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ARTISTS' LIVES

Wilhelmina Barns-Graham

Interviewed by Tamsin Woollcombe

C466/34

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Interview Summary Sheet

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F4747 Side A

[Wilhelmina Barns Graham talking to Tamsyn Woollcombe at her studio in St Ives on the 6th of June 1994. Tape One.]

Right. I was just going to ask you a bit today about your childhood and what you remember of your parents and perhaps your grandparents if you remember them at all. But, you were born, weren't you, in St Andrews, is that right?

I was, yes.

Virtually to the day, I mean it's virtually your birthday this week isn't it, I mean it is your birthday this week you were saying.

Yes that's right, 1912, 8th of June.

Which one? 8th?

Yes.

Oh right. And, it always says in your notes with a catalogue, it says that you were born into a well-to-do sort of family, or...is that right, well-to-do, or landed, or...?

It isn't really. I don't think it is right. I was born into a well known, connected family in St Andrews, and the West. My parents were second cousins, and...I don't know what today's words, 'well-to-do' mean; I wasn't born into a working-class family, perhaps that's another way of putting it, and, much to my regret sometimes, because the artist world is mainly out of, not so much the so-called well-to-do people. I don't know what well-to-do exactly means.

No I don't really actually.

It sounds wealthy, and they certainly weren't wealthy.

They weren't wealthy, no.

No.

Right.

And, I was born in a crescent, a rather beautiful crescent in St Andrews, a few doors down from Jo Grimond.

Oh really?

Yes, who I knew well in my childhood.

Oh, right. And...

And we were brought up in St Andrews and I was at school in St Andrews, and we left it in 1924 because my father suffered from asthma and he had inherited land in the West, and he sold the big house that he had been brought up in and we moved to a farmhouse that he owned which he had improved and extended, and we moved there in 1924. But it was a very different climate, a soft, feminine, wet sort of landscape, countryside, whereas St Andrews is harsh and east-windy and bracing; there it was more enervating, but it suited my father better. And my grandparents on my mother's side lived in Fife, two miles out of St Andrews, in a small property which I now own, left to me by my aunt, my mother's older sister. And he inherited it, Charles Meldrum inherited it from his uncle, Henry Maitland. And, there was a farm attached to it which was sold during the war. Anyway he left it life rent to his wife, and she left it life rent to the eldest daughter who by then decided to have proper ownership and left it to me, and I am the first real owner of it. And it's small now, it's only seven acres of woodland and lawn, and a nice house, but it's called a small mansion house, which I have absolutely filled now. The spare rooms are filled with paintings; what was a drawing-room in my great-grandmother's day is my studio; and the corridors are full of paintings; the dining-room is taken over; and the outside sheds are taken over for framing. My assistant of the last twenty years is Rowan James and she has converted the two garages into workshops, and what was the sitting-room to the staff that my grandmother had, she has taken over now for indoor working on frames. So it's now very active as a workshop in the country, rather hidden away from people. A very different life to here, which has more buzz about it. I remember those grandparents very well. My grandfather was a great lover of nature, and wouldn't give me a lovely tree, autumn-leafed oak leaf off the tree, he insisted on picking one up, and I remember kicking him because I wanted the one off that tree. But he had such love, and this remained with me, a rather loving memory. And my other, my paternal grandparents I never knew, though I believe my grandfather died when I was six months old. But I was a bit of a disappointment, because my father wanted male issue and one was expected to produce male issue, and they produced two females, so I do know that I was a bit of a disappointment. However, they got their wish by the third, my brother.

And so, when the family had moved from St Andrews to, where was it exactly?

To Stirlingshire.

Oh right, yes.

About eleven miles from Glasgow.

Right, I see.

You see I come from a feudal system where the inherited land, the older son inherited land and hoped for an elder son to inherit it. All that's dying now, and the land that's left is hardly worth it, it's been sold most of it, so there was quite a lot of poverty really, because my father didn't have much money, my grandfather was quite well off but with a lot of expenses and so on, and anyway, what money there was was spent on my brother for his education. My sister and I went to a private school in Edinburgh, and I had a terrible job getting to the art school. However, I'll go into that later.

Mm. So, when you went to school though, you went all the way into Edinburgh daily, or did you go to boarding school?

No, I went to a school in St Andrews when we were at St Andrews, called St Catherine's, which is now the Crawford Art Centre, part of the university.

Ah yes, right.

And there my art ambitions began, because there was a marvellous teacher there called Miss Hebblethwaite, and she did wonderful chalk drawings on the blackboard, I remember her doing a daffodil and I think, I want to be an artist. And the children had pictures put on the walls aged 5, aged 6, aged 10 sort of thing, and, if only I could get one up. And one weekend I did a copy of the little figure on the marmalade jar, I don't know if you know it, it was a little - one's not supposed to use the...

Golliwog are you going to say?

Not supposed to use that word nowadays, I was ticked off for that. I don't know what word to use, but it's a little black figure, I think in a red jacket and blue trousers. Anyway I copied it

but I reversed the, I made him have a blue jacket and red trousers, I reversed the colours you see. And to my amazement, that got on the wall, 'Willy Barns Graham, aged 8 years'. I've still got it. And that clinched it, I am going to be an artist. Then the other incident in my childhood was on a train when we were travelling from St Andrews to Glasgow, and my father was in the train, maybe it was the move, but my father was there and my mother, I can't remember the other two but they must have been all there. And sitting beside me was a tall lady, and I was drawing with chalk into a book of triangles and squares, secret rooms really, I didn't want anyone to see them. And I was constantly doing this. And she asked me what I was doing, and I was livid with her, and my parents just shrugged their shoulders, said, 'Oh she's always doing that sort of thing'. And it was chalk, blue outlines and I coloured the interiors. But I wished now I had known who that was, because she took an interest in me, told us that she was on the staff at the Glasgow School of Art. And I can't have been, 1924 I would only be about...

12.

12 years old, yes. Anyway I was small and young. It might have been before that, it might not have been that date. But, we moved, and then we were brought up by two governesses from the PNEU system.

What's that?

Which is the Parents National Educational Union. It sprung from Ambleside, I don't know if it's still in existence. The advantage of it was that you were taught all sorts of subjects, general, but you lost in specialising, and I was very bad at French and I wanted to be able to, because...you did too many subjects. But the most valuable thing for me that came out of that was their motto, which I often use and pass on to other people who are in distress of any kind, 'I am, I can, I ought, I will'. And if I am in anxiety I go to the mirror and just look at that face and say, 'I am all right, I can be all right, I will be all right, I ought to be all right,' and it really works miracles. You can also put any word you like after it.

Yes, that sounds a very good idea.

And it was very good, 'I am, I can, I ought, I will'. But then I went to a school in Edinburgh, a boarding school, my sister and I went, St Hildas in Liberton; it doesn't exist now I don't think.

Was it a kind of Miss Jean Brodie kind of academy sort of school?

No, I can't... I was often in trouble there, I seemed to get into trouble wherever I went, I was in a bit of trouble there. I had a great gift, which I still have, of analysing handwriting, and I can tell all sorts of things from the vibration of handwriting, a sort of psychic thing, and I did one or two of the staff and it got me into trouble. I've stopped doing it because I've had too many funny experiences out of it. During the war somebody in hiding, I almost described where this person was, and there was a terrible shriek in the room and the letter snatched from me. And so I decided it was best to cool it. My childhood was difficult because there were three of us, and three, always two and two, my brother and sister were great pals, my sister and I were great pals, and she died when she was 31 leaving three children. And, I got on very well with both parents on the whole, excepting that I wanted to go to an art school and they were dead against it, because as my father used the old-fashioned word, 'You're not a genius'. I so detest that word, because I have a great belief that if you've got a little talent and with hard work you can get quite a long way, and I believed that I had a little talent and if I worked hard I would get a little way anyway. So, what annoyed me was, they sent me to a college of domestic science for six months in Edinburgh, and that must have cost something, being a boarder, but it made me worse. I used to run off to the library and read art books in all the intervals I could. I eventually did get to the art school when I was 19.

This is Edinburgh College of Art?

Edinburgh College of Art. An aunt of mine said she would help me for a year, so I went for a year, and there was constantly a panic about it, that, what would happen at the end of the year? Now I was terribly lucky, I won a maintenance scholarship on merit of work which settled the next two years, because they increased it for a second year, and nobody could interfere with that. I think my father probably had some genuine reasons for giving me such terrible opposition. I wasn't very robust, and he didn't think it was a life for a woman, and I think also he was testing me, and he would test me to the full so that if I really wanted to do it he wouldn't stand in the way. But it was very bad for one's health really. And fortunately I did get to one; the college was quite well off with little scholarships and I got some of those, which many of the students got.

So, what...?

When I went down to Cornwall on the recommendation of Principal, Wellington, this was nearly wartime by now, it was partly because I couldn't take up a scholarship which I had been awarded, a travelling scholarship. Again I had been ill and they kept it apart for me and they couldn't hold on to it any longer so they thought, send her to Cornwall. And he knew

Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson, and thought it would be a good place for me. And also one of the Edinburgh College of Art students was down there, married to Adrian Stokes.

Margaret Mellis.

Margaret Mellis. And so it seemed quite a reasonable thing to do. And my father was still in great opposition, and my mother probably not so much, simply that, I don't think she had much say in it. She probably thought it was an awful nuisance that I kept on about this. And, I won my father in the end, but I was 30 by now, by painting a portrait from a photograph of my brother, and it has a strong likeness. I squared it off and borrowed one of the Royal Artillery officers' hats down here and wore it in front of a mirror, and I knew my colouring was similar. And when my father saw it, this rather handsome six-foot-two arrogant man, to my horror I saw the tears run down his face, and he said, 'Who am I to stand against you? God means you to be an artist.' Because my brother was out in Egypt at the time. And, so I won my father but not on the right reasons, because, it is an academic painting from a photograph. And when I had to take my work up to the college of art after six months down here, I didn't care for it down here very much at that time, and he saw the work, he said, 'What's that?' Because I withdrew the portrait, and I said, 'Oh that's nothing.' But I couldn't explain it was very much something, it had altered my life with my parents. But, then he said to me, 'Oh go on and give it a good try.' And that's nearly 53 years ago, just about, 52 years ago. And, St Ives is a place you can't help coming back to.

Mm. But before we get on to St Ives, which is where we are now, can I just go back a bit again to your childhood and things. I mean how were you...what did the household consist of? Did you have people to look after you when you were small children?

Yes.

And cooks and things, or what?

We had a cook and a maid and a nurse.

And when you say nurse, is that the equivalent of a sort of nanny kind of thing?

Nanny, yes, yes.

That looked after you three children?

Took us for walks, looked after us, dressed us. Yes, I think we saw our parents in the evenings. Slightly vague but I remember the nannies well, there was one wonderful one. And I remember seeing a Zeppelin in the sky at St Andrews, it was a nanny that pointed it out. But they could also do one harm, because I remember seeing a dead rabbit on a pathway, and she said, 'You'll be like that one day.' And I think it's an incredible thing to say to a child.

Mm, rather sort of...yes. Sounds rather Victorian, kind of...

And then she pointed out to me that there wasn't a son in the family, and I think that was damaging.

Was that before your brother had appeared?

What? It was another nurse.

Was that before your brother appeared or...?

No no, we were very close in age, there was only a year between my sister and myself, almost to the day, 8th of June, 18th of June, and she was exactly the same age as Jo Grimond and in fact we shared a nurse at one time between the Grimond family and us, my mother tells me. And, my brother was a year and a half younger than that. So it was really one, two, three, because in no time he was the tallest, and I was the smallest, and we looked like triplets and we were dressed alike.

And in the house did you have paintings on the wall in your parents' house, did they collect anything in particular, or...?

No, but they inherited the work of an artist in our St Andrews house, and I remember...yes, now you've hit a point, because those paintings were done by a man called Cadogan. But off their music room, there was a big music room there, a wonderful room which my father had a harmonium and my mother a piano, they were very musical and played together, there was a room off it that I was hardly ever allowed into, and it was full of junk, it was Mr Cadogan's things, and my father was in there one day and there was a jar full of big oil brushes. And I remember going up and caressing them, thinking these were the most wonderful things I had ever seen, and my father turned round and said, 'Don't you touch these'. He was perfectly right, he was guardian of these things. And there was another bowl full of great big oil brushes, hog's hair oil brushes, huge ones, or seemed huge to a child, very clean, some of

them were probably unused. But this was where he had stored a lot of things. And, my father eventually sold the house, so it's a mystery to me, I hadn't thought about it until now, what happened? Mr Cadogan died or, I'm not sure. But certainly these things were there, and that room off the music room. Now that house is turned into flats, but I have crept into the garden and seen, there's still the circular window high up in that wall and there's still that small room off it, but I don't know what it is now. But that had quite an influence on my life, those brushes. But although they were very musical, they had no knowledge of art, no real feeling or understanding, and certainly not of contemporary art, and although my mother was a great reader and my father very keen on political matters and religion and history, they were not intellectual in the real sense, nor were they perceptive about art whatsoever. They knew what they liked, but it was pretty traditional. They were well read.

And was he Church of Scotland, were you Church of Scotland, or...?

Well, he was a rebel, he fought with every church because he thought they were teaching wrong, and he was always fighting with causes, and people, and thought the Roman Catholic Church was blasphemous and the Church of England and the Creed was blasphemous, because it destroyed the promise to Abraham in that through thy seed shall be blessed, and therefore they were making out... He didn't like the virgin birth theory and so on. But we were brought up with something on the table rather on this, which somehow the Scottish people can be very forceful about the rights and wrongs, and he wouldn't have us taught at school to say the Creed or anything like that.

And did he take you off to church on Sundays and things, or not?

No he didn't, he fought with every church, but he used to go and have arguments in the Church Assembly in Edinburgh. But, he was a believer nevertheless, and he once found a Roman Catholic priest trespassing on his ground and he pulled him in and they had whiskeys together, and I heard that priest saying to my father, 'Well, I wish members of my parish use our Bible like you do,' even though he was telling this priest they were teaching blasphemy. (laughing) Great laughter came from the dining-room over the whisky.

Yes.

Well, he was very dogmatic about religion and...

And did he actually...what did he do, did he have a profession?

Well he was, what you call in Scotland a laird, he owned land, and...

And there was a farm attached to the house in...the house in Stirlingshire, was there, or not?

No, he owned farms but a lot of the land has been sold. I wish he had had a proper career, because he was at home all the time. And he was an interesting, handsome man, but difficult, very difficult for my mother, and they were second cousins and she was fifteen years younger.

Oh right.

And she didn't have a chance to expand. He died in 1957 and she lived to be nearly 102, so she had quite a long time, and she blossomed, and she was really a very well-read woman who hadn't had much chance. He believed a woman's place was the home, and that, my house, my wife, my children, and it was quite difficult. It couldn't exist today, the kind of...it's rather like the 'Barretts of Wimpole Street' story. And, she only died a few years ago; this is '94, I think she died in '89.

Goodness gracious me.

Nearly 102.

And did she live up in Scotland as well?

She went in a home latterly, but she lived in his house all that time in Stirlingshire, very beautiful countryside, and a loch, and, very lovely, and she loved it there. But she had a very secluded life, she didn't run a car, and, he didn't encourage her to be very independent or...

And the landscape in Stirlingshire, is it...what's it like compared to the landscape of this...?

It's undulating, green, a lot of green, a lot of rain, so it was very green brackens, mountains, not far from Loch Lomond. The east, which I now live in, when I'm up there, is far more agricultural, good farming, it's lovely soil, by the sea, beautiful little unspoilt fishing villages up the east coast. Much more robust, much harsher climate. And of course St Andrews is a golfing, university town, very beautiful buildings. But, it was secluded, the west, I mean it was ten miles from Glasgow, right in the country, and there were right-of-ways on either side, and my father developed a swimming pool at one time that brought a lot of people out. A famous walk there, the west country walk. Very beautiful countryside, but I don't like it

much because it's...it's beautiful but it's so damp, it's always raining in Glasgow, or so it seems, always wet that side, humid.

And did you...have you drawn, did you use to draw in that area?

Not much, and I never was allowed much freedom when I went home, I had to sort of fit into the system. But, I've drawn in Fife more.

And Orkney I think you have, haven't you?

Orkney and Cornwall, and Lanzarote, I've done a lot of drawing, I'm very interested in drawing.

Yes, yes. And then, so when you actually got up to the Edinburgh College of Art, there was Margaret Mellis among your fellow students, was one.

Well she was younger than me but she had no difficulty about going there, she had great encouragement from her family, and she was...

Was she the daughter of a...?

And she was two years ahead of me. She was the daughter of a minister, and a Highland mother, or half-Highland mother. But we became friends, and... But I was under this threat of, that I had a year.

Yes, yes, that must have been...

