

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

Interview with Bob Jenyns

24 March 2010 and 14 July 2011

This is an edited transcript of interviews with Bob Jenyns on 24 March 2010 at his home in Tasmania and 14 July 2011 at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 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.

About Bob Jenyns

As an artist, Robert 'Bob' Jenyns (1944–2015) was involved in many significant exhibitions including the first Biennale of Sydney. From 1983 to 2005, he was head of sculpture at Tasmanian School of Art. A winner of the Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award, he also produced prints, drawings, and paintings, often reflecting his interest in narrative and in folk and outsider art.

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 24 March 2010

Deborah Edwards (DE): So your early life ...

Bob Jenyns (BJ): When I was a kid toys weren't readily available, everything was rationed. A lot of toys came from Europe, and of course there was none of that, so we had to make our own. Initially we lived in Surrey Hills in Melbourne and then, when I was about four years of age, we moved to Sandringham [also in Melbourne].

DE: You have siblings?

BJ: Yes, two sisters. So we moved to Sandringham, which was rural then – it is suburbia now – but then we had a cow, chooks, a garden and lots of bush. My father worked in the city – he was an office worker – so I suppose I found an interest in making things. I had a friend who I went through school with and we used to make things together, billy carts and all sorts of toys. There was a rubbish tip also, perhaps about half a kilometre away, and we used to go there and collect junk and make things from them. It was a treasure trove that we could actually put together and make all sorts of things that ranged from marble machines [a very complex track] through which we would run marbles – it had all sorts of mechanical things that were triggered as the marble ran through – to complex small buildings we made in the bush.

We used to do things on the beach as well. There was also the *Herald Sun* sandcastle competition every year. We'd always be a part of that, so I had this thing of hands-on making which was necessary. If I wanted to be active, that's what I did; I made things.

DE: Would you have been good at school too?

BJ: No, I wasn't, that was part of it. I didn't like school. I found it really difficult. Later, when I started teaching, I realised that I had been dyslexic, but it wasn't anything that was recognised at that time. I used to have difficulty reading and all sorts of things. At school I was always uncomfortable. I was always being belted because I was left-handed. We used pen and ink for writing and left-handed people used to smudge their work so I was always an outsider in that regard. I used to daydream a lot as a way of escaping, and then I used to make these things, part of the daydreams, but school was nightmarish, even secondary school, and then it got to a point where I knew that I had to do something.

DE: Sandringham High?

BJ: Well, it was Highett High. It was one of those new schools that started up with the baby boomers. There weren't enough high schools, so they started up new schools in church halls which, in time, developed into actual schools. I found the art room at the school an enjoyable part of the school. I had ambitions of being a doctor but realised that it was not going to be possible as I just didn't have the ability to focus on study. Then I heard about art school. I'm not sure how I heard about it, but I approached my parents and asked if I could go to art school and they would not have a bar of it. But I kept on and on and they realised that a cousin of theirs had studied at art school, doing something called advertising art, and was making a lot of money, so they said I could go to art school if I did advertising art, so I went to art school and started at 16 years of age, at Caulfield [Institute of Technology].

DE: What would your choices have been then?

BJ: Well, I am not sure that there was a choice but there was RMIT [Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology], and then Prahran [Technical College] as well, and Prahran ironically was on our rail line whereas Caulfield wasn't. I'm not exactly sure how I got to Caulfield.

DE: Perhaps it had the best advertising course?

BJ: Perhaps indeed. There were lots of people on scholarships. You could apply to the [state] Education Department and they would pay you to go to a school, so I applied but missed out. But I had a whole lot of friends who were successful. I was there in this place [art school] where I had to sign in in the morning and, if I went off to morning tea or lunch, I had to sign out, and in upon returning each time.

DE: There's nothing bohemian about that.

BJ: No, nothing at all, incredibly conservative and disciplined, but although I was studying advertising art, and I found that really easy, I was always working outside the square. I did things in my own way and, ironically, at the end of the four-year period I was one of only four of 24 who passed. It was an external examiner who really liked my work.

DE: What did the course involve? Drawing from plaster casts still? That kind of thing?

BJ: Yes, initially we were ... We had class subjects. One was called technical drawing, then life drawing. Another was sculpture. Advertising art, art history, painting, pure design – which was interesting to do; we had a wonderful lecturer called Warwick Armstrong who was a Melbourne painter – and printmaking.

DE: Who headed up the section?

BJ: Harry Ellis was head of school, I don't know what background he came from, but somewhere along the way Anita Aarons came in, and Stuart Devlin, who designed the decimal coins, and Ken Scarlett. I had each of those people teaching sculpture, and Kenneth Jack for printmaking. I found all of the studio subjects much more interesting than advertising art so spent all of my time in the sculpture or printmaking or drawing or painting studios. They had to kick me out at night basically, and then I'd go to night school.

DE: Were you living at home?

BJ: Yes, I was. And then I started going to night life-drawing classes at the old National Gallery Schools under John Brack, which was really wonderful.

DE: What date?

BJ: 1962–63. Anyway, I went through and finished the course and presented a folio of sculpture, drawings and printmaking. A lot of my advertising art related to them. While I was a student I had to earn an income, my parents couldn't support me – things weren't very good for them at that stage – so I used to ... well, I had a whole lot of jobs. I had a friend who used to run dances around Melbourne, so I worked as a bouncer because I was quite big, or the kids were quite small. I also used to design the posters for the dances, which was a reasonable income, and continued doing so once I had graduated.

I'd met Lorraine [Jenyns] at art school. She was on a teaching scholarship so she went out teaching after she graduated. At the time they were really desperate for teachers and so she suggested that I should apply to become a teacher. And I said, 'No, no'. I didn't want to be a teacher.

DE: Were you thinking at that stage that you wanted to be a sculptor?

BJ: Yes, well an artist really. Lorraine eventually convinced me that I should do teaching as a way of subsidising what I really wanted to do, so I finished up going for an interview and they basically said they would give me a job teaching, starting the very next day. That would have been around 1965. And I taught for two years at Aspendale Technical School, which must have been one of the roughest areas in Melbourne at the time. Now it's something of a smart bayside suburb but then it was basically a housing commission area.

DE: You were teaching sculpture? The standard curriculum stuff?

BJ: Yes, the standard curriculum stuff and I introduced carving, not so much modelling. It was a technical school.

DE: You had done sculpture at Caulfield Tech?

BJ: Yes, with Devlin, Scarlett etc, and Fred Cress was teaching drawing and painting at that stage. Fred Cress actually exposed us to ... Monash University was being set up at that stage and he had a friend who was in the medical school, so he took us out to draw in the mortuary there, which was pretty amazing.

Just to refer back to life drawing. At 16 years of age we were drawing plaster casts and then one day we came in and there was nothing there and then this naked woman came in. I was a 16 year old, had never seen a naked woman – SBS [television channel] didn't exist, there was no *Playboy* etc – and it was quite a shock. There was a piece I did which was in the Biennale of Sydney which was called *First lesson* which related to that – my first exposure to the naked female body.

DE: I've got some questions about your inclusion in that Biennale.

BJ: It was the first Sydney Biennale, 1973.

DE: And where is the work?

