

ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES ARCHIVE BALNAVES FOUNDATION AUSTRALIAN SCULPTURE ARCHIVE PROJECT

Interview with Greg Johns

26 November 2014

This is an edited transcript of an interview with Greg Johns on 26 November 2014 in Adelaide, South Australia, by Deborah Edwards, senior curator of Australian art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, for the Balnaves Foundation Australian Sculpture Archive Project.

The project focuses on significant Australian sculptors and sculptural practice. It was developed with a grant from the Balnaves Foundation in 2010, which supported the recording and transcription of interviews with artists and other figures in Australian art.

About Greg Johns

Greg Johns (born 1953) is a prominent public sculptor who has undertaken numerous commissions for works in public, commercial and private spaces. His large-scale forms are often made of steel, although his practice has developed over decades under varying influences, from Buddhism to the Australian landscape.

This is an edited transcript of a recorded interview. Some adjustments, including deletions, have been made to the original as part of the editing process; however, the accuracy of all statements has not been verified and errors of fact may not have been corrected. The views expressed are those of the participants and do not represent those of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Unedited audio files of this interview are in the Gallery's archive.

Interview on 26 November 2014

Deborah Edwards (DE): You were born in 1953 in Adelaide and you trained at South Australian School of Art.

Greg Johns (GJ): Yes.

DE: You trained at South Australian School of Art 1975 to 78 so you were 22 when you went in.

GJ: Yep, pretty young.

DE: When did you decide you wanted to be an artist or sculptor?

GJ: I went to Catholic primary school and then I went to Brighton High and to Glengowrie High in South Australia. At Brighton High when I was probably 16–17, I was initially – and I still think I am – very interested in writing and novels and poetry. So that was the initial interest but then I started to paint when I was about 17 through to 19. I did that at high school. I worked for a couple of years on all sorts of jobs, labouring and door-to-door selling, a whole range of things. I went back to that second high school, Glengowrie High School, and I was painting then. I went back specifically to go to art school.

DE: So you went back to get your ... What do you call it in South Australia?

GJ: It was called matriculation. Here now it would be called year 12.

DE: Yes.

GJ: So I went to Glengowrie High and applied for art school. Interesting enough I was the very last person who got in that year. I was number 13 on the emergency list. Enough people dropped out and I was the last person accepted in that year.

DE: Was there only one art school in South Australia in the early 70s – the South Australian School of Art?

GJ: I think so, yes.

DE: And that's the one on North Terrace?

GJ: It's now on North Terrace. It was out at North Adelaide when I went there, which was a fantastic place then. Then it moved down to Holbrooks Road, Underdale and now it's on North Terrace as you said.

DE: Right. Did you have an artistic family?

GJ: No, not really at all. Maybe a bit from my mum. She played piano and things like that when she was younger, but not really. It's interesting because the house was devoid of books.

DE: Your house?

GJ: Yes. There were virtually no books at all.

DE: What did your father do? Did he have a profession?

GJ: I suppose most of what he did was a travelling salesman. I think this was the main thing.

DE: And your mother had a job or was she was a homemaker? In the 1950s I guess she was a homemaker.

GJ: Yes. She's still alive. She's nearly 95. In that particular era for women she was absolutely a homemaker, bringing up the kids. It's one reason I never did have any trouble converting to feminism. In some ways I think she was pleased with what she did, but it was certainly a pretty constrained sort of existence for her.

DE: Have you got siblings?

GJ: One sister.

DE: And she didn't become an artist?

GJ: No. She's probably more a farmer.

DE: OK. If you're reaching your 20s or late teens by the early 70s, things are loosening up a bit, but was it a problem or an issue for either parent that you wanted to be an artist?

GJ: Yes, I think there were big problems, just probably as you'd expect. They wanted me to do law and areas like that. 'You won't make any money. You'll end up on the streets.'

DE: You did well at school? Or were you a renegade?

GJ: Yes, I think all of that. I did fairly well up until about year 12. I think I started to struggle then with the academic side of maths and areas like that, but up until then I did pretty well.

DE: Could you do art then? You said you were painting. But is that in school or outside?

GJ: I did do art at Brighton High and I did it at the second school I went to as well. I found that to be really good. A couple of interesting connections there. I think part of the reason I started doing art too was that in early high school I had some major bullying going on and I think the art and the push towards writing was, when I look back, quite a positive thing, because the bullying kind of internalised me a bit and made me look more at intellectual areas and investigation.

DE: So were you bullied because you were doing those subjects or you think actually in the context of being bullied doing those subjects made life easier?

GJ: I went to a Catholic primary school and then I went to a high school. My mother had her way with my early education, so she was Catholic. My father absolutely hated Catholics so he got his way with the secondary education and that transition from a private Catholic school to a public high school was pretty difficult and confronting. I mean, just the fighting amongst the boys was totally different. At a Catholic high school you virtually didn't throw any punches.

DE: But you would have been a big guy, wouldn't you?

GJ: I probably wasn't as big then. I was skinnier. I probably got a bit bigger as I got older. So, in a way, funnily enough, that bullying did push me towards the arts a lot more. Yes, it was around that Catholicism. The other issue was that I had crooked teeth and there was a

lot of bullying around that as well. I remember saying to kids that my parents didn't have the money to get them fixed, but you know what kids are like when they're 12, 13 and 14.

DE: A significant percentage of sculptors who I have interviewed, and most of them have been men, have said that, quite categorically, there was no question that the interest in three-dimensional work had its genesis in their father. For example, Mike Kitching's father was an engineer and an extraordinarily practical man. It wasn't quite tinkering in the shed but a bit like that. It was that there was a very early pattern of watching a male figure do things with his hands, be handy. Kitching thinks he learnt to do proper engineering drawings very young, but he thinks it also gave him three-dimensional skills early on. Did you have that?

GJ: No, I don't think it was that. When younger, I was certainly interested in Lego [laughter], all sorts of different forms of Lego, so I do think I played around with that extensively.

DE: Yes. People worked with Plasticine as well.

GJ: Yes. But also the other one for me was that my grandfather was a really interesting character.

DE: Mother's side or father's side?

GJ: Father's side.

DE: South Australian?

GJ: Yes.

DE: So are you a South Australian family from a long time back?

GJ: Yes.

DE: When you began to think you wanted to be an artist, maybe around 17, were you painting?

GJ: Yes. I did a lot of painting. I don't think I was terribly brilliant at it but I was pretty passionate about it, and then when I went to art school in South Australia there was a thing called the common course, where you could do painting, drawing, printmaking, clay work, sculpture.

DE: Like an introductory course?

GJ: That was the introductory for the first year. You had a go at a bit of everything. I think that year was really important to me. I started to realise that my strengths were more in sculpture than they were in painting.

DE: Right. So it was first-year art school.

GJ: Yes. I think that was an important transition over to sculpture.

DE: Alright. Can you remember who was there? This is 1975, the beginning of the year in 75?

GJ: Yes.

DE: So you had worked for a couple of years to get the money to go there. Were you doing art school full-time or part-time?

GJ: Art school was full-time after a couple of years of working. Those two years of working, I think were important. I was just working at a lot of different jobs and I think it broadened me up a bit. Then in that first year in common course, some of the lecturers were Ann Newmarch, who is quite a well-known printmaker; Clifford Frith; a guy called Barrie Goddard, a painter in Adelaide; and Virginia Jay. I think they were some of the main lecturers. Jay, she was a painter as well.

DE: Yes. Did they have a relationship with the Experimental Art Foundation which is where [Herbert] Flugelman came to? It was run by the American whose name I have forgotten [Gordon Samstag], the director. He went back to America in the end but left a bequest at South Australia.

GJ: He had an Irish connection as well.

DE: Did Donald Brook come first and then get Bert Flugelman?

GJ: Yes. Donald is still alive today and Donald was the dominant intellectual. He had a big influence on Bert Flugelman's work.

DE: Yes. And one of them at least was here in Adelaide by 1975 when you were starting at art school, weren't they?

GJ: Yes. They were both here at that time, and then Donald was lecturing at Flinders University and, again, he was very much an intellectual voice in the South Australian art scene. At the art school and up to this day, I didn't agree totally with Donald Brook's theories. A lot of people at that time stopped making objects altogether because he argued that the concept was the most important thing and making objects was somewhat useless. Actually I was talking to Max Lyle who taught me – he was one of the lecturers at art school – and he said he virtually gave up making sculpture at that point under Donald's influence, and it's something he has regretted enormously in his career.

DE: That's interesting. Who was the head of the art school when you were there? Can you remember?

GJ: No, I can't remember.

DE: OK. So you did an introductory course with a range of these people and then, by second year, you started to think you would focus on sculpture. Max Lyle was the head of the sculpture school?

GJ: Yes.

DE: And who else was in the sculpture school?

GJ: Bert Flugelman.

DE: Right, OK.

GJ: Berty comes in under an interesting arrangement that you'd never get these days because he was allowed to work on his own work at the same time. That was a part of his contract. And then Owen Broughton was the third lecturer, and I think Owen was also very important to me because he'd worked both with Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth.

DE: That's right. He'd done one of those apprenticeships with Henry Moore, which Ron Robertson-Swann had also done and several others. I gather Moore was very fond of Australian sculptors because he thought they were very hard working.

GJ: I didn't know that. That's very interesting. They did that under some sort of scheme. When they came out of the army, there was something like a grant set up and they got money. I think Owen did that. Those three lecturers together, I think, formed a really interesting unit and they were considered to be three of the best lecturers together in the world, really, at that time. I think that was really important for me, that Bert was making objects but Bert also brought in more of the conceptual side of stuff and was seen as a conceptual guy a fair bit.

DE: And he would have been totally immersed in Mildura [Sculpture Triennials] at that time too, wouldn't he? He took groups over, didn't he, from Adelaide?