And so...but it was so exciting that I had got there. And I remember asking one of the staff, 'Do you think I will make an artist?' And he said, 'Come and see me in ten years' time, if you are still painting.' (laughs) That must be about sixty years ago or more.

And was...you had Wellington, Hubert Wellington was one of your teachers. Was there Gillies?

Yes, William Gillies was one of the teachers. A wonderful teacher, he used to find it very difficult to speak, and very sensitive and he said, 'Well don't you think the head is a wee bit big?' Or 'The feet, don't you think the legs are a wee bit small?' And we always drew on one side of the paper leaving a great space because we knew he then would pick up the pencil and

do a drawing, and we all collected Gillies drawings of the nude. Yes, he was charming. And there was another good teacher called John Maxwell, Johnnie Maxwell, who was rather à la Chagall type of painter, but he died young unfortunately. And then, I was in a year with one of the...S.J. Peplow's son, Denis Peplow, who was a great friend of mine who alas died last year, and a great chum of mine. And I got ill with pleurisy and had to leave off for a year, and I was heartbroken about this because I continued where I left off, with the result that I didn't join my friends. However, it turned out to have been for the best, because I made a new lot of friends, which were Norman Reid and Jean Reid were at college with me, and William Gear.

Ah yes of course.

And Charles Pulsford. Those people I got...and they are friends of mine to this day.

Because William...

Except Charles Pulsford has died unfortunately. But William Gear is a great friend of mine.

Mm. Because he came from a very different background to yours, didn't he. Wasn't he...was he the son of a coal miner, or...?

Yes, he came from, where is it now, in Fife? Wemyss is it? I'm sure...yes, so he was from a different background.

But everybody went into the sort of melting-pot of art schools, so you wouldn't really know ...

Oh yes, artists still go into a melting-pot, you have to; we all come from different backgrounds but our aim is the same, trying to say something.

And so you kept in touch with them, but particularly with Margaret Mellis.

Well, really Bill Gear mostly, yes, I've seen more of him than I see...I see Margaret Mellis from time to time, and I see Bill Gear from time to time here. I had a letter from him the other day, he has been made a doctorate in Birmingham.

Is he in Birmingham, does he live in Birmingham?

He lives in Birmingham, yes. He came and stayed with me, he and his wife, but she died a year or two ago.

Mm. So what was life like at the art school?

Wonderful. I absolutely loved it, oh yes.

And did you live...what happened, did you live...you lived in a place, Alva Street, didn't you? Was that where you lived or was that your studio, or neither?

No, I lived in Morrison Street, I had a flat in Morrison Street for 30 shillings a week full board, with a wonderful landlady.

Was that the old town, or the new town, or, where did you live?

Neither, it was down by Haymarket. And I used to run up the stairs and let the door slam, I think now I must have have shook the whole building. I never thought of it, how selfish that was, just running down, all the way, I used to run all the way down the street and up those stairs letting the door slam. Dear oh dear! And then...no Alva Street is where I had a studio for just over a year when I was first a postgraduate from there, but I was so heartbroken in a way to finish my course, and I still dream about it.

Do you?

Yes. I was very happy there, I had such a lot of nice friends, girls and men, both, friendly with architects, friendly with painters, friendly with a lot of girls, and I've kept up with some, and they were the most lovely years of my life in some respects because I at last got there. And, mind you it was under threat. Well then I got this maintenance scholarship, and then things eased up a bit.

So that, I think...you got...did you go to the...when did you first go to the college of art? Was that 1932?

I was about 19, about 1931 I think. I have a catalogue which gives all these dates.

Yes I've got one here, it says '32.

Yes, it probably was about '32, because I left...

And then you had...the following year you were ill. Was that when you had pleurisy, or was that something else?

That's right, I had pleurisy.

And was that really the reason for...because you were ill a couple of times weren't you during that time?

Yes, yes.

And that was why, the pleurisy came back did it, or something, or was it...?

End of F4747 Side A

F4747 Side B

Sorry, you were just saying about the illnesses you had which...

I've been fighting against illnesses all my life, but as I said to you earlier, I'm like a cork that bubbles up again on the water. I'm very chesty and I've had everything from TB, pneumonia, pleurisy, bronchitis, all these things, partly sometimes just when I've got an exhibition on, and it seems to be something to do with anxiety I think. Anyway I am, and my father was subject to this, that's why he left St Andrews, and I seem to have inherited a weak chest. Yes I was off college for a whole year with pleurisy, and that...

So then you re-joined.

But then I got ill again when I was at the college, and I got flu badly which affected my heart and I had to go to a nursing home in Edinburgh.

Oh right.

I was 26 when that happened.

And then, you travelled, did you travel while you were sort of based at the art school, didn't you go to Paris?

Yes, I went to Paris, the three of us went, and Margaret Mellis was one of them, and we did some painting in Paris. And I remember we met Colette.

Did you?

Yes.

Did you? Goodness, what, by mistake or on purpose?

No by mistake. She was staying at the same place as we were in St Tropez, and I passed with my painting, and she stopped me because she had seen me painting once or twice. But I was rather terrified of her, I was terribly young and immature, and this woman was terribly made up. She was sitting with another woman. Of course now I would feel so differently about it, because she was a wonderful woman. But anyway she took an interest in what I was doing. Yes, that was, I don't know quite what year that was now. '33 or 4?

'36? Vacation award for one month's study in Paris.

Ah yes, the college awarded us with vacation scholarships and there was one to London, where we had to copy a picture, and I remember copying a picture in the National Gallery.

Can you remember what picture you did copy?

Yes, Giorgioni 'Portrait of a Young Man'; somewhere, I've still got it. I worked very hard at that. And then we had a scholarship for Paris, and we were over there, and I remember Bill Gear walking around a room, there was an exhibition of Van Gogh, and an American girl pointing to her mother said, 'Mum, there he is!'

Oh no!

Pointed at Bill Gear, who at that time he had red hair. It was a Van Gogh portrait, and I thought this was a huge joke. I don't know if that's the sort of thing you want to hear.

Mm, yes. And then you went further south to San Tropez.

We went to Saint Tropez, yes, and that's where I met Colette, and I did some landscapes and drawing there.

And what was your work like? When you were at Edinburgh did you have the discipline of doing life drawing and all that?

Oh yes, it was very academic teaching. And I tried to learn from everybody that was teaching me. And I remember a man teaching composition and I did an abstract, and I was told to not do that sort of thing, and I remember having a great difficulty. Then I vanished from class one day and worked at home so as to be free, and I brought it up, and Mr Westwater said to me, 'Where have you been?' I said, 'Working at home,' and I produced it. He was quite pleased with me though. And I did a chalk drawing on coloured paper. But the work, the teaching was academic. I had to spend many years undoing it, but it has its value, because I think it's important to know how to draw, but I had to undo a lot of it to feel free. The teaching was different to what they get in schools today, we had no photography, we hadn't lithograph work or printing or anything like that, but plenty of still life, plenty of nude drawing. I remember perspective classes even, I don't think they do that today. And the

diploma was different. But it was a very sound education in Scotland. I was very happy there I must say.

Mm. So you were drawing and painting?

Drawing and painting, yes.

Because you've drawn all your life, haven't you?

Yes.

Yes, even now you do, do you?

Yes. Oh I believe in drawing. But I draw to have experience of discovering new shapes and being in tune with nature, and I just like the challenge of drawing. It hasn't a lot of relation to my paintings, so I don't draw from them, I don't work from them, but I think the experience of sitting outside gets into one, because sometimes I've done something out of my mind and it's turned out to have a feeling of Lanzarote, or a beach. But I try to work in themes and follow themes, sticking to it perhaps for a few years, like glaciers and rock formations. Now I'm on a sort of fire series.

Yes talking about the glaciers and perhaps, it's not really in sequence, in correct chronological sequence, but I must just say, when...like you told me earlier, we were talking about the Tate opening in St Ives, the St Ives Tate, and you were saying that the Prince of Wales came down to open...was it the official opening or was it...yes it was, wasn't it.

The 22nd of June last year, I think it was the 22nd or 24th, I'm not sure now.

Mm. And you were introduced to him in a line-up.

Yes.

And he was rather taken with your...

Oh yes, he was fascinated by it apparently and wanted to know how I had got the little black lines. And, I would have liked to have talked to him longer really, because he was such an enthusiast.

And he had seen your work that's on display at the Tate at the moment, in the Tate in St Ives?

He had seen the glacier that's there, and he's knowledgeable about glaciers, and must appeal to him very much. Yes.

That was...is that the one...is it...is it 1950 that one?

It's the one in the Tate now. It's about that date, 1950. I was over there in 1948 and I did drawings and watercolours on the spot, and I then developed that theme for the next two or three years. In fact every now and again I still will return to a glacier theme, it's lasted me all those years.

And did you go there...the first time you went there, it's Grundelwald wasn't it?

Grundelwald.

Yes. It's beautiful round there isn't it, yes. Did the first time you go there, was that because of ill health, because the Swiss air would be good, or something like that? No.

No nothing like that.

No, no.

I met a man at St Christopher's.

Where's St Christopher's? At the guest house?

That's a guest house along Porthmeor Beach run by people called Keeley, and there was a man there called Brotherton who was on holiday because he had got mumps and had been really ill, and he was on a brief holiday. And we got talking, and I took him to my studio and he got very interested in my work. And then he eventually wrote to me and said that he and his wife and two boys were going to go to Switzerland, would I care to join them on their holiday, pay my own way. And I was terribly sad it wasn't France at the time, but we motored through France. Well I said yes. And I had no idea it was going to be such an experience for me, because we...the food was so good, I felt so well, the air was so good, the light was so good, everything, it was a very happy time. The boys were nice, they were young, and, sometimes they wanted to do things, or I thought they might want to do things on their own. And we all went up on the glaciers together with our boots and our tools and

things, and I thought, this is where I want to work. So I said, 'I'm sure you as a family want to be together and to have a few outings alone, would you mind leaving me behind?' And I went up on those glaciers, and I sort of wonder now how I dared because...

Were you by yourself going?

Yes.

Gosh, yes.

Well I went up with people but I mean by myself. And I was there alone on this particular part doing these drawings, and the light was failing and it was all getting pink, and suddenly there was the most terrible roar.

Avalanche.

And it was an avalanche into the distance, I could see it. But it gave me such a fright. And I also had another most peculiar feeling up there to overthrow myself over the edge. So I thought, time I went home, and I packed up and came down the side of the mountain down to Grindelwald. I would love to go back and see how correct my memory is of all this, it's so vivid in my mind, but have I exaggerated it? I don't know, quite possible, because I've done so many glacier paintings which I have explored and put my own thing into to a certain extent. But I did do drawings of the end of the glacier, I did drawings of the impact going up and seeing it, I did drawings of sections of it. I must have gone up more than one day to do all this.

That was all that time in 1948?

That time.

And were they large drawings or were they in a smallish sketch-book?

They were loose half imperial size. I'm not very good at small drawings, I like to draw the way I was taught at the art college, half imperial size, which is the size of those gouaches roughly. Yes, and, it was wonderful.

And what time of year was it, as a matter of interest? Was it...were they all...was it snow all around or was there green as well on the lower slopes?

It's such a long time ago. I don't know where my diaries are of that time.

It doesn't matter, I just wondered.

I think it was...

And were sort of quite a lot of rocks.

As there were children, I'm only guessing now, I would imagine it might be the holiday time, because those boys would be in school wouldn't they. They were very small.

It could be sort of spring, or...

It could have been, more likely July/August, that time.

Oh right, the summer, yes.

I don't know.

Possibly.

I think. But I know when we came back, when we got to London we hit a terrible stream of traffic, and we couldn't go...it was so slow that it got on their nerves driving through this.

Gosh, way back in '48 there were traffic jams.

That makes me think it must have been summer time.

Yes. Did you go back again there?

No, alas.

Ever? No.

Never.

Oh I see, I thought you went back again.

I wish I had.

Right, right.

I would very much like to.

Yes I know that bit myself, the other side, but...

Yes I think about it, find somebody who would come with me I would go back, I would love to, although whether I could climb up that glacier is very doubtful now. We wore special boots and had tools I remember. I've got some photographs somewhere of us climbing up that. Unfortunately the parents are dead and one of the boys is, but he got in touch with me only a few years ago.

Really?

And he told me what an impact it had been on him, my emphasis on the glaciers. He was only a little boy. Yes, he painted himself.

Oh did he?

And I could see it had had an impact on him.

Right. So, then, the first phase of the Edinburgh School of Art ended, then you stayed on as a post...

Then I had a studio in Alva Street, and the college gave me some little...

We're going back now to the...where we were before, yes.

He gave me some little bursary to help me pay the rent of the studio, I don't know that it was very much, and I attended the evening classes twice a week. I couldn't bear to be really out of the college so I attended one or two evening classes. I still dream about that too funnily enough, that I go up there and do life drawings. And anyway, I had the studio, and then I sub-let it to Denis Peploe.

Oh yes.

And then another painter, but I had to give it up eventually because by then I had moved to St Ives in 1940.

But when you were working on your own more in the studio, what was your work like? Was it becoming a bit more abstract?

Yes slightly. I was doing imaginative things, and I was doing some flower paintings, very gradually, I was doing...strange paintings, more or less out of my head, and some interiors, a mixture of things. No it took me some time to have the courage to do the abstract. I did do them in 1940 but I hid them.

Oh right.

And, you see I joined the St Ives Society of Artists which was very traditional, but I would put in three works and one would be experimental, until I had the courage to put two out of three, but I would always put something traditional in. But I've always drawn, and my drawings are fairly traditional.

And when you do your drawings you don't always just use pencil on paper do you, you sometimes put...?

Well, I stain the paper, there's one there, with tempera.

Yes I was going to say, yes.

[INAUDIBLE] in 1955.

That's wonderful, where's that?

That's in Calabria.

That's lovely.

That's 'Red Canyons' they called it. And they were shooting quail there, I had to stand up and shout and show them that I was there. But it was wonderful formations. You will see the little ones in the distance running down the hill and it was full of little shapes like that. That was lovely there.

And what date did you say that was?

That's 1955, I think. I can't see it from here but I...yes it's '55.

And also, do you use...I never quite know what it is, I have to say, offset?

Yes that's right, I did a lot of offset.

What is it exactly? What is that process?

I called it that, but it belongs to the family of...Klee did a lot of offsets. You black a piece of tracing paper with printing ink, or I used oil paint, and when it's in a particular condition, sticky but dryish, you can draw through with a knitting needle or a nail or whatever sharp instrument you like. You take a tracing of your drawing on the other side of the tracing paper so that will give you the form that you want to draw through. So if that is the piece of paper, you've blacked it, and that's your drawing which you've traced, you then put that over it and you re-draw into it. And sometimes the accidental smudge is useful. I did a lot of drawings of St Ives at that time, and rock drawings, and sometimes I would do monotypes on glass and use that. Oh it was fascinating. A lot of us did it all round about the same time in the early Fifties, and I think a book was produced by a Mr Samuel of the Redfern Gallery about monographs and...

Monotypes.

Monotypes I mean, yes, that's right.

What, Gordon Samuel did it?

Yes, Gordon Samuel did it. I first heard of it from Adler, and then Colquhoun and MacBryde were doing it, and then Sven Berlin down here, he used a spoon if I remember right, and then I think other artists, like Bryan Wynter started doing it. A lot of us at much the same sort of time. But I pursued it for some time, because it was an attractive way of drawing, in fact there's a bit of it in that one there.

I can't see what that one is. Is that...that's not Porthleven or something is it?

Yes it is.

Is it?

It is.

Is it? That's wonderful.

Yes, and there's another one out in my room which is a bit of St Ives, from the Malakoff, that's an offset. And then I had some large St Ives drawings which I've sold, I've sold most of them actually by now.

Mm, mm. Where is the Malakoff by the way?

The Malakoff is where the buses come in and turn, above the station.

So that, as you come into St Ives, that way?

As you come in to St Ives it's on your right there, and the buses turn there to go off to Penzance or St Erth or Camborne.

And have you...you've stayed in...there's that...

I stayed in Porthleven to do that, I spent a week there, I stayed in two different hotels, one down on a bank facing the sea, and there was the most awful storm and spray came and hit the hotel, and I had an awful job walking through the wind and the spume. The other one was in Porthleven itself but high up overlooking that hill and view and harbour. But I've been back to Porthleven several times and drawn there.

Mm. Because I seem to recall one that Michael Parkin had I think that you did in the Eighties possibly.

Quite likely. Yes he's had several of my drawings from time to time.

Yes he has, yes. And another thing he had...

There aren't many Cornish drawings left really, I'll have to do some more.

Mm. Because you did a lovely one of, you've done the church haven't you, what's it called, St Ia?