BJ: Collection of the artist.

DE: Good. Able to be photographed.

BJ: I don't know whether you've seen images of it but it's a naked woman lying on a sofa and there are three easels with drawing paper, so people could actually draw the model if they wished to.

DE: Did they?

BJ: Oh yes. Anyway, Gough Whitlam had just gotten in [to government] and this was an opportunity for him to announce the establishment of VAB [Visual Arts Board] grants. Anyway, he got excited about this work. Fred Williams had seen some of my work in Ballarat [Art Gallery] and he insisted that I be in the Biennale. Gough Whitlam did a drawing, and as soon as he finished it there was a mass of people shredding it to try and get a piece of it. Anyway, lots of people did drawings and it was really quite exciting to see the results of that. Some people were very serious and others were just taking the piss but it was nice to see the reaction from people.

DE: Just to go back to your comments on drawing from the plaster cast as a student. How long did that go on for?

BJ: It was just in first year. The first couple of weeks in the drawing class we drew from the plaster casts and then the casts were stacked out the back when the model came out.

DE: You weren't seeing a revolution in teaching at Caulfield then?

BJ: No, but then, mind you, a group of us took the plaster casts and used them in various ways, as decorative elements in our works, just to get rid of them. We had a strange woman called Kathleen Boyle who used to take drawing classes. She was English. At that stage it was smart to have overseas lecturers – Fred Cress was one of them. A lot of English and a lot of Americans. The whole focus in the sculpture studio, until Anita Aarons came back [from Canada] was on the current British School – [Henry] Moore, [John] Armstrong, [Barbara] Hepworth, a whole range of them – and painting was the same. The focus was Britain, and there were a number of exhibitions at the National Gallery of Victoria which fell into that pattern, and the philosophy was if ...

[Interview is interrupted]

DE: In hindsight, one just assumes that the whole thing had turned over in the art schools by the 1960s. But were you starting to get the feel of what was going on in the 60s? Did you know of George Baldessin and the whole RMIT push, for example?

BJ: No, not until much later. It was a whole different world and I wasn't involved in that. We were not really aware of much that was going on. Even in the art school I was in, I was an outsider. The figure was a focus at that point for me. I wasn't interested in British organic abstract sculpture, Graham Sutherland and those sorts of people painting in front of nature in an abstract sort of way, and even Aarons was focused in that way. I was more concerned with a narrative. I was feeling really quite odd and not sure that I was in the right place. But then the Museum of Modern Art opened by John Reed in Flinders Street, I went to an exhibition there – [Sidney] Nolans, [Arthur] Boyds and [Albert] Tuckers, a whole range of interesting work – and then I realised there were a lot of people doing work that I could relate to, and I got really quite excited about that and became happier in doing what I was doing. My work has always been narrative based, simply because I feel comfortable doing that. I've never really felt that I had to conform to a particular; in fact, if someone told me that I had to do something in a particular way, I generally won't do it. I just don't feel comfortable in being told what I should be doing.

DE: Were you showing in student exhibitions? Actually, were there student exhibitions? And do you have any work from the 1960s?

BJ: Only at the annual student exhibitions, but I lost most of that work in the fire [at the house in Daylesford] and the images of them. But there are a few around. It's funny, in my fourth year ... Dandenong Council used to run an art prize and one of my friends encouraged me to put some works in and I submitted a painting and won the prize. I was 20 at that stage. I remember coming home and I was quite drunk after celebrating, and my mother was quite sympathetic, which I found quite strange. That was really quite exciting. It was only probably \$30 but it was a prize. So, anyway, I started teaching at Aspendale.

DE: You had done four years at art school and were out around 1964–65 so you were still very young. You started to teach at around 21 years of age?

BJ: Yes. It was a fast learning curve. The woodwork department there used to have a commercial traveller coming around from a company called Perfectus Airscrew, selling wood, and that's when I first became aware of Tasmanian timbers – Huon pine and King Billy pine. I used to go to the woodwork rooms as they had facilities and I would cut the

wood that I bought. This was seen as really odd in the school. Nobody had done that before [ie staff from one discipline using the facilities of another].

DE: Is it a hard wood?

BJ: No, it's really quite soft, lovely for carving. The timber really seduced me, so then I started buying some for the art department to get the kids to carve. We used to use linocut tools. And then I started getting some sandstone in, and had kids carving that. Anita Aarons always thought the material very important, the grain of the wood. The material must dictate the form of the object; that was her mantra.

DE: She had come out of ESTC [East Sydney Technical College, now the National Art School], hadn't she? I remember she created abstract playground sculpture, but I guess very much 'truth to materials' based.

BJ: Yes, but I had always been a painter as well. I lived in a small house, which I shared with a few friends in Carlton [in Melbourne] where I could paint but I couldn't sculpt. We [Lorraine and I] got married in the second year of my teaching. Lorraine was teaching in the north of Melbourne and I was in the south, and when we got married we moved into another house in Carlton. Then when I started to sculpt I thought I would carve these things and then paint them.

DE: Which is interesting given you describe yourself as having been seduced by timber, but you clearly never did move into the 'wood craftsman' terrain.

BJ: No, and just moving on a bit, when I came down here [to Tasmania] in 1979, they had a furniture design studio in the art school, where people used to sit around, and they would have this precious wood and they polished it over and over for weeks. I referred to them as wood wankers, which they found quite offensive. I must say Peter Taylor used to take the piss out of me the whole time as I was painting this precious timber. But I first came down here in 1975. John Armstrong was here as artist in residence. At the time John and Tony Coleing had a framing business in Paddington [in Sydney] and I had met John through that. John and I were old mates. John invited me down. He was going on a trip to the west coast to get some timber. Peter Taylor had organised his residency and the trip, I think, and so he went on this trip too. We went up to the west coast. John was living in this little place which was very cold. Peter as a joke got all these pieces of Huon pine and sent them to John saying, 'Here's some firewood for you'. John said thanks and proceeded to burn them. Taylor almost had a heart attack on the spot. So when I came down here the philosophy prevailed that wood sculpture had to be precious, the material had to shine, and I accepted that. My teaching has always been to keep a very broad platform. Because I was taught in a very prescriptive way, I had always rejected that, so I took a broad-brush approach. Broad enough for students to translate ideas in whatever way they liked.

DE: That design department disappeared, didn't it, but it was mostly there through the 1980s?

BJ: It still exists but is a small shadow of its former self. But it was very strong and got lots of government funding in the 80s. When the Franklin dam business was on, a lot of federal government money came in, supposedly to develop alternative industries and develop furniture design, thus creating a new industry for the state. There were a couple of people who did very well out of that, who were lecturing in the area at the time. The students really didn't get a look in. It's been always pushed. The government has always used it as an alternative to forestry. So when I first came down, because I was painting my sculpture, I was seen as a funny person.

DE: That was in 1979. So 1975 was just a visit for a month or so?

BJ: Indeed. Anyway after Aspendale – Lorraine was a high school teacher and I was a technical school teacher – we moved to Daylesford [in Victoria] where there was a technical high school.

DE: So you could both be employed?