GJ: Yes. I went over and did some of those with him, and the Tom McCullough exploratory exhibitions that took place down on the Murray [River], and I think those were some of the best exhibitions of sculpture that took place in Australia. And Bert did works down there and artists virtually had a free hand to make what they wanted to, and there were younger artists too carrying out really innovative work. In Adelaide, I don't know if you know, but we've had the Palmer Sculpture Biennials on the property I've got and we've had six of those now and, while it wasn't particularly modelled on Mildura and those events on the Murray, I did think about them in the back of my head and remembered them, and so they had some impact on the Palmer Sculpture Biennials as well.

DE: McCullough took it from a small exhibition in 1967 or 68, which might have been the first time Bert Flugelman went into it, at the Mildura Arts Centre, where it was called the Mildura Prize, I think. He took it from that to 1973 *Sculpturscape* and, as you say, grabbed all of that land down on the Murray and let people do what they wanted to do. Did you finish at the art school at the end of 1978?

GJ: End of 78.

DE: So you do three years of a sculpture major.

GJ: Yes.

DE: OK. Can you describe, in a nutshell, the course, the way it existed at the time?

GJ: Overall I think it was a great course. It was very open. Bert probably had the biggest impact as a lecturer then, partly through his personality, I think. Bert threw around the ideas. It was like there were no real rules in sculpture but somehow there was still right ways of doing things. This was Bert's notion.

DE: Was there the sense that you still had to master certain skills in order to go on and break the rules if you wanted to? Because those three would have been teaching fairly traditional sculptural skills, wouldn't they? You would have been able to do welding, and there wouldn't have been any carving or modelling, would there? What did the course consist of? Were you actually modelling from life?

GJ: Bert, again, came from a conceptual side. The making side, which was really important, came from Owen Broughton, who had worked with Hepworth and Moore, so with Owen I learnt some fabricating skills, blacksmithing skills and probably touched on some casting as well. Owen really controlled that part of it. This is where, I think, with those three lecturers,

they formed a really interesting balance, ranging from Bert's emphasis on conceptual stuff, through to Owen as a bit more pragmatic, but he had great historical knowledge of sculpture as well. He'd show slides of every form of sculpture – Eskimo sculpture, sculpture from South America, England, everywhere. So I found that divergent input really good. Max Lyle was a maker and he had some input as well. He did a lot of the running of the art school as well. I don't want to underestimate that because that took a lot of effort and he was the head person there.

So the three of them covered a whole range of areas and I think for me in the end it was really good that in some ways, through Owen, I actually listened to historical input, which I think was really valuable. So I got that sort of foot in the door. A lot of younger artists were very dismissive, you know. Moore and Hepworth were almost laughed about at that time. What was in was probably smelly fish inside Perspex, stuff like that. I wasn't as dismissive of the historical side of sculpture, so I thought that was a really invaluable input. And then, from Bert, a little more conceptual input, and I do think the conceptual is important in making sculpture. So it was good. It came from a few different directions at once.

DE: And Bert, by then too, was more performative as well. By 1976 [actually 1975] he was burying tetrahedron forms in Canberra, digging the big trench and putting them in, and I remember seeing a reproduction of the open-mesh sort of homestead house he did at Mildura, where he and Julie Ewington do some kind of tea-making ceremony inside it [*Australian cottage*].

GJ: I think Bert was going in a lot of different directions at once. Ken Scarlett once described him as a cowboy sculptor. I don't think Bert always fitted all the models or paradigms for the art world and didn't believe – I think he's quoted as saying this – he didn't believe that one had to be consistent in a particular area of sculpture, and I partly agree with him on that. So yes, he was working in a lot of different areas. Although, at the same time, when you spoke to Bert, you could see that Donald Brook was a big influence on Bert. And some of this I didn't accept, and I don't accept it now. One of Bert's arguments was that in the end everything could be explained through logical argument. So you could take everything back to a logical point and this was partly where his cone structures [*Cones* 1976] came from for the National Gallery [of Australia], along with *The spheres* [1977 for Rundle Mall, Adelaide]. Everything was reduced down to these fairly logical shapes and in a way they don't have an artist's touch to them as well. And he saw these as paradigms that were really interesting.

DE: But he moved away from that in the end, didn't he?

GJ: In the end, in the last five or six years, I spent lots of time with Bert and he moved to these more fluid shapes and, funnily enough, I think in the six years Bert and I were really close, I think there was a nice switch around, and I think I had an influence on Bert's work. He suddenly started using round, more fluid forms and one of his comments to me in the hours and hours and hours of conversation we had on the phone in those last years was that he sort of rediscovered his childhood. He learnt to play a bit more and I think he broke outside that really logical stuff. And I personally think some of the work of the last six years was some of his best.

DE: I felt the same about Lyndon Dadswell – by nature, by desire, a sculptor with a more traditional idea of what sculpture was, but wanting to work in a contemporary way. As you say, Donald Brook seemed extraordinarily influential. He was also extraordinarily influential in Sydney. His own trajectory was, of course, from being a sculptor producing interesting semi-figurative early work. He had shows in Canberra in 1964 or 1965 when he first came out from Britain, which were long, attenuated, semi-figurative forms, quite interesting. He moved completely away from that within a couple of years.

Who else was with you as students and how many were there in, let's say, your second-year course in 1976? Is it a small studio group of a dozen or less?

GJ: Yes, I reckon that might have been round about the number. I reckon there may have been 12 or 13 students, something like that. I'm not sure on that though.

DE: When do you start to think, 'This is the kind of sculptor I want to be'?

GJ: I think the first year in art school I was finding my way and feeling a bit nervous about it but then, for me, sculpture is really explorative, so I started to do a lot of research in the library and in a range of different areas. Part of what has driven me for sculpture, I think, is, funnily enough, exploring ideas and concepts and letting these influence my work. I started to realise with sculpture that I started to talk about holistic structures and to bring these as a notion into sculpture. I started to look at the work of Buckminster Fuller and people like that. But, interestingly enough, there was an influence by Fuller on Bert as well. So I start to see sculpture as being really quite a plastic, open sort of area that you could explore in a whole lot of ways and probably a bit freer than painting. So it started to really interest me. Bert wasn't happy with the amount of time I spent in the library. He thought it wasn't necessarily the best way to go. But through the reading, in a way, and the notions of minimalism around in sculpture at the time, I started to hit on a kind of holistic notion: there's a link between extreme simplicity and complexity. I started to muck around just with a circle. I cut that circle in half and re-joined it and I started to make an amazing complexity of forms. It seemed almost endless yet it's out of virtually the simplest shape you can find. Buckminster Fuller talked about these things as well. So when I hit onto that notion, some things started to happen and I started to make some forms, some really interesting sculptural forms, I think.

DE: What were you making them in? Were you limbering up in a particular medium as well?

GJ: Initially when I made them, I probably made them out of wood, just glued together and then, as time went by, I started to make them out of steel and cut them out of metal and weld them together.

DE: Were you reading international art magazines? I don't think I have spoken to anyone yet whose art school didn't subscribe to *Art International*, *Studio International*, *Artforum* and, later on, *Flash Art*. Do you recall looking at those? Were they part of your reading?

GJ: It's one area of investigation, so I was looking broadly at all those, just trying to get an input from a whole range of different directions, and then from people like Owen Broughton. But also on a conceptual level, I think searching for a paradigm I found really interesting. In the end that was a more holistic paradigm, and intellectually beneath my work that holistic paradigm remains right up to now. So looking at a whole range of ideas, I did a lot of reading at that time in areas like anthropology, developments in new physics, developments in psychology, a lot of reading of Carl Jung and people like that, so it was really broad-based investigation searching for a paradigm that would align with sculpture in some ways without trying to use it as just a copying thing, it wasn't that, but trying to find the philosophical basis.

DE: Yes. Something that could inform the way you were going to create.

GJ: Yes, I think that's it and I think, career-wise, I've gone a bit against the flow so what has interested me has been notions of more holistic systems and holistic philosophy. There has been some very interesting research work done in that area from the 1970s up to now. In some ways I don't think it's been the philosophers that the art world has engaged with so much, even though I think it's really on the leading edge of thought and investigation and I think it's important – like when postmodernism came, it's a large impact on the art world. I found postmodernism interesting to some extent but I was dismissive of a lot of it as well.

DE: The 1970s was a fascinating decade for sculpture. At this time you have an idea about holistic paradigms, but underpinning that you were starting to develop a very specific view about what sculpture is for yourself, aren't you? All around you performance is starting to invade both painting and sculpture. There's environmental art and, as you say, you can look to international magazines and see minimalist work dominant in various places, and so, as Rosalind Krauss says, it's starting to be 'sculpture in the expanded field'. And if you hold to the notion of a sculpture as a work that is self-contained in three-dimensional space, as opposed to either being performative or installation-based ... Were you aware of those sorts of debates and of having to choose?

GJ: Absolutely. That expansion in sculpture I find really interesting and, to this day, I remain supportive of them but, in terms of making sculpture, I think there is a whole range of ways you can work but, at the same time, I like the idea of sculpture having some sort of timeless factor to it, something that takes on the big picture, trying to explain why we are here in existence, all those sort of things. So probably some of the sculpture I have very much liked, like [Constantin] Brancusi, I still like immensely. You look at Brancusi's work and there are elements of mythology and quite hefty conceptual input, but it's probably not conceptual input that much of the art world has looked at in the last two or three decades quite as much. I don't think it has. And when the pop art thing came along in the 1960s in America, there was a big change. I'm probably not such a big fan of pop art. I like some of the artmaking a little before that.

DE: Pop, it seems to me, is a convenient kind of art because it basically tries to deflate the separation of art from life, doesn't it? And with that, and with certain areas of conceptualism for certain groups in Europe and America, there are new directions. There is suddenly a view, quite a left-wing view, that art shouldn't be separated from life, that those are elitist bourgeois notions, and pop works to create the bridge. But are you saying, no, you subscribe to the notion that artworks exist at a level that is separate from normal prosaic life? Is it about values that are removed from the everyday consumer's life, not actually contiguous with them?

