

The Realisms of War

WITH NOEL LAID up with TB again his and Pat's economic situation became more precarious than that of artists employed in a reserve occupation or called up for war service within Australia. The latter at least received their meals, bed and clothing and an allowance, as did their wives. After the war they received favourable treatment in order to re-enter civilian life. It is remarkable how much painting some artist draftees were able to complete during war service. Nolan did some of his best early work in the Wimmera; Albert Tucker gained invaluable traumatic experience during his few months in the army; it served him well for the rest of his life.

With the housing research project nearing its end, Pat began to look around for a job that would enable her to look after Noel. Early in 1943 she started work as an insurance agent with T&G, being paid £5 17s 6d a week plus commission for new business. Her collection area in Elsternwick was not far from their home in East St Kilda; she averaged £10 for a two-and-half-day-week working routine. While training for her insurance work at the T&G Building she was able to help during the lunch hour with hanging the exhibition of art from the armed services which the Artists Advisory Panel had initiated.

The exhibition was opened on Australia Day, 26 January, in the Athenaeum Gallery, by Sir Winston Dugan, the governor of Victoria. About 400 works were shown: drawings, oil and watercolour paintings, and sculpture from all parts of Australia. Both professional and amateur art was included, the only stipulation being that the work shown should have been completed during the period of service. The work not only of those in uniform but those engaged in essential war work was eligible for inclusion. Invitations to exhibit had been sent to all military, naval and air-force establishments in Australia. No limit was placed on the number of works, anyone might submit, and there was a guarantee that at least one

Who will look this Child in the Face, linocut, 1950.

work from each contributor would be shown. No discrimination was made between professionals and amateurs in displaying the work; it was intended to be an 'all-in' show. The response was overwhelming.

Precisely because the armed services show linked amateur and professional without discrimination, mixed the good and bad with the indifferent, it spearheaded that thrust towards the democratisation of the visual arts that became a dominant characteristic of the war and early post-war years. The show demonstrated that drawings, paintings and sculptures could possess values other than aesthetic merit. They were also of value as records, and revealed what could be achieved under difficult conditions.

Noel was confined to his bed during the first half of 1943—a highly frustrating time. During the second half of the year he began to paint again but was required to take constant rest periods. I was then in contact with him by correspondence having become impressed by the quality of the work by Bergner, Boyd, Perceval and Counihan that I had seen in the CAS annual exhibition of 1942 when it was shown in Sydney. When I wrote to him late in May 1943 seeking photographs of paintings of his own work and that of Bergner and O'Connor for my book *Place, Taste and Tradition* (1945), he concluded his reply saying 'my rest hour has crept up on me so I had better knock off now'.¹ He had been unable to paint any pictures for the 1943 annual CAS show but had managed to get five drawings together. It was Bergner's work that he most admired:

Bergner is as usual our most significant painter in my opinion . . . He is in a Labour company away in the bush and is painting magnificent studies of aborigines. For the first time these abused people are being painted by a painter with an understanding of their sufferings and exploitation. It has taken a Polish Jew to interpret the aborigine realistically without patronage or sentimentality.

The increasing pressures of the war exacerbated the debate between modernism and realism. Communists and those sympathetic to the CPA at that time had given powerful support to the creation of the Contemporary Art Society during 1939 and 1940, but as the war intensified many of them felt that some aspects of the modernist programme—abstract art, surrealism and the more mystically oriented modes of expressionism—had become increasingly irrelevant in the war-time situation. During the war the issues involved were debated most vigorously in *Angry Penguins*, *Australian New Writing*, and the *Communist Review*.

The first issue of *Angry Penguins* appeared in 1940. It was sponsored by the Adelaide Arts Association with the support and encouragement of C. R. Jury, a lecturer in English at Adelaide

University, but was largely the creation of Max Harris, then nineteen and studying economics. Max was writing poetry strongly influenced by surrealism. He had been a member of the CPA since he was seventeen. The new magazine adopted a highly avant-garde stance, attracted interstate interest and made contact with the CAS, publishing in the first three issues paintings by Gleeson, Nolan, Arthur Boyd, Douglas Roberts and David Dallwitz. It also attracted the attention of John Reed, who gave financial assistance to the fourth or 'transition' number. In return for his support Reed became collaborating editor of the art section of the magazine. The fourth number appeared in mid-1943 and contained an article, 'Art, Myth and Society' by Albert Tucker that initiated a debate which continued intermittently until the end of the war.