Yes, St Ia Church, yes. I think that was sold. Yes, I rubbed a bit of blue into that. Now, Ben Nicholson rubbed colour into his work, sometimes using blue sometimes using a gold colour, but I was using it in 1955 but with tempera, and I sometimes hesitate now because it makes it...I don't want the work... It's very difficult to draw St Ives, for anyone to draw St Ives, without it having the look of Ben Nicholson, because it's these enchanting little houses against these spaces and sea and things. Except he had a great sense of humour in his drawings, and would play games with the buildings, slant them and put a little boat appearing behind a chimney and things like that. Well of course it all happens down here.

Mm, mm. And when...the tempera, what, you bind it with egg, you bind the colour pigment with egg, or with...?

I think I actually had some tempera in a tube that Borlase Smart had given me, but, yes you can. And then another thing, there's a lovely red stone I had which you could sandpaper, and then rub with your finger. John Wells gave me some of that, a lovely red, terracotta red stone that you could get colour off. But that one I think is tempera. And there's another one over there.

Mm, because there's this lovely sort of translucent...

...of these 'Red Canyon' shapes.

Oh yes. Yes that's more opaque than one. That's more translucent isn't it.

Yes, better when it's translucent.

Mm. And that one, the Porthleven one there, you've got...

That is oil paint.

Ah right. Oil on paper.

Oil paint and offset together.

And the sky, it's very difficult to see from this angle, is that oil?

Oil paint.

That's oil as well? Yes.

On paper.

Yes. I love that quality when it's on paper, oil. And that, you've got...we're now looking at another drawing. I think I might just take this off and just properly describe the titles, hold on. [BREAK IN RECORDING] I'm just going to say the titles of the three drawings we've been talking about that are hanging in Wilhelmina's studio. OK. The one dated 1955, which has got...

'Palinura Campagna'.

Right.

I can't remember, look on the back of that one and I'll know whether I'm right.

Then there's one with, is it white chalk or white conté or...?

That's a recent drawing, that is white chalk on black paper of the lava formations.

1993 that is.

There are several of those.

In Lanzarote.

'Palinura Campagna', Calabria.

And what date is that one?

1955.

1955, that's the same date as the other one but with more opaque.

It's the same 'Palinura Campagna'.

Yes but with more opaque tempera. And the other one is the 'Porthleven', 19...

'Porthleven', down here.

1951.

Is it?

Yes. And that is oil on paper.

That's oil on paper. Offset.

That's offset is it? Not in...ah right.

And oil on paper. And I've got another one I can show you of St Ives.

End of F4747 Side B

F4748 Side A

[Wilhelmina Barns Graham talking to Tamsyn Woollcombe at her studio in St Ives on the 7th of June 1994. Tape Two.]

Do you want to say something about.....[BREAK IN RECORDING]

OK, sorry, you were going to mention...

Somebody heard me singing when I was at the Edinburgh College of Art and sent me down to see Elsie Cochrane, who was Professor Tovey's soprano at his big concerts at the Usher Hall, Edinburgh. And to my surprise he offered to give me two years' training.

Goodness!

For nothing.

Operatic singing, was this?

To learn to sing. And I used to rush down from the Edinburgh College of Art once a week to have a lesson, and I got a piano in my digs and practised every day. But the thing is that after a few years I decided that really I must concentrate on painting. But it was a wonderful gesture.

Mm. And what was her name again, sorry?

Elsie Cochrane, or Mrs Taylor, she was known as Elsie Cochrane.

And then... Your tutor, well not your tutor but the head of the school of art...

Yes. I had to use this travelling scholarship that had been held up for me because I had got ill again, and they didn't want to keep it any longer, and the war was on so I couldn't go to France or Spain or wherever I was going to go to use this travelling scholarship for work abroad, so Hubert Wellington suggested that it would be a better...Cornwall would be a better climate, and he knew Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth who he had been at the Royal College of Art with I think, and also I felt it might be a good idea to get some distance from my family to prove that I am serious about entering the art field. And Wellington thought it would be a better place for my health and there wouldn't be a famine so much. It was the wartime. So I arrived in Cornwall, and I'm now quoting from my 1940 diary. 'After seven

pm, March 16th 1940, after awful journey from Paddington through Portsmouth, Liskeard, Truro, St Erth, St Ives, pouring rain and east wind, the first words heard, "The stars were too near the moon last night" from cheery Cornish porter, means poor weather. Certainly the next two days were awful.' And I stayed over the weekend at Treloyhan Hotel in its own grounds.

Is that in St Ives that hotel or was it...?

On the way to Carbis Bay. And then I stayed with Margaret and Adrian Stokes, and I describe their house, and that I saw there some Alfred Wallis paintings.

And this was at Little Park Owles was it?

This was at Little Park Owles, yes. Shortly afterwards I met a lady who introduced me to Borlase Smart, and I have a description of Borlase Smart. But he took me round four or five possible, and impossible studios, and eventually after some bother and reducing the price, I got one of the Porthmeor Studios, No. 3, by the Porthmeor Gallery at that time, at 7s.6d. a week, looking onto Porthmeor Beach, north light and all, and the Fuller School of Painting was a few doors along.

And now you're looking out onto the very same beach.

I've been on this beach all these years, because then Borlase Smart gave me his studio after a few years of having No. 3, because he moved into No. 5, which became Ben Nicholson's studio after Borlase's death.

Right.

So I had this...

So you had number...so his one was No. 1, that he gave you after you had been in No. 3.

His, Borlase Smart's studio was No. 1.

Yes.

And then about 1961 I let Simon Nicholson rent it from me, and I lived in London for two years renting the studio he had worked in in Ronald Alley's house.

Oh right. Is that Deodar Road or something?

Deodar Road. Unfortunately, I shouldn't have let Simon, given it up to Simon because he didn't stay in it, so I lost the control of the Porthmeor Studios. Anyway...

And Simon was one of the triplets.

The Hepworth-Nicholson triplets.

Yes, yes.

And then I saw this building, Barnaloft, being built, and this was meant to be for an artist, and I took the two floors together. I moved in in 1963.

Mm.

But right at the beginning I met quite a few, I met Gabo, Miriam Gabo, and Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth.

And they were all out at Carbis Bay at that stage?

They were all out at Carbis Bay.

And you were living...where were you living then? You weren't living in your studio, were you?

No, I wasn't allowed to live in my studio. I was living in the Pedn-Olva Hotel I think. I moved around a bit, but I think I was there after staying with the Stokes. And, I went to various gatherings at the Stokes's house and met a lot of interesting people, like Solly Zuckerman and the Gabos.

And Solly Zuckerman, he was connected with Bristol Zoo or something, was that right? Was he something to do with Bristol Zoo, Solly Zuckerman?

Yes you're right, he was a scientist. And they were playing games, and then I remember one occasion with Herbert Read, Solly, Gabo and I sat and waited and tried to describe to Gabo the game of cricket. 'He dislikes energetic games as table tennis, whereas Ben Nicholson is a keen sportsman for all games.'

Have you got that bit? Did you want to read that bit about the croquet, or not?

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

Now of course all this was wartime, and there were troops here, if I remember right there was the British Commandos, the Royal Artillery, the Norwegian Commandos, and several American divisions, of which the one I knew best was the 29th, and I think there wasn't a cottage or a house in Downalong or Upalong that didn't give a hospitality to these specially picked, very fine, healthy and intelligent men, and it was really tragic because they left I should think, if I remember right, from Falmouth for D-Day, and an enormous number of them lost their lives. The house I was in which was a masseuse, had two artists, an older lady and myself, we gave hospitality to a particular one and he came and said goodbye to me, and I remember standing outside the Porthminster and waving to the trucks as they left St Ives. Well, one of the officers turned up in St Ives some months later and told me the terrible loss of life, and I had an official notice actually about this particular friend, he had lost his life on the 18th of June.

And he was the one, he gave you...?

Oh yes, he gave me a signet ring given to him by his mother, and said, 'Have this, and if I survive I will come back and get it'. Well I still have that ring.

And you couldn't be in the forces, could you, because of your health.

I wasn't allowed in any of the forces owing to ill-health. I had had flu very badly and I had an enlarged heart, and, I did part-time work but I wasn't allowed in any uniform. Going back to the Army, one slightly amusing thing about the 29th. Punishment duty was to try and remove some of the sand pressing against the Porthmeor Studios, and they used to get up on here and peer in the windows, hoping they could see a model. But with their pressure of their feet against the sand and the glass it broke the glass, and that happened to most who would...

But you worked making camouflage nets.

I did war work by volunteering to go into a factory where we did camouflage nets, and...

And what did that involve then?

Pardon?

What did that involve?

Having a net stretched on a frame and another net on top of that onto pegs, and it was very important to get the right sized square onto these pegs. If you got them too big you did an extra row, if you got it too small it was tight and you had to stretch it. So one member out of a team - I was quite good at the work so I was in the team, we earned our pay up from 8d an hour to 2s.6d., that was the highest pay, 2s.6d. an hour - you sent a member of the team, which was in the first...turns out to be the labour rooms, but it was the first Penwith Society later on, and you had to go up and select the right net. Well, after a bit I thought, I'm sure I could do this, so I slipped up on the quiet, and just by eye I could measure that square, and I kept getting the right nets, and they got very suspicious, the other groups of people who yelled, 'Who'll be gettin' your nets then? I says, 'I don't know.' And, 'It can't be Miss Graham.' And then they said, 'It is Miss Graham. You be a cheat like we.' So, I got on very well with them and I could tell you many an amusing story of those times. It was very hard work, and they weren't very kind to people who weren't good at it.

Was it like...so were you kind of like crocheting as it were, nets?

Well you worked with your hands in and out of the squares, following, if there was a brown shape underneath and a green shape, you picked up these strips of colour and worked it in and out.

Oh I see, right.

Tied it in a knot. And I being left-handed, knocked the arm of somebody on the other side, and she said, 'Ere, you're ailin' my drag.' So, I said, 'Lang may your lung reek.'

What on earth was that?

And they were very puzzled as to what this was all about, but it meant the same thing, 'You're hindering me,' and mine was, 'May your chimney smoke well.' So...

So you worked...sorry to be boring about this, but, so you were interweaving kind of colours into nets that had already been made?

That's right, yes.

Yes, yes.

And, I enjoyed the work because I got to know local people, in fact until a lot of them died later on I was friendly with several of them, and they used to try and save time for me going back to where I was living by giving me lunch in a nearby cottage. And I suffered from nose bleeding rather a lot, and they used to put their keys down my back.

Oh no! So you saw quite a lot of Ben and Barbara and the Gabos?

I knew Ben and Barbara, and I went to Gabo's studio, which was all white. I had known Ben and Barbara's work so, I had gone on a scholarship to London from the Edinburgh College of Art, and I had visited the Lefevre Gallery, so I had seen some Ben Nicholson landscapes, small landscapes I remember, and I had also seen Barbara Hepworth in person once, pointed out to me.

Oh had you? What at that gallery, or somewhere else?

At Reid & Lefevre.

Right. So had you seen Ben's white reliefs?

No I hadn't seen the white reliefs at that time, no.

No. And Gabo, Gabo, how do you pronounce it?

Gabo.

Gabo. He had his own studio there, did he?

He had a studio in a house called Faerystones then.

In his little bungalow, yes.

And, I visited it more than once, and there is a touching time where he had a white...everything was white and there was a white pram, and he went up to this pram and the baby was by then only a few months old, and he put his hand, and this little hand came up and

clutched his finger, and he turned to me and said, 'You see that? That's the best work of art I've ever done'.

And that was Nina, was it, his daughter?

Yes it was, yes. But I had been there before then, because I remember being with Miriam before the baby was born, when she was expecting. And she invited me out one day to meet two men, I think were her sons, and I remember being asked to take them to Alfred Wallis's house as they wanted to see or perhaps buy some Wallis paintings.

Because he was virtually your neighbour in Back Street West, the back of your Porthmeor Studios, wasn't he?

Wallis lived two doors more or less from my studio, and I saw him quite frequently. And I used to see him come out and empty his rubbish into the bin. And the local people teased him, local children teased him rather.

And when did you meet him first? Sorry, am I side-tracking you, do you want to...?

I must have met him in 1940, because I moved into the Porthmeor studio very soon after my arrival, I think I was in it, I arrived in March and I think I had a Porthmeor studio at the end of March.

Yes that was quick, wasn't it.

So I saw him, that was March 1940, I saw him for the next two years. I remember the day he went into the workhouse, a van coming along and taking him and some of his belongings, and it was a very sad occasion.

And the first time you met him, was that just...he was walking along the street and you...

No I saw him coming out of his house, and then...I rather think I talked to him in his house, because I remember there were paintings all down the side of the, inside the door on the walls, there were paintings from the ceiling to the floor, done on the wall and on the top of a table, work. And then when I was asked by Miriam to take a doctor and a banker, I think they were her sons... Because previously they had entertained the Gabos and the Stokes to dinner in St Ives with me, myself, because I describe the fresh lobster and lettuce and white wine.

Who had done the entertaining?

The two sons of Miriam.

Oh I see, yes.

And we went to the Buchanans, George Buchanan and his wife, he was a writer there at the time, and then went on to the Stokes's to dance, and I describe the light and the little black, blue boats, 'and a boat with crimson sails cast a lovely reflection'. And, I don't think Gabo wanted to...he went home to work and Ben and a few of us went dancing at the Stokes's. And then the next day these young men asked me...took me to Penzance with Miriam and we went and looked at precious stones on Marazion Beach, and we had tea and supper at Gabo's. This is quite early on, I had forgotten this.

And you're now looking at your diary, aren't you.

'And Miriam's cooking was superb, sorrel soup and salad in which one ate tiny purple violets, primrose leaves, celery seeds. Gabo said he taught her; there was however a dispute on the subject. The young men asked constructivist questions which Miriam tried to answer. Unfortunately Gabo had an awful cold and retired to bed. Miriam, on looking at Picasso abstracts, said, "They," meaning Gabo, Ben Nicholson and Hepworth, "are against that kind of abstraction insofar as it needs to be explained.'" And then they walked home with me, these two young men, and I showed them Wallis's house, and took them there, I think on a later day I took them there.

And did you...when did you first see the work of Wallis then, was that...?

At Adrian and Margaret's house, I think that was the first time I saw them.

And you've got three here in your own home, in your own studio.

I own three of them, yes, one given to me by Sven Berlin, because I helped him with his, do some research for his book. The second one was given to me by Ben Nicholson. And the third one was given to me by Mrs George Buchanan with a Gabo that I bought, I bought a little spiral form that's now in the Tate Gallery, but it needed repair and unfortunately I was persuaded by Harold Diamond to part with it, because he said he would know how to repair it properly, and I did my best to repair it, but I think he sold it to Margaret Gardner. Anyway it arrived in Edinburgh, and I could trace it, because in trying to clean it I by mistake, I had a

little bit of red ink on a tiny brush and a bit of red got into the tiny corner and there was this red in the tiny corner, so I knew it was the same one.

Oh so it was yours.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

OK, so...

On one of the occasions I was invited to Carbis Bay, to Ben Nicholson's and Barbara Hepworth's house, I met John Wells, he had come over from the Scilly Isles for the day with a construction he had made, and I remember it was a sort of egg form on a grey ground, and I had never seen anything like that before, it was like seeing the Gabos, the fantastic impact, this doctor from the Scilly Isles.

I think that was in 1942, was that right?

It was about then, yes.

And, so that was the first...and you went over to the Scilly Isles, but that was at a later date.

Oh I went over to the Scilly Isles more than once. When David Lewis, who I had married in 1949, was curator of the Penwith Society for a few years, and I was doing bed and breakfast as well to try and supplement our living, because we were both very hard up, I got ill and the doctor suggested I took a rest, and we went to the Scilly Isles and Ben Nicholson asked if he could come too, so the three of us went. David had to return to the Penwith Society after the weekend, but Ben stayed on, and we both went to St Martin's Island, and he annoyed the local people because he had booked in one cottage and then changed his mind because there was a better view from another one, and of course that went around very quickly. But I do remember an amusing incident, it must have been the same visit, when we went to visit one of the islands, and in those days you got off the boat and got into a little boat that got up to the beach, and then you had to climb on the back of a man who - this won't exist today - the back of a man who took you on to land. Well, Ben, I remember him striding on this man's back, and the man said, 'And what do you do sir for a living?' He said, 'I'm an artist.' 'Oh you won't make much at that,' said this man. 'You would be surprised,' said Ben. (laughs)

And then, because we...

Then Ben got asthma and he tried to leave the island, and he couldn't because there was a wedding party in the plane, but he left and I stayed on.

Because, we were talking yesterday a bit about drawing, and also when we were off the tape, we were talking, and it's been written, hasn't it, you said incorrectly that you did a lot of sketching with Ben Nicholson.

