

JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: Mrs Ronnie Rowan (the artist's sister) on DAVID STRACHAN

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JAMES GLEESON: Ronnie, we've been looking and sorting out some of the photographs and cards, and also going through Daniel's book on David. You did mention, I think, that Daniel had done a lot of our homework for us. A lot of the basic facts, the biographical information is there in that book. There may be perhaps some refinements and additions that you could make in due course.

RONNIE ROWAN: There could be a few, mainly because at the time that Daniel was doing the book I had many things on my mind and I may not have given him the correct information.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

RONNIE ROWAN: But this could be checked back.

JAMES GLEESON: All right. Well, that would be marvellous. If we could have the basis of Daniel's research plus your confirmation and amendment or addition to it, that would give us a really solid basis of material to work from. All right. Well, now let's look at the actual works that we have of David's in the National Gallery at the moment. There's a little bit of confusion later on, but the first one's we've got are pretty straightforward. The first one is one called *Chrysanthemums* and it is oil on canvas dated 1959. In fact, it's signed D. Strachan '59, lower right. Any comments to make about that? I think it's fairly straightforward and very characteristic one of David's of that time, don't you?

RONNIE ROWAN: I would say and, I don't know, I've got nothing to add to that.

JAMES GLEESON: You don't recollect it in any particular way?

RONNIE ROWAN: No. Except that he came back to Australia in May, I think, 1960. So it was at a subsequent—

JAMES GLEESON: So it would have been painted abroad?

RONNIE ROWAN: Possibly. We would need to look in the scrapbook.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

RONNIE ROWAN: We could possibly find it listed.

JAMES GLEESON: If he came back in, you say, early '60, and this had been dated 1959.

RONNIE ROWAN: About May.

JAMES GLEESON: Where would he have been in '59?

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RONNIE ROWAN: Fifty-nine he would have been either in London or in Zurich.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. So the chances are it was painted abroad and not in Australia?

RONNIE ROWAN: Or in Italy.

JAMES GLEESON: In Italy.

RONNIE ROWAN: At the Daneo's.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah yes, yes. I know we have one of his paintings painted at the Daneo's. So that could have related to that same period when he was in Europe.

RONNIE ROWAN: Mm.

JAMES GLEESON: This obviously is an Australian subject. It's another flower piece called Wildflowers with pink boronia. Is there a definite name for that do you know? We've got all three written down, Flower piece (wildflowers with pink boronias).

RONNIE ROWAN: Bill Salmon could be of use there because he and David did quite a lot of painting together.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

RONNIE ROWAN: I think they met around about '62-'63, and they and Margaret Olley did a certain amount of painting and so forth with David.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. This is signed Strachan '66 lower left, also known as Still life with boronias. So we've got a confusion of titles we'll have to work out for our catalogue.

RONNIE ROWAN: Again, check in the scrapbook and look up the old catalogues.

JAMES GLEESON: Mm. It was bought from Artarmon Gallery in Sydney in February '67. So we need to decide on the final title for our catalogue.

RONNIE ROWAN: Well, do you want me to look?

JAMES GLEESON: If you could keep it in mind. It's a very important painting.

RONNIE ROWAN: It is indeed, and very typical.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, it is. Now, the next one, Ronnie, is Creswick landscape with Madame Berry mines. Now that's a fairly biggish one, I think. Yes. About 1967, would that be the right date?

RONNIE ROWAN: I would think so, yes. It could be done at the same time as that one on the wall over there.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah yes, yes. That's a Creswick one.

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RONNIE ROWAN: That's a Creswick one. Shall I check the date of that?

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, if you wouldn't mind. Ronnie, that one over there is dated '68.

RONNIE ROWAN: Sixty-eight.

JAMES GLEESON: And he was doing a lot of landscape painting around Creswick at that time. Was he there in '67, or do you think that this—

RONNIE ROWAN: He could easily have been there in '67.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

RONNIE ROWAN: He used to go at least several times a year there, and he was just having a landscape painting jag at the time.

JAMES GLEESON: So that is certainly the right general period, '67 or '68 would be right for that.

RONNIE ROWAN: Oh yes, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: It's signed D. Strachan lower left in ochre paint, purchased from the Darlinghurst Galleries in Sydney in, oh, '67. So it can't be '68 then because if we bought it in June '67, it must be '67.

RONNIE ROWAN: No. No, it could not.

JAMES GLEESON: This was exhibited in his Darlinghurst Galleries exhibition in May 30, 1967. It must have been purchased by the Art Advisory Board at that time.

RONNIE ROWAN: Mm, that would be logical.

JAMES GLEESON: What about Madame Berry Mines? Have you anything to tell us about that? It was a mining area around Creswick, wasn't it?