As already noted, Tucker probably met Counihan in 1938. Tucker recalled how he stood a little in awe of him at the time. Counihan was slightly older and because of his work for the unemployed during the Depression had taken on the aura of a working-class hero. Tucker's experience of poverty during the 1930s was similar. He joined the Artists' Branch of the CPA, probably in 1938, and was attracted to the branch because he understood that aesthetic issues, such as the relation of art to politics, would be discussed. He was not interested in routine party branch work such as letter-boxing leaflets at night, discussing current political matters, national and international, based on policy statements from the state executive. Tucker's overriding interest was art, not politics. However, he did occasionally take part in political demonstrations. He recalled one on the Yarra bank, probably during the federal election campaigns of September 1940 when he acted as 'part of a bodyguard around Jack Blake and Ralph Gibson and the crowds were throwing rocks' and he was 'nearly clobbered by a policeman'.²

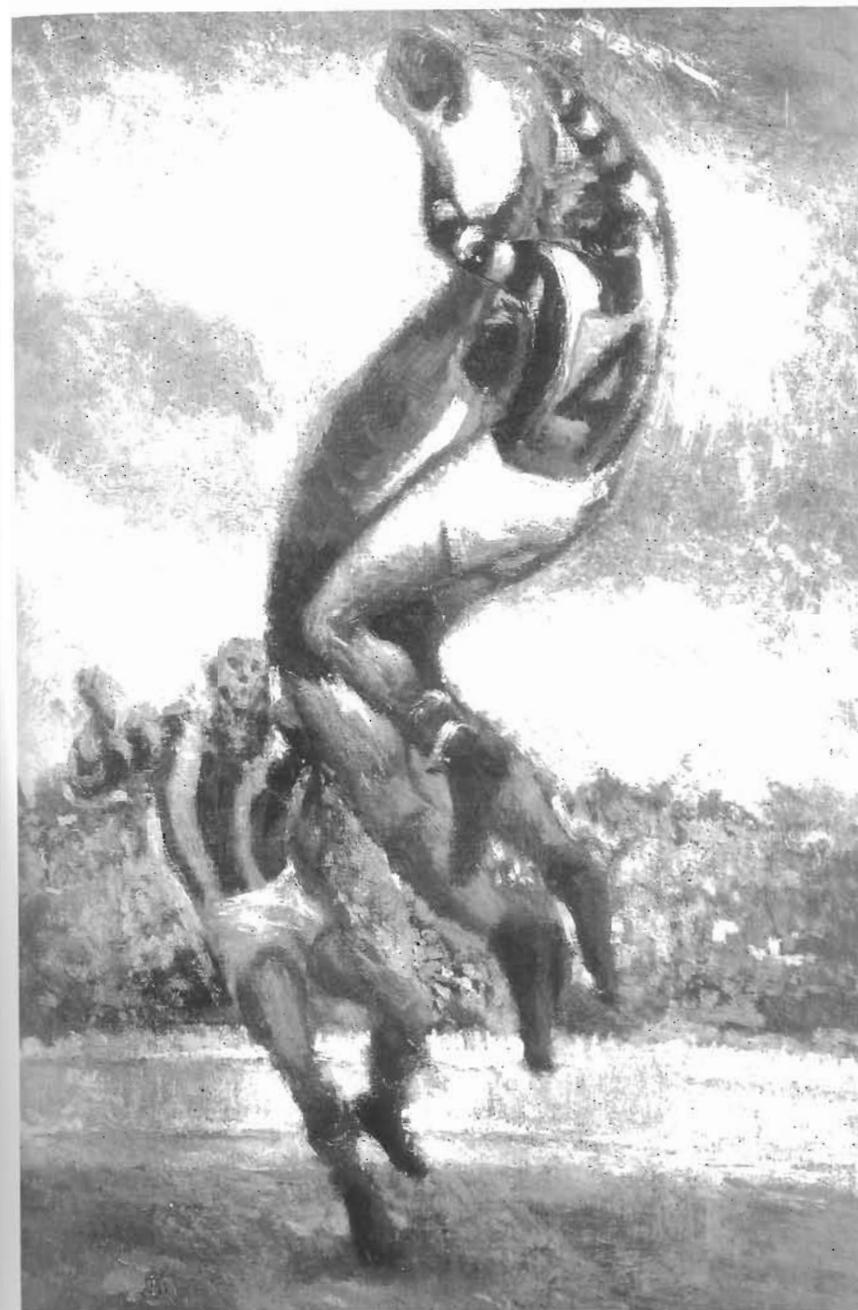
Tucker frequently found himself at odds with other members of the branch. The German-Soviet pact and the Soviet invasion of Finland disturbed him as it disturbed many party members at the time. By then he had formed a close friendship with John and Sunday Reed and had begun to search for a personal style that would combine the values of modernism with a critique of capitalist society. Tucker was deeply concerned with the view expressed by Rem McClintock at one of the Artists' Branch meetings that artists during the war should confine themselves to the production of posters and other forms of propaganda for the war effort. Increasingly at odds with the Artists' Branch, he attended only occasionally and fell behind in his dues. He was asked to appear and explain his position. The meeting took place in Harry de Hartog's studio in

