By JOHN REED

THE Anti-Fascist Exhibition of the Contemporary Art Society of Australia demands special comment as it is in many ways unique. People are not accustomed to anti-Fascist exhibitions, and are asking questions about it which call for an answer, particularly as the Exhibition may be seen in several States and in military camps.

The immediate reaction of many people, both artists and non-artists, is that art has nothing to do with anti-Fascism; but this is a superficial view, and ignores the actualities of life to-day, of which both art and Fascism are integral parts. The difficulty in practice has been that so many people come to the Exhibition looking for anti-Fascism, and prepared to condemn the Exhibition because of it, but they completely forget to look for the art.

A typical comment is that social criticism is not the duty of the artist, the critic overlooking the fact that a large percentage of the world's finest paintings of the past have been devastating indictments of society and that if a painting is not to convey social criticism, then painters must eschew everything related to poverty as subject matter for their art.

The Exhibition as finally assembled in Melbourne comprised 53 works, which in fact ranged from direct and almost blatant illustration to pure abstract settings. Whether either of these categories should have been admitted may be open to doubt, but the Exhibition must either stand or fall by its implication as a whole, and in my opinion this overwhelming justified it and represented a legitimate and powerful reaction of the artist to the present-day world and his establishment in his own sphere of anti-Fascist activity.

It will be understood that these notes only refer to paintings exhibited in Melbourne, and I have thought it wise to confine them to those artists whose work appeared to me specially to call for comment, and it is desirable, I think, to mention first the artist who suggested the Exhibition and who

ANTIFACIST ART

In this article Mr. Reed surveys the work in the Anti-Fascist Exhibition of the Contemporary Art Society of Australia, held recently in Melbourne and Adelaide.
is one of the strongest exhibitors, namely Noel Counihan. Only two years ago Counihan’s artistic reputation rested on his ability and power as a cartoonist, and the maturity his painting has achieved in this short period is extraordinary, even though the underlying polemic basis remains strongly apparent.

Hisk outstanding work in the Exhibition is “The New Order,” on which he has concentrated his full ability as an artist. The painting comprises a German firing squad in the act of moving away in a huddled group from the scene of its execution of innocent civilians, and is carried out for the most part in sombre greens of close tonal values which have received his full and careful attention. The soldiers are huddled together in an attitude which powerfully reveals their feelings of acute guilt, shame, and pain, through their faces are averted from the spectator. The officer stands slightly apart, and is the weakest and least convincing figure. Between the soldiers and the officer can be seen the faces of two of their victims, an old man and a woman lying on the ground, and here again the artist does not appear to have fully achieved his effect and the victims do not move one as deeply as do their executioners. In the background is the execution wall, in which a warm but subdued cream has been used to relieve and lighten the general heaviness of the painting.

Very dissimilar to Counihan’s is the work of Albert Tucker, whose seven paintings, seen in an almost unbroken row, provided an excellent opportunity for grasping the significance of this artist’s work. Much of it is so powerful in its immediate impact by virtue of its subject matter or the vivid contrasting colours, that time is needed to absorb its subtle elements. This difficulty, however, is not experienced in his “Anna Domino,” in which the steel-helmeted head of a young soldier confronts the spectator against the and deserted background of a battlefield, down which stretches a straight, unending road. So often are the faces painted by our artists—and this applies in Tucker’s case as well mere masks containing only the superficial surface of human emotions that it is particularly satisfying to find in this head an epitome of those old but ever new and searching questions summarized by Gauguin: “Whence came I, what am I, whither do I go?”

Superficially, it is an easy progression from Tucker’s paintings to John Perceval’s, which also have an immediate and forceful impact by reason of the startling treatment of their subject matter and to some extent, because of their size. His “Survival” seems to be by far his most successful painting so far, and shows a degree of co-ordination and ability to carry through his theme which has so often been lacking. It is the biggest painting in the Exhibition, and represents a woman seated at a table and holding her child. The heavy, crude, and distorted features of the woman forcefully convey the sense of bitter struggle against adversity in every possible form, a struggle, through which she has succeeded in clinging to her child, and together they have survived, even though the battle is not yet over. The paint is for the most part smoothly applied, with ample use of that particular
blacky green which Perceval is so fond of, but the smoothness is amply relieved by a sensitive use of textural qualities in different areas. The Deputy-President of the Society, V. G. O'Connor, appears to have reached a certain maturity in his painting, and now works with an evenness and assurance which reaches its height in "The Departure," a smallish painting with a certain stage setting quality, depicting the facade of a house from which a family has just been evicted. On the wall is chalked the word "Jude" and the family stands disconsolately on the footpath. The wall is painted in his favourite red-brown colour, ably and sensitively worked, and his figures as usual are indistinct and with faces averted or blurred. The whole atmosphere created is one of sorrow, dejection, and misery, but, as always with his work, I am left with a feeling of dissatisfaction at the vagueness and indistinctness of the impact received from the painting and a desire for a more dynamic and, as it seems to me, courageous handling of his subject. While O'Connor's ability and sensitivity are apparent, his importance at present in the creative sphere is, to me, more doubtful.

So far as I am concerned, the greatest disappointment of the Exhibition is the work of J. V. Wigley, who last year exhibited paintings indicating a high degree of sensitivity and a personal quality which promised every
possibility of development; but in this Exhibition his work, and particularly his one oil painting, seems to have lost all this quality and to have degenerated into mere superficiality. The enormous figures of his group of soldiers convey no significant meaning, and the scratched white line which surrounds many of his forms serves no true purpose. One looks almost in vain for any real painting.

The paintings of the last exhibitor I propose mentioning, John Bainbridge, have drawn some favourable attention from the press, and one of them has been bought by the Adelaide Gallery, but it seems to me that the artist has somewhat misunderstood the fundamental aims of the Exhibition, which necessitate an abandoning of that illustrative poster technique which he has adopted. In that category they are no doubt successful, but as creative paintings I can find little to recommend them. It is only by close scrutiny of his "Cette Liberte" that one can find traces of an appreciation of the medium he is using.

EVENT.

Mr. H. M. Green, veteran photographe of Australian literature, is to edit an anthology of modern Australian poetry. This will probably be filled with the notions and light of the Celtic Twilight.

TALE OF PERCY THE PIG.

I am a pig and my name is Percy, and I live in a big yard with many friends. The farmer I have a very cruel, because he has an electric fence to keep us all in. It's food is very nice, but I don't like the Rockies we eat.

Perhaps you would like to hear of some of the things which I have done in my last few years. I have lived in six places, and liked them all except one. The way I did not like was very dally, and I was very muddy. We were fed with corn, and given very little, and I was whipped, kicked, and swatted by the farmer, and the other pigs. The other day my master told that he was going to sell me to the butcher. I hope the butcher is going to look after me well, don't you?

JUDITH JAMES, from Adelaide, "Mail." Children's Page.