I put the object right in the middle of the canvas. I started out painting a white cup on a white background because there was ostensibly as little or as minimal amount of composition and colour and so forth as you could get in a painting. Gradually I came to think well this is all bull dust anyway. If you're painting you might as well go the whole hog and being anti-compositional and quasi-conceptual and all of this kind of stuff is pretty silly. If I'm going to paint, well I better get stuck into it all over again and really start to learn something about real composition, which is something I'd never looked at before, and real tactile values which I'd never really looked at before. I must say that I was inspired by the way that my friend Jim Doolan in the US, who I'd seen whilst I was over there, was getting stuck into the task himself through the inspiration given to him by people at the UCLA, particularly working under the influence of Richard Diebenkorn and so forth. Much later, after I got back to Australia, that seemed to me to be what I should be doing also. So I really did get stuck into it and out of that I started really looking at what I'd call real still-life as opposed to anti-compositional still-life in the cups and so on. Then from that I went into landscape painting. So, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: That's where we come into the scene, because I think the ones that we've got are landscapes.

DALE HICKEY: Yes, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: *Snugborough* was a landscape.

DALE HICKEY: That's right. I've got *Snugborough* here somewhere.

JAMES GLEESON: Have you? Before we deal with *Snugborough* can we deal with your first landscape?

DALE HICKEY: Oh that one.

JAMES GLEESON: Which we have.

DALE HICKEY: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Now I take it that was your first landscape?

DALE HICKEY: It was. In fact the idea of painting a landscape to me was absolute anathema. I hated the idea of it, in fact. It was only through realising

1 May 1979

that I had a lot to learn about painting that I decided to look at landscape as a learning process. I found it very difficult to contend with. I didn't know how to look at a landscape or what to isolate in a landscape or anything else. In fact this one, my first landscape, I looked at the hill out here.

JAMES GLEESON: This window here?

DALE HICKEY: Yes. I guess a lot of the stuff is gone now. There used to be a lot of gorse type shrubbery out there and I couldn't work out how to handle those sort of subtle textures and things. This *Smith's Hill* landscape is the outcome of trying to grapple with those sort of forms. The only way I could really contend with the whole thing was to turn them into rocks.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. I see. So into positive shapes?

DALE HICKEY: Yes, and having turned them into rocks I thought oh well, that looks all right anyway. So, as part of a learning process—I thought the painting was okay—I put it in the exhibition because I thought well, this is a challenging exhibition in the context of what people are doing. It's based on naturalism as opposed to photography. Well, so on and so forth. It's new naturalism as opposed to new realism. I thought well, I might as well really expose myself totally and show all the processes involved in the build up to this, so I put in all the bad paintings as well as the good ones. To me this has documentary interest only.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Well this is what I think about it too.

DALE HICKEY: I put it in the exhibition for that reason, and I was really surprised when it went to Canberra.

JAMES GLEESON: Well it's the first. I think the first, when you make a decision to do something, the first step is always an extraordinarily interesting one. It's the springboard for all that comes after it.

DALE HICKEY: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: You called it something else, *Smith Hill*?

DALE HICKEY: *Smith's Hill*.

JAMES GLEESON: *Smith's Hill*, what's its proper title? What shall we call it in the catalogue? My first landscape?

DALE HICKEY: Oh, I think *Smith's Hill*. Landscape *Smith's Hill* is better.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, and just make a note that it was your first.

DALE HICKEY: Yes, I think so. Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Good. I didn't realise they were gorse bushes or (inaudible) rocks.

1 May 1979

DALE HICKEY: Well it just seemed an interesting image in fact. Funnily enough, I painted that hill lots of time since. It has certain atmospheric perspective devices in it which removes it quite some distance from the minimal paintings I was doing earlier. But the horizontal line is very much in evidence in that painting, I think, even though it's not there. The minimal paintings I did were in the main just a division into two colours.

JAMES GLEESON: I've been aware in your landscapes of a kind of very specific kind of placement of objects that have overtones in my mind both from oriental painting, and from someone like Morandi. Do they figure in your thoughts at all, or am I just reading things into it?

DALE HICKEY: No, no. Morandi's I think an artist that if you're interested in landscape, one has to take account of Morandi, and I like the quietness of his paintings—the sombre quality, the sonorous sort of quality. The geometric aspect is an illusive one in his paintings. It's very obviously there but in fact it's heavily disguised. I must say that whilst I find it absolutely amazing in his work, I still have no idea how to compose a picture geometrically. It just seems to work out that way. Mostly I think with the paintings I do, I arrive at a structure through eliminating things as I go along. Jim Doolan said something very similar to you, in that he said that my paintings seemed to be very carefully geometric. Well, it must be something that I do intuitively, because there's no way I can—

JAMES GLEESON: It's not a conscious thing?

DALE HICKEY: No. Maybe it's because I'm square.

JAMES GLEESON: Well *Snugborough* comes next?