BJ: Yes, but we weren't both employed teaching art. Lorraine was teaching art but I was teaching English and geography and all sorts of things, but eventually we both got to teach art in this lovely environment. There were two others in the art department: Stefan Szonyi, he makes ceramic objects, is the brother-in-law of Michael Leunig; and a fellow called Noel Rowlinson – really dynamic people. The kids just wanted to spend all of their time in the art department. We taught there until 1978. We spent probably 18 years at Daylesford. It was somewhere I felt really comfortable as I had been going there for holidays for a long time, on the train, with my grandparents. We lived in the town initially, where we bought our first house, and then we bought some land outside Daylesford and proceeded to build a house.

DE: And that was the house that burned?

BJ: Yes. It took ten years to build it, and we moved out there and were there for about eight months, then it burned down. Ironically that's what brought us back down here [to Tasmania]. We were surrounded by bushfires on Ash Wednesday and Lorraine really freaked out. And a job came up here and I suggested to Lorraine that she should apply for it, and if you get it we'll move back down. I, at the time, had a part-time job at RMIT.

DE: By the time you were at Daylesford?

BJ: After coming back from Tasmania, the second time. The first time we came down was in 1979 after our house burned down. It was really an amazing experience. This house we had taken ten years to build ... We had nothing. There was a concrete water tank, and the morning after the fire I climbed up on the water tank and I saw this car come up to the gate, then trucks and tractors and a trail of people came in and asked what we wanted them to do. Were we going to re-build? I said yes, so we began cleaning up and rebuilding with the help of people at my work. We used to have working bees. That was in September. By December we had a house. It was an amazing experience. A mob of people helped and all I had to do was provide a drink for them each day. A wonderful experience for all.

DE: You were the only house to burn down?

BJ, Yes, and it was because of the toilet. We were on a cliff above a creek and couldn't have a septic so we had this Swedish-designed electric toilet and the seat used to be warm and got warmer. Lorraine thought it was one of the features of the toilet. We went to work one day and got a phone call to say that the house had burned down. We weren't insured so we lost everything. The whole toilet had just ignited, and because we weren't insured we couldn't pursue it, and we couldn't prove it had been the toilet and nobody wanted to investigate the cause, although we knew of three other people who had had that particular toilet installed and had their house burn down.

So I think it was January of 1979 that I was putting some finishing touches to the house, and my mother [who had been staying] came over and said, 'A funny man had called and wants you to ring him back in ten minutes'. It was Geoff Parr. I called and he said, 'I'm offering you a job in Tasmania as head of the sculpture studio if you are interested. Would you like to come over and have a look?' And so I went over.

DE: Did you know him? You hadn't met him in 1975?

BJ: No. I knew Tony Bishop, who was a friend of his, and I think Tony had told Geoff about my circumstances and I think they were looking for somebody. At the time, Peter Taylor had just left. Rodney Broad was also working in the sculpture studio, and I decided it would be a nice place and so I took up the offer. I thought this would be an opportunity to get lots of work done and also to teach. They had explained that there would be time to do my own work. The reality was that there wasn't. Prior to this, both Lorraine and I had full-time teaching jobs and we found we used to do all of our work at night. We'd probably work an 18-hour day teaching and then working [on our art]. I was in that routine and I continued doing this in Hobart. And then all these job offers came to me. There was one from Sydney, I think one from Melbourne – remembering, of course, I'd just finished this new house back in Victoria.

DE: So you hadn't let that go?

BJ: No, we didn't let it go at all, because at that stage we weren't sure. We'd taken two-years leave from our other jobs as I thought this job [in Tasmania] was a short-term contract. So we came down. I really enjoyed the place. At the same time we were working towards getting the warehouse on the waterfront. I organised for students to help clean out this grotty old warehouse that had just been left, with rats and pigeons etc. Over a period of six months we organised weekend working bees so we could then present it to the government as a viable proposition for a school of art. [The art school at the time was located on Mt Nelson on a greenfield site.] Geoff Parr had thought of moving the school after he had seen a similar kind of set up in Canada. He had put the proposal to the government but they were not agreeable to the proposition so he let that go. Lutz Presser started at the same time as me in 1979 and felt the same. We were stuck on the top of a hill, Mt Nelson, very cold in winter. It was designed like a fortress really, so we were up on a hill, a view all over Hobart and the bush, but there were no windows so you couldn't see anything; it was like a prison, very depressing. So, anyway, Lutz and I took it upon ourselves to convince Geoff that it was feasible to move and set about with the cleaning up of the IXL site. Geoff began lobbying government and the vice-chancellor, as in 1980 we became part of the University [of Tasmania]. Part of the school then moved down there, just to have a presence there. But I went back to Victoria in 1980. I was offered a job at the Phillip Institute [of Technology (PIT)], and I still had the Victorian house.

DE: What was 1977 at the Preston Institute?

BJ: That was part-time teaching: part-time teaching at Daylesford and part-time at the Phillip Institute. Bill Gregory was the deputy head of the school and he had just moved to Daylesford. He knew of my work and asked if I was interested in some part-time teaching. I left Hobart to move back to Yandoit [near Daylesford] and the new house in 1981, and back to PIT. The Phillip Institute had been Preston Tech [Preston Technical College] and then there was some kind of amalgamation with a teaching college. There were a number of heads of school during the year – Brian Seidler, then Betty Churcher took over, she was absolutely disastrous and I got into all sorts of arguments with her.

DE: Ken Scarlett described you as a lecturer in the 'structure' department. What was that?

BJ: Yes, it was called structure. Dom de Clario, Peter Cole, Brian Seidler as head of school, Bill Gregory had just left, Danny Moynihan, Dale Hickey, a whole range of interesting people were there at the time. It was seen as a very progressive school. They had 'strange' things they taught like 'sound structure'. The sculpture studio, in fact, involved ceramics and sculpture and there was a feeling that it shouldn't be described as either, but as 'structure'.

Peter Cole was the head of the studio at that time. It was all very casual, different to what I was used to.

DE: 1977 was part-time? How much?

BJ: About one day a week, and I did that for about two years.

DE: And in 1980?

BJ: I went for an interview and I was offered the job initially on a one-year contract and tenure at the end of the year, but the politics of the place got so involved. Seidler wanted to resign and did. Betty Churcher was promoted from lecturer to head of school within a week. I got into all sorts of arguments with her because she wanted us to teach theory as part of our studio course and I refused to do that. I thought there were people employed for that. There were also many issues regarding safe work practices in the school and I had been given the job as safety officer so, at the end of the year, I was told that my full-time contract would not be renewed but if I wanted some part-time work she would be happy to give it to me. So we parted company. Then I went back to teaching part-time secondary teaching as a fill-in teacher around the area.

DE: In 1973 you are in the Sydney Biennale, and the Sculpture Triennial at Mildura, then in Mildura in 1975 and 1978. So your profile was very much expanding. And you started to exhibit with Frank Watters in the mid 1970s?

BJ: That was in the early 1970s, and through Tony Coleing, a lovely fellow. He had won the Flotta Lauro Prize and the prize included overseas travel, and he worked as a fisherman on the North Sea at that time to earn money, and has been a surfer all his life. He's into technology now. He's mostly painting and printmaking, not sculpture.

