

JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: VALERIE ALBISTON AND YVONNE COHEN

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JAMES GLEESON: Now, what I'm really anxious to find out is some information about your father whose work you have given to the gallery, and we want background information, biographical details for our official catalogues. Now, I wonder if you can help us?

VALERIE ALBISTON: Well, we'll do our best. Morris Edwin Cohen was born in Ballarat in 1866. He came from a large family. There were four brothers, and they had a business in Ballarat which was later transferred to Melbourne. He was the only one in the family that had any artistic leanings at all. As a boy he was interested in painting and he had as his youthful friend David Davies.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, that's interesting.

VALERIE ALBISTON: They painted together in Ballarat and they remained friends all their lives. When Dave Davies left Ballarat and went to live in Dieppe, my father visited him in Dieppe and also acquired paintings of his which we have given to the Ballarat Gallery.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Two paintings from Dieppe of that period. My father died in 1931 and before then his business was transferred to Melbourne, and it has now become McEwans Hardware.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

VALERIE ALBISTON: He illustrated and wrote travel articles for the commercial travellers magazine, and he was a very clever caricaturist. He painted mostly in pastels, which he imported directly from France. He had a lot of artist friends—the artist Taylor Gee he knew very well. He also knew Longstaff very well. He had a one-man exhibition with Gill—and I don't remember Gill's Christian name—at his gallery at Exhibition Street in 1929. He sold a lot of paintings then, very small pastels, and he'd previously shown in a mixed exhibition among quite a lot of well known Australian artists such as Will Ashton, Bernard Hall, Harold Herbert, Hilder, Hans Heysen, Lambert, Minns, Roy de Maestre, Margaret Preston, Thea Proctor, Tom Roberts, Arthur Streeton, Sidney Ure Smith, John Shirlow.

JAMES GLEESON: He was in good company.

VALERIE ALBISTON: That exhibition was in—let me have a look and see—that was October 10th 1928.

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JAMES GLEESON: At?

VALERIE ALBISTON: At the Fine Arts Gallery Exhibition of paintings by Australian artists at Fine Arts Gallery, Exhibition Street.

JAMES GLEESON: Now, Morris I notice here is spelt M-A-U-R-I-C-E.

YVONNE COHEN: Yes, it's wrong.

VALERIE ALBISTON: It's wrong, it's M-O-R-R—

JAMES GLEESON: I always thought it was M-O-R-R-I-S. So they've got an incorrect spelling for the name in that catalogue.

VALERIE ALBISTON: My father really should have been a full time painter but, of course, he wasn't. He used to go out sketching every weekend round and about Melbourne and do all his pastels. He also travelled considerably overseas and did a lot of work overseas—painted. In the early days he painted in Egypt, in Spain, Italy, France and so on—has done a lot of overseas paintings in pastels.

JAMES GLEESON: Your sister just showed me a group of three little oil paintings by him. I'd never seen his oils before.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Well, he did very few oils. I have one which is one I like extremely much of his oils. I took it to have it framed one day to Martin Smith. You remember Martin Smith?

JAMES GLEESON: Mm.

VALERIE ALBISTON: He was fascinated. He wanted to know who the painter was. But these other paintings that my sister has which are really historic Melbourne—

YVONNE COHEN: (inaudible) in '85.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Yes, 1885.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. That is a very early date for a work of that, you know, it's quite impressionistic and to have worked in that way at that time was quite remarkable.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Yes, well those little oils I feel could stand up to any of the early Australian painters. He was completely self-taught; he had no lessons at all, ever.

JAMES GLEESON: Had he been in contact with anyone except David Davies?

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VALERIE ALBISTON: Not that I know of. He seemed to be quite a loner, a sort of a loner. You know, he had a small room in the house where we lived as children and he would shut himself there and work on his pastels.

JAMES GLEESON: He preferred pastels to oils?

VALERIE ALBISTON: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: It seemed to me that he had a natural ability for oils.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Yes.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Well, he did. I also feel his pastels would have been ever better in watercolour than in pastel, because I feel that he used the pastel not as pastels should be used, to my way of thinking.

JAMES GLEESON: He certainly used it as a (inaudible).

VALERIE ALBISTON: Yes. I feel that they were used more or less as watercolour, you know. A pastel to me should be a chalk and used as a chalk and left so that you see the feeling of chalk, but these were rubbed in and used almost as another medium.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Yes, it's strange that. Those three oils impressed me very much. I thought they were very beautiful paintings and, for the date in which they were painted, quite exceptionally strong statements.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Tell me about your father; you told me that he was drowned in Tasmania?