Grosvenor Chambers. Harry was then chairman of the branch, and there were about eight or nine members present. Tucker thought at first it would be no more than a discussion about the role of the artist in the war-time situation or about his own position in relation to the party; but found himself being grilled about his general political attitude, Noel being 'the chief interrogator in this'.³

It is difficult to establish precisely when the 'interrogation' occurred. Albert Tucker agrees that it must have taken place after he wrote, in a statement dated 31 October 1941: 'The development of the world crisis has led to a school of politically conscious neo-realists in Melbourne. Its principal exponents are V. Bergner [Yosl], Noel Counihan, George Luke and myself.'⁴ Evelyn Healy was present at the 'interrogation' and left Melbourne for Sydney in December 1941. On this evidence the incident took place probably during November or December 1941. Outraged by his treatment, Tucker left the Artists' Branch after the incident, having been a member, on the present evidence available, some three years, and may be said to have been the first Australian artist seriously to develop a Marxist critique of modernism.

Tucker, as already noted, was called up in April 1942. It was an unnerving and critical time for him. Until the invasion of the Soviet Union by Germany on 22 June 1941 the party passed through a period of 'deep illegality'. Malcolm Good recalled how Tucker told him he suspected he was being followed home by security police after branch meetings.⁵ That was quite likely. Nevertheless the anti-war policy of the party at that time accorded with Tucker's deeply felt anti-war sentiments. It was the party's shift to an all-out support of the war effort after the invasion of Russia that placed him at greater odds with the CPA. Yet four months after the invasion as noted he still cited himself as a member of a neo-realist group that included Bergner, Counihan and Luke. Although he was doubtful about the wisdom of the Anti-Fascist exhibition when it was mooted late in 1941, he contributed six paintings and several drawings to the show. This was after he had been in the army for some months. He was in fact, with Counihan and O'Connor, one of the three major contributors to the exhibition. But Counihan's proposal for an Artists Unity Congress early in December 1941 appears to have been the breaking point. An exhibition that combined modernists with academics, even to gain funds for the Red Cross, was in Tucker's view a betrayal of what the CAS stood for. Counihan recalled how Tucker spoke publicly in opposition to the proposal.

Tucker's article 'Art, Myth and Society' appeared more than a



A High Mark, 1947, oil on board, 62 x 48 cm., private collection, Melbourne.