Yes, it is incorrect, because, I went with...it's on is it?

Yes.

I went out with Ben on a few occasions one of those summers, I don't know whether it was 1952 or '53, or '54, or it might have been both, and he wanted to show me his favourite places, like Porthgwarra, Nanchizel, and Land's End, and Cape Cornwall, and... But also we did go to...I remember climbing up by the cairn at Carbis Bay - no not Carbis Bay, towards the Zennor Road, and we both had sketch-books, he a little small one and I with my big half imperial size drawings. But there weren't really many sketching exhibitions, they were mostly explorations.

Yes.

And I was very grateful to be shown these lovely parts of Cornwall.

Mm. And, you were also saying earlier on, I don't know whether you feel like talking about this now, that in retrospect you think it was Gabo that had probably more influence on you than you realised at the time.

Well it's very difficult to be truthful about this. One was very young and immature, although I was about, it was the years of 29 and the thirties, I worked with Ben and Barbara a lot on committees and the founding of the Penwith Society, and it was impossible not to be impressed by them. Barbara was a very good organiser and she was very good value on committees, and Ben was a very generous person with a great sense of humour. And what I learned mostly from them was really the presentation of work and how to use time well. I've never met a woman who had worked so hard, that was quite an impact for me. And Ben had his own rhythm of life and working which would be very difficult to follow, but it was an inspiration to me to see how well time could be used, set divisions for work, for rest, for play, and so on. And I suppose there must have been some influence, but then when I see my early drawings before I came to Cornwall, they still had their own distinct thing, but I've often been accused of being influenced by Ben Nicholson, but then I think Ben Nicholson was also influenced by some of the artists. Anyway, if I was influenced by Gabo, which I now think is

possible, it was innocent, I was ignorant of it at the time. But I have been very impressed by, in the Tate St Ives, at the moment, this last year has been hanging a picture by John Wells, one of my glacier Grindelwald, 1951, and a painting by Peter Lanyon, all much the same size, and I can see a distinct relationship between all three works which relate to Gabo, a sort of...

Yes, is that in...?

Letter 'C' form.

Is that...

There's one you see, there's the letter 'C' form, and there's a letter 'C' form. Did you see the John Wells, the same thing.

Not that John Wells, there's another...no, a smaller one.

No there's no one in the one in the gallery.

Yes, I'm trying to think on what it's called but I can't. 'Aspiring Form' is it called? No. No, I can't remember what it's called. Anyway...

I can't remember either. But, I think Gabo has had a big influence probably, he probably opened my eyes how to see the glaciers. It's something I think about. It's difficult to tell, because influences, they weren't a conscious thing particularly.

No.

But I think one must have been. I think we were all affected by Ben and Barbara, and Peter Lanyon and John Wells and myself probably by Gabo quite strongly.

Mm. And Lanyon lent Gabo his studio didn't he while he was away in the war, is that right? I've read.

I don't know. I don't think so, but, he was working...well he had a studio in his house when I visited him, because I remember seeing a lot of glass and perspex, shapes lying on a table, and...

This is Gabo?

In Gabo's house, Faerystones.

And so, what was your work at that time, early Forties, when you first arrived there, down there? You did, 1940, there's the work in...does it...I think it belongs to the Tate, 'Island Sheds'.

Yes that was very early on, and that, although it's rather in the colours of Alfred Wallis, the truth is, in St Andrews by the castle on the beach there, there are some black rocks, very strong growing Alfred Wallis green seaweed, and frothy white waves beating it, and I had done that walk since I was probably 4 years old, and looked at it, and I was standing there with my assistant, Rowan James, a couple of years ago, and I said, 'Look at that'. And he said, 'That's absolutely Alfred Wallis colours.' I said, 'Yes, and yet the painting I did of the two cottages are those colours, roughly speaking.' So, you see, Scotland, parts of Scotland are very similar to Cornwall.

Yes. And here in this 'Island Sheds', St Ives No. 1, 1940, there's quite a "Wallissy" boat isn't there.

So people have said, but...

But I mean they were just there, weren't they.

That was just a boat.

Yes, exactly.

I was doing...I was doing some small portraits, I've got details of them, I was doing some flowers, I did a thing of broken glass, a studio interior.

Yes the studio interior I think, is that...was that an oil, was that this?

That's a second one. No, I sold it, but it's something like. Then I was doing wet sand. So I was doing a variety of things, but they were mainly fairly traditional.

And were they mainly gouache or oil or a mixture?

Oil, more oil than anything. Then I did a broken cast, I did some portraits, and I was doing a lot of drawings, head drawings. Sometimes I had commissions from the army, the different armies that were there at the wartime, and I did some private teaching.

And who did you teach?

Children mainly, young people.

Mm. Because there's this 'White Cottage', Cornwall, that's 1944, gouache.

Yes. That interested Peter Lanyon, because he came into the St Ives Society of Artists and that was lying on the floor and he turned round and said, 'Who did that?' And I rather meekly said, 'I did.' And that was my first encounter with Peter Lanyon.

Oh right. Because he was away for most of the war, wasn't he?

He didn't come back till 1945. During the war I did some drawings of the factory here in chalk on back paper. [It's on, isn't it?]

[Yes it is. I'm just checking how much tape.]

And amongst them I did Chelsea Church, I had to get permission to do it, a very traditional painting.

Yes of...having been bombed.

Having been bombed. And I had to get permission to do work down here, because you weren't allowed to go, to do any work outside, it had to be five miles inland; well that's quite difficult from St Ives to Penzance, it meant landing up like, somewhere like Nancledra. So I worked mainly in my studio, and as I say I did some teaching.

But did you submit any of your drawings to the War Artists Advisory Committee?

No I didn't. But I've still got some of the drawings I did.

Have you? Mm, mm. And this one, who owns this? Is that...who is P.A. Barns Graham?

My brother.

Oh right. That's the Chelsea Church.

My father had it if I remember right, and he got it._

And here we have this, 'Toy Workshop'.

End of F4748 Side A

F4748 Side B

Sorry, the 'Toy Workshop Digey St Ives' 1944.

Is it on?

Pencil on paper.

Yes, that was run by Susan Lethbridge, and she had assistants, one of them was the painter Tom Early, a doctor, that was here.

And did she marry Bryan Wynter, was that her?

She was the first wife of Bryan Wynter.

Yes. And there's another...

Bryan Wynter, their son was my godson. And I did that drawing in this little workshop which was in the Digey, it doesn't exist now, and it was...she made all sorts of toys and was very successful.

And then you did the, as you were saying, the factory, 'Island Factory', and some other, 1944, pastel on paper.

Yes those were some of the war drawings, because they were making balloons and decoration things for the war, I can't remember the details now.

And this is very nice, this Gurnard's Head, gouache on paper.

Yes, there are a lot of drawings, that must have been a little later on.

1947.

Ah, then I had the freedom of movement then, and I did a lot of drawings round Gurnard's Head and Zennor, and I was staying from time to time in a cottage on the Zennor moors, and... I was doing a variety of things, and I was also doing some abstract work, but I kept rather quiet about that, but I did do a lot of work from Cornwall. I've sold most of those early works. They were mainly watercolours, some of them were oils.

And there was one I saw, because Michael Parkin used to have it, I don't know if he's still got it, I think he sold it once but he might have got it back again, it was a gouache of roof-tops of St Ives looking out to the harbour, grey, I think it was 1942.

Oh yes. That was...yes that was done from...that view doesn't exist now, that, it's been so built up and altered, but that was done up from looking over The Island before Barnaloft and Piazza was built.

Yes.

And looking over to The Island. I've done quite a few of that sort of thing and drawing from Ben Nicholson's house, Salubrious, and Salubrious House which is next door to it.

Was his house Trezion, was that...was it renamed?

Yes he changed the name to Goonhilly, but I think it's been called Trezion again.

So when you say you were doing abstracts, what form did they take?

They were small, just rather oblong shapes, and they were sometimes on cardboard, sometimes use of pencil in them.

So they weren't sort of construction type of thing, they were definitely...

Some of them were. And then I exhibited occasionally in the St Ives Society for Artists, I sent in three works and one would be a drawing and one would be a painting of St Ives somewhere, stones that fascinated me or rock forms, and then sometimes I would push in an abstract, but they didn't appreciate that very much. And then when I introduced Borlase Smart to Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth at his request they came down and actually joined the St Ives Society for Artists for a short time, and we were all put around the font. And, it was not far from there that there was an AGM that we decided, sixteen of us, to walk out. Well we didn't, sixteen didn't as a matter of fact, it was about six of us thought we would walk out and form a new society, but to our surprise the next day it was sixteen people.

Oh right.

End of F4748 Side B

F4749 Side A

[Wilhelmina Barns Graham talking to Tamsyn Woollcombe at her studio in St Ives on the 8th of June 1994. Tape Three.]

And just before we begin today I just wanted to get the title of the work by John Wells that hung next door to your 'Glacier Crystal', Grindelwald, 1950, and Peter Lanyon's 'Headland', 1948, is hanging together in the St Ives Tate at the moment, and his one is called 'Sea Bird Forms'. And you've mentioned the same sort of 'C' shape, 'C' as in letter C, being echoed in all three works. Sorry. Anyway, today you were going to...yesterday we stopped talking when the six of you decided, with the St Ives Society of Artists, that...you walked out didn't you, and then by the next morning you said sixteen of you...

Yes.

...had walked out. But I don't really want to talk about that now.

No, something important happened before that, during the days of the St Ives Society of Artists. It's important because it really was the beginning of the modern movement in St Ives, the formation of the Crypt Group. Now that photograph you see in the Tate and on the back, the Tate catalogue, and on the back are...

'Painting the Warmth of the Sun'?

'Painting the Warmth of the Sun', is taken in my studio, it was the formation of the Crypt Group. I unfortunately had promised to go to Scotland in August that year, and so I wasn't in the first one. There were three years in August of these exhibitions, and it was Peter Lanyon, Bryan Wynter, Sven Berlin, John Wells, Guido Morris and myself. I should have left a work behind so it would have been in the first show but I wasn't...

And the date we're talking about is 1947 is it? [BREAK IN RECORDING] Sorry, can you say it again? The date was...

The date of the meeting of the Crypt Group in my studio was 1946. It must have been in the summer of 1946. There were three of them, and...

Three Crypt Group exhibitions?

Yes, three Crypt Group exhibitions, and I was in the second and third.

And the reason for you not being in the first was, you had had to go to...

I had to go to Scotland, I had promised to go and see my parents. But I was a founder member of the Crypt Group.

And you...

Then, in 1949 it was, after...I went to Switzerland in 1948, and did the glacier drawings from Grindelwald and gouaches, and worked in Paris. We then, a group of us...

Excuse me, sorry. [BREAK IN RECORDING] Yes before we get on to the formation of the Penwith Society...

Before we get on...yes.

Yes, you want to go back and talk about Borlase Smart.

Yes, because I introduced Borlase Smart to Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth, but it wasn't something that happened overnight. He happened to, Borlase Smart came and stayed from time to time at the same guest house that I was living in along Porthmeor Beach, and in the evenings we used to have many, many a talk about modern art. He was an academic painter, and his friends were all Royal Academy and that type of art. He really didn't know much about Cézanne or Mirò or Ben or Barbara for instance, and he said to me one day, 'It seems all wrong to me that artists of that calibre are not exhibiting in the St Ives Society of Artists. You know them, would you introduce me them?' But as I say, it didn't happen overnight.

No.

And it turned out to be extremely successful because he invited Ben to show with him in his studio on the show day of that year, which would be about, I suppose 1945, somewhere round there. Then we get to the resigning of the St Ives Society of Artists, when we thought there were about six of us, Peter Lanyon, John Wells, myself, and one or two others, turned out the next day that it was sixteen of us, and our idea was to rebuild a new society. We had meetings in the Castle Inn by permission of Denis Mitchell's brother Endell Mitchell, out of hours, several meetings that summer of 1948. [BREAK IN RECORDING] So out of the

resigning from the St Ives Society of Artists, six of us got together to form the Penwith Society of Art in the Castle Inn at the courtesy of Endell Mitchell. That was Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth, John Wells, Sven Berlin, and Peter Lanyon and myself, that was the summer of 1948. The first exhibition of the Penwith was spring 1949.

Yes, can I just ask you, because 1948 the year you went to Switzerland to do your glacier drawings and gouache, and you had thought that might have been the summer. Would that have actually been.....[BREAK IN RECORDING] Right. You were meeting for that...

It would be after that. It would probably be...because these meetings in the Castle Inn I think were June, May and June.

Right.

Because it was early summer.

Right, so you went later on that summer possibly.

It was later that same summer that I worked on glacier drawings and gouaches in Switzerland. I also worked in Paris in 1949. And the Penwith Society had its first meeting, first exhibition, spring of 1949.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

We're talking about 1949, and that was actually the year you got married to David Lewis.

That's right.

But you had met him a couple of years earlier, didn't you.

I met him in 1948 out at Zennor.

Was that when you were living in a cottage out at Zennor, you were staying with somebody?

I stayed with him on occasions. And he was, although English, Scottish, he was from South Africa where he had been more or less brought up in South Africa, and he was younger than me, and we had hardly a penny between us at that time.

And he has described how me met you in that essay he wrote at the Tate Gallery catalogue.

Yes. He became the Curator of the Penwith Society and was one of the best they ever had, because he brought in...he was lecturing in the evenings, WEA lectures, Workers Education Association, and he brought in these groups sometimes and talked to them. He didn't just sit at the desk, he talked to them a great deal. Because he had got great charm, and he helped to build the Penwith up at that time.

Mm. But he wasn't its first curator, or was he? Was he the first curator, in 1951, of the Penwith? Because they were given a grant.

No, not the first.

No. And he thought you were a man, didn't he.

(laughs) Yes. Yes he came up to me in the Post Office and said, 'I didn't know Willie Barns Graham was back.' And I thought this was rather a cheek from this stranger. And I was having coffee with Denys Val Baker and he decided to come as well, and then he asked me if I would go for a walk with him over the moors, and I thought this was a good idea. And towards the...a few hours later on returning having coffee in his house he said, 'You are the wife of Willie Barns Graham, aren't you?' I was astounded.

But the name...

Did we discuss the name Balustrade?

Off the tape we did.

Off the tape. Well, the name Balustrade came out of those days, because Sydney Graham...

Who is the poet.

Who was a poet living out in that, I think near Gurnard's Head at the time, when David was in a cottage with some other poets, George Barker, John Heath Stubbs, and one or two others, when they were talking about W.S. Graham, David would say, 'I am talking about the artist, Willy Barns Graham, who did a thing of balustrades.' So to distinguish - very short-lived, this name - he called me Balustrade Graham, which I never liked, because I didn't like those balustrade drawings I had done.

And they were in one of the photographs in the background.

Unfortunately, yes, it was on an easel in my studio at that time.

Yes.

Well the Penwith Society became pretty well known internationally at that time, at the beginning, those first few years, and Ben started selling his work, and gallery dealers came over like George Dix from the USA and Sanberg from Holland, and his prices went up, and Martha Jackson came over. But it became known not just because of Ben and Barbara but the enthusiasm and work of a group that surrounded Ben and Barbara, such as John Wells, Peter Lanyon, Denis Mitchell, Sven Berlin and myself, and many others in the background.

And Herbert Read...

Came down.

He came down.

He stayed at Carbis Bay, and came into St Ives. But Ben and Barbara weren't social in St Ives to my memory until I had introduced them to Borlase Smart, and then Borlase Smart brought Ben into St Ives by sharing show day with him.

Yes, and then Borlase Smart actually died, didn't he, in...

He died in about 1950...

8 was it?

1940...or was it...

'47 actually, here.

Oh.

And then, then the St Ives - I mean the Penwith was sort of dedicated...

They used his name to dedicate it, which would have surprised him very much.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

The 1950s were quite important years, a lot was happening.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

In 1951 there was the, to coincide with the Festival of Britain, there was a festival...

Oh yes, there was a wonderful couple of weeks given over to a festival of which the main organisers were Priaulx Rainier and Barbara Hepworth, concerts which Michael Tippett came down to and Benjamin Britten, and it was a very exciting time. And there was prizes given for the best painting, the best pottery, the best sculpture. Ben Nicholson went off to Italy, which was kind of him because he should have got the prize, but I got it. I personally think John Wells should have got it, but there we are, I got the painting prize, Barbara Hepworth the sculpture, and Bernard Leach, who was a great friend of mine from the beginning of my time in St Ives until his death, 37 years of friendship, we all got the prizes, and I think it was something like £75 each which was worth much more in those days than now.

And the painting that you submitted that got that prize was an oil called 'Porthleven'.

'Porthleven'. Which hangs in the Library.

What in this...

It was hanging in the Guildhall St Ives, it's hanging in the Library now.