DE: As a sculptor you are not going to be able to make a livelihood at your practice, are you?

BJ: No, no way, and all the money we [Lorraine and Bob Jenyns] earned at teaching, we spent on materials as we were both exhibiting.

DE: But I am assuming that you did sell well from the 70s?

BJ: No, I've never really sold well, which has been frustrating. But if that was the measure of whether I should continue or not, I would have given up long ago. We both used to swap work with fellow artists and we had a rule that when we sold a work we would spend the money on the work of another artist, so we had an incredible collection, most of which was lost unfortunately in the fire. And now we have four containers of stuff stored, mostly our own work.

DE: Frank has become your dealer and still is?

BJ: Yes, and Powell Street [Gallery] in Melbourne, Ray Hughes when he was in Brisbane, then Lennox Street Gallery and Darren Knight when he was in Melbourne, and we haven't had a Melbourne agent since Darren. We both produced our own work while we were teaching.

DE: You have children?

BJ: Two boys. The younger one moved out of home early, the other only in the last few years.

DE: We are at 1981. But in terms of the 1970s, the 1973 Sydney Biennale work had a real impact?

BJ: Ah ... Ron Robertson-Swann was given the task of looking after the artists in the exhibition, I'm not sure why. Anyway, I was completely ostracised. I wasn't a serious artist as far as he was concerned, so I wasn't invited to any of the functions. So I took off. 'Stuff you,' I thought. That view [of his] has still not changed.

DE: Ron was in it?

BJ: I think he was.

DE: Patrick White gave the Art Gallery of New South Wales *The wedding* in 1977 [a Bob Jenyns work], and [it's] our earliest work [and] is from 1972/74?

BJ: Yes, I think it was 1972. It was from an exhibition of sculpture in Penny Coleing's garden at Woollahra [a group show] and then I had a few pieces in various shows. I think I had initially met Tony Coleing at Mildura and he came down to visit us with Penny at Daylesford and saw my work and was excited and I think went back and told Geoffrey [Legge] and Frank [Watters, both of Watters Gallery]. I think Geoffrey was still working at Alcoa at the time.

DE: Did you know Tom McCullough?

BJ: No. Anyone could apply to go to Mildura.

DE: You were there in the 1970s: 73, 75 and 78. That's pretty committed to Mildura. And you travelled up to Mildura?

BJ: Yes.

DE: McCullough said that was the national think-tank for sculptors in the 1970s. Do you think so?

BJ: Well, it was interesting. It was an opportunity for people to meet. I knew the names of lots of sculptors but hadn't met them. Marr Grounds took a real interest in my work and was very supportive. We had discussions about all things. And Tony Bishop I met there – a whole range of people who have been friends ever since. It was that opportunity to meet and talk, otherwise you didn't see people or get to know them. It was the only real opportunity to meet with and discuss issues with other artists.

At the [Helen] Lempriere [National Sculpture Award] it seemed to be the same sort of atmosphere. I came across people whose names I knew but hadn't met and we would get together during the set up and talk.

DE: What did you put into the first Mildura?

BJ: Two works. There was a *Flying man* [*Otto the Birdman*].

DE: In the history that Graeme Sturgeon wrote there aren't images. Would you have any or would they have disappeared in the fire?

BJ: Perhaps, I'm not sure. There was *Billie's picture*. At the time I'd done a series of works on Billie Holiday and this was just a portrait of her.

DE: She was carved and polychromed and life-size?

BJ: Yes, and then there was a small figure, just at the top of a cliff, flying down, based on the first flight – a hang glider kind of thing.

DE: That seems to have been very much in the air in the 70s. Lots of artists made flying machine works. Tom Arthur and others.

BJ: Yes, there was also a very slick guy from New South Wales, Tony Trembath. There was also Ross Grounds. I'm not sure if he is still around, but he once organised an exhibition of flying machines. I think I might have a catalogue of that somewhere. It might have been at the Phillip Institute in the 1980s, probably 1983 or 1984.

DE: What was the impact of your two works at Mildura?

BJ: I didn't get a lot of feedback. Just to go back to the Biennale [of Sydney] for a moment. The response to my work at the Biennale was really quite odd. Elwyn Lynn had written a review in the local paper where he really slammed my work, and then he wrote an article for an international art magazine, *Studio International*, something like that, where he really praised my work. I thought this is really peculiar because he had been very supportive of my work. Really quite odd. They were poles apart. So those sorts of things happen quite often. The reaction to my work depends on the audience it's presented to.

[This is followed by further discussion of the Helen Lempriere and Sculpture by the Sea exhibitions.]

DE: Can you tell me about your 1975 work at Mildura?

BJ: I think it might have been a big plane on a pyramid, a huge big thing. I think I left it in Daylesford. It was too big to move. A pyramid of steel and steel columns. The plane was about five metres in wing span, quite large.

DE: Hadn't you done your first plane in the Artists Week show at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1974? So this is a year after that. Were you doing a series on planes at this stage?

BJ: Yes. They were originally exhibited in my first show at Watters, *The plane show*. I kept them for years, even up to five years ago, but then we threw three huge skips of things out here and I threw them out with it. They were starting to be a nuisance. And then I got a phone call from Watters saying, 'We have sold your planes' – this is 30 years after. They asked if they were the same price, and I said, 'No, they don't exist anymore and no, they are not the same price'. I ended up remaking three of them and a fellow in England, private collector, bought them. Clive Evatt had seen the original show and he was always going to buy them, and he never did, of course, but that had been why I had kept them for so long.

DE: 1978?

BJ: I think this is right. I did a piece. Daniel Thomas was the art critic of the *SMH* [*Sydney Morning Herald*] and, I may have this out of context but anyway, he wrote a really scathing review of my work at Watters, saying that I was somebody posing as a folk artist. I thought I would respond to that so I produced a work called *The sculptor posing as a folk-artist*. We were living in a little cottage at Daylesford at that time so I did a life-size portrait of myself sitting on a bench at the front of our cottage at Daylesford. The cottage was a wooden facade. That was the piece I put in Mildura, and Daniel Thomas saw it and immediately

contacted me and said, 'Oh, it's a wonderful thing!' and we've been bosom buddies ever since. We get on very well and I see him from time to time.

DE: Well, in relation to all of the labels, James Gleeson called your work 'pop naive' in the 1970s also. Everyone was trying to label you perhaps, given your unconventionality. The most consistent label applied to you appears to have been pop. What do you think of such labels?

BJ: I suppose taking it in the context of what was being done, what was being presented as sculpture then ... I should also say that even at art school, there were not a lot of sculptors around. Clifford Last in Melbourne was a hero, as was Lenton Parr, Inge King, that was about it, plus then David Wilson and all the rustic steel boys, and Michael Young, who was a five-minute hero. There weren't a lot of sculptors around.

With regard to labels, I have never really bothered with them as I have always just thought of my work as sculpture.

DE: Less in Sydney perhaps?

