

JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: MICHAEL JOHNSON

Circa 1979

JAMES GLEESON: Mike, for the purposes of our cataloguing and recording, could you begin at the beginning and tell us when and where you were born and how you became interested in art.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Well, automatically at a very young age I did the same things as every other kid does. I think that all children are artists. Well, up until seven, until they become self-conscious and they start to realise that an education's being laid on them and an attitude's being laid upon them by their teachers and their family, when their family stops laying their attitudes on to them. But as a very young age, probably around five, my ambition was to be not really an artist, a portrait painter.

JAMES GLEESON: Go on.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: I wanted to be a portrait painter because my father, when I was three, four, five, my father was painting portraits from photographs of the Queen and from—

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: During the war, you know, he was painting Macarthur and people like that. It just seemed that there was always art around the kitchen table. He always had a work that he was working on and it was always being looked at over his shoulder while we were eating.

JAMES GLEESON: So it was there in the background all the time?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: It was always there.

JAMES GLEESON: You were born in Sydney, Michael?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: I was born in Mosman.

JAMES GLEESON: What was the exact date?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: I was born in 1938 in, you know, the place in Mosman.

JAMES GLEESON: What date, can you remember the exact

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Yes, it was 17 March 1938, which is Pieces. It was a good place to be born in. I mean, on reflection, Streeton and Roberts camped in Sirius Cove. We had a house down in Sirius Cove. But before that my parents rented a house out on Middle Head where the guns were going off. I can remember the guns going off as a very young child, and going down to the back yard and lifting a piece of tin and finding goannas and all the rest of it. Then we moved down to Sirius Cove where Streeton and Roberts camped. You know, as a young child I

Circa 1979

wasn't aware of that, but later I realised that's where they camped. As a teenager, well, pre-teenager, around 12, I realised that, and that's the area that I first started painting in. With oil.

JAMES GLEESON: This was before you went to an art school?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Yes. I started painting at about, well, I never stopped painting. I always painted.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. What was it like (inaudible)?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Because my whole family painted. My mother painted too.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, so there was a definite background of art in the family?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Well, my mother, when I was very young, went out and decided right, we'd furnish the house. The first things that she chose to furnish the house with was prints by Albert Pinkham Ryder, Jan Vermeer and occasional Van Gogh *Sunflowers*. But they kind of like weren't measured as seriously as the Vermeers and the religious side, especially the religious side of Albert Pinkham Ryder.

JAMES GLEESON: So that they were fond of (inaudible).

MICHAEL JOHNSON: So they were always behind the toaster or over the phone and the house was filled with those first. There was the three piece suite from Grace Bros or wherever, but the furniture always got a second because I grew up in a family of seven children. My father was always like working on the kitchen table. He was a freelance illustrator for all the newspapers in Australia.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, a professional artist?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Yes. He always wanted to be a painter, and could have been a good one. His black and white work, his rehearsals for his illustrations, had the gesture of the late forties. There was the same vibration in his drawings as all the best American abstract painters, but he happened to be illustrating magazines and newspapers, periodicals and so on. But what sort of amazed me was that when I got into art quite seriously and went to art school, that his sensibility was parallel to and was an introduction to abstract expressionism which gave me access to people like Klein, Gorky, Pollock. But he was completely unaware of those people, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: He was coming out of funny kind of European art like the English art like Frank Brangwyn.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: And via *American illustration*. The *American Illustration* was the thing that interested me the most because he had a filing system of illustrators from the first illustrators, and the first illustrators worked rather like a renaissance artist would work. They didn't work from photographs in those days, they worked from live models. They'd do sketches without reference, without live

Circa 1979

models, and then finally they would work through a whole permutation of imagery to the point where eventually they would take photographs. My father never had to take photographs. He would use live models. Probably one of my greatest values was to be visually articulate at an early age. I found—no, I'm lost. I'm losing myself here.

Looking back, that I profited more in terms of becoming involved in art—apart from my own—making drawings in order to digest experiences. Apart from that childhood naturalness, the things that I used to enjoy most of all was meeting—via my uncle the publisher, who published a lot of Henry Lawson's things and so on. But there was in the late forties—and the house, the house I lived in always seemed to be nostalgically entrenched in black and white art, which seemed almost like somewhere in southern Italy or something like that, now I can sort of make a reference. But something like to explain a story to a group of people, a village, that are completely illiterate, via visuals. The old *Bulletin* was sort of political via an image rather than a scholarly verbiage.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Yes. Mike, when you went to Julian Ashton's, that was the first art school you went to?

