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Noel Counihan
—1945—

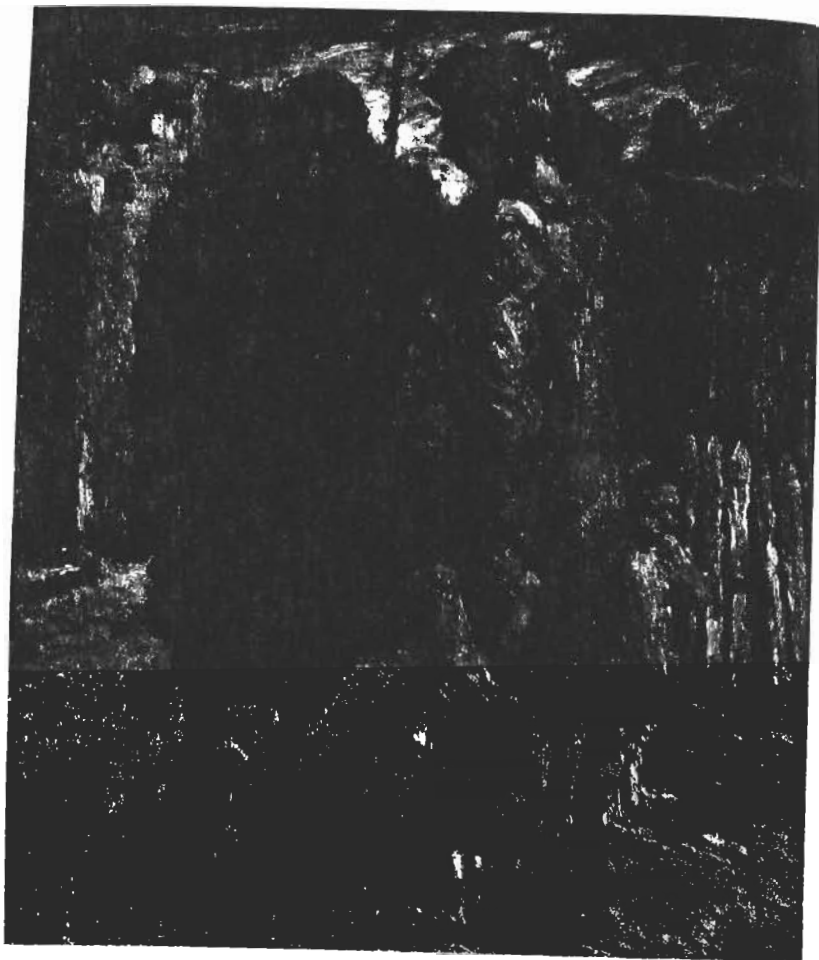
In *The Happy Prince* Oscar Wilde has the prince say to his messenger the bird, 'you tell me of marvellous things, but more marvellous than anything is the suffering of men and of women'. On hearing this remark the bird, had he been an Australian art critic, would have accused the prince of spreading left-wing political propaganda.

For though suffering has been one of the great themes and problems of art throughout history there have always been those who would place it beyond the pale of painting. It is well known that suffering is easier to bear in art when it is softened by time or gathered into a universal symbol. Owning no plantations in Dixie we can feel for Uncle Tom; knowing the gods could not possibly want to single out our own little lives for their exquisite agonies we readily share the burden of Oedipus Rex. But there are artists for whom the salve of time and the cushion of myth will not do, for whom suffering begins, like charity, at home.

Such artists are realists, the stormy petrels of art; among them are Brueghel, Caravaggio, Goya, Daumier, Barlach, Grosz. Noel Counihan belongs spiritually to this company.

The artist who dedicates himself to the portrayal of suffering comes to grips with one of the great problems of art. He must transform by his technique and expression that which is often squalid and repulsive in real life into something aesthetically valid. Individual and social conflict are drawn upon for artistic conceptions that must become beautiful yet remain true, attain the values of art without rejecting the values of life.

Counihan began his career as a caricaturist in Melbourne at the age of nineteen. When he was twenty he lived for a year on the



Noel Counihan, *At the Corner of Nightingale Street*, 1944, oil on board, 58.5 × 50.5 cm. Private collection.

dole and depicted the life of the unemployed during the depth of the Depression in an exhibition of drawings held in 1934. Not until 1941 did he begin to paint in oils. Since that time he has exhibited with the Contemporary Art Society, the Studio of Realist Art, the Victorian Artists Society, and held seventeen one-man shows.

Counihan's art has grown directly from his own experience and political faith. He knows the people he paints and identifies himself with their lives: the mothers prematurely aged by poverty and domestic squalor, the dole queues, the old men and women waiting through the day at the out-patients departments of public hospitals, the miner with dusted lungs. His world is, for the most part, a sombre world but real enough. His paintings ask us what we are even as we ask them what they are, testing our charity as we judge their value. When we have exhausted all the fashionable clichés—that it is propaganda, that it is representational, that it has been done before and done better—we must still face the art itself. Is it worth saying, worth painting, well said, well painted? And we come to the fact, disturbing to those who cultivate their sensibility at the expense of their natural feeling, that Counihan is prepared to see steadily what most of us are only too ready to turn away from. Propaganda or no propaganda, illustration or no illustration, the conscience of the nation is held in trust by artists and people like Counihan who have the strength and desire to turn over the stones of our smugness and reveal what lies beneath.

Few Australian artists have been inspired for long by politics or suffering; their achievements have been won in other fields. The poets and the novelists have spoken for the common man. But it is of the greatest importance for the maturity and diversity of our art that we can number one unflinching critic of society among our best painters.