BJ: Yes, there was Robertson-Swann and his followers. And then Tony Coleing, way off, really lovely stuff, and amusing. That's what I love about Tony, his inventiveness. But in the context of what was being done, what was being reviewed, like the [*Melbourne Herald*] art show [in Treasury Gardens], paintings, sculpture, there was all this cloned stuff, all these copies from overseas or very traditional sculpture, and more a hobby show. That was what a lot of people saw as art. [Arthur] Boyd was doing some interesting ceramic sculpture, [Albert] Tucker was doing an occasional piece, ceramic sculptures, I saw a bit of that.

Even when I was a student, friends of mine lived in an old tram at Mentone. The house in front was owned by John Sinclair, a painter, and Jean Langley, both formerly part of the Heide set. He felt eclipsed as a painter and so became a music critic, I think for the *Herald*. I used to go and visit my friends and would be invited into the house and see this incredible collection. They didn't own it, I think, but were looking after it. There were works from Heide, so there were Boyds, Nolans and Tuckers. The house was just crowded with the stuff and I was just in awe of this stuff, and there was some sculpture I was exposed to there, which were the ceramic Boyds.

But, apart from that, the stuff of the time when I was starting to exhibit was the rusted steel brigade, clones of [Anthony] Caro and mostly English, oddly enough. Just tedious stuff. I could never really see any value in it at all.

DE: There was a stream of students from ESTC in Sydney who headed over the England to see Caro.

BJ: It was the done thing at the time. Paul Zika went over, not as a sculptor but as a printmaker, and studied whilst there and worked in the studio of a well-known British artist. It was what people did.

DE: So were you looking in any particular direction?

BJ: Not really. I've tried not to look at artists because I feel intimidated. I just want to ... It's almost like I've blinkered myself but, on the other hand, for my teaching I've always had to keep a broad perspective, so I've consciously tried to keep ... I've never shown my work to students.

DE: What about New Guinea? There was a very strong interest in the art of New Guinea in the 1960s.

BJ: It's interesting you should mention it. As a kid I worked as a grocery delivery boy. I had a bike. One of the places I used to deliver to on a weekly basis was a fellow who'd been a district officer in New Guinea, and the garden was incredible, jungle growth, and that's where he had a lot of New Guinean sculptures, and the house was full of stuff. So I was exposed to that quite early and I was interested in it, but also I had come across Yugoslav peasant painters in *Time Life* magazine. I started buying those magazines because they had sections on art in them. I also saw African sculpture. I must say that one of the interesting things whenever I went to Sydney was to go and see Tony Tuckson's Aboriginal collection in 'the cellar' at the [Art] Gallery [of New South Wales]. I found that very exciting.

DE: In the 1960s were you an assiduous reader of *Studio International* and *Artforum* or other magazines?

BJ: No, not really. I was always feeling intimidated so I just wanted to get on with my own stuff basically.

DE: What about going overseas?

BJ: I didn't go until 1992. I didn't have money. Even immediately after art school my best friends all jumped on a ship and headed off to England. One didn't come back for 15 years. They had all gone overseas and I thought they were a bunch of wankers. They had the money because they had been on studentships but then in 1978 our first trip overseas was to China, just after the Cultural Revolution, and that was really quite interesting and the result of that was the China show at Watters Gallery. Our youngest son was three years old and he stayed with my parents, but then in 1992, when my youngest son was then 14, he came with us. I think Lorraine had the Cité [International des Arts] studio in Paris, that was really good. Other than that I never really wanted to travel. But we travelled on a fairly regular basis thereafter, often trying to get a studio residency because that, at least, gives you a base to work from. And David Jones, a sculptor from Western Australia, contacted me just before I left the art school and said he had bought a place in France and asked if I would like to go there, so I've been there once and would like to go back. It's quite a substantial set up, with a number of French artists. It's in an old silk town, around four lovely old buildings. David has two studios there but I am not sure he does much work there. He was quite surprised to see me working the whole time.

DE: Are you drawing all the time?

BJ: Drawing and painting.

DE: You have never made a practice of drawing for sculptures, have you?

BJ: No, it's just that I haven't had the time to do drawing, but since leaving teaching at the art school I have had the time and do a lot of drawing, which I really enjoy. Paintings and sculptures come from those.

DE: But not drawings for sculptures?

BJ: I do drawings and they develop into sculptures. They're not specifically drawings for sculptures. I haven't had a good workspace here. We've been having trouble with the neighbours and the studio should have been much larger, so I've had to rethink the way I work. So I've had to do drawings, but I haven't been able to do any sculptures much over the past four years. My son chucked all this Meccano at me and said, 'Well, you could do some

work with that' [making maquettes]. Then I have to do drawings to present – technical drawings that made me think and work in a whole new way.

DE: Are you using the computer for that?

BJ: No, I should be able to but I don't have the skills, so what I do is fairly detailed drawings and feed those into a CAD system. I'm designing my own pieces now. The principle of having components that bolt together to make a large structure is really ... I mean it costs me \$5000 to get a show from here to Sydney, so I've got to contain it and that's one way. The truck that went into the Lempriere show just fitted into my car.

DE: And you just found the logs for it in Melbourne?

BJ: I got a friend in Victoria to get them for me and I could just assemble it.

DE: Just like the caravan. That was the same principle as well?

BJ: Yes, so that way of working is really quite interesting but I'm trying not to get bogged down into that. [Followed by comments on the dispute with his neighbours over the studio.] That's what made me rethink my practice. Because I couldn't do any sculpture, I started doing Meccano, and then I found a fellow in Hobart and he just feeds it into the computer.

DE: Would you be happy to be still carving?

BJ: Well sure, as soon as I get space, it will all resolve itself.

DE: Your focus on the narrative and figurative has disappeared in dealing with these 'big toys', hasn't it, but I assume not from your drawings?

BJ: No, there is still a narrative in this new work but the hands-on thing is really important to me. I've always been a maker. [Followed by comments on making and the current school of art]

DE: I thought there was now a strong emphasis on digital technologies. But that's another question. Is there a definition of sculpture that you have begun with perhaps that you have held to? Something about three-dimensionality?

BJ: Historically, most contemporary practitioners want an easy way of doing things, they don't want to get their hands dirty. It's interesting. Entrance to art school for students is about getting rich and famous. I suppose it's something to do with technology. And kids have had it pretty easy. Like I said, the roots of my own practice are in having to make my own toys and entertain myself as a kid. I was conditioned to think it that way. I suppose the demands of that conditioned me to think in that way. I think there is an integrity in that, that a work's not honest unless there is some input of the individual with a work, so I find that very difficult with the technology. Although it is really only another tool. Too many use it as an end product rather than a means to an end.

DE: But art since the 60s has given us many instances of handing plans over to workshops.

BJ: Yes, up until this point it's always been hands on. I've done it all, but still, once the parts have come off the computer, I still have to make changes, shape and fit the pieces. But unless people work through problems like that physically ... I used to say to my students all the time, 'Think with your hands, don't think with your head, think with your hands'. These kids come up with an idea and they think it's the end of the world.

That's not to say that someone can't come from anywhere and do interesting work. That's why I have a real interest in art brut. I have some good friends up on the west coast who used to find all sorts of bits of wood in the forest in strange shapes. One is a woodcutter, never been trained in any way, but I have more respect for that more than some of the contemporary artists.