GJ: I reckon this gets into some really interesting areas. Where I'd find the balance here is that, say in terms of everyday pragmatic items – I've got some that I've collected myself – New Guinean culture and a whole range of cultures where they would use little tools crushing seeds and things like that, they're imbued with a sense of sacredness about those tools used. So the handles are really quite beautiful and they have these beautiful rhythms in them and they connect in with their belief systems, in mythology, and they might have little protection symbols on them. I like the notion more, that there's a sacredness about everything. There is a sacredness about the common as well. There is something more universal, even about simpler things. I think a good way to put it is that a lot of the items that we use daily these days have become more consumer items, throw-away items, but in different cultures the simple tools were used in a way that had a sacredness about them, in themselves, something special about them. Does that make sense?

DE: It makes perfect sense. It reminds me of Bob Klippel, who I think wanted the same kind of thing, but had a realisation in the 1940s in London that, whilst he wanted to be a relevant contemporary sculptor, he felt that he was producing sculpture at a time and for a society that no longer had that kind of need for it and that was the quandary of being a sculptor in the 20th century.

GJ: Yes, yes, that's really spot on, and I find that a bit of a quandary as well. In some ways I think we live in an amazing universe and there's lots of quite incredible things that go on the whole time and there's quite a sacredness about the whole thing. Overall, I probably have some criticisms. I think the culture has become more materialistic and consumable and, in

some ways, areas like pop art also partly reflected that. I don't think they're particularly deep, I think they're a bit superficial.

DE: No, not at all. Well, pop art is a kind of fantastic pivot, it seems to me, in the sense that so much of what is going on now you can see has its genesis in a movement that is, in many ways, an ironic take on consumerist society but ends up being completely engulfed by it and part of it, at a time which saw an extraordinary explosion in the art market. It means all artists, but perhaps sculptors particularly, have to face those kinds of questions. You were starting to mature as an artist in decades where many people were saying painting was dead, even art was dead. By the 1980s sculpture had been besieged from every front, but the dominant mode for contemporary artists today is three-dimensional, because the dominant mode is installation art. Is that sculpture?

GJ: I have no problems with installation art being sculpture simply because often there are a number of elements involved. You're involved with 3D space and moving through 3D space rather than illusionary effects, which is what you get with painting. So I don't have problems with that at all. I just think that sculpture has a scale and physicality. I think one thing sculpture can do in a whole range of different ways is take on looking at the contemporary, challenging paradigms, and engaging with them in some sort of way. I think quite a bit of object-making has become more about the internalising of often quite silly intellectual arguments. In the times we live in now, what is challenging? What are the real intellectual areas of investigation that are going? Postmodernism I found interesting to some extent but I wasn't totally convinced by it. I think in areas like physics and science there have been some very interesting developments, in quantum physics and a whole range of areas, but there also has been a group of people investigating what's happening in psychology, what's happening in terms of investigations around the subconscious and areas like that. A lot of that has been going on but it's been pushed into the background. So some of the philosophers I have engaged with a bit more in the last couple of decades. There is an American philosopher, Ken Wilber, who carries on a lot of work after Carl Jung, and I think in these areas there are some really interesting developments and really challenging ones. They're not the areas the art world has been looking at quite so much. Maybe that's switching around now.

DE: What is contemporary art? It's almost impossible to say who's doing what. The contemporary situation is simply *carte blanche* – the most remarkable spectrum delivering highly individualised visions and artworks that curators and critics and commentators still try to pigeon hole. The liberation in that is that there's actually no longer a sense about what is an appropriate contemporary vein, there is only the market: one buys a certain something for investment for five years and then moves on to something else.

GJ: That divergence into a whole range of areas, I have no problem with that at all. It doesn't have to exist in that five-year timeframe, and with public sculpture I would like to think that people will look at it in five or six hundred years' time and still get something out of it, so I don't think it's quite caught into that time bracket. There is a huge tradition in areas like mythology which deals with the relationship of opposites, so [that's] a whole range of interesting philosophical ideas, and I still think some sort of engagement [with] these areas is really interesting. One of the main things beneath my sculptures is that notion that everything is interconnected and lots of the structures I've investigated talk about underlying patterns in nature and things like that. These are big picture sort of arguments but I think they're highly exploratory, and I think there have been some artists looking into these areas but I don't think it's been dominant. In all reality postmodernism has dominated the arts for quite a long time. I think postmodernism in the end argues that there's no ultimate truth, that everything is relative. It's an interesting argument but has limitations if taken as the only operating paradigm. It sort of fuzzes everything up a little bit but one of the things I like about postmodernism is the statement it makes that there are no ultimate truths. But, of course, it's

a paradox because, when you state that, that becomes a rule in itself, as Ken Wilber pointed out.

DE: The way you're talking, I think, has links with a generation of artists who were still working when you were studying as a student, like Frank Hinder or like Roger Kemp for whom almost platonic ideals were important, producing art that somehow was locking into universal structures, and of course that fits with the modernist platform of not being interested in the national or the local but interested in the global. Modernism itself became a kind of synonym for the non-national. If you were a modernist early on, then you were subscribing to a language that was seen as universal, particularly with early abstraction. So I think in some ways if you're starting to develop in that way in the 1970s, that expressing quite strong connections with a previous generation of major Australian artists, it seems to me ... You note that it actually is a path that maybe is a little bit against the grain.

GJ: Yes, look, you're right. This is throwing my memory back a bit now because it just exists inside my head these days, but notions of archetypes, underlying patterns in nature, notions of mythology, questions of timelessness, questions of spirit, these are things I would have been looking at then and they're things that interest me right up till now. But there are areas in which a lot more developments occurred since the 1970s and there's some very interesting contemporary work going on.

DE: Were you reading dynamic symmetry texts, and did you read *The golden bough*, and is that the way you start to move into this?

GJ: Well, back then there's really a whole range of areas ...

DE: And you said you were looking at Jung.

GJ: Jung is important and I still think Jung is important to my work now. He's been dismissed a lot, I think; in the last few decades he's been dismissed a lot by the scientific fraternity. I think there's a guy called Hill in America writing some fantastic work now. You don't hear many discussions about notions of subconscious these days. What happened to those discussions?

DE: It's interesting, isn't it? That's true.

GJ: There's a Canadian anthropologist, Wade Davis, I like immensely, a contemporary writer, and he talks about the development in the West of technological cultures. But then many other cultures have put their efforts around developing questions of spirit, living with each other, living with the landscape, so the developments in these other cultures are often over thousands of years. I mean these areas of investigation still really interest me and I still think they're very contemporary and there's been some fantastic work going on in them. I don't think overall the art world has engaged so much with those areas and that, in a way, has been something I've been looking at. So, in a way, there's been a little bit there of going against the grain which I'm aware of. It's not that it's about looking for ultimates, by the way. When you do a quite deep study of world mythology and you look into the development of thought in Tibetan Buddhism and areas like that, funnily enough, in lots of ways it is exactly the opposite. It's about notions that everything moves and changes and nothing remains static. Every second changes, every moment changes. The only absolute is change in a way. So it's almost that paradox coming together again. They're quite complex ideas. In some ways I think a lot of Western thought has abandoned these areas and leans towards a more materialistic, more simplistic approach. So I think a lot of those cultures have got immense amounts to offer and when it goes through to my mandala sculptures, which I made quite a few of, these reference or form a conjunction between these notions that every moment changes, every second changes my sculpture, that you move around and they

change immensely too. These sculptures are also wave-like patterns that come out of more investigations into contemporary physics. So what happens with that series of works is that there is a union between contemporary investigations in physics and also in some of the concepts out of older perennial philosophies, which I think are really important to where we stand philosophically right now. As Wade Davis, the Canadian anthropologist, said, in all reality Australian Aboriginal people would never have put a man on the moon but in all reality Australian Aboriginal culture would never have brought the whole environmental system down on its knees. So who is the more developed culture? Who has got the better paradigms? So some of those older perennial paradigms really interest me and have had an impact on my work. Well, that's my feeling towards it. And I admit that, with sculpture, that sculpture that has more of a timeless sense in it interests me the most. With Brancusi there's a lot of mythology in there. You shouldn't be making Brancusi-type sculpture now, that's not the right way to go, but that sort of work personally for me blows my socks off a lot more.

DE: Flugelman's *Pyramid tower* you could certainly say comes from the context of Brancusi, you certainly could, and I don't mean just at a superficial level, I mean actually quite deeply. The precepts of modernism – you're talking against them in a sense. You know, in the 60s there was a strong sense that formalism had reached a kind of arid form, that it was quite sterile, so you're coming out of that context as well, aren't you? That there are various reactions – conceptualism is one of them – against the surface-only interest of formalism.

GJ: The conceptual side of making sculpture is really important and I like the argument of balance between the conceptual side and the visual, making side. I think both are important, it's not one or the other. Caroesque sculpture, which has dominated sculpture in Sydney, really through Ron Robertson-Swann and his brother, from the late 50s to now ... Look, I must admit, while I don't mind some of the visual decision-making, some of it's very subtle, but a lot is only visualist decision-making and I don't find it to be enough for sculpture and, in the end, some of it really bores me. So I think sculpture should have a visual, making side and a conceptual side, both important to it.

DE: OK. Can you say a little bit about how you developed during the time that you were at the South Australian Art School? Did those teachers all stay in place until you finished what, I presume, was a diploma?

GJ: Yes.

DE: It would have been a diploma of fine arts (sculpture) at that stage?

GJ: Yes. It was a degree course a year after I left.

DE: OK. And you saw it through to the end?

GJ: Yes.

DE: And so you came out [of study] in 1978. On leaving where did you think you were at, in terms of limbering up as a sculptor? Did you have a set idea of how you thought you'd go about life as a sculptor, not a student?