VALERIE ALBISTON: Well, he was drowned in Tasmania in 1931. He was a great sportsman and we'd gone over to Tasmania so that he could sketch and fish and that sort of thing. But in the early days he and his three brothers used to go down to Apollo Bay. They were well known down there as the Cohen family. The only way they could get there in those days was to take a boat in the Yarra and go right round to get to Apollo Bay. There were no roads at all.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

VALERIE ALBISTON: They were quite well known as a family down there. My father was interested in fishing and shooting, but much more in painting. He used to go and stay at this property called Yarra Grange just on the way to Healesville, which was a few properties away from where Dame Nellie Melba lived at Coomb Cottage. The artists used to go up and stay there. Longstaff stayed there and Melba used to come over and visit them and that sort of thing. But those were all the days that we don't remember. We were too early.

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JAMES GLEESON: Because you were quite young when your father died.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Yes, we were quite young. Yes, Yvonne was only 16 and I was 18 and a bit, so you weren't really interested in your father's friends. But I do remember Taylor Gee quite distinctly. Actually, his paintings I see have now come into the auction rooms. Recently I've seen them in some of the Australian auction rooms commanding quite a fair price. I don't know whether he's well known or not, whether you've ever come across the name.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, I've come across them. Yes.

VALERIE ALBISTON: He was interested in music of course. His friend was Fritz Hart.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh yes. I met his widow in Honolulu.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Did you? Well, Fritz used to visit our house frequently. He was a very great friend. The Hart's were very great friends of my family. So they were connected with music and painting.

JAMES GLEESON: But both of you have been involved in the Melbourne arts scene?

VALERIE ALBISTON: Oh, yes. We grew up with all the boys.

YVONNE COHEN: We were not really interested in painting really while my father was alive, but we wanted desperately to learn painting later and we did, you see. I think one day I tried to do a little pastel when he was doing a pastel and funnily enough we discovered it the other day in one of the folios. I couldn't have been more than about 12 when I did it, you know.

VALERIE ALBISTON: But we grew up with all the boys here. I mean, Arthur Boyd and John Perceval and, well, you name them; John Brack, Blackman, Neil Douglas, you know, we knew them all personally.

JAMES GLEESON: Murray Bail tells me that you knew Fairweather and that you have a collection of his work?

VALERIE ALBISTON: Well, we have met Fairweather. I wouldn't say we knew him.

JAMES GLEESON: A difficult man to know.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Yes, but we did offer him our place up in Queensland at one stage, which was an island and he wrote and said he was sorry he couldn't accept but he felt at his age it was just too isolated for him.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, this was when he was getting on.

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VALERIE ALBISTON: When he was getting on.

YVONNE COHEN: Yes, before he went to Bribie this was.

VALERIE ALBISTON: So we saw him on Bribie Island at one stage and, of course, before he went to Bribie Island he was living at Lina Bryans. She had a big house out at Darrabin and Miss Plant, the artist, lived there.

JAMES GLEESON: Is that Ada Plant?

VALERIE ALBISTON: Yes. She lived there, and Fairweather. Fairweather had the basement. He never painted in the daytime. He used to paint at night by candlelight and mix all his paintings—

YVONNE COHEN: Put all his paintings right round the wall and do a dab on each, going right round.

VALERIE ALBISTON: He was so poor that mixed his colours only with sunlight soap and that sort of thing; anything at all. The only person that had any contact with him was Lina Bryans. He wouldn't appear or see anybody.

YVONNE COHEN: Especially women. He was scared.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Yvonne saw him once. She was sitting for a portrait. Jock Frater wanted to paint her once, and Fairweather appeared up the stairs and quickly looked and dashed away again. But that was the only time in Melbourne that we saw Fairweather and then up at Bribie Island once.

JAMES GLEESON: Can I tell you a story about Fairweather that I heard yesterday? I'll take this opportunity to get it on tape. I went to see Alan Sumner, you know.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Yes, yes I know Alan.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, Alan used to be many years ago in the early 30's assistant to Jock Frater in the glass field.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Yes, I know.

YVONNE COHEN: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: One day he said—this must have been about 1933—a strange man came in, in sandshoes, without socks, with no singlet on but with a very beautiful English sports jacket all frayed at the sleeves and an English sporting cap on and with a roll of drawings—he said there must have been about 80 drawings there—tied up in the singlet. He asked to see Jock Frater. Frater was out at the time and Alan said, 'Could I have a look at the drawings? He saw that I was absolutely astounded by the quality'. He said he's never seen anything like

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them in his life before. He was just bowled over by them and knew that Frater would want to see them. So he said, 'Look, Frater will be back in about an hour's time. Will you leave the drawings and come back?'. So Fairweather—it was Fairweather—went out and came back. Frater came back in about 20 minutes time and looked at these drawings and was you know, equally bowled over by their quality. Then Fairweather came back in an hour's time and Frater said to him, 'What do you want? What's the problem?'. Fairweather said, 'I'm flat broke. I have no money. I want to see if I can sell some drawings'. So he took him around to George Bell's studio, which wasn't far away.