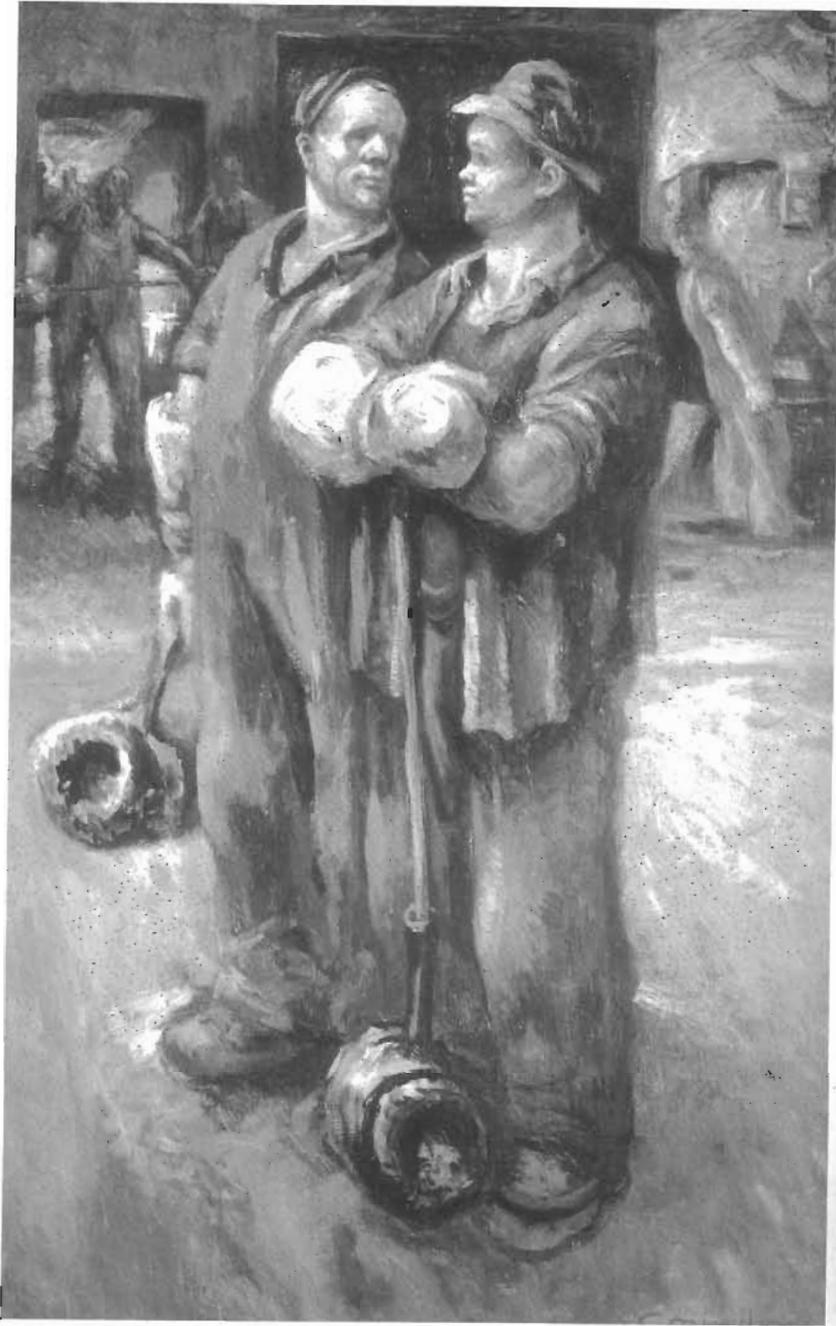
year after he had been discharged from the army.⁶ In it he argued that there were two kinds of cultural activity — functional activity and conceptual activity — the one immediately, the other ultimately useful. Conceptual cultural activity embraced both the arts and the sciences and was carried on for its own sake, autonomous and independent of society, though it could be advanced or impeded by social circumstance. The achievements of the conceptual avant-garde accumulated beyond the capacity of society to absorb them, being carried out by visionaries and innovators. Society had to find ways of absorbing their achievements or else it would regress.

Artistic form, he argued, derived from constant archetypal forms that were themselves derived from natural constants such as space and time, and biological constants such as sex and hunger. Such constants lie beyond the realm of history, which expresses the variable factors in society arising from the evolution of human consciousness. But at no time do we possess absolute knowledge, only a relative knowledge of external nature which is fashioned in the form of myth that provides a symbolic reflection of reality in terms of human desire. Such myths are beneficial when they accord with 'bedrock human practical reality'. But myth can also be maleficent. For example, the objective social reality of fascism produced an evil myth supportive of the irrationality of the fascist system. In order for myth to be adequate it should incorporate the greatest possible quantity of scientific truth and hypothesis.