JAMES GLEESON: Well, the first art school I went to was living in the house. I mean, my father was always drawing, but he was drawing because he worked at home. They allowed him to work at home. He thought he would go to war and they said, 'Oh no, you are too important, we'll keep you here to do the war illustrations or to deal with the visuals from that point of view'. I profited far more from—the introduction to art school was born out of my father talking about Will Ashton and Bill Mahoney and the *Smith's Weekly*. There was a heavy newspaper nostalgia around our house all the time.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Eventually I ended up on newspapers, you know, as a teenager.

JAMES GLEESON: Did you?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: I started off in advertising because my father used to say, 'Design is more important, colour is more important, typography is more important. That's the future. Photography's got a firm base now and we don't really need those people, those artists, to describe things in that type of format'.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: But when I took off for Ashton's, before I went to Ashton's I went into an advertising department and studied type and subsized adds so bad for *Women's Weekly*, *Women's Day*, that kind of thing, which was a brilliant introduction to compositional format in terms of moving things around within a rectangle or the format of the periodical. That's still with me. I'm still aware of that page, how you deal with the page in terms of impact.

JAMES GLEESON: Did you get much from your study at Ashton's?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: I never went to Ashton's as a full time student. We used to go around and go to the pub first and theatres and there was other young

Circa 1979

fellows around then and we just used to go to Ashton's. Well, the first day I went to Ashton's I started drawing the skull and I didn't have any trouble because my father gave me the skull when I was 10 and said, 'Right, do it with a very hard pencil'. He kept me on the hard pencil for a whole year and then he said, 'Well, why don't you start using a little bit of chiaroscuro with some mixed colour' rather like they did in the tints of newspapers, you know, like sanguine or whatever.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: When I got around to drawing the skull and the plaster cast, I had no trouble. I went through the whole thing in one day. I drew every object up to the Rodin boy. Henry came up to me, Henry Gibbons came up and said, 'You can go in the life class'. I said, 'No, I want to do this over and over', you know. So finally I got into the life class and Henry gave me, as my other brothers, he gave us all in sequence free lessons for as long as we wanted to come, because we could all draw. My father could draw.

JAMES GLEESON: Your other brothers were in art too?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Oh, they're still in art in various ways.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: But the thing I profited most from Gibbons that my father couldn't give me was a dry non-emotional static analytical approach to what I was drawing. By the time I got into the life room, where all the perverts were supposed to be, I found that Henry would come around and I'd mostly prefer to tear my drawings up before he could sort of lay anything on me. Because my father had been laying so much on me, like how long it takes to become one—not a pervert, an artist. But Henry, the main point Henry put forward to me which has had a resounding echo right through—and I really admire the old grey haired, scholarly, lousy, wooden type artist, but he was good. He didn't play around with any of your own personal sensibilities. It was attached ruthless analytical approach. Is it right to your vision, or is it not? The most important thing I can remember as profiting from those life drawing classes of Henry Gibbons was where is the weight of body and he'd say, 'Draw a vertical line'. Hang a plumb line on your page. That's not his terminology, that's my terminology.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: If the weight's on one leg, it goes through the pit of the neck and through the ankle. Then everything else is relative. But I profited from that and it still hangs there. It's like Newman's *Onement*. You know, the centrality of the painting, the frontality of the painting, and the frontality of the centrality of the experience of your model or of your drawing. But the problem there was that there was always only one model and I was composing one figure in relationship to the one figure of the rectangle. There was no compositional issues.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: So I got into trouble there for a long time. All my illustrations for *Women's Weekly*, *Woman's Day* and even when I started making money in London out of that, I found I only had one figure in the rectangle instead of two. There was no ambiguity of the background in relationship to the figure,

Circa 1979

which now interests me more, but I still see my recent paintings as figures—because of that early compositional problem—as figures, rather like figures coming into a room.