RONNIE ROWAN: Well, Creswick being so close to Ballarat was very much a mining town.

JAMES GLEESON: Gold mining.

RONNIE ROWAN: All around, particularly to the north, there are these great mullock heaps of the cream clay or white quartz sticking up amongst all the sheep and the rest of the fields.

JAMES GLEESON: That must have attracted David's interest?

RONNIE ROWAN: Well, I think it's part of his childhood and I think this is why he loves Hill End so much. It's similar type of country, as far as I can see. Of course, as kids we used to slide down the mullock heaps on tin trays and things like that when we were very little.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

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RONNIE ROWAN: But, yes, gold mines and mine shafts are part of childhood.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. No particular memories of the Madame Berry mines, no story or significance about that? Or is it just one of many mines?

RONNIE ROWAN: No, the Madame Berry mine has got a particular story against it, but there again I would have to check on that for it.

JAMES GLEESON: Ronnie, there are possible sources where we can find out about the Madame Berry Mines. You mentioned Walter Withers *History of Ballarat*.

RONNIE ROWAN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: That was published when?

RONNIE ROWAN: That was published in the 1880's and I have a copy of that somewhere. But also Geoffrey Blainey, I think it was, published with Melbourne University Press a book on gold fields of Victoria. I feel there's something in that.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Good. So we could get further information from those sources. Good.

RONNIE ROWAN: I think.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, the Ibiza landscape. I don't know how those Spaniards pronounce it. David lived there for some time, didn't he?

RONNIE ROWAN: Well, he used to go and stay with Jean and Paul and he painted there, yes, quite a bit. Actually, I can't give you anything additional on this at all except that it was one of the paintings that was in Paddington Street at the time of his death.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. We bought it from the Bonython in March '74, 7 March 1974.

RONNIE ROWAN: No, I'm sorry.

JAMES GLEESON: But it would be characteristic of the landscapes that he painted at that time.

RONNIE ROWAN: Characteristic, yes, and maybe this was just a change that he was starting to do more landscapes. Remember how he did so many still lifes in his early ones and he had the figures in them?

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

RONNIE ROWAN: He seemed to be moving into landscape. This, I would say, would be one of the earlier ones before he came back to Australia and just did so many here.

JAMES GLEESON: Late fifties, do you think?

RONNIE ROWAN: Oh, that would be guessing. Ask Jean and Paul.

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JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes, they'd know. Right. Now, this takes us back to an earlier period. This is a portrait of Wolf Cardamatis as a quite young man. I would say probably painted in the very early forties. We've made a note on the card that it was possibly exhibited at his first one-man show in Macquarie Galleries on the 27 September 1944 as Catalogue No. 19. It's only a small work. We don't have the measurements here but it's, you know, only a quite tiny one. I knew he knew Wolf at that time, and I think Daniel points out in his book that they were both dancing in the Kirsova Ballet, or early in the forties anyway.

RONNIE ROWAN: Yes, that is so. I remember seeing them and going back stage afterwards, much to my joy, and there seeing the suspender belt hanging up with the stockings still attached. Nobody but a man would ever do that.

JAMES GLEESON: The drawing relates it to that period, doesn't it?

RONNIE ROWAN: I would think so, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: That slightly attenuated, elegant kind of drawing.

RONNIE ROWAN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Good. Now, a pencil study of a still life, very characteristically Strachanian. Is that the one over there I see?

RONNIE ROWAN: Well, that is the shape that he loved so dearly.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

RONNIE ROWAN: That is one of the ones from Paddington.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah ha. It's just an untitled still life pencil drawing showing some fruit with a suggestion of a vase of flowers on the right. It could date from almost any period.

RONNIE ROWAN: It could be anywhere because he always drew flowers, he always had, you know, compotes.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, it was one of the recurring motifs.

RONNIE ROWAN: Very typical. Yes, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: I notice it's signed by Bill Salmon, who was David's artistic executor.

RONNIE ROWAN: That's correct, and this number of A184 is possibly a cataloguing number of Bill's.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Good. This one is again I think very characteristic. He did a number of paintings with flowers, of faces emerging in flowers, or vases of flowers, and this seems to relate to that kind of painting, doesn't it?

RONNIE ROWAN: Yes.

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JAMES GLEESON: Except that this is a watercolour, I think. Coloured ink and pencil on thin white paper, again with Bill Salmon's number A63 in it. It's called *Leaning boy with flowers and face*. I suspect that's more a descriptive title than one actually given to it.

RONNIE ROWAN: That may have been a title made up by Bill and myself. Because, from memory, this was part of a collection of drawings that were found in a drawer under the divan and they were sort of spilling out. We listed them and, well, tried to sort out David's drawings from those of other peoples. But there are similar ones still in the drawer under the bed.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. This one looks a very direct immediate drawing, as though David's, you know, feeling his way towards the composition. For instance, he's moved the position of the hand several times, so it looked as though it could have been a preliminary study for what he intended to make into perhaps a final painting.