GJ: I knew it was going to be really difficult and it was for about 20 years, unbelievably difficult. I think I was really passionate, really energised about it but, again, just repeating, I realised I was a little against the grain, from all these timeless things, you know Brancusi and people like that whose work I really liked, and there wasn't as much interest in that area, but as an investigative tool for almost starting to realise, in a way, that the whole world is interconnected and that you can find amazing structures in nature and all sorts of things that were really interesting areas to work in. So I found it a really interesting investigative area to

be working in. At the end of the 1970s – this is a really interesting one – I used a Y shape to construct a whole lot of forms. Now I started in 1979 to use that shape. In the 1990s I built a whole lot of sculptures and structures out of it using the Y form, including *The dance continues*, which is a work in New South Wales that I feel really strongly about and I hope it gets looked after. So with that Y form I made a whole lot of divergent sculptural forms. I think I also commented on underlying patterns in nature and structures in nature and all sorts of things, but people now talk about these works as being my fractal works. That term ‘fractal’ appears in the sciences in common language in the 1990s. I started to use that as a structure to make 3D objects back in the late 70s so it predated, by about 16 years, the discovery in the sciences that I was using in the arts.

DE: So in 78 you were starting to feel like that. What is still the usual trajectory at that stage, was to get yourself overseas as quickly as you could to look at other art. Had you already become interested in Aboriginal art and culture by that stage?

GJ: No, not so much. There is another really important area, I believe, which is of developing a sense of Australian sculpture [which] I think is a sense of form, and which I don’t think has been done extensively up to now. I think it’s really important and something I start to look at in about 1990. So getting overseas, I probably saw it as being somewhat important but I simply didn’t have the money to do it. But I did make, in 1988, with my first long-term partner, Libby, we made a big trip as artists and residents of Rhode Island School of Art [now Rhode Island School of Design], which was really good and then – I wasn’t particularly in love with America – we did a big trip in Europe and England and I really enjoyed those places. Then we did a road trip through France, to the bottom of France, up to Switzerland and back to Paris. We went to Greece and Italy too so it was quite a large trip.

DE: Looking at sculpture everywhere?

GJ: Yes, looking at sculpture everywhere and I think that really rich tradition of sculpture in Europe added fuel for my investigations. In Athens seeing the Cycladic work which I knew about, but I really loved the Cycladic work, and of course Cycladic work is quite a non-linear point, that suddenly in this point in time in Greek culture you get these very minimal forms that appear illogically. So that was my big trip, which did provide really good input.

DE: Aboriginal art – are you interested in it by 1978–79?

GJ: I worked in the 1970s luckily enough with Margaret King-Boyces who was quite a famous anthropologist and close friends with Margaret Mead and she was a big influence on my work. She wrote a wonderful book called *Patterns of Aboriginal culture past and present*, [actually *Patterns of Aboriginal culture: then and now*] which I still have. We worked together quite closely and we were quite close friends.

DE: When you say worked together, did you assist her?

GJ: She was teaching a course called ethnoscience which was, I think, in education probably three decades ahead of its time, but that’s another big discussion.

DE: And where was that?

GJ: At Uni SA [the University of South Australia].

DE: And you went to those classes?

GJ: I went to those classes. Margaret also for over ten years worked with a Kimberley Aboriginal mob and then she was asked by the elder men to leave after ten years of study

as an anthropologist and write the book she wrote, *Patterns of Aboriginal culture past and present*. In that book – this also had influence on my work, but Margaret and I were looking at similar areas – what comes through is that Aboriginal culture realised that everything is interconnected. They realise that a sense of spirit is very much in the animal world and in the plant world and everywhere. As Margaret said to me once, in Aboriginal culture, no fuss over this, that a six-year-old child realises that the whole world was interconnected and if you damage one part of it then you damage another part of it. So this notion of interconnectedness, which I was already interested in, I think that's been a really dominant theme of my work and when I mix with Aboriginal people they often pick up on it. They realise there is a sacredness in the forms, circular forms that talk about interconnectedness so, in a way, she has given me some sort of deep reading of Aboriginal culture as well. But the work I made up until about 1990 I think is more artwork that could come from anywhere in the art world so it doesn't have a particular feel to it that it belongs to Australia or anything like that. It's more international in style, even though it did talk about underlying interconnected patterns and everything is interconnected so there are themes there, but then about 1990 I actually sat down for about half a day and thought, 'So what's really important for me as a sculptor in Australia?', and I came up with two things. One was to start to try to make some sculpture that looked Australian in feel, and the other one, interestingly enough, was I thought of the impact of technology that was starting to happen then. I thought these were two really important areas. So then I started to make the more figurative work, it started to come into play and, in my opinion, the forms of those look far more like they come out of this country, and that's been probably the thing that's dominated my work the most from 1990 up till now, although I'm still looking at universal patterns in about ten percent of the work.

DE: So why the change? Why the drive to have something local, a sense of the local? Because it's not really the national, is it? You say 'Australian' but there isn't a generic Australian, there's only different kinds of Australian. It's basically about the links to the landscape. Is it really about the environment, the natural environment?

GJ: Yes, well, I think that's one of the formative tools still in terms of ... I still think that connection to the interior which a lot of Australians still don't engage with to today ... There's a great comment of the Australian writer Tim Winton. I love where he says that Australians, in terms of how their lives are formed, they're often formed on the beaches when they're younger. They go to the beaches. When they go through a marriage break-up, they walk along the beach. So, in a way, this is quite a formative thing for Australians who cling to the easier parts of Australia. But he says, at the same time, if you want to find the really deep stuff, you've still got to go to the interior of Australia. I probably agree with that comment. So up to now with sculpture, up to 2014, I don't think there has been too much Australian sculpture that looks Australian in terms of form and the notions that it takes on this world. I mean painting white-fella type stuff is not the same. I think Fred Williams did crack the seed open to some extent. That's my feeling. But I think in sculpture that hasn't really occurred and while sculpture is really divergent now, and I don't say that you have to work in this way, my comment is that there is a great gaping hole, that there has been virtually no sculpture in Australia that has looked like it comes out of this place, and I think the forms that come out of this place should be different to the forms that come out of sculpture in England and America. That's my feeling on it. Except for John Davis in Melbourne who used twigs and things like that. He was a bit more literal about the whole thing, but he is the one other sculptor who added to the discussion a bit.

DE: Yes, because they're interesting works, aren't they, in the sense that there is a whole lot of influences that seem really quite strong, quite significant in the work but the work also carries very strong resonances of the particular landscape that he was involved in. It's an interesting issue: how much sculpture or any art relates to its environment. I suppose in its reductive form it's the whole nature–culture business, isn't it? For a lot of artists living in

urban landscapes, modernism has asked for certain links to be made. The links have been to elsewhere. The links have been to forms of artmaking and experiences that aren't about connection to where you live. They're connection to where you don't live.

GJ: One of my observations is that when I have travelled around the world and Australia, I think you get the most interesting art production out of the local, where there is a very strong local culture functioning. So with lots of wonderful Aboriginal art, it still amazes me that you'll get some black fella in the middle of absolutely bloody nowhere who has never picked up a paint brush in his life, he or she picks up a paint brush and produces these absolutely extraordinary artworks that talk so much about the deep heart and soul of Australia.

DE: But that's with very long traditions of visual culture, that might have been coloured sand paintings originally, but the traditions of that kind of visual communication are there. In some ways I don't think the Aboriginal renaissance was extraordinary at all. I know the way in which you mean it but I'm also saying that, because the culture is so strong in those other ways, to be given Western paints and to be given pigments and canvas was just a sort of translation, wasn't it? It was a medium change but the actual systems and the art are all in place there.

GJ: There are many, many Aboriginal groups as you know and I think a lot of the strength of that work comes about through the extremely strong and, in a way, real connections to place and that comes through in the art world by what is expressed in that artwork. Just for me, when I have travelled around the world, you will see little works produced, like Papua New Guinean work, that there is an incredible tradition of sculpture in Papua New Guinea and the New Hebrides close to Australia that a lot of people are not aware of, but I think the work that is made there is incredibly expressive of that place. I think their playing around with form is so innovative that a whole lot of people aren't aware of it. It's incredibly explorative so I think you get some of the best sculptural work produced out of those situations, rather than aiming for this sort of international style where, in a way, it seems to go against place and things seem to get watered down, the cultures get watered down and you don't get as good expression through the artwork. You may not agree.

DE: I guess I think one of the realities is that there are a lot of artists who don't feel those connections. They actually feel connections elsewhere and so, instead of being a cultural society that, for argument sake, in 1000 years time is going to look in museum cabinets like Cycladic figures have looked to us, as coming from a particular place, we will be left with individual projects and artworks. And so I'm not sure. Anyway, this is your position, and your platform is – tell me if I'm wrong – that the most resilient and significant work comes from being receptive to those connections. That the artwork comes, like Aboriginal art in all of its unique forms, from its environment, the relationship between the people and the environment.

GJ: Yes, I think the gutsiness of Aboriginal work does come out of connection to place and the land, and that when that culture is functioning at its best, that there was indeed an absolute real connection to the land and to some sort of spiritual understanding of connection, and realistic connection to land as well. I mean, this is the difference between developments in different cultures. Certain cultures develop this notion, which in European culture we did not develop, that everything is interconnected and therefore you have to look after place. The paradigm that comes out of European culture is really dominated by the scientific one where you see place as something that provides you with wealth, and that you dominate and you exploit, and there is no cause and effect in that exploitation. Now that's a pretty dumb-arsed conclusion, which I think we're starting to realise now, because of the horrific environmental effects. In fact, everything is interconnected and certain cultures realised this and probably our culture, where we came from, really did not. So I feel, as an artist, I've been more attracted towards some of the notions from cultures that got to a stage

of development where they realised everything is interconnected and there are a whole lot of themes and ideas that go with that and those sort of areas of thought probably attracted me a lot more.

DE: What is the relationship then between that position and being an artist of your time? What's the relationship, do you think, between aiming for more permanent structures, if you like, or structures that actually don't speak about their time? Because you've said that you want to speak about structures that actually are about their place. What about their time? What about the temporal area?