DALE HICKEY: *Snugborough* comes after that, yes. I'll see if I can find that. I'd say when I was painting the landscapes that Morandi was no more important to me than Streeton, and all of the Australian impressionist painters. I spent about six months at one stage trying to copy a Streeton and still couldn't work out how he did the bloody thing.

JAMES GLEESON: It was more in composition that I was thinking in terms of Morandi—certainly not in any other way.

DALE HICKEY: That's not *Snugborough* but it was one painted around the same period. That was probably the most compositional painting I did. At least people thought it was. But oddly enough that is a pretty direct transcription of what I was looking at.

JAMES GLEESON: Now what is *Snugborough*? Is it a place?

DALE HICKEY: Yes, it is a place. It's a place down in Gippsland and, yes, it's a place down in Gippsland near Yarram.

JAMES GLEESON: Do you do much actual outdoor work? Do you go on expeditions to find places to paint?

1 May 1979

DALE HICKEY: At that period of time I did it in the spring, the summer and the autumn and I painted still-life in the winter inside.

JAMES GLEESON: When you paint, you do it en plein air, you don't—

DALE HICKEY: Mm.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

DALE HICKEY: Definitely. Yes. You mentioned Morandi and the Australian impressionists, but I think probably Cézanne really figured. The example of all of those people was very important to me at that time. I think there are obvious elements in all of the paintings I did at that time, references to those people. *Snugborough's* here.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh good.

DALE HICKEY: It's one of these two. That's it.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh yes, yes, now I remember it. I don't know why we haven't got a photograph of it. It's probably on loan somewhere and we just haven't got the photograph, but I do remember it now.

DALE HICKEY: Yes, well I painted that on the spot. It probably took me a couple of hours. It's really a study in atmospheric perspective. Again the horizontal thing is very pronounced and I really came to painting the *Snugborough* picture after I'd gone into much more compositional type of landscape. In other words, I'd looked at much more complicated landscape subjects and I'd had a hankering all along to do the kind of very simple landscape that the *Snugborough* picture is. But I didn't think I could really be convincing with the painting like that until I'd learnt a few lessons. It was after having gone through all of that other stuff that I thought well okay now I can do that. So it really did come after a long period of—

JAMES GLEESON: Where does the last one fit in?

DALE HICKEY: Which one was that?

JAMES GLEESON: *Object on Table*, is it?

DALE HICKEY: Oh well yes—

JAMES GLEESON: That's a still-life.

DALE HICKEY: Yes, that was a still-life painted around that whole period.

JAMES GLEESON: All these came from the Pinacotheca, if I remember correctly?

DALE HICKEY: Yes, yes. Well again I'd say about this painting what I said about the *Smith's Hill* landscape. That it's a study rather than an argument about what painting is or isn't. It's very incidental. I guess it certainly has a lot

1 May 1979

of the elements that are in paintings that I had done prior to this. But it has interest from that point of view, but there's nothing much really I can say about it other than that.

JAMES GLEESON: No. Well, I like it, it's one of my—you know, I think it's a very good one because it's absolute uncompromising—

DALE HICKEY: Oh yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Starkness and simplicity and a kind of solemnity and weight in it.

DALE HICKEY: That's something I continually try to escape from. I concede that it's there. One of the reasons—I can say this, I think—why I left Pinacotheca was because I feel one of the things I want to do in my life is to escape type casting of any kind. Being involved in a gallery like Pinacotheca, even though they're all my friends there still and Bruce is one of my closest friends, I just felt I had to indicate my independence from that. Just as to me the paintings from this period that are the most significant to me, are the ones where I got furthest from that solemnity that you're describing. Psychologically I think for me the thing that I most want to do is to escape what I am. That also has a lot to do with why my painting appears to change or my artwork appears to change from time to time. There's a certain amount of—I know this sounds terribly arrogant, but I don't mean it to. People have looked at my work at different times and responded to it. To me it feels as though I've got to smack their hand and show them that that's not really what I'm all about and go on to something else. So whilst I agree with you that all those elements are there in that painting—

JAMES GLEESON: It's not what you want.

DALE HICKEY: I hope that when I die, people aren't going to say 'Well this is really what Dale Hickey did and what he was good at' because the painter I really love most is Matisse.

JAMES GLEESON: It seems to me from this conversation that you regard painting as a process of coming to terms with yourself, discovering who you are.

DALE HICKEY: Exactly, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Well that sounds to me to be a very valid and very fine attitude. I would agree with that exactly.

DALE HICKEY: Yes, well I think it's the way for me, but it doesn't win you too many friends in the art game, particularly from the economic point of view. Had I not had a good teaching job over all these years, I don't know what I would have done really.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, Dale thanks very much for that.

DALE HICKEY: Pleasure.

1 May 1979

JAMES GLEESON: That's going to be a great help.

DALE HICKEY: Good.

JAMES GLEESON: Good.