RONNIE ROWAN: Yes, and to me it would probably be sort of late forties, early fifties. Would you agree with that?

JAMES GLEESON: I think so, yes. It's a beautiful one.

RONNIE ROWAN: Possibly because of this sort of shutter down there, it could possibly be one of the Paris ones, when he was in the Rue de Chatillon.

JAMES GLEESON: The idea of the birds and the flowers and the faces does seem to relate to the book that he did, you know, *Accent and hazard*.

RONNIE ROWAN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: It seems to have that kind of period look about it. Would you agree with that?

RONNIE ROWAN: Yes, I would agree with that very much. He was painting a lot of that sort of thing at that stage.

JAMES GLEESON: That was what, '52?

RONNIE ROWAN: Fifty-one, I think.

JAMES GLEESON: Fifty-one?

RONNIE ROWAN: The work was finished on the 24th day of September, one thousand nine hundred and fifty-one at the Stramur Presse, Paris.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah, that's the book *Accent and hazard*.

RONNIE ROWAN: That's right. It was called the Stramur Presse because S-T-R-A, Strachan, Murray, Jacques Murray.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. It's a combination of the two names.

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RONNIE ROWAN: Yes. Jacques was a Belgian and he was the printing expert and, well, then they worked in with Alistair Kershaw who wrote the poems and that was that.

JAMES GLEESON: I remember Alistair Kershaw. I went over on the same ship with him the beginning of 1947.

RONNIE ROWAN: Good lord.

JAMES GLEESON: The next two are studies of angels, and they appear to relate to another book that David did. I think that was a little later, wasn't it? Nineteen fifty-three, was it?

RONNIE ROWAN: I'll have to look at the dates on that one and see. Nineteen fifty-three, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: This book was called?

RONNIE ROWAN: There you are. Has it got a title? I don't know that it has.

JAMES GLEESON: It's a book written by Charles Pegi in French, and I think it might be called [speaking French].

RONNIE ROWAN: Well done.

JAMES GLEESON: Very rusty. Now, there is an image of an angel carrying an olive branch in this book, but it's not identical with the one that we have the drawing of here. But it seems to me to be quite closely related to it in style and thought.

RONNIE ROWAN: There it is. Yes. He was drawing quite a number.

JAMES GLEESON: That one's called [speaking French].

RONNIE ROWAN: No page numbers.

JAMES GLEESON: No page number.

RONNIE ROWAN: But this actually, if you're interested, I could check in Sydney, because I've got proofs of this one, for instance.

JAMES GLEESON: The big double page of the fisherman.

RONNIE ROWAN: The big double page of the fishermen and the nets and the children. There are several runs of that with a different colour as it comes off.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

RONNIE ROWAN: These are all sort of folded away and need checking. I've also got one of that, which is sort of a flame of light, and the dividers, there are several drawings of those in the same collection.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Well, we can't get much closer to, you know, dating those than the fact that they seem to relate to his thinking about that book in

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1953. The other angel carries a harp and there's no equivalent to that in the book. Of course, angels did feature quite a lot in David's work, didn't they?

RONNIE ROWAN: In 1953 and thereabouts he was frequently in Brittany with Moya Dyring, possibly Margaret Olley. Don't they in Brittany have the little wayside chapels?

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

RONNIE ROWAN: This maybe where he was sort of influenced by that. Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. These are both signed by Bill Salmon too and given a number A161 and 17.

RONNIE ROWAN: They were just our listing numbers for probate.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, listing for catalogue.

RONNIE ROWAN: Whatever, cataloguing.

JAMES GLEESON: Good. Now, the following one we've got quite a deal of information about that because Daniel reproduces it in his catalogue. He shows it in that retrospective he arranged. It was Catalogue No. 53 in Daniel's book and illustrated on page 40. So his descriptions, I imagine, would be very accurate and detailed in that. It's *Trees in a walled garden*, pencil on graph paper, around 1949 to '50, and again with Bill Salmon's—

RONNIE ROWAN: Authenticating mark.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes. Were they written or were they rubber stamped?

RONNIE ROWAN: No, they were all written.

JAMES GLEESON: All written.

RONNIE ROWAN: All done in pencil.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

RONNIE ROWAN: The drawing on graph paper, well, the French do seem to sell graph paper more than a lot of other things, and David drew a lot on that at that stage.

JAMES GLEESON: Do you feel the subject is a French one? I think Daniel did seem to think that it was.