The contemporary mythological system with the 'maximum objectivity' was the Communist Party but in understanding the role of myth, religion and art, it betrayed a serious weakness. It tended to stress an economic determinism that saw non-economic factors as mere reflections, superstructures of existent economic situations. Writers such as Zhdanov and Trotsky, whom he quoted, fell into such errors. Marx was more cautious, aware there was at times an unequal relationship between economic and artistic achievement, as in his famous comments about the artistic achievements of Greece.

By demanding art, Tucker concluded, that was grounded immediately in the exigencies of the economic situation and an art immediately acceptable to the people, the politicians of the left denied the validity of artistic perception. If artists are to co-operate with any political movement they must be assured of creative freedom at all times. Tucker's article thus presented a critique of art and society based on Marx, the Saint Simonian concept of an avant-garde, and also incorporated the idea of archetypes derived from Jung.

Counihan's reply, 'How Albert Tucker Misrepresents Marxism',



Moulders, 1948, oil on board, 56 x 35.5 cm., private collection, Melbourne.

was published in the next issue of *Angry Penguins* in September 1943. He wrote it while still laid up recovering from his second bout of TB. It is an angry article, over-confident and dogmatic; a personal attack, not an attempt to address Tucker's arguments in detail. In his view it was 'metaphysical claptrap'. Tucker himself had criticised Trotsky's view on the relation of art to revolution and society, but the mere citing of Trotsky's name was sufficient for Counihan to proclaim Tucker a Trotskyist. He accepted without question the evidence of the Stalin show trials. Later in life he came to regret the unpleasant combination of self-confidence, vituperation and innocence that pervaded the article: 'I was rather doctrinaire. I was very concerned with the rise of Hitlerism in Europe . . . Mussolini's fascism in Italy . . . military fascism in Japan.'⁷

The article 'Fascism in the Making', published in the same issue of *Angry Penguins*, was if anything worse. In it Harry de Hartog argued that Tucker was on the way to defining a fascist position in art. This was nonsense; there was nothing remotely fascist in Tucker's article.

Counihan and de Hartog were not voicing a defined CPA policy on art and culture. There was none at that time. There was a cluster of interrelated views as published from time to time during the war years and later, mostly in the *Communist Review*. The CPA policy during the war years was to unite all shades of cultural opinion behind the war effort. Counihan had gained support for this policy in the Artists Unity Congress from a wide range of opinion. But a certain sectarianism, a certain Manicheanism, lingered on from the 1930s whenever artists committed to modernism raised questions concerning artistic freedom in the war-time situation. The in-temperate tones of the articles by Counihan and de Hartog meant that they could not be read sympathetically by any but the most committed of the party faithful. Those articles tended to divide artists in Melbourne rather than unite them. Although there were substantive differences between Tucker and Counihan there was unquestionably a personality clash also. Starting from broadly Marxist positions, both had sought to develop for themselves a role for art and artist in the war-time situation. Both had had problems with the CPA. Tucker drifted out; Counihan had been expelled, as already noted, for 'right-wing deviation'. He was re-admitted towards the end of 1943, a few months after his reply to Tucker appeared in *Angry Penguins*. Political party functionaries of the time not overly concerned with culture (and that was true of the great majority) might have been pardoned for dismissing them both as unstable bohemians. Both were highly articulate, possessed

strong-willed personalities, and Counihan's humour could be scathing. In Sydney, where similar issues were discussed throughout the war years, finding common ground with modernism became a matter of greater importance than stressing differences. There is some evidence that Counihan began to consider the art world itself as a battlefield.