Oh right, oh.

Yes. St Ives Library.

And that one, that painting is quite a descriptive painting.

Yes, it is more or less a landscape.

Because about this same time your work was changing a bit, wasn't it?

Yes. Well I hadn't the courage to put out...I was doing abstract work, yes I was, but the funny thing is that I did two paintings for that and at the last minute put in the Porthleven one, I

lacked the nerve to put in the more abstract one I had done. At that time I travelled to Paris with David Lewis and Roger Hilton, and with Ben Nicholson visited, he took me to meet the director of Aujour'd'hui at his glass-wall house, and I visited Veira da Silva who I had had an exhibition with in London at the Redfern early, some years before, and we went to Venice, and I worked in Tuscany, Calabria and Sicily and did a lot of drawings and met Poliakoff, Israti, and Poliakoff asked me to get him some volcanic dust which I got in Sicily and took to him.

What, for him to use in his paintings?

To use in his painting, and he showed me his work in his studio and his sketch-books. Then in 1955 as well, Ben Nicholson gave David and me an introduction to visit Michel Seuphor, a lawyer to Brancusi and friend of Arp, Giacometti and Pevsner, and he gave us introductions to those artists, and it was, I have special memories of visiting Brancusi, and...

What, can you describe what happened when you went to visit him?

Well, he was a smallish man with a great white beard, and smelling strongly of garlic, and he sent us round to his studios but told us not to touch anything, and he had actually listened to us from another studio.

Oh no!

Because when he came in, he just spoke French for a bit, and then he broke into English and I then realised he had heard us, and he had spoken English perfectly well, and he said that he had been brought up with an Irish maid in the house who he had flirted with but he had learned to speak English from her. It was a wonderful experience, his work was inspirational, and we had a long talk and I got on rather well with him.

And what date was that? That was '55 was it?

This was 1955. And Michel Seuphor warned us not to talk about Ben or Barbara, but we have realised you don't talk about artists, other artists in artists' studios. And he said, 'Don't tire him out, he hasn't been very well.' And Mrs Seuphor turned up, and Brancusi wouldn't let us go, he was so enjoying our visit, and he asked which of us was the writer and which the painter, and he seemed to attach himself to me and talked at great length, and I found it inspirational. It was also very interesting visiting Giacometti, a very unpretentious studio, he was a successful artist by now, and his studio was dark and he had his maquettes all over the

place, big ones and little ones, and it was very dusty. And he took us to a café nearby and gave us coffee and talked to us. I unfortunately couldn't speak much French, well neither of us could, but sufficient to... Pevsner I had known for some time.

That's Antoine Pevsner, the brother of Gabo.

Gabo's brother. And I had met him two or three times before that.

What, over there?

Yes in France. And Arp, visiting Arp was very interesting, because I had very much admired his wife's work, Sophie Taeuber, art, and it was wonderful to meet him. All very different experiences but so valuable.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

And can we talk a bit about the work that you were doing at that time?

Yes, well I had been to Switzerland...

Which you've talked about.

...in 1948, doing the glacier drawings. Well I worked on that scene for a very long time, partly from my sketches made on the spot but also from memory, and some of them would come under the title of Abstractionist, they weren't purely Abstract but they were Abstractionist insofar as they were based on an experience. The colours were mainly, as I remembered, blues and greens and whites, but the drawings, no, I did offset drawings of glaciers, I did...I started using the Golden Section, and fitting the glacier experiments into that. So I worked on this scene for many years, and it led me on to rock formations, again using the Golden Section and fitting shapes into this. I was also doing abstract work, pure abstract work but not showing it very much, but I was showing the rock formations, and one went up to Leeds in a modern art gallery up in Leeds.

And there's one hanging at the moment in the Tate, isn't there? There's something called 'Composition One', 1954.

Oh a tiny one. Well that, although it's very very tiny it is a sample of what I was doing at that time, single rock forms in very simple colours using black, grey and white, variations of that, even up to six feet.

Goodness. Because, in the label accompanying that work that's on the Tate St Ives, on display in the Tate St Ives at the moment, they've actually decided it was something else, relating to something else.

Well they're totally incorrect in their discussion, I've told them several times.

They relate it to 'Roof Tops'.

It's got nothing to do with 'Roof Tops and Roses', it is entirely a single rock form, and a lot of people have asked about that.

And there's another picture that you did, I wish I could find it. [BREAK IN RECORDING]
You were just talking about one of your paintings of rock formations that was in Leeds, and it's actually titled 'Three Rocks', 1952, 24 x 42, oil on canvas and it's at Leeds City Art Gallery.

Yes, well I did a lot of rock formations, and it's strange, having worked in ice and earth things I should end up in the Nineties, Eighties, Nineties, working with fire, the lava series; that only struck me the other day. Well I did...

There's something else you did, sorry to interrupt you. At the same time as you were doing these quite abstracted shapes, the rock forms, there's another, quite unusual work, for you, 'The Rock', St Mary's, Scilly Isles'.

I drew a lot on the Scilly Isles, and rock formations.

It's oil on board, and it was actually on the cover of your retrospective.

Yes that was a large rather serious study really, done with small brush of rocks I saw on St Mary's.

Because that's got a...I haven't seen it in real life, but the texture of it seems different to some of your...how did you achieve that?

Yes, well that was a very small brush. It was really a drawing coloured with small brushes. It was a study really.

And that was in your retrospective.

And I did a lot of drawings of clay formations, because I was very interested in the effect of what water and heat had done to clay, country in Sicily - and in Italy I mean, Italy.

Yes, because you did some drawings of San...

San Giuliano, and clay working country, Chiusure.

Oh yes.

In fact Ben was very interested as to where I had been, and I was rather afraid of him going and drawing there because always it would be me that would be told I was influenced by Ben, and this was my secret place, so he bought one of my drawings of Chiusure.

Ah!

Very exciting country, Tuscany.

Yes. And Assisi?

And I went there more than once and did these drawings in offset, washes, sepia, and did a whole set of them after being there, did a lot of themes of clay country drawings.

But some, originally they were done on the spot?

Some, the originals, notes done on the spot and some drawings done on the spot, yes. And I went to different towns.

Yes, there's Assisi here.

And I also was drawing in Sicily.

Yes.

They had the same sort of subject almost as at Sicily, the canyons at Palinura, Campania that we talked about earlier, where I used tempera, and I used oil paint on the Chiusure drawings, sometimes oil paint I rubbed in, slight brown colours, or terracotta red or...

And was that mixed with turpentine or something to make it thin?

Yes mixed with turpentine, often using my finger.

And then, it happened that your husband had decided to train to become an architect.

He decided to go to Leeds, and I was employed on the staff at Leeds, and I thoroughly enjoyed teaching.

And that was under Harry Thubron.

Yes, under Harry Thubron.

And that was at the Leeds College of Art?

That's right.

Yes. And at the same time, I think, was Terry Frost, he was teaching there too?

No, Alan Davie.

Oh right.

Alan Davie. But Terry Frost followed on a Peter Gregory Fellowship. About that time my marriage broke up and I went to Spain and worked in France and the Balearics, this was about 1957/58 we're talking about, and I returned to St Ives.

Yes, but, sorry, to go back. When you were on the staff at Leeds School of Art, it's got written down '56 to '57, do you agree that's right?

Yes, that's probably right.

Can I just ask you before we go on to...

Is it on?

Yes. Before we go on to when you went to work in Spain and France and the Balearics, there are some reliefs that you did.

Yes, I made a lot of reliefs in the Fifties.

What, had you started making those before you went to...?

Oh yes.

Yes, yes.

Long before. They were small, some were coloured, and I carved them out with razor blades and hardboard, and some of them...yes I've sold them all I think, I don't think I've any...well I may have one or two left.

Because there's this one illustrated again in your retrospective, and I must just...sorry, may I just say so that everyone knows, it's called 'W Barns Graham, Retrospective, 1989, City of Edinburgh Museums and Art Galleries, 1989'. And did it tour, actually?

Yes it toured.

Is it down here?

It started in Newlyn, its main showing, because I think it was an Arts Council sponsored exhibition, it was the City Arts Centre, Edinburgh, and that was a huge exhibition, they showed the whole thing. It was over 108 works. Newlyn could only show about 75. Then it went to the Perth Museum and Art Gallery in Scotland, and that filled at least two rooms there, it didn't show the whole thing. Then it went to Crawford Centre for the Arts in St Andrews.

By this time it was 1990.

Yes, and it was shown in the main gallery plus three smaller rooms. And then it went to the Maclaurin Art Gallery which, it had to be rather strictly cut down, and I didn't feel it was any longer a retrospective, but it was a beautiful gallery.

And, while we're on the subject of exhibitions, you also had a drawing exhibition, 'W Barns Graham Drawings', and that was 1992 at the Crawford Arts Centre.

That's...that was also a travelling exhibition.

Yes. That had an introduction by Martin Kemp.

Yes, a very generous... By then I had been given a doctorate by, an honorary doctorate by the St Andrews University, and I had this drawing exhibition at the same time as they celebrated my 80th birthday, and then it travelled, it went to Truro. I think it's also going to be taken up again. At the same time there was this other exhibition in London, 'At Eighty, A New View', and that travelled.

Yes, and that was the William Jackson Gallery was it? The Scottish Gallery or whatever it's called?

That was at the.....

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

Shall we just have the title? The title of it is, or originally was anyway, 'W Barns Graham at Eighty - A New View', and William Jackson Gallery, London, that was in 1992, and Crawford Arts Centre, St Andrews.

And it went to Exeter, Kendall, Milngavie in Glasgow, but, it went to seven venues.

Right. And in another introduction to, in an introduction to another of your exhibitions, it was written down, you had written down something about travelling on the train and drawing when you were young, which we mentioned the other day.

That was in that, yes.

And...which one is it in?

It's on one of your tapes.

Yes I know, I know it is, but at that point you said you thought you were probably about 12, but actually when I looked back at that introduction you wrote you were younger than that, you were 8.

Yes, I thought I had made a mistake.

Yes, yes. So did you have any overlap, when you were in Leeds did you have any overlap with the architectural students or anything, did that affect...?

Yes I taught them.

You taught...?

I taught an evening class to architectural students, drawing, life drawing.

And did you...you enjoyed the teaching aspect?

I enjoyed teaching. Because I think the exciting thing about teaching is that you just impart enthusiasm. And I had one or two very good students in life class.

And have you done any teaching since then?

Not since then, no.

And the architectural students, did they...did you sort of get any feedback from them on your work, or, which you used in your...?

I was only there about a year, but I thoroughly enjoyed the teaching, but I didn't have a lot to do with the architects.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

And, when you were in Leeds did you meet anybody like Peter Gregory or...?

Well I knew him, but I don't think I met him there. Bryan Robertson came up one day. Well I met Maurice de Saumarez who was Head of Fine Arts.

End of F4749 Side A

F4749 Side B

Sorry, you were saying...

I was interested in the teaching of Thubron, and knew Maurice de Saumarez, and Bryan Robertson came up at one time I remember. But, these were difficult days for me, my marriage was breaking up. 1958 I returned to St Ives and worked in Spain and France. I went to Ibiza and did a lot of drawings. Which takes us up to about 1960.

Yes, when you...yes.

When I inherited the house in St Andrews.

Yes I was going to ask you actually...

Near St Andrews.

That's Balmungo, where you now still live.

Well which belonged to my grandfather.

Yes, which you mentioned in the first tape.

Yes.

Do you feel you've...it must be difficult to know, do you feel more allegiance to Scotland than to St Ives?

No.

Because you really are Scottish.

No, I've been here since I was 27, and I've been here 52 years, 53 years, and this is where I have worked and built up. St Andrews is something I associate with my grandmother and grandfather, aunts and uncle. But I'm now gradually making it more my own thing. But the contrast is fantastic, because there are similarities, they're both places by the sea, both grey towns, but St Andrews is a university golfing town and this house and grounds that I've inherited are a mile and a half out of St Andrews right in the country, and the peace and quiet

I am appreciating more and more as I get older. And I have a friend there who is an assistant to me and makes my frames, and she, it's possible now to work there; before I was always rushing away to get down here, because I went up to Scotland as duty really. No, I look on myself as a St Ives artist, not a Scottish artist. My work doesn't really fit into the Scottish school or approach, it fits in more with international, international, I always think I'm much more international than just St Ives. I don't believe in these groups of schools.

Mm, they're really rather labels aren't they that are put on in retrospect.

Horrible. But it has been, although it was a nuisance at the time to inherit a house like that, because I had to keep going up there and supervising this and that, I sub-let to students and staff at the university, now I find the change makes me see St Ives in a very fresh way every time I come back, and I see the countryside of St Andrews, I can see where I get some of my colours, like the black, grey and green that I told you about near the castle and the rocks; the undulating countryside is very similar to what I have picked out here, or in my drawings in Sicily and so on. It makes it immensely valuable now. I just wish I was younger to have the strength to go up and down, it's quite a decision. So what I do is, I have a few months there and a few months here, but they're irregular, they're not... When my mother was alive, she lived to be nearly 102, I went up with a sense of duty, and it dictated winters there, and I've just had seven months there that I got held up there, and I had a good spell of work, but on the whole I've always thought of St Ives as my focal point.

Mm. And since 1960 I think you've spent a couple of years in London, and we'll go into more detail about this in a minute, but...

Yes, that was before I inherited this house. I went...

Yes. Sorry.

1960 I decided to.....

We've got here in another of your chronologies, '61 to '63, studio in London'.

That's right.

And then '63, returned to St Ives, purchase No. 1 Barnaloft', where you are now.

Yes, that's quite true. And the intention of that was that I was going to sell Balmungo and concentrate on here, but for various reasons it didn't work out like that. But I had a studio in Ronald Alley's house in Putney.

Yes, you mentioned...

That was a new experience for me to live in London, and to go into town I had to cross the bridge, the Putney Bridge, and I found that a very valuable experience, a new... And I spent a lot of time going round galleries, studying galleries, and going to exhibitions. It gave me a taste for finding out what was going on around me, though it was difficult to work in that atmosphere.

Mm. And did you actually have a studio space, or somewhere you could work in that house?

I had a proper studio.

You did? Oh right.

Yes, a little studio flat at the top of the house which had a bedroom, a kitchen and a studio, it was just perfect really.

And who were you associating with up there, in London?

Oh all sorts of people. I was great friends with Robert and Pat Adams, and...

Yes, because you had met...

I had known them before, I had met them at a Gimpels party years ago when they returned from their honeymoon in America, and have been friends ever since, they've stayed with me frequently in St Ives and with Denis Mitchell, and was really one of my closest friends.

Because those works there, one, two, three...

Yes I purchased one or two Robert Adams' small sculptures, and also we swapped work. He had a drawing of mine and a little painting of mine, two little paintings of mine, and...

And have you done that...you've done that with other people occasionally too, haven't you, swapped work, or...?

I've got a small collection, but I've more purchased when I could. I've got a Patrick Hayman, I've got two Johnny Wells, one I bought on the death of Shearer Armstrong, from her collection. I've got two Ben Nicholson, three Ben Nicholson etchings, but they were given to me. I've got three Alfred Wallises.

Which we talked about last time, we talked about them...yes, you mentioned them last time.

I've built up a small collection. As wedding presents I got a lithograph from Bryan Wynter and a pencil drawing of a nude from Barbara Hepworth, she's amongst my treasures.

And also, I think it's referred to in the St Ives catalogue, you had one of those Terry Frost, you and your husband owned 'A Walk Along the Quay' by Terry Frost didn't you?

Yes we did have, mm, I'm not sure where that is now.

And when you first had...

And I've got some Bernard Leach pottery.

Oh yes.

And Denis Mitchell sculptures, gifts. And I've got that beautiful pot from Bernard.

Do you feel like talking about that, when you bought that?

That was a present, because I had bought one in the Penwith, and another person had come in and paid for it then, and I had said I would pay for it tomorrow, and I came out of the gallery rather cross about this, because I had said I would buy it.

You had reserved it, hadn't you.

Reserved it. And meanwhile I ran into Bernard and his housekeeper, and he shook a stick at me and said, 'Well what's the matter with you?' And I said, 'I'm furious.' And he roared with laughter when I explained to him the details of the story. And then a few months later, I really don't know when, he was on his way to Japan, and he walked in with this particular pot, placed it on a shelf, went to the window with his hands behind his back, said, 'Now, you'd better make your mind up quickly.' And I said, 'But Bernard, that's exactly like the pot that I

had reserved.' And he said, 'Write the cheque to the Leach Pottery.' And when I wrote the cheque I found it was less than it had been at the Penwith. That is typical of Bernard's generosity and thoughtfulness, and it's a great treasure to me. And later on the Central Office of Information were down doing photographs of Bernard; he requested that they be taken in this room in Barnaloft, holding that pot, and then they took another photograph of me standing beside him, a very nice photograph it is too. I was very touched by that.