RONNIE ROWAN: I would say so. Forty-nine-'50 was the time that I was over there. He went with me down to the South of French and then across to Italy for his first visit to Italy. He used to draw quite a lot then because he didn't have the space to paint. Well, there were four of us in the car and not very much space to cart things. We were travelling too so you couldn't really have wet paintings everywhere.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no. Good.

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RONNIE ROWAN: Nothing more on that.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, this one too we've got quite a lot of information about. The sick girl, two girls, 1950, etching and aquatint, this one numbered 11 out of 30. I made a note here that the drawing for this etching in pen, black ink and wash is in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and it's dated around 1945. Catalogue No. 57 in Daniel Thomas' book. The print reproduced in the same book page 42, Catalogue No. 57. So this one's well documented.

RONNIE ROWAN: I don't think we really need any comments on that.

JAMES GLEESON: No. It's signed by David and dated 1950. It's not part a series of illustrations around the book, is it?

RONNIE ROWAN: Not that I know of but it's running very similar.

JAMES GLEESON: So it's not related to any sequence?

RONNIE ROWAN: Not that I know. It seems to be very similar to many of the things that were done at that time in the 1950's.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Good. Now, *The lovers*. This is a drawing. Lovers on a beach, pencil on cartridge paper, around 1955. It's reproduced in Daniel's book on page 41, catalogued as No. 56. It doesn't relate to a painting, does it? Or do you know of any painting that is based on that drawing?

RONNIE ROWAN: No, I would say that the girl's face is a similar sort of face in many—

JAMES GLEESON: Has a characteristic look.

RONNIE ROWAN: Has a characteristic look.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

RONNIE ROWAN: Well said. But, no, I couldn't give you any more detail about that. In fact, even looking at the back, the rocks in the background—

JAMES GLEESON: Possibly made up, yes.

RONNIE ROWAN: It's just made up, I would say.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Good.

RONNIE ROWAN: Can't help you.

JAMES GLEESON: Right. Now we come to a sequence that come from the book *Accent and hazard*, which is really a very pivotal work in David's output, I think. It's a very important book. He emerges as one of the, you know, important printmakers through this book and had a big effect when he came back, I think, showing these prints. He did them in Paris. Can you remember where he studied printmaking, the techniques of printmaking?

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RONNIE ROWAN: No. I think he got some help from a chap called Basil De Rakowitz, or some name like that.

JAMES GLEESON: In Paris?

RONNIE ROWAN: In Paris, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: He hadn't done anything in that way before he went to Paris?

RONNIE ROWAN: Not that I know of. But, you see, David was four and half years older than me and that makes a lot of difference, and mostly I was in Australia.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

RONNIE ROWAN: Brother Michael may be able to help then, because he did visit in Paris a few times then. But going back to the printmaking, no, the Stramur Presse was called so because of Strachan/Murray, Jacques Murray being the printer.

JAMES GLEESON: They set it up, did they?

RONNIE ROWAN: They set it up. It was at Rue de Chatillon in Paris. No, I'm sorry, I can't remember. I know where it was and I've got photos of it. There's a photo of David in his studio in the Georges catalogue of that exhibition and I've also got some photos that brother Michael took at that time.

JAMES GLEESON: Was their output large, as a press?

RONNIE ROWAN: No, no, it was minimal. They did this one book, this other one for—he did the drawings for the Pegi and he also did reproductions of a lot of the contemporary English painters of that time.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

RONNIE ROWAN: I've got pulls of those in Sydney. So if you're interested to see those any time, just let me know.

JAMES GLEESON: They were individual plates, not books?

RONNIE ROWAN: Oh no, no, no.

JAMES GLEESON: There were only the two books then?

RONNIE ROWAN: As books those are the only two that I know of.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, the key one seems to be the Alistair Kershaw book of poems, *Accent and hazard*. We don't seem to have the complete book but we do seem to have a very large number of plates from it plus some test proofs and drawings. So perhaps we could go through it and see just what we have got. First of all we've got a sheet, it's a double sheet which contains the poem, *The Lover*, on one side and a still life set against a sky and sea on the left hand side. The writing, which was etched into the plate, I gather—was it?

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RONNIE ROWAN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Is that David's writing?

RONNIE ROWAN: Not really. I think maybe he could have done it that way but it possibly is Jacques Murray.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah, I see.

RONNIE ROWAN: Because it's too neat and it's too upright for David.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. How on earth did they etch it, because it has to be done back to front, doesn't it?

RONNIE ROWAN: I don't know.

JAMES GLEESON: It must be awful difficult.

RONNIE ROWAN: This where you ask a craftsman, is it, not a sister?

JAMES GLEESON: Anyway, we have that one. It's from the book *Accent and hazard*. It's the introduction to *The Lovers* and the poem. The format is that they're in separate entities, each has a title page, then the poem with perhaps a vignette on one side, followed by a double page illustrating the theme. That's the usual format, isn't it, about each poem? So the poem itself, and the vignette for *The Lover* 1951, etching and aquatint. I think that's all we need to about that one.

