



Gleeson, James (b. 1915)

by Joyce M. Youmans

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One of Australia's most acclaimed artists, James Gleeson embraced surrealism early in his career and has remained committed to it as a means of exploring and expressing psychological conflicts and conditions.

Gleeson was born in Sydney on November 21, 1915 and grew up in a small town north of the city. His mother raised him after his father died in the great flu epidemic of 1919. An aunt fostered his artistic talent during his formative years, and his career as an artist began in the 1930s.

Gleeson was classically trained as an academic painter at the East Sydney Technical College from 1934 to 1936. He studied at the Sydney Teachers' College from 1937 to 1938. The European surrealist painters Salvador Dalí and Max Ernst particularly influenced his early work, which was central to the manifestation of the surrealist movement in Australia during the 1930s.

For Gleeson, however, surrealism is not simply a movement that flourished during the 1930s; it is a life-long endeavor that assists his exploration of the forces that drive the subconscious mind and, thereby, create human emotions and behavior.

Gleeson's paintings incorporate imagery that ranges from the recognizable to the indeterminate. Frequently arranged in swirling, brightly colored compositions, their forms, colors, and textures render them visually enticing. Nevertheless, they are as elusive to the mind as they are seductive to the eye; their meanings seem just beyond conscious understanding.

Critics have deemed Gleeson's work macabre, threatening, beautiful, and erotic. Paintings such as *Greek Myth* (1980) reveal homoerotic undertones. In this work, a nude male lies prone in non-representational white, blue, gray, and yellow forms. He appears to float in an indeterminate space that may represent the artist's unconscious mind. Expanding upon this interpretation, one may conclude that the painting illustrates the unconscious as it entices the conscious mind to take pleasure in the male flesh.

Paintings such as *Greek Myth* may represent the universal struggle of the liberation of the individual will from one stronger than its own, such as that of society. Gleeson uses various metaphors to suggest the constraints of convention. Red cloth, frequently shown binding human figures, serves this function prior to 1942. After this date, human figures are often shown entangled in weeds.

Weeds are integral to the composition entitled *Images* (1946). This painting features a central female figure that represents the soul. Around her rotate several male images shown in boxes of varying degrees of transparency, or conscious awareness. A weed ensnares all of the figures in this work.

Through his imagery, Gleeson stresses the difficulty involved in the liberation of the individual will. The artist believes that, as a result of this struggle, the mind seeks to return to the past, to a world of pre-human organisms that pulse with a life force.

Perhaps this belief explains Gleeson's artistic production since 1983. In that year, he began producing abstract compositions that seem to represent a type of pre- or post-human biomorphic cosmos. Featuring jewel-like tones, these works may illustrate either the beginning or the end of humanity.

Throughout his long artistic career, James Gleeson has explored realms beyond human consciousness in a variety of ways. His paintings reveal his fascination both with the potentials of the subconscious mind and with the idea of extending the boundaries of reality.

Bibliography

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