



James C. Sourris Artist Interview Series

Judith Wright *as interviewed by Julie Ewington*

Julie: Were you one of those kids who was a compulsive scribbler or a drawer, or someone who made things?

Judith: I was certainly someone who made things, and I think my practice now has gone full circle.

Julie: What sort of things did you make?

Judith: At that time, back in the Dark Ages, it was possible to buy little plastic dolls in Woolworths, little tiny things like this. And I used to make them into ... give them plasticine tails and make them into mermaids, or whatever. So I lived in a whole imaginary world, very similar to what I'm doing now.

Julie: Did you learn ballet in Tewantin or in Brisbane?

Judith: In Brisbane.

Julie: So your life took you away from Brisbane at what age?

Judith: Sixteen.

Julie: Oh, that's the ballet dancer eating a chocolate cake.

Judith: That's the (1:02), yes.

Julie: Got it.

Judith: We were a motley lot. In that first intake, there were people like Graeme Murphy, Janet Vernon, various people with whom I've kept in touch.

Julie: This was the first creative outlet you found. Did you leave that behind, or did you bring it with you?

Judith: I did bring it with me, the way the body is an instrument for one's emotions, creativity, tactility, all of that.

Julie: The first eight or ten years of your practice, what sort of works were they? Can you describe them?

Judith: The scale was literally to do with the body, to make ... in fact, however this might sound, lay down on the paper and made a shape relevant or a triangle, a rectangle, relevant to my own shape.

I've seemed to be interested in contained forms. But sometimes when a form is very dominant it, for me, in a way takes over from an engagement with the viewer. When the eyes aren't the dominant thing, then other senses have to come into play.

Julie: And there's a work in the Queensland Art Gallery Collection that dates from 1988 to 1991 called *God's Bones for Nicole*.

Judith: Soon after Matthew, I became pregnant with another baby, and that child died; it was cot death. But at the time, people didn't make ... you know, it was just all hushed up, and the baby was taken away. And so the *God's Bones* work was for Nicole, to make a memorial that she'd never had.

I think what I try to do is to talk about what it is to be human, and the fragility of that experience.

Julie: Can you talk to us about *One Dances*?

Judith: I was wandering around Sydney looking at the antique shops, as I do, and I saw in the window this fantastic mannequin. And that became almost like the reincarnation of Nicole. So I used her – I've used her right the way through, pretty much – and that first video was with my youngest son, Luke.

Julie: Who's behind the camera, Judith?

Judith: My middle son, Peter.

I suppose I've always been really interested in primitive art. That's been more inspirational for me than anything else.

I've used masks that I've collected until I've run out and have to replenish them.

Julie: I see that you have a storage issue.

Judith: Yeah. I kind of (4:20) just the store.

Julie: The store.

So who have we got in here?

Judith: That's a friend, Luke. Matthew had a friend who was a bit of a, bit of a difficult child.

Julie: I do remember one day when you said, "I've got this new work in the studio; I want you to come and have a look at it. I think you'll think I'm mad," was more or less what you said.

Judith: So that was *Awake*. I'd collected a lot of musical instruments, old ones that no longer were functioning. And I was interested in the memory that those instruments held. The shadows are really more important than the actual objects.

Julie: You have very precise lighting, which is actually very much like stage lighting; very dramatic.

Judith: Yes, yes. Yes. The next one is *A Journey*, and that was a journey through the afterlife, sort of.

Julie: So they were all in little vehicles or conveyances.

Judith: Yes, they were all in something that was, that was allowing ability.

Julie: And what's the third one?

Judith: The third one is *Destination*. And that's the arrival of whatever one would perceive that to be.

You know, I asked several people, "When you die, what would you like to happen?" And though I haven't really been able to follow that in any direct way, that's the premise.

Julie: What are you working on now?

Judith: I'm still working on *Destination*.

Julie: The work is not finished?

Judith: No.

Julie: So you haven't quite reached your destination?

Judith: No. I'm still looking for it.