RONNIE ROWAN: I think so. Although that vignette there is very similar to the drawing that we were looking at earlier of the compote.

JAMES GLEESON: It is indeed, isn't it?

RONNIE ROWAN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: It's one of David's recurring themes.

RONNIE ROWAN: Exactly.

JAMES GLEESON: One of his great loves.

RONNIE ROWAN: Yes, yes, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Now, the next one is *The poet*. The format is the same with the etched text of the poem on the right, and on the left an image of two birds in flight, doves perhaps.

RONNIE ROWAN: Well, you see, the doves that we were talking of earlier in the drawings, sort of the same angels, doves, birds, life, birth, death, seems to be recurring so much at that time.

JAMES GLEESON: That's right. So we have that. That's quite straight forward. The next one is a similar treatment for the poem *The criminal* with a hand holding what appears to be a dead bird as the vignette opposite the poem. That again from *Accent and hazard*. Straightforward. This is a little vignette but we haven't

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got the poem that it relates to. Oh, it wasn't, it was a separate thing, wasn't it, in the book?

RONNIE ROWAN: That was a vignette of something.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. From *The criminal*.

RONNIE ROWAN: From *The criminal*.

JAMES GLEESON: From *The criminal* poem, yes. A boy with head in his arms, that's right. So that relates to *The criminal* poem, but it's without the actual poem next to it.

RONNIE ROWAN: That's right.

JAMES GLEESON: Now we come to one of the big double page etchings, *The idiot* from *Accent and hazard*. But we don't have the vignette with the poem.

RONNIE ROWAN: No. It may have been that by the time you got these, they weren't a full set and so forth. Actually, this is one that he liked himself, because he's got it framed in Paddington Street.

JAMES GLEESON: Has he?

RONNIE ROWAN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: So we don't have the full book, we only have bits and pieces from it. This is *The poet*, from the *Accent and hazard*. We seem to have two copies of it, one signed by David Strachan, lower right, below image in pencil, and one signed by Bill Salmon. So we seem to have bought two copies of this illustration for *The poet*, the full page one.

RONNIE ROWAN: Yes. The only thing there is that it may have been that when you acquired these, there were some that were a gift and some were a purchase. Maybe this was part of the gift thing because, you see, you'll notice that one's got a price on and the other has nothing.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

RONNIE ROWAN: This could possibly have been something related to it.

JAMES GLEESON: That's right, yes.

RONNIE ROWAN: I'll check in Sydney and see if I've got any copies of letters either from me or from you to help you out on this.

JAMES GLEESON: Right. Now this one we have no photograph of. It's from again the book *Accent and hazard*, *The poet*, one reverse. The poet is a vignette of two flying doves. Would that relate to that one?

RONNIE ROWAN: Quite easily.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

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RONNIE ROWAN: I would say.

JAMES GLEESON: So it could be just the vignette without the poem itself.

RONNIE ROWAN: I would say so. Just hold on a moment.

JAMES GLEESON: Anyway, it does seem to be a separate one to the one with the poem on it, because it is inscribed by Bill Salmon.

RONNIE ROWAN: By Bill.

JAMES GLEESON: There's no inscription on the one that we've got the photograph of, so I take it we do have two copies of that vignette. Now we come to *The drunkard* and, although we don't have a version of the final etching, we seem to have two drawings, preliminary drawings for it, and two trial proofs for it. We have one drawing illustrated. Well, I don't know whether we've got two drawings or we've got two cards for the same drawing.

RONNIE ROWAN: Untitled working drawing, drawing for etching. I think it's very difficult. Signed—

JAMES GLEESON: The measurements are—the only thing that makes me doubt it here, on one card they say there's no inscription, whereas quite clearly there is an inscription on that card, A167.

RONNIE ROWAN: That would be Bill Salmon's number, I would say.

JAMES GLEESON: So I would think that this probably came in—ah, it did. Or did it? It came in the 10th '54. No, it came in the same date.

RONNIE ROWAN: Came in the same date and came in the same thing.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. So the possibility is that it's two different cards for the same drawing. The possibility remains that we could have two versions of it. So that will have to be checked out in our collection. All right.

RONNIE ROWAN: Just as a matter of interest, earlier you asked me to check through and see if there were any discrepancies. See on the back here this information that he was born in Salisbury England in 1919, Adelaide 1921. Well, by then my father was in Creswick, because brother Michael was born in 1921 in December in Creswick and father had been there for quite some time. This actually is something I'll check with Mama, the date in which they came to Creswick. Because I think it was in—

JAMES GLEESON: Earlier than that.

RONNIE ROWAN: I think it was earlier than that.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. We probably got that information from Alan McCulloch's book.