JAMES GLEESON: You went to the East Sydney Tech, afterwards National Art

—

MICHAEL JOHNSON: I used to go to the tech and Ashton's and to all the sketch clubs with all the cartoonists.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. All at the same time, in the same period?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Yes, all at the same time. Every night of the week we'd have a few drinks and say, Where do we go tonight? Like, what's on? And we'd go wherever we could. Like, at 15 I just found that the New South Wales Gallery was boring. There wasn't enough backlog of information, there was no introduction or anything, so it was more interesting just to sort of wander around. So we went to places like illustrators, cartoonists, that had sketch clubs and we used to pay our \$2.50 or whatever it was. But over and above that sketching thing, we always went every lunch hour we were working to the New South Wales Gallery. That's people that are still painting now, you know. We all sort of like somehow landed in advertising.

JAMES GLEESON: Mike, what years were these? What were the dates?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: This is throughout the fifties.

JAMES GLEESON: Fifties.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: From 1950 to '59.

JAMES GLEESON: When did you go to London?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Nineteen sixty.

JAMES GLEESON: Did you go to a school there, or what did you do?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: No, I didn't go to school there. Well, I went to a school for one week and when I found I'd got in I left immediately. Once I felt I was approved of in London I left. I had a thin time there financially and so I went around and took up illustration again and made a lot of money and bought some paint and got on with it. Then eventually got a teaching job out of the work that I'd done from making money from illustration.

JAMES GLEESON: Mike, you mentioned that you had worked as a conservator, or curator, illustrator?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Yes, yes. There was one period there I demolished buildings, I did interior decoration. I worked for a year at the same place that a lot of Australian artists worked at restoring pictures or gessoing frames, frame making. One of my magic jobs was to scaffold the whole street and paint the outside of a building on a cheap quote. The scaffolding fell to the street and I got it back up again and then I painted all these buildings out. But every lunch hour Francis Bacon would walk by and I'd sit down during my lunch break and we'd

Circa 1979

have a talk. I never went to his studio. I had no intention of going to his studio. He said, 'What's happening?', you know? He said, 'What are you doing?'. I said, 'I'm throwing the paint on now'. There was a beautiful inter-reaction of dialogue and then we'd go out on Friday nights and get pissed and he'd bring up a sale or whatever and then we'd go on. But I saw a lot of him and we used to go to the Victoria and Albert Museum in the lunch hours, because his studio was next to all these six complex of buildings I was painting by myself. We'd go and he'd like my past, like he'd like William Etty, you know, the guy that died at 28. He liked funny things and I'd say, 'Well, I like Courbet with pallet knife' and he said, 'Oh no, I like these other chiaroscuro illustrative type English artists', which had its sort of source for me and people like Frank Brangwyn or Dean Cornwall, the American, or Matt Clark and those cowboy Remington type illustrators which I could do. I didn't have Bacon's problem.

The most important person I met in England of everybody was pretty much a week after I arrived from Italy and I went around to the American Embassy and bang. The American Embassy had a show on, I think it was 1960. It was called Vanguard American Art. Walking up the steps was Roger Hilton. We went in with Roger and we walked around the show and Roger pointed out that Greenburg thought that the brown veils of Lewis were (inaudible). There was reference points made about American top critics interests in certain vanguard artists there. But then we went off and got pissed with Hilton and Hilton came back to my studio and the whole seven years I lived in England, once a month. He was kind of encouraging and always gave me money when I didn't have any money and that sort of thing. I learnt a lot from Hilton in relation to French painting rather than American painting.

JAMES GLEESON: What was your own painting like at that time?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Well, I was sort of like painting like Boticelli when I left Australia. Then I saw Boticelli and it was kind of like my illustrations, very lineal taut drawing, but incredible preoccupation with underpainting, over-painting, glazing. Almost like superimposing over—not really—but Modigliani's line or Degas line, but breaking up the spaces in between things, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. It was representational? You were still working figuratively?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Oh no, when I arrived in London—I've always have a dual ambiguous anxiety of wanting to be really loose with my painting and really tight. I'm comfortable with the tight thing. But I'm so comfortable with the loose thing that I'd go crazy. It would be too easy. Well, it wouldn't be too easy but I just find it too exciting. I'd become too indulgent. It's like what Kenneth Clarke says, you know, 'Inside the classicist there's the romantic', and vice versa. But I don't have any preference of the type of painting. I like soft gentle delicate painting, but I also like very hard mean, cruel, well-built painting.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: But even though I've got that ambiguity in myself, I think I'd be using both. You know, just a question of how I focus and control it. But going back to this Hilton, and there was this general environment of meeting all those successful Highgate Australian's too, because around that time Brian Robinson put on that large Australian show.

