

# ANTI-FACIST ART

By JOHN REED

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.

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 paintings. Whether either of these extremes 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 overwhelmingly 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

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.

His 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 brutality, though 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 uninterrupted 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 "Anno Domini," in which the steel-helmeted head of a young soldier confronts the spectator against the arid 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

black green which Perceval is so fond of, but the smoothness is amply relieved by a sensitive use of textural qualities in different areas.

Apparently the most inaccessible of all the painters is Sidney Nolan, and appreciation of his work comes from only a limited number. In some cases this may be understandable, but his "Going to School" (1) achieves an immediate response in myself which I find it difficult to believe is not shared by others. Here, the artist has imposed on the bright open golden Australian landscape, his vision of a bomber crashing into the school to which the little girl in the foreground is going. That both the school and the aeroplane are treated in an abstract manner does not in any way lessen the human quality and brilliance of the painting, which lights up immediately that hazy field in one's mind, where one realizes how incongruous are the things that do actually happen. In this respect it vindicates surrealism without being in any superficial sense surrealist.

Although there is little doubt that Josef Bergner is one of our foremost artists, and one from whom one expects the most exciting things, in this Exhibition his "Warsaw Street," painted some years ago, easily overshadows his three recent paintings. In it, one feels all the intensity and vitality of the vigorous emotional artist who has something definite to say and his own extremely personal way of saying it, whereas in his two paintings of aborigines and one small Picasso-like group of children, we are confronted with a comparatively smooth and carefully painted surface which, though by no means lacking in sensitivity, fails to convey any depth of feeling. It is as though the artist was ashamed of his own vigorous handling of his colours and was trying to discipline himself to some unnatural technique, and he does not for long deceive us by the use of a soft and delicate pink which appears for the first time in his work and charms one into a momentary oversight of the weakness of what lies underneath. If one had not seen other paintings of Bergner's, one might be satisfied.

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 indefiniteness 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 suaveness. The bulbous forms of his group of soldiers convey no significant meaning, and the scratched white line which bounds 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 pedagogue of Australian literature is to edit an anthology of modern Australian poetry. This will probably be filled with the sweetness 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 is very cruel, because he has an electric fence to keep us all in. My food is very nice, but I don't like the turnips we get.

Perhaps you would like to hear of some of the things which I have done in my last five years? I have lived in six places, and liked them all except one. The one I did not like was very dull, and I was very unhappy. We were fed seldom, and with very little, and I was whipped, kicked, and knocked by the farmer, and the other pigs.

The other day my master said 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.