When the war really got under way and became an anti-Fascist war, I wasn't able to become a combatant, because I was rejected on the grounds of tuberculosis. So I looked on the art world . . . within the context of a profoundly important war in the interests of the preservation of our democracy, and in opposition to Fascism and Nazism . . . I felt that, as citizens, quite apart from being painters . . . artists had some responsibility to society at such a time.⁸

In this regard, at least, Counihan was speaking from his own personal experience. Oddly enough the bitter debate between Tucker and Counihan foreshadowed a change in the way both approached their painting. In their own ways both moved away from an art based upon a direct experience of their contemporary world in order to reach more deeply into their past experiences. It is well known that Tucker, shortly after writing 'Art, Myth and Society', turned his interest to archetypal imagery such as the crescent shape that first appeared adventitiously in his portrait of *Adrian Lawlor* (1939), and the protoplasmic forms that began to appear in the series of paintings first called *Night Images*. However, and this has been little noted, Counihan's paintings also took a more personal turn, a deeper interest in past experience, in the months following his debate with Tucker.

Within a year of the return of the paintings Counihan had exhibited in the Anti-Fascist exhibition he had destroyed most of them, usually by painting over them in producing new work. He was dissatisfied with them. It was not that he had any desire to evade the politics of everyday life in a metaphysical bunker specially designed for war-time use by artists. That would have been, for Counihan, a ducking of his responsibilities as a citizen. For him, all his life, the artist was a citizen (in the classical sense) with a citizen's responsibilities. To be free was to be a citizen. But he had come to realise that he could perform his practical duties as citizen primarily through his graphic work. From 26 November 1943, shortly after his re-admittance to the CPA and his public debate with Tucker, he began to contribute weekly cartoons to the *Guardian* using his old pseudonym, 'Cunningham'.

In the months following his debate with Tucker he began to paint his first memorable and successful paintings, such as *In the Waiting Room*, *At the Start of the March 1932*, and *At the Corner of*

Nightingale Street. Most of the paintings exhibited in the Anti-Fascist exhibition of 1942 had been urgent responses to events in Europe, grounded in feelings of political outrage. *The New Order*, one of the few paintings that he preserved from the show (and perhaps the best of them), was influenced by one of William Gropper's paintings also entitled *The New Order* and also painted in 1942. Noel probably saw it reproduced in *New Masses*.⁹

By contrast, the new paintings of 1943–44 were based on personal experience of the Depression years of the early 1930s. In reply to a written request of mine for some photos of his paintings and those of O'Connor and Bergner for my book *Place, Taste and Tradition*, he told me that he was painting again. That was on 6 December 1943. But he was still not well and was required to take constant rest periods. *In the Waiting Room*, painted at this time, he always said, was based on memories from the Depression years. 'My restricted time is broken into various demands, including political cartoons in recent weeks', he wrote, apologising for the long delay in getting me the photos I needed:

we really have no one who can take them for us, commercial photographers are charging high prices for good size photographs and while the other two lads are both full time in the army I'm severely restricted as far as my movements to the city are concerned.

However, a week later he wrote again to say that he had found a photographer they could afford and that it would now be possible to meet my deadline.¹⁰

Counihan's paintings of 1944 testify to a basic change of approach. No longer does he seek to produce overt political statements, such as *The New Order*. However strongly he continued to feel about the hideous brutalities of fascism, he began to realise that such paintings derived their energies almost entirely from his political life. He became aware that he must delve deeply into his personal experience and use it as an inspirational source for his art. But for him personal experience was not wholly private experience, it embodied the experience of others, and it was this social component that he sought to evoke, to realise in his new paintings. When asked, years later, by Barbara Blackman whether such 'positive' painting would involve the introduction of a polemic within art he replied that it would not necessarily do so. It depended upon whether artists could respond, in their own experience to their 'private worries' or whether they could also embrace matters of more public concern. Again it was an issue between the introverted art long championed by the romantics and the more public art of the classical tradition.

I was at that time proposing to provide a section on contemporary Australian realism in the last chapter of *Place, Taste and Tradition*. Because of restrictions on war-time interstate travel my knowledge of the work of the Melbourne realists—Counihan, Bergner and O'Connor—was confined to what I had seen in the annual interstate CAS exhibitions. So I asked Noel to provide me with a description of what the three artists took to be their aims and intentions.