Circa 1979

JAMES GLEESON: Was this at the Whitechapel?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: At the Whitechapel which was, I think, '62. But there was that American show and there was people like Pollock. The wave had broken on the English shore of American art and the French thing was fatiguing and the Australian thing was a literal novelty of the colonies, you know, in terms of exotica.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: That didn't seem so exotic by the time it landed there. But it was a very interesting occasion and England was a peaceful, beautiful place to live in, which eventually ended up with Carnaby Street and the Beatles. It was a kind of like very easy time. Finally it got too sweet and too easy and too promiscuous and too comfortable, and we were all living in one of those apartments, even though we had no money. Then finally I decided to come back to Australia, just to the abrasiveness of Australia.

JAMES GLEESON: What year was that?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: In '67, late '67, in order to go to America, where originally I put my name down when I was 13, but there was like a waiting list so I dropped that. But really I wanted to go to America all the time, because the American illustrators were there. At that stage, had I gone to America I would have been an illustrator, not a painter.

JAMES GLEESON: What year did you get to America for the first time?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Oh, I came back here '67 and I left in 1969.

JAMES GLEESON: Did you exhibit here?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Yes, I had two exhibitions here, one in Sydney and one in Melbourne. Then I went to New York, like the last month of '69, and got into that one.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, and you were there quite a few years?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Yes, I was there for about seven years.

JAMES GLEESON: Did you find that stimulating, exciting?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Well, unlike England, I found I could always work in England, I never stopped working. I covered all my walls, my ceiling and suitcases. I'd go out and tick up gold frames and never pay for them and sell all the works but forget to go and pay for the frames and leave half behind, half my work behind. All the framing companies still own a lot of my works because I never came back to collect them because I wasn't prepared to pay. But during my English situation, which is kind of like—not really—do all the dishwashing, demolishing, sorting furs, everything, which is beautiful when you're young. But on the way to England I got off the boat at Greece. This girl convinced me to get off the boat because she said, 'That's where art starts'. I said, 'I'm not interested in that classical routine, I'm only interested in recent developments in art'. She said, 'You get off the boat'. I got off the boat and I stayed for three months,

Circa 1979

worked on a fishing boat. These girls that convinced me I stayed with too. Then I rode a donkey out of Greece and went overland to London and I literally just walked across to London and I arrived in London with a pair of shorts.

JAMES GLEESON: This was the first time when you arrived? Yes.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Shorts, bare feet and no shirt, brown as a berry.

JAMES GLEESON: What about New York? Did you work much there or was it too disturbing? What?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Oh, in London I always felt comfortable. I always could go back, see a show and digest it. It's that kind of place. You go back and say, 'Right'. Put sixpence in the meter and keep warm and get on with it. I found I was digesting things at a greater speed. But really when I got back to Australia, and now I look at my Australian works that I made in Australia—having resolved that English trip, not so much the Italy thing or the French thing—I found that they were everything I tried to avoid of the pop American influence on the English and all the English guys I knew very well. But when I went to New York it was a different story altogether, I just found. From the experience of going to England, like I was on the verge of becoming an English artist and I was representing. I could have, I was offered a lectureship in the college I was teaching at. I was on the verge. But when I got back to Australia I sort of like consolidated my experience in England, and now that I look back I find all that work affected by the environment of having lived in England. It wasn't Stubbs, it wasn't as good as Stubbs or Hilton, because I found that most English artists were translating the influx of what—it was always coming from somewhere else. But when I went to New York I found that I couldn't work that easy. I didn't go there to make it. I didn't go to England to make it, I just went to study. But in going to New York the stimulus was so consistent. There was no way that I could accommodate, and I had no intention of becoming super eclectic or hybrid out of those earlier generations of artists that I always loved, and I was always aware of fine reproduction or the odd painting. But in New York I didn't work that well. I mean, I just think I work a lot better in Australia because I can reflect and I can sort of put myself first, as it were, rather than something in the middle of my porridge, you know, that I have to get rid of before I eat it, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: Mike, you came back to Australia briefly, was it, in '74?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: To teach for a year in '75? Is that right?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Yes, I came back in '75 to Queensland. I chose to come in through the back door because I knew if I came back to Sydney I'd go back straight back to New York.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Now I don't feel like that any more because I've been back here three and a half, four years. But I chose to go to Queensland because it's tropical.