Once art schools became part of the university system they were expected to conform to the traditional university model and art theory became a very important part of that, and I'd have students who felt really bound by this idea that theory is more important than practice, but theory follows practice.

[Referring to an ABC TV program, *Art from the heart*, which featured interviews with artists.] It's probably back in the 70s but it was the first program I had seen that really presented how artists think. These days there's no real perspective on things.

DE: There is certainly a pressure on artists and students to theorise their own art, but hasn't it always been about a wide ground that artists find their way up and out of?

BJ: But I think there's also the history and the integrity of the work. All of that is dismissed. I just find it difficult to relate to work where the artist really doesn't have any knowledge of the history or feeling for sculptural practice. History of art was good for me at art school and gave me a real perspective on things.

DE: In Mildura in the 60s and 70s there doesn't appear to have been a particularly strong presence of the welded steel guys. Was there?

BJ: No, it's true, there wasn't. Inge King was probably the strongest representative of that particular kind of work in the 60s and 70s, stronger than Robertson-Swann, [Clive] Murray-White, [David] Wilson or [Greg] Johns from South Australia.

DE: Did you have anything much to do with Nigel Helyer?

BJ: No.

DE: When you started to show with Frank Watters did you get to Sydney more often?

BJ: No, we were not able to afford to travel that much.

DE: Would you say the way in which you are using whimsy or satire has changed over time?

BJ: I don't know. I'm pretty intuitive in what I do. My path has been a narrative and virtually an autobiographical narrative one in my sculpture. I respond to things we do and experience but I would hope that it hasn't changed.

We have a friend who loves coming to visit us and stay for a while because we see things differently from her and she finds that exciting. We also meet up if we travel overseas for the same reason.

DE: Is your philosophy sympathetic with Lorraine's?

BJ: No, not really. Sometimes I find it frustrating that she spends so much time researching her ideas and dealing with the little details of things. I try to keep things simple. I want to get the ideas resolved and made in some way. Lorraine can spend a year on a work and I would have done a lot.

DE: You have worked in themes and series?

BJ: It's just worked out that way. I may respond to an overseas trip or the planes. A Canadian kid came to our school when I was young and he had all these model aeroplanes and he used to torment us all by flying them everywhere and I really wanted one but I could never afford it, my parents couldn't, so finally I made the bloody things. I have a real fascination with planes, and they occur frequently in my work.

DE: Isn't there a strong interest in word play also in your work?

BJ: Oh yes, but not consciously, but it's just something that develops in an intuitive way. I don't consciously think of it, just as an idea develops the thoughts about that come. It's like we said before with the theory following the practice. Just in terms of the narrative, in 1956 the first TV sets came and an old school mate, his father had an electrical goods shop and had TVs so we'd go down at night and sit in the shop and watch the TV, and then my parents bought a TV soon after and that was the end of me in terms of any academic pursuits I might have had as I found it a real distraction. My parents thought it the most wonderful thing on earth but it probably destroyed me and my younger sister, but that probably is where the narrative came from. A lot of my early works also use a framing device to contain the narrative and that's probably from TV as well – literally defining a space. I remember the canvases I used to put behind things, or boxes.

Peter Cripps, a Melbourne artist, did a range of performances for which he constructed a theatre so that he could control the way the audiences viewed his performances – a portable cardboard theatre just so he could control the audience's viewing. I find that quite interesting. I used to always say to my students that sculpture must demand its own space, it's not something that you stick on a plinth. If you are going to make a sculpture you have to have something to dictate how it is to be presented and what's going to happen to it. That's the way I feel about the three-dimensional object. If you don't have control over something, it can become an appendage to a piece of furniture. The sculpture is the whole, and that's something I got from Constantin Brâncuși who, oddly enough, is somebody I have looked at for a long, long time and much admired, which is a real contradiction with my work but ... I don't know whether you remember my Brâncuși piece, which was a homage to Brâncuși's *Endless column*. I make a pilgrimage to his studio – well, the reconstruction of his studio – every time I'm in Paris.

Tony Coleing introduced me also to Galerie Art Brut [Collection de l'Art Brut] in Lausanne, Switzerland, so whenever I go to Europe I try to go to Galerie Art Brut. Tony actually rang from Lausanne and said, 'Get here. It's an extraordinary place, the best thing you can imagine. You've got to get here'. And then there is another place some distance from Paris which it's very hard to get to, but when I was in the studio in the south of France I went there. It's a little village which an architect [Alain Bourbonnais] had bought a large section of, and he set up what is called the Fabuloserie, where the architect has commissioned artists to produce work, mostly all naive, art brut. It's just astounding, stunning stuff, all art brut or naive art.

Interview on 14 July 2011

DE: How did your Art Gallery of New South Wales work, *The wedding* come to Patrick White?

BJ: He had been looking at my work at Watters because he used to visit Watters on a regular basis; he bought a lot of stuff from them. But actually no, I don't think it was in a

show at Watters. It was in a show I had with Lorraine. He saw it in that, and he and Frank had communication about it. Frank thought he should have it in his collection, and he was convinced he should purchase it, so he did.

DE: Was it part of a series?

BJ: Yes. I am trying to remember. Margaret Rich was at [the Art Gallery of] Ballarat [as director], and she invited us [Lorraine and Bob Jenyns] to have a show together, which was *The Jenyns show*. It didn't have a catalogue, they were too expensive. But I think it [*The wedding*] was exhibited at Ballarat at well, and then travelled to several regional galleries. Lorraine had her ceramics and I had sculptures.

DE: Just a housekeeping question, as the work is polychromed in any event. What kind of wood is it?

BJ: I think it is a combination of plywood and King Billy [Tasmanian softwood]. Again it is so long ago. Glenn Barkley [curator, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney] in relation to his *Tell me, tell me* show, and he said, 'I am looking at a catalogue of yours from Ballarat with a work I want in my show. Do you remember it?' And I said no. We had a fire in Daylesford and lost a whole lot of stuff. So I said, 'If you have an image of it, I will re-make it' – because now you mention it, I do remember it – which we did, which was nice. People still ask me about work I lost in the fire. And some of it I have chosen to forget, not because it was related to some particular incident, but because I have pushed it aside. But it is nice to be reminded.

DE: We had some general discussion about sculpture last time, but you have your own unique position sculpturally. I have been asking sculptors to comment on the two strains which moved through from the mid 1960s and into the 70s: high modernism and conceptualism. I am interested to know if you had a sense of that and if it affected you, whether there were pressures on you in relation to these trends.

BJ: All of that was heavily influenced by what was going on in Britain at the time, and also in the States, which I personally found objectionable because it wasn't anything to do with us. It came from magazines and books, because we didn't have the media that we have now, and there was a definite division there. I was completely ostracised by those people and I used to be snubbed whenever we saw them socially because I wasn't doing the right sort of work. From my perspective – and it is difficult for me to speak from a broader perspective because we really only had Mildura and those sorts of exhibitions where we came together and showed together, that we actually had discussions – but from my perspective, first of all I was rejecting what I was taught at art school. Anita Aarons, an Australian who had spent some time in the States, came out and was working with form and material, and the notion that the form follows the material, so [with her as teacher] we were encouraged to do lots of wood-carving where the form was defined by the grain. Even at art school I was rejecting that, and just doing what I wanted to do. I suppose to me all of that was irrelevant. And I didn't go to many exhibitions because I didn't like to be intimidated by it. I wanted to do what I wanted to do. And it was easy to do that because the media isn't what it is now.