YVONNE COHEN: That's right.

VALERIE ALBISTON: That's right, and George had the most marvellous collection of Fairweather's, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, but he also had a lot of rich students who were working there at the time like May Casey, Mary Ellis Evatt and Maisie, who is now Maisie Drysdale and Drysdale himself, Peter Purves Smith. Between them they bought 80 pounds worth of those drawings, which set Fairweather up in a studio for a while and allowed him to buy paint. But the interesting thing—you know, this reminded me of it when you told me of his methods of work—he bought a whole role of cartridge paper, a single role, which he tacked up all around the wall and painted on it continuously. He'd go out into the theatres, into the streets, and look at people and come back and work on them. Then he'd tear out the bits that he thought were good. How all this really came about, Alan Sumner had a little fragment of a drawing, a painting, a gouache, on the wall. This must have come from the end of that role because it had three straight edges and one torn one; a beautiful thing. Jock Frater had given it to Alan. Alan had put it up on his wall and then sometime later it disappeared and I don't think Alan noticed that it had disappeared. He didn't pay much attention to it. Years later, there was a retrospective show of Fairweather's work in Melbourne. I don't know whether it was the National Gallery or—

VALERIE ALBISTON: There was one at the National Gallery.

JAMES GLEESON: Anyway, this picture turned up and Alan recognised it as the one that he used to have on his wall that had disappeared. He tried to find out who owned it and they wouldn't tell him at the gallery. Anyway, he found out it was Lina Bryans. He finally found out the whole story. Jock had come in and pinched the painting back that he had given to him and given it to Lina. Then when Lina was in hospital, quite recently, Alan Sumner went to Lina and told her the story and she gave it back to him. So it's now in his house. But it's a nice story.

YVONNE COHEN: Very.

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VALERIE ALBISTON: I can tell you a funny one about Arthur Boyd, if you'd like to hear it.

JAMES GLEESON: I'd love to hear it.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Arthur came out one night for dinner. This is before he went to London—about the first time, I should think. It was just when Craypas were on the market. Cliff Last was here and a few others, and we were sitting round and we said to Arthur, 'Have you seen the Craypas?'. He said, 'No'. So my husband produced some and they all started scribbling on the floor, with Craypas sitting on the floor round the fire. Cliff said to Arthur, 'Oh, that's not a bad one of yours, old bloke'. He said, 'Put your name on it. I wouldn't mind that'. So he said, 'Well, we'll do a swap'. So all the stuff that they left on the floor, all their scribbles, I threw in the fire.

JAMES GLEESON: Goodness.

VALERIE ALBISTON: It was just rubbish, I thought, you know. A little while afterwards Cliff was a bit hard up and he thought he'd like to hock this thing that Arthur had put his name on. So he took it to a well known gallery here, which I won't mention the name of, and they refused it. So eventually it ended up in Sydney, in a retrospective show of Arthur's, or in a mixed show of Arthur's work, I can't remember which. I think it was Elwyn Lyn who picked it out as being one of the best things in the exhibition with a fantastic price on it. All his scribbles I had put in the fire.

JAMES GLEESON: If only you had foresight.

VALERIE ALBISTON: They weren't signed.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. The things that happen.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Yes, it's extraordinary, isn't it?

JAMES GLEESON: You saw Fairweather's hut on Bribie Island.

VALERIE ALBISTON: I saw Fairweather's hut.

JAMES GLEESON: It was an extraordinary place, wasn't it?

VALERIE ALBISTON: Yes, extraordinary. It looked like a bowerbird's nest.

JAMES GLEESON: It did.

VALERIE ALBISTON: He was getting very old and sick and he looked pretty sick when we saw him then. But he was still the English gentleman.

JAMES GLEESON: My word, wasn't he; very proper.

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VALERIE ALBISTON: Right to the last. You know, when he came out to—

JAMES GLEESON: That marvellous voice.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Yes.

YVONNE COHEN: Those eyes, those deep blue eyes sort of pierced you.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

VALERIE ALBISTON: You know, when he came to Australia, first he came out with everything was of the best. He had monogrammed underclothes even.

JAMES GLEESON: Did he really?