JAMES GLEESON: Was it Townsville?

Circa 1979

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Yes. I'm into seafoods and things like that. It was a time to just think. You know, I gave myself a year to think about—the abrasion of stimulation from everybody I always loved, I saw in retrospect. Every single person that I admired I saw in retrospective. In terms of retrospective one-man shows and so on. It was just like an on-going onslaught. I mean, I should have become a curatorial scholar or an art dealer from what I've gained from going to New York. I've always had a natural accessibility to qualities and dimensions of artists. It was very profitable, New York, from that point of view. But I couldn't work there that easily. Coming back to Australia and landing in Queensland just seemed like an easier way to break down the thing, rather like coming back from London to engage the vulgarity of the American influence in Australia in order to hit New York where it's a little bit more rough. Like I was picked on as a teenager so I figured that I'd come back to Australia, get picked on, then go to New York and no one would pick on me. Well, during my London times which was 1960 to '67 I had the luxury of scraping enough money together to go to the South of France, and I went down Sigean right through to Salvador Dali's beach.

JAMES GLEESON: Figueres.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: South of Sigean there's a place called Le Lac and I stayed there in this great castle. I used to get up at five o'clock in the morning and I'd paint. Oh, I'd paint about 12 watercolours a morning. I was only there for about six weeks but what I did was I went down there and I was so saturated by the whole English cleverness of translating American and French culture, or French painting and sculpture, into their work, into their tradition, that when I went to the South of France and I—well, when I woke up in Paris I found a beautiful light, softer light than Australia. Not a harsh light but a beautiful light. Then when I got to the South of France I found myself painting more honestly and less eclectic, less hybrid, so I was probably already eclectic and hybrid in London. That was the thing I was suspicious of in New York in myself. So I used to go out in the morning and do watercolours and beautiful watercolours. I'd walk through the vineyards and I'd find a pond and there'd be an old wasted post in the middle. Kind of like a fresh water poddy mullet pond here. Like an intimate private backwater. I'd say, 'Right, the sky is reflected in the water, there's a post', and I'd get into this sort of green-grey, delicate yellow, beautiful light. I got into the light. I celebrated light by going to France. I couldn't find any light but I still had the greys of the objects with me from England. I painted a whole set of watercolours. When I went back to London, returned to London, I laid all the drawings out and I put them in a gigantic painting and naively called it—and represented Australia on a travelling show through Germany and England and all European countries. What I did was I recomposed all these experiences of France into one painting. Every young friend came around and helped me frame it and it was massive painting, but no one seemed to notice it on its travels. But it was a terrific exercise. It was like trying to compile an experience, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: A synthesis of all the—

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Yes, that's right.

JAMES GLEESON: Where's the painting now, Mike?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Oh, I rolled it up and when I was leaving England I thought: oh, just slash it because like that's over. It wasn't a great painting but it was a good idea. It was in oil and wax.

Circa 1979

JAMES GLEESON: What about the watercolours you did? Where are they?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: They're scattered all over the world. In actual fact, I got depressed when I got back to London and I went up to the frame company and said, 'Hey, you frame all these and I'll pay the bill next week'. I had a little exhibition in my studio and I sold them all. I endeavoured to live and finally there was a whole pile of paper plus the frames and I threw them all out the window in a moment of depression of being back in England. Friends came around and collected them all back together and threw the frames away and brought them back sort of like a month later and I framed them again and then my friends own them all now. They're all over the place. In fact, one guy used to come around. I mean, when I got married David Hockney was there. The painting in the Victorian Museum has some relationship, but the whole English art community was at our marriage which was in '62. They were like hanging around the stairs and stuff. But what's interesting is that all those little intimate private notes had diagonals, verticals, and they seemed to be related directly to what I'm doing now. You know, the transparent thing and the opaque thing. But one guy in particular came around at the opening and said, 'I really like your work, but would you paint my portrait and my wife's portrait?'. I said, 'Sure, for like a hundred quid each'. I went through the whole thing of unveiling. But in the meantime they were buying all my little South of France things and my little private studies. I used to just sit on the floor and just paint all day. I never stopped painting. In fact, I've never stopped painting.