DE: Were you reading Donald Brook's critiques then?

BJ: Not really, simply because I didn't want to be intimidated by what people were doing and saying. But that's where Mildura became really important because it brought a lot of extreme positions onto a common ground. And it is amazing what a campfire and a few drinks will do to people. They would all sit around, and everybody had a lot in common. So it was quite interesting from that perspective.

DE: Do you have a sense of what did, or didn't, come out of Mildura?

BJ: Well, it's interesting. Tom McCullough has just been 'dug up'. He became quite a significant figure in that whole context. But Tom used to take it upon himself – the more eccentric people were, the more extreme, the more he wanted to be involved, because that was what he was about. He saw himself virtually as the 'striking stone' for all those figures, and there used to be clashes and arguments. But people would spend days, sometimes weeks there, setting their works up, and they were forced to communicate.

DE: He brought out a German performance artist, whose name escapes me at the moment, but he did performance works slightly similar to Ken Unsworth. Would performance have been an important catalyst to things there, do you think?

BJ: People used to talk about performance a lot, and obviously it had an effect on different people for different reasons. Although we had heard about performance art we hadn't seen it, in our faces, until that time. Stelarc then became the stellar performance artist of that era and has maintained that, whereas many other performance artists of that time are somewhere else.

DE: Kevin Mortensen, who is now largely painting, I think.

BJ: Yes, a good case in point. His performances were very strong. I remember his performance in the butcher shop at Mildura. It drew a crowd. He had an actor, of course, who was performing as the butcher, and had all of these cuts of meat in the window, which were sculptures, and the butcher would ritualistically go through the whole procedure. And all the locals thought he was nuts, of course. And Tom's reaction to all of this was: 'Bring it on! This is magical'. Tom was a real doer in that sense. Not only getting all of these people together but igniting interest in the local community. And in the end that was his downfall, because he became too close to it, in the sense that what he was presenting was in their face so much that they couldn't ignore it. And that was sad. And I remember saying to him once, 'There is a lot of shit in the show, Tom', and he said, 'Yes, but it will look good in the catalogue'.

DE: Were people discussing performance and the conceptual in terms of how it could affect sculptural practice?

BJ: You had cross-overs, people like traditional sculptors being adventurous enough to try performance.

DE: Like Bert Flugelman.

BJ: Indeed, trying it, because there was a sense of excitement. [Mentions Jillian Orr's performance] And you had Peter Tyndall, a well-known painter, going to Mildura, I think simply because he wanted to be at Mildura, he had heard of this spark that went on. He did *The shooting gallery*, which the locals thought was the greatest piece. It had that sense of carnival. Like Brisbane, the [Asia Pacific] Triennial – if it entertains, it is good.

DE: I suppose to continue to attract funding. I think, in retrospect, that Mildura was given a life which related very much to government funding through a budding Australia Council, and what they wanted for this funding.

BJ: Indeed.

DE: Were you reading many international art magazines at the time?

BJ: No, I wasn't. I simply couldn't afford it and the local library didn't have them.

DE: Do you have a sense of the large quota of New Zealand sculptors who came to Mildura – Jim Allen and the like?

BJ: Yes, Tom encouraged that because he wanted to get that cross-fertilisation.

DE: Did you have anything to do with them?

BJ: Not really. Tony Coleing, who did some very interesting stuff at Mildura, and also Tim Burns, who did very controversial things at Mildura, became good friends of Jim Allen and a number of other New Zealanders. Marr Grounds was interesting too.

DE: What was your position in relation to that set of artists, for example?

BJ: Well, because I was a personal friend of Tony's, and Marr also befriended me ... Just going back to performance art, I suppose people found it difficult to understand how they should read it. Was it performance in the sense of stage performance? Was it performance in the sense of having a presence? Or whatever. A lot of performance was judged in comparison to stage performance and it just didn't stand up. Ewing Paton Gallery at Melbourne University with Kiffy – I think her name was Kiffy Carter then [nee Rubbo]. They had quite a thing going then. They organised exhibitions of a whole lot of artists who you wouldn't really see together – a miniature Mildura in that sense – coming together in one exhibition. As I remember it was in the university union building so students really couldn't miss it, so it created a lot of discussion there. The National Gallery of Victoria, if they were having an exhibition, would at that time have also a preview for artists, with drinks etc. And you would catch up with an odd range of people and that was also a good place for artists to catch up and discuss things.

DE: Are you able to summarise how things might have changed between the 1970s and 80s? Did your own work change?

BJ: My own immediate response would be no, although if I looked at my work I might see some changes. To me, art is fairly straightforward. I relate to what's around me and what's happening and that's how I respond. I don't respond to other art movements or other artists' work. But in terms of other things, I think there were some radical changes there.

But just harking back for a minute. *The field* exhibition [at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1968] was pretty critical in terms of sculpture and the acceptance of ... That was very significant. It was a new gallery, a smart exhibition, quite an odd exhibition for the time because Melbourne is not into colour, and here were lots of Sydney people, oddball people, quite dynamic. It was the talk of the town, in terms of artists.

And Bruce Pollard at Pinacotheca [Gallery]. My friend Bill Gregory used to exhibit with him, and he was saying [recently] that Pollard, although he has closed the gallery down, is still dealing. He has a Balinese princess as a wife, I think, and spends quite a lot of time in Bali. He opened first at St Kilda on the Esplanade in a shop front, and that was a bit prissy. It was a fairly anal exhibition space and he had a range of anal artists mostly. But once he got to the warehouse [in Richmond] it opened up. There was a whole range of oddballs that he brought together, mostly from the Phillip Institute or PIT as it was known. Dom de Clario, Dale Hickey, Peter Cole, and a whole lot of Italian guys who were there at the time, they all exhibited at Pinacotheca and Bruce was held in high regard.

DE: Was Bruce Pollard making any particular statements about sculpture?

BJ: Not really. But a lot of his artists were artists in the sense that there were not divisions. There were paintings that became sculptures and sculptures that became painterly. It was flexible. There were not pigeonholes.

DE: Do you hold to any particular notion of sculpture?

BJ: No.

DE: You don't have that romantic modernist view of material?

BJ: No.

DE: You are not interested in the techniques of sculpture particularly?

BJ: No.

DE: You are serving your own vision, materially. There is nothing intrinsic to this?

BJ: Not really. Even now, stuff overlaps all the time, and I will incorporate two-dimensional images in my sculpture. I work with an idea and it really determines where it [the sculpture] is going.

DE: In terms of what sculptural practice is, was there a sense that the boundaries of sculpture were breaking down in the 1960s and by the mid 1970s the boundaries were gone and that had been accepted?

BJ: There was still a school which rigidly stuck to earlier premises. Murray-White, for example, stayed with the same kind of work until the 1990s, until he started to work figuratively. But he was entrenched in a very strict notion of what sculpture was.