GJ: These are always really interesting discussions. So for the times we live in, yes, I use a lot of steel, I use some wood, I use some stone as well. Interestingly enough with sculpture, 2014 is a time of immense change and things are just changing really rapidly technologically also. In some ways I think one of the functions of sculpture is to provide some very sturdy points you can rope your boat to in moving seas. So I like the idea of sculpture again taking on these notions of timelessness involved into the work. That you might look at a sculpture, you might use a very round form, and again this talks about that everything is interconnected, that a circle has always been a symbol of stillness as well as interconnection. So, in some ways, through engaging with the sculptures, it can perhaps give you a sense of stillness in very moving times, so the sculpture can have a stabilising effect as well. I'm not saying all sculpture has to work that way, but I think some sculpture should work in that way.

DE: Is it important then that the sculpture, if it speaks of a place or comes out of a connection with place and that somehow shapes the actual form, is it important that somehow your sculpture also speaks about the Western tradition which you are part of?

GJ: I like the argument about hybridising in a way. Since 1990 my work has taken on a lot more of the forms of this place. I use these big horizon lines in quite a few of the sculptures. Interestingly enough, the first time I started to draw these was when I was going to Port Augusta, north of Adelaide, and I was with a landscape architect in the car and he made the comment, 'It feels like we're driving this big horizon line'. So I got back to the motel that night and I did a whole lot of drawings with big swoops of horizon lines and then that form started to come to my sculpture and I've used horizon figures after that. The body forms a lot of my works since then. Those forms have come out of looking at the roundness of rock forms that you get in the Olgas [Kata Tjuta] and all sorts of areas in Australia. So there is kind of a visual reading of the Australian landscape going on, and I'm trying to pull in some of those forms. At the same time, maybe it's a bit more on a symbolic level. In some of those sculptures there will often be a symbol of a fire form on one side and gentle form on the other. I think this is really interesting. This is more sub-reading into things that form the Australian landscape. David Tacey, I think, is a great writer on questions of spirit in Australia. He says when you contrast Europe with Australia, that in Europe where they've got green fields, the sense of beauty established with this sort of green fields and pretty flowers and everything is a bit easier, but in Australia our sense of beauty comes out of a close interconnection between life and death which are much closer together. So that our sense of beauty can often come out of quite harsh environments. It still does develop a sense of beauty but it's a sense coming out of where life and death are closer together whereas in Europe it's a lot safer. That's one reason I tend to use these gentler forms with the harsher forms, kind of saying that this is a kind of formative tool or motivating thing that goes on in the Australian culture. To this day most Australians still cling to the coast because they feel safer there. In Aboriginal culture you have got a real adaption in parts of the country to living in harsh environments. They clearly see the amazing beauty and understand it more closely. But if you cling to the coast you don't get to see that.

DE: I've forgotten exactly what the statistics are, but by 1900 around 88 percent of Australians were living in urban environments and, yes, they happened to be along the coast, mostly along the eastern seaboard. It's all about living in urban environments.

GJ: OK, but in that sort of strip.

DE: Yes.

GJ: And I take your point from that in terms of making art in Australia. You could say that influences from the urban could be a formative tool in terms of forms that we make for Australian sculpture. My only comment, again, is that if you want to, it's like the Tim Winton comment, if you want to reach into the deep, deep soul of this place and a lot of the stuff that forms Australia, I still think you've got to get away from the coast and go into the interior as well.

DE: What the urban context gives you is global forms. There are parts of cities everywhere all over the world that look like other cities everywhere all over the world. A Western blueprint for what a city is. And so I'm sure that's part of it and, in fact, part of the urban context is all about the lack of connection to the local. I take the point of what you're saying.

GJ: I was up in the Kimberley a few weeks ago and I went to Windjana Gorge.

DE: Yes, I've been there. It has the little freshwater crocs, doesn't it?

GJ: Yes. It's hard to verbalise but there's an amazing sense to that place and a feeling to the place. Those places are the equivalent of the cathedrals that we built in Europe and there's a sense of sacredness about them. At Windjana Gorge, if you remember, there is a white stone in the water there. You might have been told this story, but that's where the men used to go. That stone was meant to be a place where the spirits of the child were going to be produced and would come into their bodies. Then they went home and mated with their partners. In terms of the spirits coming in, it happened there.

DE: No, I didn't. There's a place in Windjana Gorge, isn't there, where you actually go to a pool and it has a huge half-roof or something?

GJ: No, that's Tunnel Creek. You walk through Tunnel Creek and get to there, and there's a pool at the end of it and you go underground.

DE: There's no question that travelling through the north of Australia, travelling through the deserts, is just staggering. You see places that you can't quite believe. I found Lake Eyre also extraordinary and strange, a bit like Lake George outside of Canberra. So, anyway, back to chronology. So 1978 you come out [of study], you want to stay in Adelaide? Is it important for you to be in Adelaide or has that been a kind of chance or accident?

GJ: I feel fairly comfortable in Adelaide. It was an easier place financially but I will make a comment that I do go to Sydney and Melbourne the whole time. In Sydney there's a pace, there's an anxiousness there, there's a competitiveness there that I can also partly do without.

DE: Yes, OK.

GJ: Sydney is a tougher place in a way.

DE Well, maybe let's get on to that for a minute then. Process. Is it a contemplative practice for you, sculpture? What's the practical way by which you work? You mentioned drawings. So, do you do a lot of drawings?

GJ: Yes. I have a stack of books a metre and a half tall or something, which have got tens of thousands of little drawings in them. So, yes, I think there is a contemplative aspect to it and I think, interestingly enough, I have heard other artists say this, that the times we are living in, when I draw I like to have a quieter place to work in. The franticness of what surrounds us now, I think it's much more difficult to come up with ideas and concepts. So I need some quiet. I think what's been a really good thing about sculpture is that it allows you to investigate in a whole range of areas and develop some sort of philosophical comments about explaining where you live and all those sorts of things and what the whole thing is about. And then, at the same time, in making the sculpture I am really aware of looking at a whole range of sculpture and the whole tradition of sculpture, and then you have to make decisions about what you think is good work and what you think is not the good work. So it impacts on a lot of different directions. I have liked a lot of [Antony] Gormley's work. I think he engages in a way with the questions of spirit as well in the 21st century and 20th century and that interests me. He talks more about the internal dominating over everything. I like the idea of internal and external dominating a bit.

DE: You've referred to series. So do you find a modus for your art is that you are interested in an idea and then you work that idea through a set of different variations until there's a resolution or a view that that's actually been done and you move onto a new idea and a new series?

GJ: There's lots of investigation that goes on. I don't think sculpture is simply a model of that investigation. I will often hit onto a theme. The *Run aground* series, the boat forms. Initially there is a boat form with one piece of stone, one big chunk of stone, in the bow of the boat and this series for me was partly about the arrival of European culture here and how as soon as that boat hits the landscape, then that boat form starts to change a bit. So the incoming culture gets modified by what's here as well. So the boat forms initially were the boat forms in stone. There's a number of those to work through. Then the boat form changes over a period of time. They go through a number of transitions. It actually becomes a pod form at a point in time, more of a landscape sort of form. And then beyond the pod form, there's a series at the end of that series that I called *The settled explorer*, and there's four of those up in the Palmer landscape, where I bring the boat form in at the top and it takes on a distinctively figurative feel. So that series for me is partly about adaption to place. Adaption by European culture where, over a period of time, they have to start to become part of this place so that incoming culture gets modified by this place. And I think in the end if you don't adapt a place essentially the culture will eventually disappear. Not that we've been brilliant at doing that. It's still not achieved.

DE: No.

GJ: And I do think that part about having a sense of form, out of this place and something that does reflect this place, I still think it's a really important part of sculpture right now.

DE: Right. So you win the Whyalla Sculpture Prize of 1980. Tell me what you were doing for the next five years after you were out [of art school]. Did you do part-time teaching? Did you ever want to do that?

GJ: It's not that I didn't want to, but I've worked full-time as a sculptor for the whole 38 years.

DE: So how have you managed that?

GJ: Oh, it's bloody difficult. And I've had two long-term relationship break-ups which stripped me back. That's all part of life. How did I survive? One thing I picked up when I was 17, I trained properly as a wallpaper hanger. So the first few years out of art school there was a combination of two things. I made some money from that and I was on the dole as well, which was very useful to my intellectual development, I think.

DE: And then getting yourself a studio?

GJ: The first few years out of art school, the wallpaper business I conducted on a pushbike with a ladder I carried on my back and I would ride 20 or 30 kilometres to do wallpaper hanging in people's houses. I actually pulled in some reasonable sort of money from it so that helped. Out of art school then I set up my father's garage as a workshop and I worked there for about five years, I reckon. I only had a pushbike then, I couldn't afford a car. So I went and made work there and that led on to one of my first shows with the Bonython Gallery. So the first 20 years was a really minimal existence. I pulled in income of probably about \$17,000 a year and survived on that. I didn't go out for meals, didn't go out for coffee or any of that stuff.

DE: Because the commissioning landscape in Adelaide wouldn't have been great, would it? In Australia the context for commissioning large public sculptures or even private sculptures has not been great.

GJ: Back then in the 1970s in the Adelaide context, after Bert left and Owen Broughton died, there was virtually nobody making public sculpture.

DE: When did Aleks Danko start to do his big public pieces?

GJ: He was around the place but I don't think his drift was towards that sort of public artmaking at that time.

DE: Yes, maybe that's too early.

GJ: Yes, quite a bit further on. And, just out of interest, making public sculpture wasn't popular back then as well. I caused a bit of a stir in Adelaide. In a way it was useful but I wasn't aware of it – actually I still don't see anything wrong with it – it was probably about 1979–80 I actually wrote letters to a lot of the councils in Adelaide saying, 'Are you interested in public artwork? I'm here and I'd like to get some work'. It caused a big stir.

DE: Why is that?