RONNIE ROWAN: It could be.

JAMES GLEESON: I know he's not always absolutely accurate in detail.

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RONNIE ROWAN: But these are sort of fiddly little details that I'd better check up.

JAMES GLEESON: All right?

RONNIE ROWAN: Okay.

JAMES GLEESON: Good. Talking about dates, you know, so many people have assumed that because David was born in Salisbury in England in 1919 that he was English, that he came from an English family and you moved out here afterwards. But that's not true. You'd been an Australian family for many, many generations before that.

RONNIE ROWAN: That's right. The first one came out in about 1830 to Hobart and he was one of the first silversmiths in Tasmania, listed in the book on silver there. My mother is English but her family had been out in Sydney town in the 1840's, or some members of them. In fact, one of them was in Gosford in 1856. I have a letter from him written back to the family in England talking about the oranges on the trees in midwinter and so forth. So we've been mixed up.

JAMES GLEESON: To get back to *Accent and hazard*, we seem to have no final proof of *The drunkard*, but we have two trial proofs which are just tentatively listed as the first trial proof, because it apparently has two colours, two colour etching and aquatint, and an ex- trial print with three colours. Does that seem to be right to you? Did David use three colours in that Drunkard one?

RONNIE ROWAN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: He did?

RONNIE ROWAN: I think he did. Let's look in the book and see.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, we've checked and there are three colours. He's used black, ochre and red. I can't remember having seen the two trial proofs, but I think what is most logical is that we've got one with the black and ochre without the red, because that seems to be an overprint to get this sort of orange-y colour. Then we've got a final proof with the red added. Anyway, we can check that out by looking at the two proofs.

RONNIE ROWAN: I would say so.

JAMES GLEESON: Good. Well, that seems to clear that up. Clearly, we don't have a complete set of the *Accent and hazard* book. We've got two important parts missing, at least, and some other parts as well.

RONNIE ROWAN: I think that's likely. After all, it was only an edition of 50 copies, I think, as it says here. There were only 50 copies for sale, and 15 copies not for sale, marked A to O. David has got—or did have—the A copy, and this one here of mine is number 20.

JAMES GLEESON: Signed by both.

RONNIE ROWAN: Signed by all three.

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JAMES GLEESON: Oh, yes.

RONNIE ROWAN: All of them were signed.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Good. Right. Now we come to one that's caused us a little bit of a problem.

RONNIE ROWAN: Oh, there we are, look. 'In facsimile of the author's manuscript', so it's Alistair Kershaw's writing. Told you it was too neat for David. Look at the signatures, you see?

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

RONNIE ROWAN: Alistair Kershaw. Look at his A, it's absolutely right.

JAMES GLEESON: Of course, yes.

RONNIE ROWAN: David could never maintain that upright.

JAMES GLEESON: So that clarifies that.

RONNIE ROWAN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Now we come to one, we've called it, Untitled head of a youth, etching and aquatint. It's not signed and it has no inscriptions. But it is very closely related to the right side of *The criminal in Accent and hazard*, but the image seems to be reversed. At least the hand is reversed. The treatment of the face is somewhat different. It's obviously not the same plate. I think it might have been either a completely new plate, or a completely re-bitten plate. I don't know. But something that's interesting too is that this full one of *The criminal* was exhibited in the Society of Artists where it was reviewed on April 23 1961 in *The Mirror* by John Olsen as *Rebirth*.

RONNIE ROWAN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: So I think David must have shown that full one as *Rebirth*.

RONNIE ROWAN: I think so, and it's very similar to the one that I have which he titled *The poet*, which has this personal inscription 'The poet for Ronnie', which he sent out to me in 1959, by hand, Alan Bourke. Because they'd been friends in London and Alan was coming back to Canberra.

JAMES GLEESON: Now this one, it's almost identical I think with yours. It's obviously from the same plate.

RONNIE ROWAN: I would say so.

JAMES GLEESON: So he called it there 'The poet for Ronnie'.

RONNIE ROWAN: On the one that he sent me, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: So it's got a complicated history because it does relate to *The criminal* and also *The poet*.

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RONNIE ROWAN: Well, I suppose crime and poetry were (inaudible) hand to hand.

JAMES GLEESON: We're on firm ground now, except that there's a little confusion about the title of this one. We've got it called *Interior with still life*. I notice in Daniel's book and in the exhibition where it was exhibited—it's Catalogue No. 27 and reproduced on page 27—it was called *Studio interior with flowers*.

RONNIE ROWAN: Could you just hold on and I will check.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, Ronnie, we seemed to have tracked down this painting as being exhibited in Canberra at Bible House from 21 to 29 June 1963, where it is catalogued as *Studio interior with flowers*. It seems that is the title Daniel has given it too in his catalogue on David and perhaps that's the one we should stick to.