Mm, mm. Because he was a neighbour...did he live...?

He became a neighbour for a long time, when he left the Leach Pottery he came and resided in No. 4 Barnaloft, I am No. 1, so there was literally two flats between us, and he constantly came along and used to knock his silver-topped cane on the door and say, 'Are you entertaining?' And I said, 'I will be if you come in.' I saw a lot him, I used to read to him in the last few years. He was a very close friend.

And you met him, when?

Quite early on.

Way back at the Carbis Bay days, or not?

No, no I met him, he came down, I used to open my studio for show days, and he came in. But I met him before that, because I met him with his first wife, his cousin, who is the mother of his children, and then he married again and he brought this second wife into my studio. In the early Forties. And his wife was living at Carbis Bay then and she was a dear friend of mine. And then, I kept a friendship with him for 37 years, I miss him very much, because he was constantly in the house, just as Ben Nicholson was constantly in my studio, had a studio next door to me in Porthmeor, more or less, he was No. 5 I think and I was No. 3 then No. 1. And I've been very fortunate in having such friendships as Borlase Smart, who was so kind in getting me a gallery, a studio, and helping me, and then Ben Nicholson took great interest and gave me faith in myself about my work, and bought a number of people to our cottage when I got married and we moved to Bethesda Hill. David acted as a sort of agent for the British and Arts Council by introducing, they sent artists down giving them introductions to Ben and Barbara and whoever was on their list, and this didn't make us very popular with other artists though, I found this rather a strain, but we often had to entertain these people, and Ben would bring them along, like Mr Sandberg and George Dix, and various people who came down. He also wanted to show off our little cottage that he called the White Tower, because it was little rooms based one on top of each other, facing the front beach, the Porth Beach, now spoilt by,

somebody has built up in front of that view. But Ben was a very generous person, and... And Mr McEwan[ph], Frank McEwan[ph] was another person that we got to know who came down.

And who was he?

He died recently, he was on the British Council I think, then he went out to Africa if I remember rightly.

And, I think, John Wells mentioned, he helped you paint out your house. He said he helped paint it white, and he dropped a paint pot and it went through three floors apparently, but you were very nice about it and it literally went...crash, as if it... I don't know that he meant it literally went through each ceiling.

No, but it's true. Because it was the little white tower, and, yes, I had forgotten all about that, I believe he did. And if you did drop paint from the top, it would seep through the floorboards right to the base, to the little kitchen. It was a minute house. You had to walk through the kitchen up the steep little stairs to the bedroom, and up that again to this lovely little room facing the harbour, and above that an attic, and anyone who stayed with us went up into the attic. It was all very difficult because the bathroom was off the kitchen, downstairs, and everybody had to walk through the bedroom to get... But it was an enchanting little house, called The Gap.

Right.

At Bathsesda Hill.

Was that...

We rented it.

Right. And then you had lived in Teetotal Street before, had you?

No, then an aunt of mine lent me the money to buy Teetotal Street, a little cottage in a very narrow grey little street. When people shook their dust out at the weekends one side and you shook yours out it met in the middle and you got their dust and they got yours. And it was rather a minute little house; it hadn't a view like Bathsesda Hill, but it had two bedrooms, a bathroom, attic room where my husband used as his workshop, and a cellar room which we

used to let, because I did bed and breakfast in the summer, as we were so poor. And I had No. 1 Porthmeor Studio by then, which was a huge room compared with these tiny rooms in Teetotal Street.

So was that...sorry, was that...

So I lived Downalong for quite a bit, and got to know Downalong people, which was quite valuable, I like to get to know the Cornish people, and made many friends amongst them.

So which order was that? You lived in the house that you bought after you had lived in The Gap?

Yes.

It was that way round?

And then I sold that little cottage in Teetotal Street and bought this unit in Barnaloft, and at the time it only cost me a few thousand pounds, because I sold Barnaloft for just £500 more than I had paid for it, but this was only...

You mean you sold the cottage in Bathsesda Street.

I sold the cottage in Teetotal Street.

Oh in Teetotal Street, yes, I see.

And bought this, two flats here, but the difference at that time wasn't much, because the sale of the cottage, this only cost me something like £4,600, and now it's worth a very great deal more. It was a good bet as it were, except that the maintenance has gone up and up and up over the years. I often go and look at Teetotal Street and think, how could I manage in that tiny little cottage? It was quite difficult days those really. Bed and breakfasts at that time was 8s.6d. a night. Well we've got to...

We've got to the early...

I started then, I had to go up to Scotland at intervals because I had let two-thirds of Balmungo House to staff at the university, and I kept a flat to myself, and I had an awful lot...it split me from my work for a bit. Those were rather difficult years because I had to give my mind to

other things than my work. But gradually I got the place, I had the courage to take down family portraits and that sort of thing and put my own work up, and paint the room out as a studio and so on, but it took time to do it. I meanwhile, in 1966 I think, visited Amsterdam and Rotterdam and studied the collections there, and that was very exciting. And the next year I went to America with the Contemporary Arts Society run by Paulein Vogelpoel.

Oh yes.

And I did some lectures on that trip afterwards. But that was invaluable, we went to all sort of places, from New York to Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, seeing galleries, seeing private collections, being entertained by collectors. It was only a two-week thing but it was a very crammed-in visit and I remember many wonderful things about it, the bus run up to Los Angeles for instance, and seeing collectors in Chicago and the work of collectors. It was a very exciting trip, very valuable, and going to the Modern Art Gallery, I forget what you call...Modern...

Which one?

The Museum of Modern Art. And the Guggenheim.

Yes. And don't you find they...I don't know whether they always have done, but the American museums they show their work in such a good way, they display their work incredibly well.

Yes. It was so exciting seeing Matisse, a room of Matisse in the Museum of Modern Art, the sort of juiciness of the paint. It's all very well being very familiar with reproductions, of course I had seen a few over here, but there were the actual work of postcards I had seen; to see the real thing was a fantastic experience. Like in Italy in my travels to Italy, I had a scholarship to Italy from the Italian Government.

Oh yes, that was in...

Earlier on.

'55.

And seeing some of the work in places where they were meant to be, like convents, is a very different experience to seeing works in galleries, museums and galleries are not the best place to see works of art, but to see them in their original setting...

Yes, especially the earlier Renaissance and...

Ah, absolutely. So I started working in St Ives and St Andrews.

So on average, well we probably can't work it out really, but is it split about 50-50?

It varies, it varies, it might be just two months in a year, one month and then one month, or it might be a six months run. When Rowan James first joined me I was there eighteen months, because we decided to transform the...the grounds had got out of order, the trees had got out of order, and the farmer, the local farmer beside me used to be the Balmungo farmer sold in 1957, he said, 'You women will never get that into order,' but we did, we had bonfire after bonfire. We both went off and got information from the botanical gardens about tree surgery, and we did a tremendous job, I've got photographs of it. And never slept so well in my life at the end of each day, we worked really hard, and got it into some sort of shape. And then I came back to St Ives, that was quite difficult because I was out of touch with everything. But it was a valuable experience all the same, and I just looked on it that some people are teaching in schools and colleges, I was working on the land, and we achieved it. And we also opened up the garden and grew vegetables at that time. And then I got into a rhythm, because she could look after Balmungo for me, she stayed there, and took that off my hands as it were, and I could come back here freer and...

Not have that worry.

Those intervals of Scotland, I just went up from time to time, but it was...it just depended really on circumstances. Having a mother alive at the time I probably went up at Christmas and New Year, because her birthday was New Year, to see her at Christmas. But I find the Scottish climate, St Andrews in particular, very very severe. But then funnily enough over these last years the whole thing seems to have gone topsy-turvy; I mean lately Scotland is having much better weather than we are having here in Cornwall, and they've had some very rough winters latterly here, whereas we've had the normal kind of rough winters but not extreme, so it's...and I've got the house much more comfortable than it was in the Victorian days, increased the heating. They didn't believe in heat when...

Oh no, absolutely. And, we're sort of skipping now.

I could talk about my work now.

I was just going to say, we ought to go back a bit and talk about your work, because it changed again quite dramatically.

Well what happened is, I never...I never went for anything I was successful at, I was always experimenting. I went abstract in the Sixties. I was developing themes like taking two pairs of complementaries and, two hot and two colds perhaps, and I did things, ascending squares of equal amount, and groups of things; worked on the Golden Section usually, or calculated exactly equal amounts. And I was experimenting trying to see how intense I could get colour.

Because, there are some things you did in...before you did more purely, more sort of shape paintings, I'm not quite sure how to describe it, there were some in the late Fifties that were rather different, before you got onto the things you are talking about in the Sixties. The late Fifties, things like this, 'Orange and Black', 'Geoff and Scruffy' series, 1958.

Yes, now those related a bit more to what I'm doing now. They are free and easier.

Mm, they're more sort of painterly.

Yes. I then, but I tightened up when I was doing this two squares, the square ideas.

Yes, what suddenly...you suddenly decided, or you had been thinking a bit... When you had been in London and not painting so much, that couple of years, was that when these ideas began to crystalise?

I loosened up a bit after the visit to Spain.

Yes there's one isn't there, 'Spanish Island'?

Paintings called 'Night Coast' and 'Spanish Island'. Several gouaches, quite large gouaches by then.

Can we just say the...can you just say the titles of this sort of thing?

Well there's one called 'Spanish island', 1960 this was, but it was inspired from going to Spain in 1958, it's a gouache.

And there's another one, 'Night Coast', Spain, No. 2, 1960, another gouache. And 'Spanish Island, Under Over', 1960.

Yes that's right. All inspired by the 1958 visit.

And likewise, that one, there's one called 'Underwater No. 1 for Winifred', 1958, gouache on paper, and 'Lime and Flame', 1958, gouache on paper there, they're all much...they're the looser. And what are the colours like? I'm looking now at these black and white reproductions, so I'm not quite sure what colours...

They are pretty brilliant in colour some of them. Now, the Tate Gallery at St Ives has been incorrect in its description of my 'Geoff and Scruffy' series. They talk about me painting a man and a dog. This is absolutely incorrect. What it was, I did what Ben Nicholson sometimes did, he did a series called 'Cat Under the Table', 'Cat Not Under the Table'. It was what you associate when you did the work. I did a lot of little pictures called 'Geoff and Scruffy' series, a theme I worked on for a long time, and they were fairly loose and brightly coloured little gouaches. And they were called 'Geoff and Scruffy' simply because, I went away for the weekend with David Lewis, who was lecturing at Newquay in painting, and an architect there was giving it on architecture, and her husband was a schoolmaster, and he was sitting correcting papers in front of me while I was working out this design and on his knee was a huge black dog called Scruffy. And I worked all that Sunday doing these studies and I called them 'Geoff and Scruffy' series simply because he was there in front of me, and it became associated and they became known as the 'Geoff and Scruffy' series. But it was nothing to do with Geoff and Scruffy, they were abstract designs which I can show you one or two of them, I still have one or two. Then I started being interested in 'things of a kind, in order and disorder'; I rather think Bridget Riley used that title. But I had used...and there's an example of that called 'Cinders' in the retrospective catalogue where I...

1964 that is.

...did loads of squares, some touching each other, some knocking each other, and I did various pictures of this nature. Things of a kind in order and disorder. Because of my broken marriage I started to realise, a canvas that is now hanging in the Law Courts in Truro is of emerald green squares on vermilion. Now if you knock them, I cut a lot of squares out and if you knock them the tiniest bit of vermilion will show between emerald, because they are complementary colours, green and red. And that taught me the importance of what these things did, how they moved, how they...what position they got into, how it affected the others

all round them, and I realised that this is what happens in life. So I learned a great deal out of painting, taught me a lot about life, and life taught me about painting. And for several years I worked on things of a kind, in order and disorder, tiny little squares. 'Meditation East No. 4' is an example.

What date are we talking about now?

This is...

1968.

1968.

Yes.

This is the Sixties I started this. There's one called 'Pilgrimage', which is 1967, and that is vermilion squares on brown. I at that time was going on pilgrimages, and they're sort of marching along and out of the canvas. Some are touching, some are together, some are tilted. It's again the same thing, the same theme. I used squares, I used circles, I used egg forms in doing it, and Robert Adams said to me, 'Why don't you do enlarged paintings of those little egg forms and so on?' And I said no, because I have discovered that Terry Frost is doing enlarged paintings with egg forms, and they will work out, although quite different, there will be some conflict there. So I never did it, I kept the little ones. And I then started working with lines, things of a kind, in the same rhythms, like if you were to take a lock of hair and draw it, you would find fine lines going in a particular rhythm. Well I started doing that.

Can I just give...sorry, excuse me, can I just say, the 'Pilgrimage' painting you were talking about was 1967, it was 40 x 60, that was quite a big one wasn't it?

Quite a big oil, yes. I did quite a few big oils, but unfortunately over the years, I was so hard up, this is one of the sad things, I've had to scrape out canvases so often and use them again, and many of the big paintings which I've had photographs of, Rowan has said to me, 'Where's this painting?' I've said, 'Scraped out.' I know they were.

End of F4749 Side B

F4750 Side A

[Wilhelmina Barns Graham talking to Tamsyn Woollcombe at her studio in St Ives on the 9th of June 1994. Tape Four.]

Right, we were just talking about the collection, well about the Tate at the moment, the Tate in St Ives, and the Tate generally, at the moment, and you were saying, it was quite a good point, that you've got nothing...

Well they've never bought anything of mine to date, and I never presented them with anything in the Fifties and Sixties, which I understand some of the St Ives major artists did, plus their galleries presented the Tate with their work. So what I have on show is what's been left to them; I understand one of them, which was bought by a doctor and he left it in his will to the Tate, was actually presented by the Contemporary Art Society, so it says on the plaque there.

And this was another...

A collector in St Ives called...

Hodgkins.

Mrs Hodgkins, and she mainly bought Ben, and she bought two of mine, a very small and that one, the 'Red Form', which is in the Tate Gallery.

Yes, 1954, 'Red Form'. And she also...

Otherwise, as they're showing only what's in their collection... The Tate did recently buy an early print of mine, but apart from that, I'm hoping that one day they will come round to it.

Mm. Because the glacier one that we've been talking about a lot, or the one that's up there on display now...

That's 1950 work you see.

1950, presented...

I had nothing. The late Forties or Fifties.

Yes. Although at the moment there is a gouache up there.

There is a gouache which...

It says, there is a label below saying you were unable to...I think they asked you...

No they commissioned me to do a drawing from a particular window, and it was commissioned very late, and I wasn't able to do it, I had flu very badly, and so I persuaded the director, Michael Tooby, to take a gouache made, a very recent gouache, made much at the time, which I thought anyway was much more representational of my work. I do draw, and I enjoy drawings, but they're not the major contribution.

And we've been talking about things on display in the Tate at the moment, the Tate St Ives; sometimes it's not always clear what we're talking about, and quite often we also talk about the Tate St Ives exhibition.

Yes of course. I always say Tate St Ives.

Yes. And, I just want to give the title of the, sometimes when I say the Tate St Ives exhibition I mean 'St Ives 1939 to '64', which was the exhibition from 13th of February to 14th of April 1985, which, Dr David Brown was the main curator who worked on that.

He did tremendous research.

And did an amazing amount of research, and that was when Alan Bowness was still a director at the Tate.

It's probably, in my mind the best part of the catalogue, because it really is informative and thorough.

Mm. And that was, the introduction was written by your ex, your husband David Lewis.

David Lewis.

Yes. Anyway.....

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

We're going to look at some work now.

I could tell you I had an exhibition, but I don't know the date. Was it 1949 or '51?

Well...

It must have been '51 or 2.

In the Tate St Ives? Selected...well, this is selected, one person exhibitions. You had one at Downings Bookshop, St Ives, in 1947 and '49, and at the Redfern, 1949 and '52, and the...

Well it would be 1952, when I gave an exhibition of glaciers, and Veira da Silva had a show as well.

Oh yes, and then you met Veira da Silva later in Paris.

Yes.

Yes, yes. And then there was the one, Roland, Browse and Delbanco in 1954.

It's not on, is it?

[BREAK IN RECORDING

Of course I had had experience of exhibiting in exhibitions in Scotland before I came to Cornwall. I can't remember all the details, because one or two of them were outside Edinburgh or near Edinburgh, but what I do remember was the Fine Art Society, the Society of Scottish Artists, and the Royal Scottish Academy, more than once, before 1940.

Yes, yes, right. And then of course there were several mixed shows that you were in.

Oh yes, in Cornwall.

I mean, innumerable ones.

Yes.

And there was 'British Artists of the Sixties', Tate Gallery 1977, do you remember that? That was a big... And then the Arts Council tour, the Penwith Society of Arts, 10th anniversary tour 1960 for example. I mean I'm just picking out a few.