I really never was interested in abstract steel sculpture. I did exercises at art school and I just found it boring. Yes, this line comes through space at this point, and these planes are working, but so what? That happens in nature. It's more interesting in nature, I find. There was a range of oddball people. If you look at sculpture in the 1980s, there were a lot of diverse things going on. And I think some people respected each other, and others didn't. I have made friends for life out of those times. People making quite different work to me would just sit down and talk and we had common ground. But there were hardliners who were so entrenched. Anything that threatened that, you scratched the eyes out of.

DE: The current situation is so diverse and artists don't want to label themselves in any way. But by making objects you are dealing with space and three-dimensionality and that is a central part of your work, of making objects, isn't it?

BJ: It is. One of the most interesting things was teaching at a tertiary institution because every day was a challenge. Because you would have students coming in with the most diverse range of ideas and fairly fixed knowledge on how to pursue it, and to try and encourage them to rethink that narrow perspective was a real challenge, and I used to take that on, and in a sense took pride in it – I had people coming in wanting to make nice little things in bronze – in suggesting that maybe they think about personal stuff. Because that is what art has always been about for me. If it is not about an individual, it may as well have been done by a machine. That's what I saw, harking back to the 70s, the rusted steel and highly coloured and polished sculpture to be. One of the things that I think has broadened the perspective, but also narrowed it in a sense, is the introduction of art schools into universities. Suddenly art schools had to be academic institutions. Instead of art history, one would have courses in art theory. Art theory people were not necessarily artists and so many

didn't have a knowledge of making and so all the talk was about ideas, and I used to find that students would come in the studio and say, 'I am thinking about doing this but I don't know how to resolve it in terms of objects or physical presence'. And I would say to them, 'Forget about all that, that's just academic jargon'. [Mentions Ted Colless] I used to say to the students, 'Don't think with your head, think with your hands. Start by doing something and it will resolve itself'. They would come back and say, 'It works'. That was always my doctrine.

I had a post-graduate student, and a friend came in to examine him – I hadn't chosen him – and he said, 'The work is really interesting but what is all this bullshit?' The student had met a philosophy lecturer and suddenly a whole lot of philosophy was involved with the objects. I sat down with the student later and said, 'Think seriously what you are doing. If you want to be a philosopher then go to another campus, but if you want to be an artist stay here and rethink what you are doing'. He got worse though [laughter]. He chose the philosophy lecturer for his supervisor and did a PhD.

DE: It's a particular kind of pressure on art students now. But I am assuming that sweeping through the 70s and 80s is an increasing drive to conceptualise or theorise the work.

BJ: Of course. Through the introduction of art theory too. The thing is, when I trained, I was sat down and told sculpture wasn't a serious enterprise. You don't become a sculptor. They're not real. They don't make money. I was determined to push that aside. But you look at art schools now, the sculpture studios, here anyway, are the most popular studios. It's amazing. In fact, just at art schools now, the number of people!

DE: You have always been a maverick in that landscape, haven't you, with a maverick practice?

BJ: I have, and in teaching the same. I've always been marginalised, because I'm always outspoken about everything. It hasn't made me popular.

DE: Do you have a sense of what is going on today?

BJ: Not really, but I think that is healthy in a sense. There have been some amazing reports on what various curators and directors have said about the opening of MONA [the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart], the fact that there are no labels. To me that is always the way I have judged a work of art. It doesn't matter if it's a minimal thing: if I look at it and respond to it, then that is good for me. Video art is something I have never had much passion for, except when Lorraine had the studio in Barcelona, there was a retrospective there on Tacita Dean – this was quite early in her career – and I spent a whole day there. They were all narratives. A really deep investigation on her part of a village and a murder. It was the most intriguing narrative, a really interesting thing. And when I started looking seriously at video art, I still had a cynical view of it, but occasionally I come across things that are really quite exciting. I look for a response, whether my heart or head, and if I don't get it, I just walk through.

DE: One is very aware of the market. I wonder whether one very significant difference between the 1960s, 70s and now is that very strong sense we have of the dictates of the market.

[A brief discussion of the Saatchi Gallery and the art market follows.]

BJ: Way back in the 60s an exhibition came to the National Gallery of Victoria, which was at that stage at the top end of Swanston Street – *Recent British sculpture*. There was

Hepworth, Moore, [Kenneth] Armitage, a whole range of artists being presented as recent. And I looked at it and thought, 'God, this is not recent'.

At that time, in an art course, the lecturers would present ideas and work that was similar to themselves, and the more followers one had, the more successful one was seen as being as a lecturer. Because that was the way you did it. You moulded these people into your own form. That's all gone by the wayside, although it still exists in some pockets. That's just not the right way. That sort of doctrine being presented to students, I just don't agree with. As I have said, I tried to keep my vision as broad as possible, because it is a significant position to be in in terms of influencing students.

DE: What is interesting now is to look back and see how so many people did move through the dominant trends of the time. Everyone, nearly everyone, did experiment with colour-field painting. There was a generation which moved through Caro and David Smith etc. That now seems somewhat weird, but I guess it was then about dominant trends. That ground has totally shifted.

BJ: Sure, I think it comes back to teaching in the art schools. It was very tight and strict at that time. I remember we used to do a subject called pure design and you would draw up geometric shapes and forms and then have to experiment with colour, and you had it marked, like in primary school. You had to conform, and if you didn't, you weren't even considered. My reaction, and that of a lot of other people, was that it was irrelevant. Sure, I will go through the process and keep it as a knowledge source, which was good, but you then looked further afield. But lots of people didn't because judgements were made. Many students tried to perform like the lecturer performed, because that was looked upon favourably. But then I think people started to reject that. There was one lecturer I recall at an art school who was there into his eighties. Kevin Mortensen came in and threw that apart, blew it apart.

DE: Were the terms 'post-object art' or the 'dematerialised object' ones that were being put about then?

BJ: It didn't mean much to me. It was all coming out of the art theory department.

DE: Did I ask you about your commission for the Collingwood Education Centre in 1977? Does it still exist?

BJ: The centre does, but the sculpture doesn't. I think it's long gone. It was on the roof. There were industrial buildings around and it was a very modern building so I made clouds and a plane, a kind of mobile, so it looked like the plane was flying over the building. That followed on from the plane show.

I had a commission for Illawarra Primary School. They wanted a specific thing. It was down there near the mouth of the river, so I had a ship and a jetty and a lighthouse, which was a symbol of the school. Anyway it lasted six months and then it was removed. And I demanded to know why it had been removed, and they said, 'There are people doing things over the weekend. They climb into the ship and they do things'. What can you say?

DE: It's now not there either?

BJ: It's now at Bellerive [in Hobart]. Arts Tasmania moved to Bellerive. But it's now surrounded by a big wire fence, for the same reason [laughter]. Arts Tasmania moved it there.

DE: You did a show called *Sacred sites*. Regarding the notion of the national, you have said that your work is autobiographical, but I guess part of this is the experiences you have. Does sculpture or artistic practice have to be of a place?

BJ: That was the last show. No, I don't think it has to be of a particular place. I was fortunate enough to be doing some travelling for a decade, prior to about eight years ago, and that gave me a good perspective on things and I found there were cross-overs.

[End]