RONNIE ROWAN: I would say I remember that show.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

RONNIE ROWAN: David stayed here, as also did Moya Dyring who was out at the time. They came in, and we were fascinated hanging the paintings in Bible House which was then the best place to hold an art show in Canberra. That's about all the comments I can make on that one.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. I think Daniel's given us quite a lot of information about that, that this was the studio in the Daneo's property near Rome?

RONNIE ROWAN: Yes. Again I would suggest you talk to Jean and Paul on that, because they were there with him at this time. There was a tremendous lot of space and these people had the freedom of being able to, well, just have studio space and work away in a congenial atmosphere.

JAMES GLEESON: The Daneo's were the Italian Ambassador to Australia, wasn't he, or Consul General?

RONNIE ROWAN: Well, I don't know what his title was. I think he'd been in Sydney first before they came to Canberra. They were here in the late fifties, somewhere round about that time. Because even though I had met them because I'd sold them books, I didn't realise that they knew David and Jean and Paul. Silly.

JAMES GLEESON: I know they were deeply interested in artists and Australian art.

RONNIE ROWAN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: I know that they did, you know, throw their place open to artists in Italy. So I will ask Jean and Paul to elaborate on those circumstances. David did a number of paintings not only of the interior but of the outside of that house, didn't he?

RONNIE ROWAN: Yes. My regret is that I don't have one of the inside. I've got one of the outside. Another one of the outside won the Dahlia Festival, I think it

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was, in Devonport in '61, which was one of his first things that he got when he came back. He did some beautiful paintings of the old wicker covered wine bottles in the same period with the big broad floorboards.

JAMES GLEESON: This is the late fifties. Fifty-nine I think this one was dated.

RONNIE ROWAN: Yes, round about then.

JAMES GLEESON: Good. Well, that really comes to the end of the ones we can be positive about or pretty clear about. Now we come to problem areas. We have a painting called *Young girl on a balcony*, it's oil on board. signed D. Strachan lower right. No other information, no size, except that we purchased it from the Holsworth Gallery in Sydney in August 1972 for 1250 dollars.

RONNIE ROWAN: I would think that that was in for re-sale.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

RONNIE ROWAN: I would think that maybe Reinhart Hassart may have been the negotiator in that because he was then working at Holsworth. But otherwise I have no memory or can't help you on that.

JAMES GLEESON: The theme is one that he was interested in.

RONNIE ROWAN: It's a recurring theme.

JAMES GLEESON: It went right through, did it?

RONNIE ROWAN: I think it's a recurring theme, particularly round about the late forties, early fifties, wouldn't you say?

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, I knew it was very strong. The girls on balconies were a feature of his painting around the late forties and early fifties.

RONNIE ROWAN: Again, the time that he was with Paul and Jean in Ocean Avenue, I would think possibly.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes. One of those dark toned, nocturnal sort of images.

RONNIE ROWAN: Or also another thought too for early things, Douglas and Dorothy Dundas.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah yes, yes.

RONNIE ROWAN: Because remember they've known him for a tremendously long time and they've got this splendid visual memory.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, they have.

RONNIE ROWAN: So, try them.

JAMES GLEESON: All right. Well, I'll contact them. Now we come to an etching, aquatint, 14 out of 30. I don't think it's a title. It seems to suggest that this is a

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description of two girls on a balcony beyond 1950 and it's signed David Strachan '50 lower right. That, I suspect, comes from the same period, except that this is an etching and not a painting.

RONNIE ROWAN: I would say so. Another thing, seeing the type of paper that it was on, this was the paper that the *Accent and hazard* was printed on.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, it's French (inaudible) paper.

RONNIE ROWAN: So probably it is French hand made paper and he had some leftovers.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

RONNIE ROWAN: So that it wouldn't have been before 1951, would it?

JAMES GLEESON: No. Well, it's signed '50. So he was back in Australia by '50, was he?

RONNIE ROWAN: No, no. Nineteen fifty he was in Paris working and starting on the *Accent and hazard*.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

RONNIE ROWAN: The exhibition that was here in 1950 were of paintings that I'd brought out.

JAMES GLEESON: Of course, you said he didn't do any printing to your knowledge before—

RONNIE ROWAN: He was just starting to get interested in it. I left in, oh, it would have been about October 1950 to come back here, because it was the exhibition at George's Gallery in Melbourne in 1951—no, the end of 1950 that I brought the paintings out.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. So that the fact that this is printed on the cream hand made johannot paper means that it must have been done in Paris if it was dated 1950.

RONNIE ROWAN: I would say so.

JAMES GLEESON: So it doesn't seem to relate to any of the books that he was working on.