VALERIE ALBISTON: Yes. I mean, he'd come from this very well to do family in the Channel Islands. He eventually discarded everything and he just became like a modern Gauguin. But the extraordinary thing was that he was up in Cairns at one stage, living in an upturned boat up there on the beach.

JAMES GLEESON: Is that so?

VALERIE ALBISTON: Yes. This was before he went to Timor. We had a friend up there who was a Sunday painter, and he did very sort of look and putters, you know, as we call them. He had no feeling for Fairweather's work at all, didn't understand it. He liked Fairweather very much. But when Fairweather left for Timor, he said to this friend Charles, 'Anything I leave behind you can have'. Charles was broke and he wrote to me and he said, 'Fairweather's left a whole lot of rubbish. I've burnt all his sketch books, and all his note books I've burnt, but I have got a few paintings and I'm so broke, do you think you could sell them?'. So I said, 'For heaven's sake, send them down'. So he sent them down to me. There were about 12 of them. Of course, we picked the best out of them, the eyes of them.

YVONNE COHEN: We had them valued, of course.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Yes, and of course the value was nominal in those days. I think the highest one was \$20 or 20 pounds, \$40, something like that. I sold them all over the weekend to friends—I mean, they just grabbed them—and sent this friend of ours a cheque for the Fairweather's which he—

YVONNE COHEN: Because he thought that Fairweather had left Australia for good. He'd got on a raft and gone to Timor and he said, 'I'll never come back'.

VALERIE ALBISTON: But, anyway, they were unsigned, a lot of them, but they were very good paintings and I'll show you some at my place.

JAMES GLEESON: I'd love to see them, yes.

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YVONNE COHEN: Yes, you'll see them.

JAMES GLEESON: How long was it before he died that you saw him?

VALERIE ALBISTON: Oh, I suppose perhaps six years, something like that. I really can't quite remember. Probably about six years, six or seven years.

YVONNE COHEN: He looked like a broken down seaman. He had nothing on his feet. He had an old, old pullover on with elbows out. You know, he just looked so seedy and so ill. He walked through the sort of country up to the store each day. We asked at the store, you know, when he appeared. They said, 'He comes about two o'clock every day and he gets mail and he sits on the little seat outside and he drinks a bottle of milk. That's his lunch. He reads his mail and then he walks through the woods back to his house'.

VALERIE ALBISTON: But it's quite hard to find his little house, little shack, on Bribie because you had to find the bended tree.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

VALERIE ALBISTON: But he was very gallant and charming, and we had messages from Lina and from Jock to give him when we went up there, so he was pleased about that. Also pleased to meet us, I think, because we had offered him this place to go to which he hadn't taken.

JAMES GLEESON: Is Lina Bryans now well enough to be interviewed, do you think, or is she too ill?

VALERIE ALBISTON: Oh, she's not ill. Well, I mean, she's temperamental, we'll say perhaps. I think so. Some day's she would be quite pleased to see you. She has just come back from the Centre somewhere, where she's been on a sketching tour, which is good because she hasn't painted for some years. Well, not years, but for some, well, perhaps—

YVONNE COHEN: Years, I think. She hasn't painted for years, hasn't she?

VALERIE ALBISTON: Anyway, she's just come back from this trip to Cooper's Creek or somewhere. So, I mean, if you got in touch with her she might welcome you with open arms, and then again she mightn't. Murray Bail has had some difficulty. He's had difficulty, I think, with her.

YVONNE COHEN: She has good and bad days.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Because she's the only one that really can give you the real inside information about Fairweather—she's the only one left—because she and Jock, you know, knew Fairweather so intimately for years.

JAMES GLEESON: They were probably the closest.

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YVONNE COHEN: The closest, I would say.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Yes, and especially Lina, he was very fond of Lina.

YVONNE COHEN: And George Bell, he was very fond of George Bell.

VALERIE ALBISTON: But Lina especially because he lived in the house and they used to go to films occasionally and that sort of thing. But otherwise he just didn't leave the house as far as I can tell.

YVONNE COHEN: She gave very wonderful parties, Lina. She always had all the artists around her and she always invited Fairweather but he would never come. He wouldn't come because he didn't like the people.

JAMES GLEESON: He was a very solitary character.

YVONNE COHEN: Yes, he didn't like lots of people. He didn't like women. He didn't like lots of people and so he stayed in the basement. How he could have stood the noise, I don't know.

JAMES GLEESON: He's a remarkable man and a great artist.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Oh, tremendous.

YVONNE COHEN: Quite remarkable. Certainly had his own handwriting, didn't he? There was nobody else quite like him.