JAMES GLEESON: No. Mike, the name of the place was Le Lac?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: How do you spell it?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: L-E/L-A-C.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, the Lake, yes.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: The Lake.

JAMES GLEESON: Was it near Sigean you mentioned?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Yes, south of Sigean. A friend of mine, Wendy Paramour, went down there and she went looking for a place. She wrote to me and I said, 'Go find a place with Byzantine tiles' and she found it. It was six stories high and we never went to the first floor it was so big. With a pump and it was five pounds a week.

JAMES GLEESON: Was Whiteley in Sigean then?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Yes, he came down there too, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: At the same time when you were down at Le Lac?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Yes, well, he was there. But the guy that's got the best collection of my work in the world are my private little studies and that's Michael Wells who's married to Suzannah York. He used to come and buy things all the time. I'd build a collection for him of Berninis and Rodins. We'd go out together

Circa 1979

and I'd just say, 'Right'. I used to try and sell him the contemporary things like Milton Avery, but he used to get shunned because they felt he wasn't informed about that. But I was informed about that. They were like a thousand pounds then.

JAMES GLEESON: Good lord. Well, Mike, let's get on now to the paintings we have of yours. The earliest one we have is this one called *Landscape Sofala, New South Wales* bought in 1973 from the Artarmon Galleries. We haven't got a photograph, but it's in Bangkok at the moment. Can you recall it?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Is Artarmon Galleries the same—

JAMES GLEESON: Art Lovers. It's the same gallery.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Oh well, originally I showed this painting in '59, '60, before I left for England and I showed it at Macquarie Galleries.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, so it's a resale from the gallery.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: It was a group show. That's the only work now that I'm aware of. I was paid for that when I was in England, but all the other works have been lost in their files because they were unframed and they can't account for them.

JAMES GLEESON: The Macquarie?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: But they were mostly studies of the Rocks, but this was on the occasion where Brett Whiteley and myself went out. We used to go out to the bush a lot and paint. This was an academic little conventional painting, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: It's quite small, I notice.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Tiny, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. What was the medium, can you remember?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Well, how come it's in Bangkok?

JAMES GLEESON: It's probably on loan to an embassy, the Australian Embassy there.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Well, it's in oil. Lloyd Rees showed us how to do that. It was masonite, glue size, a good quality cotton duck glued down, then cotton, then glue size again over that, broken down about eight times, sealed and let stretch dry on the masonite. Then it's just plain Windsor & Newton's oil paint and easy to restore.

JAMES GLEESON: So it's no problem about that one.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Except I think that anything that's going to restore it, if it has a sense, if the person's alive and there's a gestural sensibility of weight of brush stroke, I don't think any restorer can mind that.

Circa 1979

JAMES GLEESON: No, no.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: I think that that is probably a bold little painting, but I think there would be sort of, you know, a variant on the weight of how the paint was applied that doesn't get mimed easily.

JAMES GLEESON: No, No.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Not that one could ever repaint it, not even the same person.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, it's probably one that it's not likely to face the possibility of much damage.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: I think that's quite safe, that painting.

JAMES GLEESON: Mike, we've got the wrong photograph with the right card in this one. We've got a card called *Gentle 1* 1969, acrylic on canvas, but we've got a photograph of a painting called *Frontal red*.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: That's correct. *Frontal red* is a painting that I can't completely account for. I believe it was damaged at some stage in France. In transit it was damaged. But would you like me tell you something about *Gentle 1*?

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes please.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: *Gentle 1* is—for the restorer's information, right?

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: *Gentle 1* is painted on cotton duck.

JAMES GLEESON: Acrylic?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Acrylic.

JAMES GLEESON: Right.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: The yellow area is yellow ochre, local chromocryll with white added.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: The exterior blue zone around the edge is yellow ochre mixed with cerulean and white—the same chromacryl, a local product. The surrounding blue of the interior bars is without yellow and it has cerulean and white with no yellow. So there's a slight difference of the interior blue and the exterior blue in terms that the exterior blue has a little of the ochre.