RONNIE ROWAN: No. It just is in the mood of the things that he was doing around about that time.

JAMES GLEESON: That's right. Good. Now, we're really in the dark here. All we've got is a figure etching, purchased from the Macquarie Gallery on 19 November 1973.

RONNIE ROWAN: Well, this is the exhibition that I was telling you about that was held in Macquarie at that time. If only I could find a catalogue I could help you. But if I don't have a catalogue, Macquarie would.

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JAMES GLEESON: Do you want to have a look whether you've got a catalogue?

RONNIE ROWAN: That's the one that I had a look for a few moments ago.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, you did, and you couldn't find it?

RONNIE ROWAN: Not in a hurried look. I think I've got one in Sydney. I'll have a look there.

JAMES GLEESON: Right. So that's a complicated one. If we could get a catalogue from the Macquarie for that, or even a photocopy of it, that would be useful in helping us identify that.

RONNIE ROWAN: Well, I think your best bet really would be to get in touch with Macquarie because they would have their sales list of 1973.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. And we bought another one too, *Birds*, an etching, from that same exhibition.

RONNIE ROWAN: Yes, yes. I remember those. I remember them being framed and so forth.

JAMES GLEESON: Not related to any of the books?

RONNIE ROWAN: Not related to any of the books. These were drawings and things that were from that bottom drawer. That's really why they were sold, for painting the house, I think, or something like that.

JAMES GLEESON: So we'll check on those with the Macquarie, the figure and the *Birds* etching.

RONNIE ROWAN: I think it would be more accurate than me paddling around through my papers.

JAMES GLEESON: Now some problems. One painting, a very beautiful one I think, of 1951 of David's, an oil painting. It's untitled but it depicts still life with lemon. Has a goblet with what looks like to be some perhaps lemon blossom or orange blossom in it on the right. Do you recall that painting at all?

RONNIE ROWAN: No. Nineteen fifty-one. Again, I think if I just check.

JAMES GLEESON: Ronnie, we have no card about this and it could be that it's not even in our collection, but we've tracked down a picture called *Still life with orange blossom*, which seems to describe this picture very accurately. It was Catalogue No. 2 and exhibited at the Skinner Gallery in Perth, February 1961. Oh, wait a bit, now this is 1951.

RONNIE ROWAN: Untitled 1951. Oh well, we'll just check again.

JAMES GLEESON: All right. Having second thoughts about this painting which we've called *Untitled still life with lemon*, but which could be *Still life with orange blossom*. I have an idea that that might have come from Mrs Roland Instan. I know we looked at some pictures of hers when she offered them to the Gallery.

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I'm pretty sure, now that Frank had jogged my mind, that that was one of hers. So we'll have to check with that when we get back to the gallery.

RONNIE ROWAN: Good.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, the only two remaining ones are a drawing of a man's head, dated 8/11/44 and then again '44 with something preceding it which we can't decipher. On the back I've made a note from Ronnie Rowan saying 'David was working in the CCC around 1944'—that's the Civil Construction Core. 'This could be a drawing of someone he encountered at that time'. However, she also said that she had some doubt about it being by David Strachan. The drawing quality did not seem to relate to David's way of drawing and you suggested that we should have a talk to Jean Bellette or Paul Haefliger about that. Do you still now feel that the style is different to the way—

RONNIE ROWAN: Yes, I think that there's more shading and so forth and that it's more Jean's style, or someone else's style than David's.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Well, I felt that too.

RONNIE ROWAN: It needs checking, I think.

JAMES GLEESON: The first time I saw it I had doubts whether it was by David. But, anyway, that's another one for us to do a little checking on.

RONNIE ROWAN: And it also hasn't come from me, because it would have had Bill Salmon's signature.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. We've got no card for it at all.

RONNIE ROWAN: No, no.

JAMES GLEESON: I suspect that that's by some other artist that's somehow got mixed up and identified as a David Strachan.

RONNIE ROWAN: Could be.

JAMES GLEESON: Now this one's more problematic because it could be by David.

RONNIE ROWAN: It's similar to some of the drawings that are in the drawer under the bed in Paddington. That is something that I will make a note to check and see if I can find out any more about it.

JAMES GLEESON: All right. It seems to be, what, a pencil or a crayon and wash drawing of a house with iron railings in front of it and some sort of pine tree?

RONNIE ROWAN: Pine tree. To me it's this sort of belfry church like piece at the back of the house that is similar to some of the drawings that are there.

JAMES GLEESON: Again, we have no card and no information about it, so it remains a mystery one.

RONNIE ROWAN: That's correct. Yes.

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JAMES GLEESON: All right, Ronnie.

RONNIE ROWAN: All right.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, thank you very much. I think that goes as far as we can go. We might have to have a return session one day.

RONNIE ROWAN: Fine.