JAMES GLEESON: No, No. What other artists in the Melbourne scene stand out in your mind as being, you know, of great importance and significance you've know?

VALERIE ALBISTON: Well, there're all the young ones that have come up from like Perceval.

JAMES GLEESON: Nolan, did you know?

VALERIE ALBISTON: I didn't know Nolan. Charlie Blackman, I can remember his first exhibition. I can remember seeing some of his little girls, odd little frightened little girls in the lanes, you know. They were selling for about \$10 a piece, you know. Up at, what's the name of the place at the top of Bourke Street?

YVONNE COHEN: No 9.

VALERIE ALBISTON: No, no, no, no.

YVONNE COHEN: Oh, Bourke Street.

JAMES GLEESON: McClelland's?

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VALERIE ALBISTON: No, no, it goes a long way back. It doesn't matter. It was a sort of half-departmental store and they had a gallery underneath. It was a big place up near where the Florentino is in Bourke Street, up that area. Charlie had his first, and I can remember Arthur Boyd, one of his first exhibitions. I think his highest price was \$25 or \$50, we'll say.

YVONNE COHEN: Clifton Pugh and the Group of Four. We saw their first exhibition, didn't we, the Victorian artists.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Well, Cliff was so broke in those days he dug all the drains in this place at one stage.

YVONNE COHEN: He was working with Alistair Knox when Alistair built these houses. He did quite a lot of work out here.

VALERIE ALBISTON: This was Alistair's first big achievement over here. He had four houses to build and he left the bank and we really launched him on his career.

JAMES GLEESON: Because Templestowe is a famous name in Australia art.

YVONNE COHEN: Well, it is. It is now.

JAMES GLEESON: Whereabouts did the painters work? Have you been able to identify any of the particular places?

VALERIE ALBISTON: No. I think actually Dave Davies, he did come back from France at once stage and, what I can understand, his brother had a house over here at Eaglemont, a farm. A lot of the painters were over there; McCubbin. I can't really remember. I'll have to look it up.

JAMES GLEESON: Is the house still there?

VALERIE ALBISTON: I couldn't tell you but it was—

JAMES GLEESON: Not far from here?

VALERIE ALBISTON: No. Eaglemont is only about, oh, five miles away.

JAMES GLEESON: I see. Yes. That's another name in Australian (inaudible).

VALERIE ALBISTON: Yes, and they had this farm. I can give you the exact name if I look something up for you and tell you some of the artists that were there, but just off the cuff I can't.

JAMES GLEESON: I think that has been recorded somewhere.

VALERIE ALBISTON: I'm sure. I think you'll find a lot of that in Hughes' book on Australian art.

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JAMES GLEESON: Yes, and also in McCulloch's book of *The Golden Age of Australian Paintings*.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Alan, of course, was an old friend of ours. I think Alan brought Arthur to our house when he was about 19, I think.

JAMES GLEESON: Is that so? Well, coming here we passed a sign post which said one direction Heidelberg the other Templestowe and I thought, 'Well, there aren't any two greater names in Australian painting than those two localities'.

VALERIE ALBISTON: That's right. I mean, this was the venue, wasn't it, for all the early Australian painters.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, it all began here.

VALERIE ALBISTON: I mean, Dave Davies most famous painting *Moonlight at Templestowe*.

YVONNE COHEN: Yes. Just along the river; you can almost pick the spot along the flats, you really can.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Of course it's all altered now.

YVONNE COHEN: That's an interesting painting I'd like you to have a look at. I doubt if you'll be able to recognise the artist. But that's the river just down about, oh, 10 minutes walk from here.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. No, I can't pick the artist.

YVONNE COHEN: That's Neil Douglas.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, I see.

YVONNE COHEN: Neil gave me that painting, oh, 20 years ago. Just as a little sketch.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

YVONNE COHEN: I thought it was really quite—he didn't even bother to sign it. But it's got a lovely sort of feel about it, hasn't it?

JAMES GLEESON: It has.

YVONNE COHEN: Liquid watercolour.

JAMES GLEESON: Is that the Yarra?

YVONNE COHEN: Yes, the Yarra.

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JAMES GLEESON: It flows through Templestowe and out.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Because Neil has always been a great conservationist, even 30, 40 years ago when he was living out at Bayswater with his old Mother, he was a conservationist in those days. He used to come down to us when we were in South Yarra with armfuls of vegetables that he'd grown on concrete.

YVONNE COHEN: Herbs.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Just putting mulch down and growing these things.

YVONNE COHEN: He had this fascinating old house at Bayswater where he had his studio.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, shall we go round and have a look at those paintings; I'd love to see those.

VALERIE ALBISTON: Yes, all right.