A travelling exhibition arranged by the Scottish Arts Council I remember, six artists, which Colquhoun and McBryde were amongst them and myself, I can't remember who the other three artists were at this...

And talking about Colquhoun and McBryde, you met them, didn't you?

Oh I knew them in Scotland, with Adler, there was a painter called Adler.

Yes, yes I know, Jankel.

Then they came down to Cornwall and we knew them again.

Because they were...were they from Glasgow actually?

They were Glasgow artists, yes, then they went to London, but they were in St Ives in the early Forties. I gave a party in my studio which they came, and they got to know...they were friends of Sydney and Nessie Graham, and John Minton came down and stayed down here with them at one time.

Oh did he?

Yes. And I used to go and meet them in London and go to some of their pubs, clubs, the Mandrake and various places.

What, sort of Soho area or...?

Soho.

Did you go to the...did you ever go to the Colony Room?

Yes.

That sort of drinking...did you?

I went to quite a few places with them, I was quite friendly with Colquhoun and McBryde.

And did they come and lecture? How did you first meet them up in Scotland then?

I can't remember.

No, no, no.

It's rather a long time ago. I made...you see, I was at the Edinburgh College of Art and we used to go and visit Glasgow one day a year, there was an exchange, and I might have met them then, I don't know.

To the school of art you exchanged?

Yes, went to the Glasgow School of Art, and they came to us. It might have been like that, I'm not sure. It might have been an exhibition. It's a long time ago but I was friendly with them before I came to St Ives.

Mm. And, the other thing I was talking to you earlier about was, when you were up at Leeds and you taught...you said you did evening classes with architects.

Well I had an evening class which was a mixture of people of, if I remember right, dress designers and architects, yes.

Mm. And that was in the evening, but in the daytime...

In the daytime I had a class of students, life painting, and then I had another class which was mainly, some outsiders were in, people came in from outside. And then I had an outdoor sketching class. Yes.

So you went off into the dales, or...?

Explored, yes. But, I had one or two good students from outside.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

Right.

I have two studios in 1, Barnaloft. The upper one in which I do my oil paintings; in the lower studio which was my sitting-room I do my gouaches and drawings. We are now in the upper studio, and I am showing you works done in the Sixties, where I was interested in things of a kind...

'72, that one.

...in order and disorder.

'68. Yes, '68. And what are these on? Are these...?

These are acrylic on hardboard, and some of them are oil on hardboard. And, I'm just showing them because they are things of a kind, little oblongs or squares in...and there is one, 'Yellow on Black', circles.

And these colours are...this is when you changed, you were sort of tightening up, and your...

Yes, they were Hard Edge more or less.

And the colours you've got, describe exactly the colours because you know.

They're strong colours. That is red oblongs and black oblongs on brown, with mustard yellow at the top, and this one looks like cadmium yellow on black.

Yes.

And that is another series I did, 1962 to 4 of squares.

Like you were talking about yesterday, knocking against each other.

Yes, I did them into large canvases.

Have we got titles for any of these on the back, or not, I wonder? Shall I take one...?

If you take that down.

That one's actually dated 1970, that one.

It'll give a clue though.

Yes.

`Yellow Discs on Black', Wind on Waves series. I did several. They're small paintings.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

`Red and Black', June 1957, it's a series I did using heavy black lines. It's a red painting, an oil painting. There's a similar one in the catalogue.

Yes, and this one actually was exhibited at the Beaux-Arts gallery, Bath Festival, `Three Generations of Scottish Painters'.

That's right.

Yes. And that is a different...you did a few of that sort of ilk.

One or two bright red paintings with black diagonals, but it's strange, it links up with some of the work I am doing now in the Nineties.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

We're now in your bottom studio.

We're in the lower studio where I work in gouache and works on paper. And on the walls are a mixture of things. There is a 1960 work over there which is red and orange and two blues, cobalt and turquoise. That is squares, I was being very hard edged at that time, and doing a series of paintings, giving myself challenges like two complementaries, or two hot and two cool, which that is an example. I then moved from squares, which I talked about earlier to you, about the emerald squares on vermilion, I then worked in circles. They were worked out, they were all calculated, the positions of these circles, and they were in fairly primitive colours, primary colours I mean, red and green and blue and yellow. This is in some way illustrated in the book. At the same time, after my visit to Ibiza and the Balearics I did some gouaches in 1960 which are fairly loose and are quite similar to some work I'm doing now where I loosened up and stopped doing the Hard Edge. This one is a large gouache, it's 23 x 36 inches, and it's called 'Night Coast Spain No. 2'. I did a series of those.

And, have you used charcoal in that?

No, I don't think so. It's fairly dry paint, black paint.

And a very nice surface you've got. Is that actually on paper? Yes.

Yes it's on paper. I think it's a mixed media probably, there's oil in it as well by the look of it. Though it says gouache on paper, but it does look as if there was oil paint in it.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

.....looking at below...

Yes, 'Spanish Island'.

1960. That was exhibited in your retrospective.

Yes, it was in the retrospective. It's been in various exhibitions. I've kept that one out, it's my own collection, and it has an affinity with the gouaches I am doing today of heavy black strokes across forms.

But are the colours you are using today different, they're more vivid?

No, it's more subdued, it's darker, my colours today are more brilliant and even more free; I've gone away by then, by now I mean, from the Hard Edge, and this is not a Hard Edge work.

No.

And there's this...oh, except we don't have the date of it. But anyway, is there a pastel in this one?

Then I did a couple of pastel things. These are worked out on the Golden Section, and the circles, of which there was one in the catalogue, called 'Construction with Circles No. 2', pastel on paper.

Mm. And then also...oh yes I see. Oh yes that's right. And that also was in the retrospective.

It was in the retrospective exhibition, yes.

And can I just ask you about this, 'Waves'?

Now, yes, I was doing a series of line drawings in the Seventies to the Eighties, pen drawings on paper, sometimes using a bit of oil paint rubbed in. Sea movements, or line movements. Some were pretty abstract, some had a flavour of the beach. This one we're looking at is

called 'Eight Lines', it's eight lines of terracotta, of sand dune or wave movements, very simple, starting with a straight line and then building up into waves crisscrossing, just in line. That's a 19...

That's actually a 1986, it says.

Yes, but I did them before then.

Yes, for some time.

I did them, I started it in the Seventies. And in the Seventies I was also doing a lot of collages, or, I called them constructed paintings, sort of little reliefs. In fact I spent a long time on them, about two years doing little black ones with built up, very bright colours. And they started very small, something like three inches by five, and built up to six feet. But I've stopped that.

Because this beach here, Porthmeor Beach, has been fascinating to various artists who have been hooked on these wave movements. I mean Pasmore came and did some drawings, didn't he.

Yes he did, of wave movements.

And Adrian Heath did something as well.

Did he? Yes, well, it's been of infinite... It took me a long time to realise that it had affected me, but I have done work from the beach off and on throughout the time here.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

Across the room, we're now in the sea room between the two studios, there is an 'Orange and Red on Pink' gouache which was done in 1960, that is quite bright colours with large black strokes going across it, and that links with the work I am now doing, which I will show you presently.

And this is sort of much looser and soft.

It's looser. Yes I was doing both in the Sixties, because alongside it there's a small red and green painting with squares, I think done at random, that isn't on the Golden Section, but I did a lot of those small things, and also quite loose ones as well, but I've sold a number of them.

And here you've got something...

Well I did a kite series.

Yes, I was going to say, your kite series.

Yes, that's into 1970, but I did some in the Sixties as well. These line drawings were mainly in the Seventies. That's a little oil painting, very simple, just grey with white kites and a touch of black, and one note of lemon yellow. I started putting colour into the line drawings, but I've stopped doing that now. I've worked in seams. I did a lot of these collages or constructed paintings, and then I did drawings, I was short of drawings, I concentrated on drawings, rock formations, going over to Lanzarote for five years and doing volcanic movements and volcanic rhythms.

When you say five years you mean every year five years running.

Yes every year I went much the same time, from 1989 to '93. And then.....[BREAK IN RECORDING Working in themes, then I concentrated on gouaches, they became very loose and there was a sort of urgency about them, because I had been pretty back with bronchitis and I felt a great need to do whatever I could while I could, and so there was this urgency. And they loosened up considerably, but there is a link between them, and I will show you some presently, between them and one or two of the 1960 gouaches I had had was loosening up in between the hard-edged work.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

Now, in the Nineties, and I will explain more about it presently, I've concentrated more on oil paintings again.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

.....1960s, your one-man solo exhibitions were...

Well in '59 I was at the Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh; the City Art Gallery, Wakefield in '57; in 1960 the Scottish Gallery in Edinburgh; and then in 1968 the Richard Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh, which John Wells and Denis Mitchell also had an exhibition in other rooms of the same gallery; the Bear Lane Gallery, Oxford, which Roger Hilton had a show downstairs; which leads me to 1970, the Sheviack Gallery, Cornwall. But I was in various mixed exhibitions throughout those years, Newlyn, Penwith Gallery, New Craftsman, Wills Lane. And one or two shows in Dundee, mixed exhibitions, Dundee, Edinburgh.

And do you still go in for the Royal Scottish Academy?

No, I did a couple of years ago.

What about the Royal Academy, have you ever shown in the Royal Academy?

I have, yes.

In London?

Yes I have, but not very often. And though they do do more modern art now, they weren't at that time very much.

Yes, sometimes they do a sort of special room of invited sort of...

Yes.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

After the Seventies, where I was doing numerous line drawings and constructed paintings, or collages, I specialised in those for a couple of years. When we move into the Eighties I was back on to oil paintings, and I did some large ones which were shown in the Royal Scottish Academy, and...

Can you give it a title?

'Passing Over', tribute series which was later bought from my London exhibition, 1989, by the Government.

Oh for the Government art collection?

The Government art collection. And there was another one called 'Untitled', 1987, a large oil, also shown in London, and some early work, like glaciers or the expanding forms I did in the Eighties which was a series of oil paintings on canvas inspired probably by wave movements, but they were quite calculated, I measured the shapes out. I did a series of them, and two of them were bought by the Bank of Scotland, London branch.

And you were saying a moment ago that those were done up in Scotland.

They were done in Scotland, I had a spell of working up there.

And those are 48 x 48.

Yes, they're squares. Expanding forms. I did one very large one called 'Black and White' which was shown in London by an exhibition opened by Jo Grimond.

So you remained in touch with Jo Grimond all those years?

Yes, from time to time. Then there was another painting which was very calculated and hard edged called 'Expanding White', 1980, it's an oil painting on board. Very simple colours, just black, grey and white, of these white forms passing over it just.

Mm. And that was in your retrospective and also...

That was in my retrospective exhibition, and it was also in the London exhibition.

At Eighty, that...to celebrate your 80th birthday.

Yes, celebrating my 80th birthday which, that exhibition travelled to six venues I think.

Yes, you mentioned them last time, yes.

And there is a sample in the catalogue of one of my reliefs. As I say I went up from a few inches to six feet. This one is not six feet but it's greys and a touch of blue on a grey ground, it's built up forms. Again, things of a kind, they're all oblongs except for one circle.

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[Wilhelmina Barns Graham talking to Tamsyn Woollcombe at her studio in St Ives on the 10th of June 1994. Tape Five.]

Yesterday you were showing me work that you've done up to about 1980, and we're going to look at some more examples of your work a bit later, over that period. But in 1989 you had a retrospective which we've mentioned details of it, 'W Barns Graham, Retrospective, 1940 to 1989', City of Edinburgh Museums and Art Galleries which toured, and we've given the details of that. But what was it like to have a retrospective exhibition?

Quite difficult to talk about really, because it was very embarrassing, the early work of the Forties, it was like seeing our clothes that no longer fit. But on the other hand I learned something from it, I saw little shapes in an early work of mine done of a box factory fire that I had abstracted and put into abstract work years later, certain circles and that sort of thing, and things overlapping, things of a kind overlapping, touching. It's a doubtful point. I would much rather now not have a retrospective. Some of the exhibitions I've had have had a mixture of early work and other work because there's been a demand to show the development of an artist. I personally would rather concentrate now on a patch of, say, three years' or four years' work. But I certainly learned something from it, and from the public point of view they're very interested to see what your development is. It did rather remind me when I was embarrassed by one or two things, Ben Nicholson once said to me, 'Never put out a work that you are unsure of, because it has a nasty way of turning up.' And that is perfectly true, and I've never forgotten it.

Mm. And have you actually found that that has happened to you?

Oh yes, yes, certainly. Perhaps somebody has bought something out of auction and put it in their gallery and I've come along and said, 'What's that? That's not a very good one,' and discovered it was a work of mine that had slipped through somehow, perhaps somebody had bought, and...when I was hard up, and you let it go. No, one should never do it, one should always try and stand by belief that the work that you are parting with is a proper statement.

Mm. Because there was a very nice one of yours, or I thought it was very nice, it came up at Sotheby's about three summers ago I should imagine, and it was...I don't know how I can describe it. I think it was...it was Forties, I think it was about 1946 or something, and it was...it had white and bluey-grey and sandy colour, I think it was sort of Porthmeor. I don't...

Rock forms?

Might have been. And a dealer called Jonathan Clarke bought it from the auction and I saw it in one of his catalogues. Do you know the one I mean?

No I don't.

It wasn't actually rock forms I don't think, it was...

An abstract?

Yes it was abstract.

Yes.

But, anyway...

There have been one or two turning up in the auction rooms in the last few years, and I've been quite surprised, I've been quite pleased with one or two I had forgotten about, but there is always the odd one that one is embarrassed by. But you asked me about the retrospective, it was a huge exhibition, I think I mentioned it earlier on.

Mm, we have, yes.

We had three floors. And it had a mixture of everything in it, from oil paintings to collages to line drawings to drawings...to gouaches. Quite peculiar. One would go around looking at it almost as if it was somebody else's work, because some of it was done in the Forties, Fifties.

And, you know you were just talking earlier on about the box factory fire work.

Yes.

Is that the one of 1948 that's reproduced in that actually, that one?

That one, yes. Unfortunately some of these have been cut off in the reproduction. There is a colour one of it I think, is there?

Oh yes, I think there might be. Oh yes.

Yes. You see these shapes there.

Oh yes.

Well it was this part here, these circles, I was studying that, do you see the little circles, and things of a kind. I was quite surprised, that painting was done in '48 and it was twenty years later that I was working in things of a kind.

And was that...?

And of course I was interested in...in my childhood I knew a famous professor, D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, who was a professor at St Andrews University and was very fond of children. I was a child when I knew him and later on when I was older, but I bought his book 'Growth and Form', I studied that quite a bit and found it was quite exciting, leading into the rhythm that is found in shells, cell formations, the rhythms on horns and so on, and I could go and study this in St Andrews at the museum or the university. Of course it led one on to expand further into one's own work about this. But it was quite an inspiration.

Because some of your drawing - some of your works, not drawings, oils, at some point are about cell formations possibly are they?

Yes I mean, I was interested, that came into the studying things of a kind in order and disorder, which you find in bird flights, and I've referred in catalogues to fire works in.....[BREAK IN RECORDING] The markings in plants, on the backs of fern leaves, say, and I have referred in one of the catalogues to the markings in foxgloves. All that sort of thing very much interested me, because they are markings of things of a kind but there's variation between them, and it led me on to looking at crowd scenes and movements, that kind of thing.

Yes, because I know you did portraits and things when you were down here during the war and things like that.

During the war I did, yes.

And people. But you haven't really done people since, have you?

No, I was commissioned, a lot of it during the war, and also I was very interested in sculptural drawing, head drawings and bone construction, and that was supposed to be my strength, but I discovered I couldn't really be so creative in that as I could in landscape or studying more abstract forms.

Mm. Because...

I stopped it.

Yes, because all your landscapes, I mean, there's not a figure to be seen anywhere.

No. Well, not often.

Although you took life drawing classes didn't you in Leeds.

Oh yes, I'm interested in drawing, and I've done a lot of figure drawing, but in my actual paintings I'm more interested in abstract shapes.

Yes, exactly.

As such.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

And during the Eighties you had a very...you had many exhibitions, your work was included...and the one-man exhibitions, let alone mixed shows, and that they are all recorded in this drawing, 'W Barns Graham Drawings' exhibition that we mentioned before, we gave the details before, at the Crawford Art Centre, and Truro, 1992.

That was a sort of mini retrospective because the drawings I think are included from 1940 up to the present date, Lanzarote lava studies.

Mhm. And were there any of those one-man shows, or even the mixed ones, that you remember that you were particularly keen on during that period, do you want to mention them?

