Obituary: Albert Tucker (1914-1999)

Artist of a turbulent epoch dies

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The death of Albert Tucker last October at the age of 84 closes another chapter in the history of 20th century Australian Expressionist painting. A key figure in Australia's contemporary art scene in the early post-World War II years, Tucker's stark imagery and raw psychological themes were angry explorations of the social tragedies that he witnessed in his early life. Like his contemporaries—Arthur Boyd, Sidney Nolan and John Perceval—Tucker's artistic and social awakening took place during the Depression and World War II. His strongest and most significant works were produced in response to the barbarism of the war.

Born in Melbourne, the son of a railway worker, Tucker was a self-taught and intuitive artist who was forced to leave school at 15 years of age and take on a variety of jobs in order to support his family. Like thousands of others during this time, Tucker moved from one low-paid demeaning job to another in order to survive.

Determined to become a painter, Tucker, who had no formal training, turned to the only resources that he knew—the Arts Room at the Melbourne public library and figure drawing classes held three nights a week at the Victorian Artists Society. He spent hours studying art reproductions at the library and attended the classes for seven years, honing and refining his draughting skills throughout the 1930s. He was deeply influenced by Modigliani, Van Gogh and Cézanne as well as European Expressionist painters such as George Grosz, Otto Dix and Max Beckmann.

In the late thirties Tucker met two young European artists who had recently immigrated to Australia—Josl Bergner, a Jewish refugee from Poland and Danila Vassilieff, a Russian painter. These artists and their unsettling depictions of the anguish of the most oppressed elements of Australian society had a strong impact on Tucker, who soon began to investigate and reproduce in artistic form the trauma, insecurity and anxiety produced by the Depression and the war.

In a recent interview Tucker explained how the Depression impacted on him: "In 1929, the year of the stock market crash, I was 15 and starting a life where we ate badly, paid the rent and had nothing left... I remember feeling confused and almost floating in a void, about to be consumed by vast, hostile forces... All I remember is blankness, anxiety, fear and desperation. This dominated an entire period."

Like many other artists and writers of his generation struggling to understand the tumultuous period in which they lived, Tucker was attracted to, and briefly joined, the Stalinist Communist Party of Australia (CPA).

The young artist, however, soon came into conflict with the party and its endorsement of Socialist Realism. The CPA insisted artists and intellectuals participate in the creation of a "new nationalism" and, after the outbreak of WWII, to uncritically promote the Allied war effort.

As Tucker later said: "I quickly found that their [the CPA's] attitude to art was totally different to mine. They were trying to turn the artist into an illustrator for political concepts and that was simply just not on."

In 1940 Tucker was called up for army service and spent some months working as a draughtsman at the Heidelberg Military Hospital, where he also drew patients suffering from dreadful wounds or mental illnesses produced by the war.

Man at table (1940), his horrifying pen-and-ink illustration of a man whose nose had been sliced off by a shell fragment; *The waste land* (1941) with its image of death sitting on a stool watching and waiting; and *Floating figures* (1942), a pastel and pencil sketch of two figures floating down a hallway and another in the foreground with a demented smile, all explore the consequences of the war.

Tucker's work at this time is strongly reminiscent of *Mental Cases*, Wilfred Owen's disturbing poem about shell-shocked WWI soldiers.

Therefore still their eyeballs shrink tormented
Back into their brains, because on their sense
Sunlight seems a blood-smear; night comes blood-black;
Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh.

In 1943 Tucker painted *Victory girl*, a surreal and highly emotional picture of a debauched young girl welcoming

visiting troops. The girl is wearing the stars and stripes as a dress, her lips are covered with a bawdy red lipstick, whilst towering behind her is a hideous face, its teeth barred. This work became the centrepiece of a series of paintings—*Images of Modern Evil* —containing themes that the artist returned to again and again during the post-war period.

Tucker's determination to artistically investigate the physical horrors and distorted social relations produced by the war was anathema to the CPA and its promotion of the war effort. This, combined with his involvement in the Angry Penguins, a loose association of liberal artists, writers and intellectuals opposed to Socialist Realism made Tucker a target for the CPA's verbal attacks. According to the CPA, Tucker's expressionist painting was "arrogant mysticism".

Writing in the September 1944 *Communist Review*, Noel Counihan, a CPA member and artist claimed Tucker's work "reflected the panic of those elements in the middle and upper classes who are terrified at the enormity of the war and the necessity of sacrifice." Tucker's painting, according to Counihan, led directly to "demoralisation, pacificism, defeatism, "whose end "can only be in fascism."

While it is not clear whether Tucker, who never claimed to be a Marxist, attempted to understand the political roots of Socialist Realism, he refused to be swayed by these ludicrous allegations and continued to explore the themes first presented in *Images of Modern Evil* —the corruption and dehumanisation produced by the war and the commodification of sex and other human activities.

The immediate post-war period, however, did not bring tranquillity to Tucker's artistic vision. In fact, his paintings still contained many of the disturbing characteristics inherent in his wartime work. He regarded much of what he saw in the post-war period with great anxiety, a world where human relations seemed irreparably damaged.

In 1947, Tucker travelled to Japan where he produced *Hiroshima*, a pen drawing in black, grey and white of the city demolished by the atomic blast. This drawing, in my opinion one of Tucker's best, is of a sombre landscape; there are no figures visible, just flimsy houses, tents and other shelters.

After this trip and the breakup of his first marriage to fellow artist Joy Hester, Tucker travelled to Paris where he lived for a year in a caravan on the banks of the Seine. He later moved to Germany and then Italy where he lived for three years. After several exhibitions in Europe during the 1950s, Tucker travelled to New York where he lived and worked for several years. His work was exhibited in private exhibitions, with some paintings purchased by the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum.

In 1960 Tucker returned to Australia for what was to be a temporary visit. Struck by the changes to metropolitan Melbourne and the visual beauty of the rugged bushland he decided to stay.

Although many of the paintings he produced in the 1960s and 70s lacked the vision of his previous work, Tucker still retained his unique ability to develop semi-abstract icons that somehow captured the spirit of the location or the essence of the individuals portrayed. His restless examination of shapes and forms, his use of disjointed animals or human heads with fractured or sometimes deeply gouged faces was constant. Some of the more memorable paintings from this period, such as *Wounded Landscape*, *Wounded Head*, *Assassins*, *Armoured Figure* and *Solitary Figure* examine bewilderment, tragedy and death.

In 1995 Tucker told a journalist that the anguished despair that always recurred in his paintings was connected to his attempt to understand the concept of freedom. "If you've got a mouse in a box, the mouse is free within the box; but he is never free because the box contains him. He's both free and imprisoned at the same time. I feel this way about us. I suppose a painting is my own private battlefield where I am still in the process of exorcising my own demons."

Albert Tucker, who continued working throughout the last years of his life, refused to accept much of the complacency generated by the post-war boom. Throughout his 70-year artistic career, Tucker constantly demanded of himself and all those who had the opportunity to study his work that they look beyond the prevailing social conventions and attempt to find, via an investigation of the darker side of humanity's inner soul, the moral and pyschological foundations for a more humane society.