JAMES GLEESON: Mike, how do you prepare the duck? Do you paint straight on to the cotton duck, or do you size it, prepare it in any way?

Circa 1979

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Well, in most cases I stretch the canvas. In this case, of this particular painting *Gentle 1*, is English canvas and it has a powder size within the duck.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: So that when you lay some water on, it seals the surface.

JAMES GLEESON: Can we have that one—you've got a copy of that—just to identify it? Good. Okay, so that already has a surface. It's a commercial kind of canvas that you can buy and it's already prepared?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Yes. Well, you can buy up until next year. Most cotton ducks are introducing nylons and synthetic bases. I've found that most canvas now has some—I don't work on it myself. All the canvas I've painted up to date, is pure cotton duck.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. All the ones that we've got, except that early one, are acrylic? The first one, the *Sofala* one is oil.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: *Sofala* one is oil. That's acrylic, *Gentle 1*.

JAMES GLEESON: *Corrugated*?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: *Corrugated 1* is Jim Cobbs chromocryll. This painting—

JAMES GLEESON: That's *Emperor*.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: That's a homemade paint. Cornealson pigment, pure pigment, which is—

JAMES GLEESON: Cornealson?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Cornealson, which is out of business now. It's a straight lemon yellow pigment. The white line is the raw duck itself, raw cotton duck, and the interior is mid-chrome yellow pigment mixed with a PVC, which all yellows easily mix with, greens don't, and fugitive reds don't.

JAMES GLEESON: *Veronese*?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: *Veronese* is painted in Le Franc, which is branded Flash acrylic paint which is in genuine pigment before the company changed hands. But now they've gone back to the original pigment, but that pigment is quite reliable and still available and will be available for the next 10 years.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. I notice on the back it says flash vinylic.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Vinyl.

JAMES GLEESON: Vinyl. V-Y-N-N-Y-L.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Well, the company's name is called Le Franc and they're stationed in France and beautiful pigment, the best pigment, but very low in glue content.

Circa 1979

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: So it has a tendency to burnish and mark easily, but after two and a half years it tends to seal itself. Even though the glue dries underneath, it tends to get tougher.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes. Can we go back to *Corrugated painting*? Now that is a problem picture in a sense because it's a very complex construction, isn't it? Mike, could you tell us something about the actual physical construction of the painting. You know, it's based on a timber framework.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Well, it's called *Corrugated painting* but, in actual fact, all the angles within the painting, raised or receding, are all at 45 degrees. But this particular stretcher was milled crudely. I wasn't present when it was milled. I believe that this painting, the actual structure, could be rebuilt, either fabricated with ply or cut. A 45 degree cut isn't a problem.

JAMES GLEESON: No.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Then it could be mitred and reassembled and re-stretched. I know, in this case I know all the colours and the hue of the colours, and there's not a great deal of underpainting. They're all fundamentally straight Australian made acrylics, chromocryll in this case. I seriously think that this painting should be rebuilt and repainted rather than restored. I think it's a mess.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, from this photograph I can't remember now looking at it recently. But it does look as though it's been abraded on all the edges.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: All the surfaces have been burnished and mutilated. The paint has been erased back to the canvas, and I just think that it will always show. You know, in order to restore it back to its original feel, I just don't think it's possible.

JAMES GLEESON: You wouldn't have any sort of ethical objections to repainting it? You wouldn't consider it a different picture if you repainted it?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Not in that case I wouldn't. I have drawings, colour notes and everything to verify that it would be exactly the same in every way.

JAMES GLEESON: Well look, I think the best thing is for you when you are in Canberra next time to look at it and just come to a conclusion about whether it can be restored or whether it should be redone completely.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Well, I just think in this case that I have so much documentation on this particular work, and it was a very important work to me, I think that would be a restoration in itself. Even though that 1) people could argue about that. I think that my documentation of how I went about that, and at that particular stage of my career I was very thorough in documenting and dealing with the amounts of colours. I was actually measuring the colour and I know exactly what I did on that painting.

JAMES GLEESON: So that there would be no problem in recreating it completely?