GJ: Well, I had a run-in with Tony Bishop. Tony was very upset about this and said he saw it as being very self-promotional, and that it wasn't acceptable, and he had a very big go at me over it. I just saw it as a way of starting to make some opportunities. Funnily enough, out of that, Tony was the initiator of the art in public places scheme here, partly, I think, out of what I had done which he wasn't happy with. Then the government body was established and they started doing exactly the same thing. To this day it's led to significant council involvement with making artwork. Overall – and Adelaide I think has been one of the worst offenders though it's occurred in other areas throughout Australia – public art has become work that literally responds to briefs and it is more literal in a way. I think it's become more of a design area and I don't think you get more significant, challenging sculpture out of that committee-driven, brief-driven thing.

DE: Yes, I think a lot of people, a lot of sculptors, would agree with you. The commissioning landscape and history in Australia is strewn with artist casualties, isn't it?

GJ: The private commissioning has been really important to me in that area.

DE: Yes, because you would have more freedom, I would think.

GJ: It's a gargantuan difference. You do your best to make significant sculpture that makes intellectual commentary on the times we live in; it is contemporary in that sort of way. Again, I like it having a sort of timeless sense to it. But, strangely enough, I like the idea of engaging in place and engaging with community. But where they get it wrong, in my opinion, for the public art stuff is they engage with community but they take the lowest common denominator. So there will be a bloody river flowing through the area so then you have to have this damn river that appears in the sculpture, which is really literal treatment of it. Or the community might say, we're a really linked community so the artist will produce a work of eight people holding hands. For me that's not what it is about at all. It's about: you engage community, you listen to what they say and you try to sub-read it and you try to almost symbolically read it rather than literally. And then you can make the work that connects to place and physically to place as well but you can still make a statement. So you're not being arrogant and just putting something that doesn't consider community, but they just don't get it. They do this very literal interpretation. And I don't think in Adelaide over the last few decades we've gained very many significant sculptural works, and I think there are some in Melbourne and Sydney. I think Melbourne has done a bit better. There is a lot of easily consumed public art in Melbourne, and Sydney too, but at least they have gained some public sculpture.

DE: Melbourne has a much more significant presence of sculpture generally, I think.

GJ: I agree to a reasonable extent. I think Melbourne has gained some public art but has gained a greater percentage of more significant sculptures, and I've been lucky enough to do quite a few commissions there as well and I have been given more room to move and freedom to move there.

DE: So the first show at Bonython, which is only two years after you have graduated, how did that come about? Did Kim Bonython see your work somewhere? What did you win the Whyalla Sculpture Prize with?

GJ: The Whyalla Sculpture prize wasn't ... It probably was of some importance but there's a funny story around that one. I slept in a caravan and I think I nearly died in the caravan.

DE: In the heat?

GJ Yes. I still know the guy who ran that and I don't know what's happened to the work. It was interesting. I was told I should sleep in the caravan because – he made me laugh – he said, 'I don't think we can get you to sleep in the house because artists are notorious for trying to sleep with other people's wives'. I thought it was hilarious. What do you think? I'm going to jump into bed with your wife or something? It was a comedy. I think I probably approached the Bonython Gallery back then and probably spoke to Kim Bonython, then he gave me the show.

DE: And what did it involve?

GJ: That was an exhibition of about say 12 or so maquettes for larger scale sculptures.

DE: Right. And that's your first solo?

GJ: That's my first solo. And Kim Bonython over a long period of time was really supportive and very good.

DE: Did it go well?

GJ: The show was well received. I didn't sell one piece and another life story is that at the end of that show Kim Bonython came up and said to me, 'The bastards bought nothing, Greg. I'll buy one off you'. So he bought a piece which was in his collection until he died and got passed on through auction to another collection.

DE: Can you describe what your preoccupations were with those first works and what were they made out of?

GJ: So the first works, I think, were more international in style, before I tried to do the work in an Australian flavour. So these were works in kind of wave patterns which created forms, and the more rounded works ... People made some connections with that early work with [Clement] Meadmore, and I don't totally deny that. I used a square box section and Meadmore was one of the sculptors that I looked at early on, although other sculptors, [Eduardo] Chillida, the Spanish sculptor, I liked his work probably more than I did Meadmore's. So, modernist round forms, often with two wave patterns which were interconnected and create a form which came out of notions of wave patterns and physics creating forms. I think the work ... Actually Bert said to me once, Flugelman said that, while I could make some connection with Meadmore, the forms I made were greatly different, much, much different to the forms he made, rounded sort of forms.

DE: What was the scene like in Adelaide at that time? So, if we're starting to move into the 1980s, was it lively? Were there many sculptors?

GJ: I think the sculpture thing was pretty alive. The time I went through art school there was a huge amount of enthusiasm around sculpture, and Bert said that year and the year before me were the two best years he ever had with young sculptors in Australia. So quite lively. Yes, a lot of interest. I did dare at that point in time though to make objects. To make objects that people saw as being more formalist. So I took a lot of flak from a lot of other sculptors who were making more things like ripping up paper and putting dead fish inside plastic and stuff like that. So my work wasn't actually that well accepted in South Australia but, funnily enough, it did get better acceptance in Victoria and New South Wales where object-making was still going on. The art world was very buoyant at that point in time financially, and these are things you probably know so, in a way, that was a part of the flavour of the place as well.

DE: And when did you move to steel?

GJ: I used steel even when I was studying at art school.

DE: Right. So you liked it?

GJ: I wanted to make sculpture that went outside the gallery because I liked the idea, funnily enough, of engaging the public, and steel was simply a very robust material that, for simple reasons, couldn't be damaged by the public. I liked the idea of using the Corten [steel], which Owen Broughton introduced me to. Not Meadmore, it was actually Owen Broughton. I thought it was more real. It wasn't painted surface, which always seemed a bit superficial to me. It wasn't talking about the actual material to paint the sculpture. I wasn't convinced by that. Not to mention it's got terrible conservation problems with it as well.

DE: I was going to say it's been a bit discredited, hasn't it, in terms of conservation.

GJ: It's a nightmare.

DE: It's a nightmare too in terms of any kind of graffiti, isn't it? It basically stuffs the surface.

GJ: And it fades and all sorts of things like that.

DE: There seem to be a lot of Corten steel works that actually sit out in the weather and leak, get rainwater coming in through the joints somehow.

GJ: It does get water coming in. That's a problem with it. Just recently I've started putting holes in the bottom of the sculptures to allow the water to come out and I think that's probably the better way to go.

DE: But it's actually such a beautiful surface. It's matte and soft and it's actually pretty beautiful.

GJ: Yes, well, I reckon Corten was lucky for me in a whole range of ways. Initially, I just used it because I thought it was a more real material to use rather than painting it. But then, after a period of time, and this leaps onto the work for me for the last 20 or 25 years, the fact that it's got that irony patina to it and the colour, I think, relates really well again to the Australian landscape and it sits so much better here. Imagine putting a bronze work into the landscape or at least a polished bronze work. I think it [Corten] does look like it belongs in this place. I feel Corten works far better overall in the Australian landscape. So I like that connection with it as well. Most of the Australian landscape is made of iron and that's where its colour comes from. One of my favourite pieces is a piece that went up in the Pilbara in Western Australia in the middle of nowhere a few years ago. I like works being placed in those sorts of situations.

DE: You're working on a monumental scale. Is that an intrinsic part of the works? Well, there's a whole lot of works that you're working on a much smaller scale too, I guess, but largeness seems to be a very important part.

GJ: Funnily enough with the larger works, I think some people miss the point. Say the large work I did at Chadstone on the way into Melbourne. When you make a large work to some extent it actually engages people more because when it gets to a certain scale, people can move under it, they can move through it and they can become engaged like moving inside a house. So that's one thing that I like.

DE: So the architectonic aspects of the sculpture?

GJ: Yes. I like those being explored. *The dance continues* is a really large work that's still up, I wish would be moved to Sydney in time, because one of the universities has bought it but they're having trouble moving it. But with that work too you can move inside it which gives the public, in a way, more engagement. The other thing is that if you're putting it in a landscape, the work has to have a certain scale so it doesn't get totally lost. But out of that at a point in time, I think there is also another subtlety. I don't like a sculpture dominating over the Australian landscape. You'll see at Palmer I like to have a certain scale where it looks a bit smaller when you move back but when you get close to it, it has a presence. There was a sculptor out of Paris, quite well known, Art Brenner, who has showed in the Palmer Biennales. The first time I took him out there, he said, 'But Greg you need a piece here that's 50 metres high to have some presence'. This is the difference between, I think, the perception of an Australian sculptor and a European sculptor. I don't want to dominate over the landscape. I want it to integrate but have a presence.

DE: Yes. So the 80s. How about major commissions?

GJ: I'll show you a list of work. I've done a hell of a lot of work, there's no doubt about that. So 1978 I did the first really large commission, *Rhythm*, which is at Glenelg in South Australia and is still there.

DE: Oh, is that 1978?

GJ: That's done in the final year at art school. I won't extrapolate on it too much but it did cause some problems. With some youthful naivety I didn't realise that getting a fairly major commission as a student ...

DE: Could be difficult? I was talking to Lou Lambert. Do you know Lou Lambert?

GJ: I like some of his work a lot.

DE: Yes, from Perth. He was saying he got a huge commission not long after he left the Perth Institute of Technology. Anyway, he was still teaching when he got a major commission in Japan which he didn't even apply for. He'd been contacted by the Japanese authorities. He said that it actually caused horrible reactions amongst colleagues who he thought would be happy for him. So there's a lot of that. It's competition for small resources, isn't it? Scarce resources, I suppose.

GJ: To be direct about it, I thought there was a fair bit of jealousy and I did get a lot of negative reaction back.

DE: How did you get the commission? Was it a competition?

GJ: No. I think I was probably showing some youthful energy. I'd started to speak to a few councils and what I offered to Glenelg Council was that I would make this work and receive no commission from it. So they paid for costs and they went ahead with it. I did not get one cent for it. It is about eight metres long and about 2.4 high and 2.4 wide. So it is fairly big. So I received nothing for it. That was alright. It was a large work put up there. So I did that work.

DE: So, apart from causing some jealousy, it caused a splash too, though in relation to people recognising what you could do.