Well it was quite exciting because I had three main exhibitions in the 1970s, four. In 1981 I had several, in Cumbria, St Andrews, Germany, Orkney, London, Roxburghshire, Glasgow,

and on touring exhibitions, which the retrospective was, which went to about five, six venues, leading up to the William Jackson Gallery which we have discussed, and the Crawford Art Centre, St Andrews, 1992.

And, were these things...I'm just looking, quite a lot of them, they're a mixture, aren't they, between commercial and non-commercial.

Yes, museums.

Yes, museums.

The travelling ones went to museums.

Yes. And who initiated, when you say the Crawford Arts Centre...

That was Scottish Arts Council. So was the retrospective, it was organised by them, although it started in Newlyn, but it was such a big exhibition it was quite difficult to find venues, but it did go to...six venues I think, five or six.

And has your assistant, Rowan James, she must have been a great help to you in the...

Oh enormously, because...

Helping put together those shows.

Yes, enormously, because my job now is to paint. It's been quite difficult for me to hand over because I've got quite a lot of experience in hanging exhibitions, and working with Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth and the group that we all had, the Crypt and the beginning of the Penwith Society of Art days, but, yes, she does the organising of the exhibitions, the cataloguing; she works sometimes with a London man, a gallery man, but...

What, a particular man?

Yes.

Who's that? Someone.

And... So my job is to get on with the painting which I find now is the best thing for me to do, to concentrate on that. And she attends to the archives and the photographs and the press, and this is invaluable help to me.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

We were talking about D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson a moment ago. As you were saying, in this current issue of 'Modern Painters', the summer 1994 edition, there is an article, 'Hats off to the little amoeba's friend', which is about Professor D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, and they have reproduced a drawing of yours, a 1988, 'Quicksands', it's a line one. Is it...yes, pen and ink on paper.

I did a lot of those line drawings of sea movements, sand movements. Some of them were worked on a mathematical basis, some of them, like 'Expanding Forms' that I was telling you about, the painting, but a lot of them were looking at the sea but most of them turning my back on it, just re-composing rhythms, movements, which I sometimes gave a title, like 'Sand Movements' to, like that 'Quicksand'.

Mm. And on the same page there's a Victor Pasmore, 'Spiral Motif, White, Green, Maroon and Indigo', 1950-52.

Well when he came down to St Ives he actually did some drawings from the Porthmeor Beach.

Yes I know, yes.

Spiral forms.

Yes, yes. Did you meet him, did you know him?

Yes I know him, yes, and I knew him then, I remember when it was, it was in the Fifties.

Yes, yes.

Yes. We were friendly with him and Wendy.

But you didn't sort of, you were really based down here, or in Scotland, you didn't have much London connection.

Yes. I was much more based here. I only went to Scotland at Christmas-time or in the summer in August for brief spells to visit my parents.

Yes.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

...inherited the house in Scotland that I've worked in.

Yes, yes exactly.

Commuted.

Yes.

Irregular intervals.

And, I don't know whether you want to go and talk about your more recent work now, or not; do you want to?

Is it on?

Mm.

I could show you, I started, in the late Eighties I started working more in gouaches; having done the line drawings and the collages and drawings I went back to gouaches and did a lot, and had some rather good work periods where things started to flow, and they became more loose and stronger colour and more assured. Now I can show you a few of these if you would like to come down to the lower studio. And the last phase has been returning to oil painting, but would you like to come and...?

Mm, mm.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

Right, we're now down looking at your...some gouache.

Well these are selected gouaches for the next London exhibition, so they haven't been seen, some of them, and certainly not exhibited to date, and I'll show you a few of them. There's about twelve of them are here.

So what date...? How recent are these?

This one is 1992.

And has it got a title?

Yes, it's to do with Barcelona, 'Celebration of Fire'.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

This is just...is it on?

Yes.

This is a theme that I have been on, I sold one to Milngavie Art Gallery, and this is the second one I've done, and I will presently show you another one, quite different. This has been reproduced I think in Peter Davis's book.

Oh right, what, 'St Ives Revisited' or whatever it's called, is that the one?

Yes it might be that book, I haven't bought it or read it yet.

Because, can I just ask you, I mean it's not only gouache, you've got other, a pastel haven't you, in there?

No, it's all gouache.

Is it? Oh right, oh it looks as if...yes, I see.

Yes, it's gouache, and it's...that's one of the selected ones.

And do you use...is that hand-made paper you use?

Well I use...

Mm, very good quality.

Very good paper, and anti-acid materials; I spend quite a bit on the paper and the paint that she mounts the boards and frames with, anti-acid materials.

Mm. Oh that's interesting.

This is a 1993 one. It's untitled.

And this, these have got these diagonal lines that you've done, you did an earlier work, didn't you, you did black, didn't you?

That's right, yes.

In the early Sixties.

I hadn't connected them. There is...yes those diagonal lines have come through several works on the oils I'm now doing. This is a free gouache, I rather like it because it's joyful and colourful.

You've got kind of, emerald green?

Emerald green, yes.

And an orange, red and yellow. The diagonals are on a...

On dark red.

Dark red ground.

I don't know if you can see it well there.

Yes. And it's sort of layered, there are sort of layers, aren't there, going back and back.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

This is another 1992 gouache where I've used a dark ground of green, dark green and dark grey, and there are three circles drawn in light blue, orange and lemon yellow.

And the way you do this paint is...makes it from far away look as if it might be oil pastel or something, it just...

Yes it does, that's what I was studying, it looked like pastel just now but it isn't, it is gouache used direct from the tube.

Mm. And this is wonderful, this one. What's this one? What date?

This is one, 1992 again, called 'Fire'. I've been developing this Fire series which started with the Barcelona lot, and then I've done some oil paintings which I have called 'Bush fire', 'Sparks'.

And have you done the oils after the gouache, or not, or just at the same time?

Oils after the gouaches, my last development. But these came out of a great sense of urgency, and I felt a great need to, and I think I quoted something, to make a song of it.

'Come and see what I have found,' you said.

Ah, that's what I say about the purpose of artists, is really that one doesn't quite grow up, one's all excited like a child who takes you by the hand and says, 'Come and see what I have found,' yes. I won't show you more than a few. This is another one, I've had that one in the Tate Gallery St Ives for one summer but I removed it for fear that the strong light would affect the colours, being a watercolour, a gouache.

It's quite similar, isn't it, to the one that's hanging there now, by you?

Not really.

Oh right. Actually I've seen...you've had a card made of that, haven't you, I think.

I had a card made of that, yes.

And that's 1992.

That's 1992. It's a Barcelona series again.

What's this?

Can you turn it off a minute?

Yes.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

Sorry, I just wanted to ask, I'm now looking at this very very bright, well, quite intense bright colours, purple, violet or whatever.

Ah, that is mixed media. It's a purple print, silkscreen, with a black shape, and it had some red shapes on it and a brown shape on the right-hand side, and I didn't like it, I felt something needed doing, so I put some great broad brush-strokes of gouache, turning the brown into lemon yellow with orange, and I did two or three with orange, two shades of orange, a black, a blue and a green. And it became quite alive.

Yes, it certainly has, it's wonderful. And this one, sorry, contrasts rather...

That's one that relates to, it's untitled, relates to one that I had in my London exhibition of my 80th.

Yes, and there you've got these two discs, one...

Yes, it's something to do with Lanzarote, though it doesn't look like it, of volcanic hills, and the lovely coloured pebbles I found of terracotta and pinks and greys, but it's an abstract.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

And so, you've just shown me some work upstairs, recent work that you've done...when did you start it?

January.

Right.

I began oil painting again last summer, '92...'93, '93 of course. And then, that was a spell in St Ives, and I had two good gouache spells in St Ives. But recently I had a rather good spell in Scotland, I did a series of oils, I did about fourteen paintings, most of them on a series of, Fire

series I call it, bush fire, but they're abstract, you know, they're not... And I've shown you now two of that series, one upstairs, the upstairs studio, which is red with a violet under...a ground of violet, and then on top is some blue, some green...

Is there black, red?

And then black going over the red. I used cadmium red deep, it's rather a nice dark red. And one or two vermilion strokes and black strokes of movement going across. And then the other one...

That was in oils wasn't it.

That's in oils, oil on canvas. And much the same size hanging downstairs is an acrylic, a green one which is like sparks or movement going across the surface, could be wind-blown or could be sparks from a fire, black, yellow; it's on a greenish ground.

Greenish-yellow isn't it, somehow.

Greenish-yellow, and these strokes of colour are all kinds of colours, black, vermilion, a touch of yellow, a touch of blue, a sweeping across the canvas.

And, can I just ask you quite a naive question actually, but... When...did you call them...did you think about them being a Fire series afterwards, or during, or before?

Well some of them during. I followed it up from gouaches last year done on the Barcelona fire celebrations which so...that was the Olympic year, the Games, there was a film that came out of the Olympic celebrations, and they so inspired me. I had been to Barcelona the previous October on an exploratory visit where I went to various museums, the Miró Museum, Tàpies Museum, Picasso Museum and so on, and was so happy there studying this that when this film came on, it was absolutely fantastic and very imaginative, and influenced by Miró, and it set me off into doing some gouaches of the feeling, not from it but the feeling, of celebration of fire dance, because they had fire figures dancing and balloons and extraordinary figures, and great moon-shaped things, and there were actually figures inside these enormous balloons, and there was a silver one with a nude man in it and it went round so quickly you couldn't really see him properly but you knew he was there. It was brilliant. And then fierce sort of dragons on the stage. And then these little men dressed as fire, flame figures, with wonderful orange wings. And this inspired me very much, so what I did was, I used the colours that I thought of, the orange and the blue and the red, and I think the

Barcelona colours if I remember right are red and orange. And I used black as well, and I threw some paint at it, because there are so many little dabs of colour I thought maybe I could get the feeling of it. And I did two or three, then I did more simpler ones, and then these canvases sprung out. There's been various things happening politically, like Bosnia, I was terribly worried about all that of course like everybody else, and I did an acrylic canvas of Bosnia which I have downstairs with great big bands of blue strokes over yellow and red backgrounds. I think you saw it.

Yes I did.

And then that led me on to the January to April series, where I did some yellow grounds and simpler shapes, and I called them the Fire series because it's simply in my mind. One was a bush fire but it's not really, but I called it that to identify it, because it's got some yellow in it and some black, and black strokes going across it and it's very fierce. And it's just a theme I'm still in, and I'm rather enjoying, and I've prepared some more canvases upstairs of coloured grounds, like yellow and violet and raw sienna to see what I could do out of this. The theme will change, I mean even wondered whether to do the ripples on the sand. But I don't want to be representational in this at the moment, I want it entirely to be an enjoyment of colour, vibration and shapes. And they're not as innocent as they look. There's a certain...the black brush-strokes are all calculated; they look spontaneous but they actually are calculated in the relationship to the sides and height of the canvas.

Right. And do you actually draw in a kind of grid or something to...?

Yes, I do. Basically I draw certain intersections that I want, and that helps me to arrange my last brush-strokes. And it's strange because it relates a little bit, behind me is a gouache I did, 1960, with black strokes going over, I think it's called 'Pink and Orange'.

Yes, we talked...

Or 'Red and Pink on Orange' or something.

Yes, and there are these two sort of discs.

'Or Orange and Red on Pink'. And it's a 1960 work. And I see an affinity with it, and with one of the Spanish coast ones downstairs I showed you which had some black shapes going across. I don't know why it has happened just now, but anyway that's the series I'm on now, and I haven't finished it, and I'm hoping to get some for... like the gouaches I showed you

downstairs to put aside for my next London show. I did a white one as well, just black and white.

Oh did you?

On a very pale beige ground, and that was rather exciting, after the very hot ones.

And you did quite a lot of work, didn't you, I mean a great deal of work between December and April, you were saying.

Yes, it was from the 1st of January to the end of April. I think I had about sixteen canvases, but I destroyed two and I reckon I will be destroying another two. But I did get something out of it. I'm rather pleased with that little period.

Mm, mm. And when you say destroyed, do you actually paint over with...do another work, or do you just...?

I scrap them, yes. I don't do it straight away, I mentally put them aside and then go back a long time later. Sometimes you know what to do, sometimes you work over it, and sometimes you just, well with the gouaches you put them in the bath and wipe them out, but you get a really good ground, yes.

Mm. That's because you've got such good paper that it can stand up to that.

It can stand up to that, yes.

And, so, say in that month you were concentrating...that period of six months, five months, you were concentrating solely on oils, you weren't doing some gouache at the same time?

A little, I did have a few gouaches, but not in the same way as I had done before. And this period was...I've noticed more than once that when I'm under stress I sometimes do my best work, and I was under stress this time because I had a threat to my eyesight, and that's been overcome, but it made me concentrate particularly hard. Just a few hours painting per day, and then thinking, a quick two hours, and I realised that thinking is as important a part as the actual work. And Barbara Hepworth once referred to that, the importance of thinking, keeping yourself quiet so that you have time to think. It's so important. And the funny thing is that although I had to restrict my working time for only about two hours a day to begin with

and then I worked it up to a bit more by April, I did as much as I do when I work all day long and you scrap it out at the end of the day.

Mm, mm.

So that, because I was thinking a lot about it, and had become...I more or less knew what I was...you don't always know what you're going to do the next day, it's often by chance, but I more or less knew.....

End of F4751 Side A

F4751 Side B

Sorry, you were saying you more or less knew...

One paints intuitively some of the time, but there's no knowing what you're going to do, but on these occasions I had thought a great deal about what state I had got to what was I going to do next, and this process was invaluable to me because I was doing so much thinking, I was forced into this situation, to rest my eyes a bit and so on. Anyway, it was a productive period, and one only can get...I reckon I get...about a third of the work of what I do is the best.

Mm. And I saw up there, there were two things I saw up there, one was the glacier, one of your glacier ones up there.

Ah that's a discovery I made the other day, was a small canvas, it must date back to the Fifties, with a pencil drawing of the glacier face again, and that I had done, something akin to the one in the Tate Gallery of that shape of a great ice cliff with a hole in it. And, I thought, that must be the last one I've got, and I thought, I don't like the pencil on canvas, and I put some charcoal and re-drew it and started fiddling with it, and rubbed a little bit of blue in it here and there. Then I left it, and I think it's quite sort of telling, as a drawing, as a charcoal drawing on canvas, the tone of texture and colour behind it. That's a one-off really.

Mm, mm. And you normally paint in oil, that's right isn't it? Acrylic is quite rare for you is it?

No, I do quite a lot in acrylic. When I was doing gouaches I used acrylic very thinly and they almost looked like gouache. I don't really like acrylic; it's quite useful for ground sometimes if you want quick drying. But I've done acrylic paintings on paper, I'm stopping that now, I don't really like it. There's nothing to beat good oil paint. But I use gouache a lot, I'm very easy with gouache, and Ben Nicholson used to say to me he thought that I had a flair with gouache, and I think I'm very at home with gouache, but I also want to do some oils again, I haven't for some time, I've been neglecting that side of it.

When was it then, when do you think the last time was that you used oil before this last lot?

Last summer, last summer.

Oh last summer, yes, yes.

Yes. I worked intermittently with oils and gouaches downstairs, I would spend a day upstairs and then two days downstairs, because I keep the two rooms quite separate, with those materials.

And do you ever do, nowadays do you ever do oil on paper?

Yes I rub in. Some of these little line drawings which, the one illustrated in 'Modern Painters' for instance, you don't notice that but it's got a slight rubbing-in of pale ochre behind that, I think, if I remember right. And I use, I rub oil into paper quite often and then draw on top, you get wonderful texture of pencil running through oil.

Mm, yes I've seen that.

That, you do it with your fingers mostly.

Mm, yes.

Yes, yes even a little bit of the drawing with a tiny note of rubbing in of oil is good, yes, I prefer that to gouache, doing it in gouache.

Mm. And you also, I saw up there that you had a tape recorder up there, a sort of machine. Was it a tape recorder or a radio, or something?

It's a radio, but it does play tapes.

Yes, so do you work with music then?

I work with music a lot, classical music mainly.

Yes. And have you got any particular composers?

Well I play different things. I like Mozart and I like Bach, but I also like modern work, I like Stravinsky, Michael Tippett, I like... I also like real jazz, but that's more difficult to work; it peeps you up sometimes, but I like music that puts me into a state of contemplation or meditation, because I've done a lot of paintings that are meditations. When I was doing the things of a kind in order and disorder, a lot of them were sort of prayers in my mind, and, I find it best to get a still mind, because I don't need to be pepped up with, or pepped down with tranquillisers or anything like that; I find that what one wants really is to get into a state of

control. And there are many challenges down here being a woman painter, and when I'm in stress, which I am from time to time, I find the best thing to do is to keep affirmative, come what may, and do another painting, in other words work, work, work, and I've even dedicated certain paintings to certain disturbances in my life. That's how I keep working.

End of F4751 Side B

End of Interview