Circa 1979

MICHAEL JOHNSON: No problem at all providing, you know—no, I don't see any problem at all with that painting being repainted anew.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. So that it would be an exact replica of the original.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Mm, which is not often the case. But this case is uniquely a clear case of something that I could do.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, it would be worth doing it because I think it's—

MICHAEL JOHNSON: I think it would be really—because I think it's quite a rare painting.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: I think it's a painting worth retaining and the fact that I have all the documentation, the exact documentation, and I have a close relationship with my paint manufacturer that could match the colour.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, that's certainly worth taking further.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: I have references, not only lineal, colour reference, I also have painted canvas reference of that painting.

JAMES GLEESON: Really? Oh well, that would solve that problem. There are no problems about this, as far as I know. *Emperor* is in very good condition and so is *Veronese* in very good condition.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Yes, there may be a scuffmark, odd scuffmark, but I don't think there's any problems there.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, Mike, that really covers it, I think, unless you've got anything you'd like to add. But that from our point of view really covers it very well indeed. Thank you.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Well thanks, there's nothing I can say other than I like to see all my paintings cared for and looked after in the organic state they were created in.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, of course. That one, *Frontal red*, in your opinion is a complete write off?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Well, there again, I wrote it off in a moment of anxiety, of irritation.

JAMES GLEESON: Should you look at again?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: I would like to see it again.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, when you come down to look at *Corrugated painting*, perhaps you should have another look at that.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Well, there's a 10 year's elapse since I saw that painting before, and I sent it back in anger.

Circa 1979

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: But it's quite likely that it could take some patches, or it may even be repairable, but that particular painting—

JAMES GLEESON: Was it a structured one?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: That particular painting was homemade paint, which is very strong and very durable, but unavailable. But it's likely the colours could be matched. I'd need to see it.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. It wasn't a structured painting like this one, was it?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Mm.

JAMES GLEESON: It was?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah yes, oh well (inaudible).

MICHAEL JOHNSON: It was built in one, two, three, four stretchers and the area of lemon yellow was parallel to the wall. Stable from behind.

JAMES GLEESON: Was the problem not with the structure?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: There were no colour problems in that painting. I know all the colours. It was lemon yellow in the recess, a straight ultramarine blue on the sides, and scarlet red on the top and a deep carmine red on the base. Those particular paintings were very detached in their making and their application and they were just flat colour soaked into the canvas with two coats.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: It's not a problem. *Corrugated painting* is not a problem either to reconstruct.

JAMES GLEESON: Good.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: And not a costly problem either.

JAMES GLEESON: Okay, Mike.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Where any of my spray paintings would be a real problem.

JAMES GLEESON: These were brushed?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Yes, brushed.

JAMES GLEESON: Do we have any of your spray paintings?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: No.

Circa 1979

JAMES GLEESON: All the ones we have are brushed?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: There's only one painting that you may inherit from—

JAMES GLEESON: Philip Morris?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Philip Morris.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Which is a spray painting and apparently has a lot of acid finger abrasions on it which I'd need to see.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Okay. Thanks very much, Mike. Note: The artist wishes the following information to be added to the tape.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: All content of this tape dated 30/7/1979 recorded on the above date I wish to be placed in my hands before it is to be used or considered for any use without my approval by me personally.

JAMES GLEESON: And that's signed by you?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: And that's signed by me.

JAMES GLEESON: And by myself.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: And it's also signed by James Gleeson.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Now, by that, you mean all contents, you mean a typescript of the tape.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: The typescript of the tape I expect to see before it's put to any use whatsoever.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: I would prefer to consider the typescript that has been taped on this date the 30/7/79, so that it's not used in any way that I don't consider right.

JAMES GLEESON: The only use we had in mind was for the preparation of the catalogue and for future information for the Conservation Department of the Gallery.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Well, it's only fair that certain elements of the tape may be of a personal nature that I may wish to withdraw from the manuscript of its final use.

JAMES GLEESON: Quite.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: I would like to make that a positive statement in relationship to having made the tape.

Circa 1979

JAMES GLEESON: Fair enough. Well, once the typescript is made we will send it to you and then you can edit it and from the basis of that edited version of the tape—

MICHAEL JOHNSON: You may use that for any use related to your intended purpose, plus educational use.

JAMES GLEESON: Good thanks, Mike. That's fine.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Thank you.

JAMES GLEESON: Thank very much.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Thank you.