GJ: Yes. It certainly caused a splash. I think overall that piece was fairly well received but I guess it got me a little on the map, so to speak. And then after that, I think I showed a lot of youthful energy stuff, so then I had the steel ... I think Max Lyle had given me some money to buy some steel in the last year of art school so I went ahead and made a work from the studio that was actually at my mother's place. Actually I might have made this work before the Glenelg piece, I'm not sure which one came first. Anyway, the Adelaide University acquired it, not for much money, but I might have made a couple of thousand dollars out of it. And so, step by step, I started to build stuff up. Then there was a commission for Pembroke private school somewhere in the early 80s and, again, it was quite a large work that I might have made a few thousand dollars out of it so it supplemented income.

DE: And what steel works are you dealing with?

GJ: The piece at Adelaide University I made myself. The Glenelg piece was made at Bristers which also made a lot of Bert Flugelman's work.

DE: And what were they?

GJ: They are a steel fabricating shop.

DE Mainly doing industrial work?

GJ They were experts in stainless steel. So, again, they made Bert's tetrahedrons in front of the Festival Theatre here. They made 'Bert's balls', so to speak. I think actually Bert referred me to them, to make that work. The piece at Pembroke, I think, was made by a couple of people privately who did work for Bristers. So I was making large steel sculpture myself, and having people work on it. I think I just went out there and took it on myself and did it basically. It reminds me of a comment of Bert's again that I've always liked. He said that in the art world there are people who speak about it and the people who actually do it.

DE: Yes. Did you travel to Sydney and Melbourne much?

GJ: Well, first of all then, another sculpture I made was *Rhythmic circle* which I showed at one of the Adelaide Festivals here. That had an interesting history because it ended up going up to World Expo, but before that, I can't remember how, it ended up in the Holmes à Court collection in Western Australia. So that is still in the Holmes à Court collection now. That work I totally made and funded myself, built it myself and paid for the whole lot. So I took that approach of really being pro-active and just making the work and funding it and everything. But I did get some results out of it. Then I recognised early on that to remain in South Australia alone, I just wasn't going to survive. I made a decision to remain here physically but to go interstate. I made a trip interstate after the show with the Bonython. I had some good images of my work.

DE So a little after 1980? Maybe 81 or 82?

GJ: It was somewhere around there, yes. And I went to a number of galleries and showed them my work. I can't remember the name of the gallery in Melbourne right now. And I also went to Robin Gibson in Sydney. I went up to Sydney and I did approach a whole lot of galleries. Robin Gibson showed interest in the work fairly well immediately.

DE: And he was interested in sculpture from very early on.

GJ: I love the story around this one. He thought he would give me a show and I said I would think about it. I was 24 or 25. He sort of looked at me with a blank look on his face. As I left Sydney that day I rang him back on the landline. I said, 'Look, I'm thinking about it and when I get back to Adelaide I'll make up my mind'. And with Robin on the other end of the phone, I remember him saying, 'Do you realise who you're speaking to? This is Robin Gibson of the Robin Gibson Gallery and I'm offering you an exhibition and you're telling me you're thinking about it?' But I still didn't agree then. I went back to Adelaide and told a few people and people said, 'What? You said you wouldn't consent to an exhibition with Robin Gibson?' I said, 'Well, I wanted to evaluate it a bit'. I did ring him back and say I accepted the exhibition.

DE: And he let you have it.

GJ: He let me have it.

[Break in interview]

DE: So you are starting to have exhibitions. Robin Gibson, 1983. Then you had one in Adelaide in 1987. You had one at Roundspace in 1981. Bonython Gallery 1980. And they're mostly maquettes. Are they being made with the idea of getting larger commissions?

GJ: Yes. That's probably for those first exhibitions. I was relatively happy to sell them as small works but absolutely aiming towards getting larger jobs as well.

DE: And what about Mildura? We probably should discuss that in the late 70s and into the 80s. You were involved in Mildura in 1978, your last year of being a student. So you went over with Flugelman?

GJ: Bert was there and I made a piece out of wood. It's like the piece at Glenelg with two wave patterns that intersected each other. So I showed that work there and I think that's when Bert did the work sitting inside the wire cage.

DE: How did you find Mildura generally? Did you go and camp there and meet a whole lot of sculptors that you hadn't met before? Did you find it a lively context for discussion of work?

GJ: I thought Mildura overall was great. It was lively enough. I showed work in Mildura through the 1980s period as well.

DE: Yes, OK.

GJ: It was still a tough gig in that I made some large works and took them up by trailer and installed them and you totally financially fund these things yourself. But overall I found Mildura to be good and when I was a student there, it was a bit more a flavour of the times but there were some pretty lively parties there.

DE: Did you meet Tony Coleing, for example? He made a real splash. Was it 1978 that he did the huge flowers in the monumental vase with flowers?

GJ: I remember the name. I don't think I met him.

DE: OK. Because he also did another sculpture which looked pretty fabulous which I think was called *To do with blue*, concerning clouds. Clearly, I have only seen a reproduction. It had wooden forms suspended, hanging and actually moving.

How did it [the triennial] work in Melbourne? Did you go to the 1984 one there that would have been at Melbourne Uni or at a campus somewhere?

GJ: I was in the first one, yeah. That was La Trobe University.

DE: Oh, that might have been 1981 then. How did that go? Because there were a lot of artists' forums at that one, weren't there, saying it didn't work well?

GJ: Well, look, I thought Mildura overall was a fantastic sculptural event and partly, like you said, through its diversity, so I'd always favour having that explorative approach and that's what I've tried to transfer over to the Palmer Sculpture Biennales we have here as well, where anything from environment to performance work and standing objects installation [is included] and then people can make up their own minds over a period of time. So Mildura I speak really highly of. I thought when that show moved to Melbourne, I thought it was a death knell for it. And part of the reason for this was nothing to particularly do with Melbourne. The fact that before it was decentralised, people came from everywhere, there weren't so many big egos involved and stuff like that, and it was broadly curated. Suddenly with the Melbourne shows, the curators decided it was all going to be about the human form, or it was all going to be about wood one year, I think. And I thought, 'Oh my god, it's getting too tight'.

DE: Yes, and eventually I think [curator] Geoffrey Edwards did one and that would have been by 1988 or 1990 or something that ended up just being like 12 or 13 artists at the National Gallery of Victoria and I think by that stage it was called the Australian Sculpture

Triennial, wasn't it? So, in a sense, it was its death knell. My impression of reading the literature is that it was that first one, or maybe it was the one in 1984, that there was a lot of dissatisfaction from sculptors. And by that stage I think there probably was a lot of OH&S [occupational health and safety] stuff and a whole lot of things that McCullough hadn't had to factor in in Mildura. He also seems to have been a broken man about it. He was horribly done over by the Mildura Council and they pulped his last book and he basically had to leave.

GJ: I think he did a fantastic job and I think the events down by the Murray and Mildura overall, and particularly those events by the river, were really great for Australian sculpture and I speak really highly of them. Part of the reason that it finished in the end, from what I heard, was over some really explicit photographs being shown by an artist so there was a rift between the community and the event. That was one of the main reasons.

DE: What of a performance or something?

GJ: No, I think there were photographs shown by one artist, I think very explicit, of a couple having intercourse and then the local community threw up a big fuss about it and I think that's one of the reasons and so then there was a big argument about who was right, the local community or the artists could show what they wanted to show.

DE: OK, you got a visual arts grant in 1980. What did you do with that? And was that to simply finance making work or did you have a project in particular or you didn't travel with that?

GJ: That was a VAB [Visual Arts Board] grant. It was a national one.

DE: Yes, Australia Council.

GJ: I remember getting that one and it was probably to develop work in the studio. I think it might have been about two or three thousand dollars or something like that, and to put exhibitions on.

DE: OK. And so how would you describe your development over that first decade of leaving studentship behind and becoming a mature sculptor?

GJ: I was really keen to keep producing work and really determined about it. It was a financial struggle, really difficult financially. But I just kept producing work and exhibiting pretty continually and I thought that was important. I did manage, along the way, to carry out, even back then, reasonable numbers of commissions even though I might not have made much money out of them. I also made large-scale work which I usually made off my own back.

DE: Yes. Did you find that you'd laid down the genesis of art forms that have carried you through to this day or did you find you started to develop in really quite different ways? It strikes me that the former might be the case. That you had a really intense developmental period as you were a student and kind of laid the ground work for what's fed your art from that time since.

GJ: I think that when I was a student that initial ground forms did arise through the investigation I did. I think that laid quite a strong format for that work during the 1980s but then I think in 1990, in some ways, that's when that work changes quite a bit as well. That's when I try and develop the sense of Australian aesthetic about the work as well. When I had the show in the early 90s with Robin Gibson, I brought in some of this new work. He said, 'What's this new work?' I said, 'I'm sick of the round forms. I want to change'. But he said,

'We have a market for this now and we don't want you to change'. And I remember looking and I said to him, 'Look, I'll tell you straight up, Robin. I'm bored by it and I'm sick of it. It's still an area I want to investigate but I want to move into new areas'. He said, 'Well, we have a market and we don't like the idea'. That's what happened.

DE: So how did that show go in 1995–96?

GJ: Well, maybe that one's a bit late because I started to make the figurative work about 1990, 91 or 92 or something. There should be a show there in the early 90s.

DE: Not listed on the CV that I've got. You've got one with Robin Gibson in 87. Could it be that one?

GJ: I think that's a bit early. It should be the next one after that.

DE: The next one after that is 1996.

GJ: Well, mind you, at that point in time I might have been making the figurative work for a little while then. That show in terms of sales, I'm trying to think, I can't remember exactly but one of those shows went reasonably well and the other one just sold one piece. I think that one, off-hand, went reasonably well.

DE: Who did you admire in that decade? Who were the artists that you were seeing in Australia?

