



James C. Sourris Artist Interview Series 2015-2016
Item 30602/4: Leonard Brown Digital Story

Interviewee: [Leonard Brown (LB)]

Interviewer: [Angela Goddard (AG)]

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AG: So, Leonard, you were born in Brisbane, and grew up in the suburb of New Farm. In your childhood, your first exposure to works of art was within a spiritual context, in the context of the church. I wonder, what was your earliest experiences of a more secular kind of artwork? Did you see exhibitions at the Queensland Art Gallery?

LB: My brother, who's nine years older than me, would—I would quite often hang out with him, in the movies in Fortitude Valley, where we in 1955, I think, we saw Robinson Crusoe, and that made a very marked impression on me. But then my brother also took me to the Queensland Art Gallery, the National Gallery of Queensland.

AG: And the museum in that time had amazing dioramas—

LB: Everything was out—everything was out. It wasn't a curator's selection—all the great cases of birds' eggs; it was just a labyrinth of things to look at. But then we went—the first time I remember walking into the Queensland Art Gallery, and I didn't know what they were at the time, but the show, it would seem, was the travelling Turner show from London.

AG: What year was that, do you think?

LB: I think it was 1960. And because it was a travelling show, the works, for the most part, were small. And they were very—they had the appearance of being very fragile. But very intense.

AG: And so, you, in 1968, have your first solo exhibition. At the age of nineteen?

LB: I lied about my age.

AG: Right.

LB: Because I thought they wouldn't take me seriously.

AG: Or serve you wine, perhaps.

LB: I told them I was not quite twenty, yeah, I was worried that they may not take me seriously.

AG: And did they?

LB: Yes, they did. The exhibition attracted reviews by Dr Gertrude Langer. She spoke about my cruel, quite white nudes that were not erotic. It was very strange that she saw them as unerotic. I'm not quite sure about that.

AG: Up until this point, things had been set, yet your next solo exhibition isn't until the early 1980s, so, what happened in 1969 after you left art school?

LB: Well, after this idyllic four-year period when I could see that it was coming to an end, there was a certain kind of crisis. And so, to put it on hold, seemed a perfectly logical thing to do while I developed other aspects. And so I fell in with this community of Anglican Franciscan friars, who were very much non-conformist, and at the end of my fourth year in art school, I went to the brother in charge and said, "I'd very much like to come and test my vocation." And he asked me whether I had a wife, and I said no, and he asked me whether I had debts, and I said no, and he said I was welcome to come in January, which I did.

AG: Then there's another shift, where you become interested in the Russian Orthodox tradition.

LB: The brothers had built a brand-new chapel, octagonal.

AG: In Brisbane.

LB: They asked me to paint an altarpiece—five-panelled altarpiece, and in two weeks I knocked one up.

AG: On timber panels?

LB: Masonite prepared with canvas over the Masonite. And they loved it. It was like a theatre set. It didn't have a permanence. It was a bit of an embarrassment. But, nonetheless, I did it.

AG: So this world opens up, and then you become baptised into the Russian Orthodox—

LB: Yeah, so I left the friary—I didn't become Russian Orthodox straight away—it took me some courage to ask that question. Bishop Constantine alerted me to what I needed to be doing.

AG: He left you with some books, yeah.

LB: But also he asked me to paint two icons for him—he asked me to paint the [Владимирская Икона Божией Матери 00:05:17], the Mother of God of Vladimir, which is the pre-eminent of all Russian icons. He asked me to paint an icon of St Nicholas, just head and shoulders. He alerted me to things like, the use of bole, laying French rouge underneath my gilding—things I didn't know about. Fine-tuning. But up until this stage, I hadn't used egg tempera, and the thing about icon painting—traditionally, it's egg tempera, which is the preferred medium, which is a more—oil painting has a certain kind of sensuality, whereas the medium of egg tempera has a kind of hieratic, priestly kind of severity.

AG: Maybe, Leonard, we could talk a little bit more about your more recent works, in which you've returned to the brush.

LB: I had to modify the way I worked because my spine protested, and so I began a whole new body of work where the application of paint was done with the brush, and so the exhibition that came out of this body of work was called old-fashioned painting. But when I

was in first-year art school, I can remember Roy Churcher saying, "Oh, there's talk on the grapevine that painting is dead." This was in 1965, and I thought, "Well, you know." With passing decades, you would hear to a greater or lesser degree the same thing being said. But my great love is painting—it is one of the very few things that we have always done, and that we are still doing. It is one of the few areas of cultural continuity. There are not many things that you can say that about.

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