GJ: Leading up to when I wanted to make the changes more towards the Australian-feel stuff, artists I liked along the way were Inge King. I certainly liked Inge's work. [Robert] Klippel's work I spent some time with. Over a whole body of work I saw Robert make some breakthroughs and I thought he was an important sculptor. I'm not sure if back then I was looking at his work but certainly now I like Geoffrey Bartlett in Victoria. I think he is a good Australian sculptor. Perhaps bringing us up to 2014, out of Sydney, Bronwyn Oliver I like. I thought the best of Bronwyn's work was fantastic. They're some of the sculptors along the way. In Sydney I haven't been such a big fan of the painted steel stuff which has dominated Sydney for about five decades and it still does now.

DE: There was also a quite uniform and very extensive move into heavily shiny metallic car finish polychroming about ten years ago or 15 years ago which seemed very Sydney-centric.

GJ: I gave a talk at the Cottesloe Sculpture by the Sea [exhibition] when Ron Robertson-Swann was at.

DE: Was that in 2008? I read a couple of your talks.

GJ: I think it might have been 2008. I reckon it might have been then, yes.

DE: And did you say something like that?

GJ: I just talked about the sculpture that was made in Australia that was produced in the shadows of tall buildings, so I was referring to what you were referring to, the urban landscape and suburb and landscape as well. And that while, as you said, I recognise that a lot of this urban landscape is a reflection of Australia, again on one level, I also thought at the same time, because people were trapped along the coast, that they weren't getting the real feel of Australia or they weren't getting into the interior and getting that feel coming into the work. I know Ron came up at the end of that talk and said, 'I know there was something wrong with that talk but I can't figure it out right now'. I'm not saying that Caroesque work is

not well considered, that's quite good sculpture in a way, but I think it's gone on for many, many decades and it is an example of work coming out of city-based and urban-based sculpture and it doesn't extend beyond that.

DE: Maybe we could wrap up with how you would summarise the directions of your work by the end of that decade and then I thought perhaps we could finish after that on going to Rhode Island and doing the residency there, and what that gave to your work as well, if that suits.

GJ: That 1980s period, there's many works made. I think they were a bit more international in style whereas in 1990, as I've said before, I think that work becomes more Australian in feel.

DE: Are you going into the landscape a lot then as well though?

GJ: No, not in particular at all. That's a change from 1990 onwards really. And I'm becoming more connected in with that as well. So there's many of these rounded forms that are made. I did lots of reading in physics and around physics about wave patterns and that's one of the underlying things, in the way two wave patterns create a kind of form. Back then I am interested in notions of interconnectedness and underlying patterns in nature so I'm just doing a whole lot of investigation into that area. The hexagonal form that I use right up till now in the mandala forms, that came from an investigation partly around people like Buckminster Fuller, where if you look at one underlying pattern that occurs in nature all the time it is a hexagonal pattern that appears in bee comb structures and such. I investigated that a lot and I took it as a really interesting structure and then I cut a circle up into six halves, like a hexagon has six halves, and then I re-joined it and I found you could make all these amazing structures out of it. There's an interesting thing here, for this underlying pattern or unit that I was using, this came from a natural system. Meadmore's system came from a cube which he did on a computer back then and put a 30 degree or 15 degree curve in it. So in relation to the basic units that Meadmore was using compared with mine, it's always intrigued me that mine came from a natural system, and I think the forms evolved from that reflect the natural world, and that's why they contrast so much with some of Meadmore's work which was computer based.

DE: Nonetheless, both of you were already interested in the energy that can be encapsulated in the sculptural form?

GJ: Sure, yes.

DE: They're really energised forms.

GJ: Yes, and that's another aspect to it as well. I mean that's where in sculpture you draw from a whole range of different sources. You know, you're looking visually at it, you're trying to make it visually interesting, 3D interesting, but then the conceptual input comes into the work as well and hopefully the work makes quite significant statements as well.

DE: One arresting trait of your work is that encapsulated energy.

GJ: Yep, yes.

DE: And sometimes in more baroque forms, yes? You might not like the word 'baroque'.

GJ: Well, sort of baroque. This is another development a bit further down the track. The earlier forms in the 1980s are more geometric. Later on I start to draw on steel and they become more organic and then more energy. Funnily enough that was a couple of drops of

postmodernism to move beyond the purity of just that pure form. In the 70s they are more modernistic, more taking it from the circle. In the early works I'd take the simplest form you can find, a circle, I'd divide it up, and I discovered that you can get an almost unlimited complexity of forms just from that simple act, so there's a link between simplicity and complexity, which is, I think, the way natural systems work. It seems ironical, but there's a link between extreme simplicity and complexity.

DE: Yes, you get almost an infinite set of variations from a very limited number of forms ultimately. That is the model of nature, isn't it?

GJ: Yes, and at that stage I am looking very deeply beneath the surface of things and I think what you can actually discover in the end is that there are underlying patterns and systems that point to everything being interconnected, which is more of notion with the Australian Aboriginal culture. It's nice that when you dig down deep, you discover something that says everything is interconnected and in some ways we should recognise that and we should take care of place. So the works, conceptually, say that in nature there is a huge diversity everywhere, there's huge change and difference, but there's some commonalities underneath that connect everything together and recurring patterns.

DE Alright, so how did Rhode Island come about? Four periods? You went in 1990, 93, 96 and 1997?

GJ: That's not right, I don't know what that is down there [on the printed CV]. I was in Rhode Island in 1988 or 89.

DE Just once?

GJ: No, sorry, 1988 I was at Rhode Island. Yes, just once.

DE So 1993 and 1996?

GJ: I don't know what that is.

DE: I think it's on the CV on your [web]site.

GJ: Well, it's wrong.

DE: So what did Rhode Island involve and how did it come about?

GJ: An art collector, Bart O'Connor, came out here. He bought a sculpture of mine from BMG or Bonython-Meadmore Gallery then. And then he wanted to come over to the studio and have a look as well and I think he bought another work and then I said to him I was thinking about travelling and he offered to set up a Rhode Island School of Art, a residency there.

DE: How was he connected to the school? He just knew them? He wasn't a teacher there?

GJ: No. He was a school teacher but he had some sort of connection with the place and knew people there.

DE: And what did that deliver to you?

GJ: I had that offer and I said, 'Look, I'll take it up'. I think I applied for a South Australian arts grant and I did get some money for travelling for that, a couple of thousand dollars. So then I went with Libby, my first long-term partner. We travelled there and that's when we did

that big world trip. So we were in America for about five or six weeks and I was at Rhode Island School of Art. I worked for about two or three weeks there. I worked in the studio and actually made the first figurative work I had ever made. I made it there.

DE: OK. And why was that?

GJ: Look, I think it was interesting that this is where I think the work started to bend a bit back towards Australia. I think when I was there I was starting to feel a little bit nostalgic about Australia at a point in time. It was the first time I had been away on a big trip. Then the first form I made there has a helmeted sort of head form on it and I think I started to move a bit away from the more rounded abstract work. With that head form I was thinking of some Cycladic work and things like that, but when I made it I thought it looked a little bit like the Kelly-type head as well. And, funnily enough, I made the mistake in America of showing the awful Ned Kelly film with Mick Jagger in it, which was an absolutely deplorable film. So all those things sort of came together and I made that work.

DE: Did you meet many artists? In two or three weeks of making a work there you probably couldn't.

GJ: They were amazed that I could make that sculpture in that period of time. I would have spoken to some artists there but I worked bloody hard and made the sculpture. The sculpture is still there, by the way. Rhode Island School of Art is one of the best known historical schools in America so I did really enjoy working there and the workshop was great.

DE: Now, designing a children's sculptural playground in 1991. Will we end on that?

GJ: In that period, what comes about in Adelaide and probably in Australia is this notion of collaborative work with architects but, at the same time, part of making sculpture – I refer to [Isamu] Noguchi here – that I'd always been interested in doing some of these other areas. So in that period I did, perhaps it was only one playground I did in the end, but I designed a couple of staircases which we made, which I think were interesting. In collaborative work with architects which is still going on to now, in my opinion what's important is that the artist brings some of their studio work to this process, and the one work I did I was really pleased with was the Magistrates Court railings in Adelaide, which was a big, big job made in the early 90s. I can show you some photographs of it. It goes right around the Magistrates Court.

DE: Where is it? Is it on North Terrace?

GJ: No, King William Street.

DE: OK.

GJ: It's always on the news here because of court proceedings. But this work has a whole lot of figurative forms which slowly come out of a flat plain and the figure appears and then it goes back into it again. It's using bars of steel that gradually bring the form out. So it's a job I'm really pleased with. So there was a lot of that work done, probably seven or eight or nine jobs. I did a baptismal font cover for a Catholic church which I was reasonably pleased with.

DE: You mention Meadmore was a designer first and that was mostly just to get the money, wasn't it? And Klippel the same, although Klippel gave up. I think he tried to be a designer in Sydney and just couldn't do it. The artist today should probably be someone who can be engaged in a whole range of works that aren't necessarily simply freestanding sculptural objects. I guess it was a combination of both, was it?

GJ: There were a whole lot of paradigms going around. One was about architects and sculptors exchanging ideas, which I had no problems with. One was about bringing some of those sculptor qualities as something different into areas like balustrading staircases, which I had no issues with as well. There was one notion floating around that the collaborative approach was a good ego buster for artists, that making more stand-alone work was just a bit of an ego trip and stuff like that, which I don't agree with.

DE: No.

GJ: But there was a bit of political stuff coming in then as well. But, as I said, like with Noguchi, I don't mind the idea of making some of these more functional works.

DE: It comes from the Bauhaus in the end. Ultimately the genesis of those sorts of ideas, I think, are in the Bauhaus idea that you do need to be involved, that modern art and modern life are much more enhanced if artists become involved in those sort of areas.

GJ: I like that I did make the ordinary – I don't know if 'special' is the right word, but giving it some sort of aesthetic quality. I like that idea quite a bit. Like I said to you before, I like that in a lot of tribal cultures where everyday objects are actually sacred objects.

DE: Imbued with something.

GJ: They are imbued with something and I think that's a great notion as well.

DE: OK. Let's leave it there today.

[End]