He said their work fell into two main categories, the first dealing with 'the imaginative treatment of aspects of the war against Fascism, inspired principally by the European struggle', and the second dealing with 'local Australian subject-matter'.¹¹ Again he spoke highly of Bergner's work: 'a powerful and highly original series of pictures based on the Aborigines (a set of pictures without precedent in Australia)'. O'Connor was 'painting his best work, based on street scenes in West Melbourne, a series of very warm studies of a grim area of Melbourne'. He felt that his own work was developing as a result of his decision to turn to local subject-matter 'rich in human and social content, principally working-class areas and institutions, waiting rooms, street scenes, etc.' He then proceeded to a more general description of their intentions:

Our trend at present is to endeavour to reach the most important, most comprehensive, most suggestive, social subject matter by digging into the depths of our own intimate individual experience—that is, the indirect approach, to reveal the social relations involved in our most intimate experience. This approach to socialist realism, our objective, is the antithesis of the subjectivism of surrealism, and the sterility of all formalism. We are not concerned with examining our own 'stream of consciousness' or attempting to photograph it, we are not concerned with symbols of purely subjective experience or psychological symbols. Our subject matter is the material, tangible, visible world of nature and above all human society—the human society of 1943, capitalist society with all its social class relations, its conflicts—our approach is strictly objective—but we are seeking to give our pictures flesh and blood, warmth and richness of feeling by tapping the reservoirs of deep personal experience—i.e. seeking the subject matter that we know, and finding our way through this understood, assimilated experience to the broader, vaster subject matter of wide political significance—our ultimate and unswerving aim.

We feel that 'Socialist Realism' is an aesthetic philosophy not easily assimilated—on the contrary this heritage of all past cultures presents us with the most complex problems, and will be no more easily mastered by the artist than will Marxism-Leninism be grasped by the working class student and politician.

We feel that 'Socialist Realists' are not ready-made—that the mere painting of an illustration with a 'correct' political line will not necessarily create a living art (nor will it be the correct application of our political line to art!). To slip into that schematic approach to creative work is to capitulate to RAAP, in fact would mean virtually reviving RAAP on Australian soil.

We feel that the only possibility of mastering 'socialist realism' is through carefully relating our observations to objective truth, made more possible as we assimilate Marxism-Leninism, and that the material must be the living material of real, profound experience. We feel that in Literature, for example, this is the method of Sholokov, the method which recreates living men.

We feel that if we are at all successful in our efforts we will be adding a new page to the history of Australian art, a page dealing with an objective picture of contemporary Australian society in its movement and development. This is a life's work. We feel we have just begun, are just on the threshold, so to speak'.¹²

Though this statement concludes with a strong sense of political commitment to the party and its objectives it is also clear that Counihan is here presenting a view of the nature of 'socialist realism' that he and the others in their discussions had thought out in response to their own personal problems as practising artists.

While Noel spent the first half of 1943 in bed and then had to take rest periods from all activities, his initiatives of the previous two years were taken over by others. Victor O'Connor, having taken over work arising out of the Artists Unity Congress, led the realist faction within the CAS, where a struggle for control of the society developed, and for which the realist group and the supporters of John Reed both canvassed tickets not only in Melbourne but also in the Adelaide and Sydney branches. At the annual general meeting of the CAS held in July 1943 the realists were defeated by the narrowest of margins, Tucker being elected president with 48 votes to Bergner's 46; Reed being elected secretary by 57 votes to O'Connor's 56. This vote should not be seen as one taken wholly along communist-non-communist lines. There were some party members and sympathisers who voted for the Reed group because they questioned the wisdom of the realists' bid to control the society by gaining its key positions, and there were unaligned members who distrusted the Reed faction and the way that the CAS was increasingly becoming identified with the journal *Angry Penguins*.

Counihan was able to muster only four drawings for the 1943 annual exhibition of the CAS which was first held in Sydney. The Sydney branch was now numerically much stronger than the parent body; the dissension between the rival groups in Melbourne resulted in a decline in the membership. O'Connor began to canvas the view that the realists should consider leaving the CAS. The group around *Angry Penguins*, Reed, Nolan, Tucker and Harris, claimed 'working-class affiliations' and their work contained spurious social and critical content. This, he felt, was more pernicious than the aestheticism championed by the Sydney CAS. If the 'realists' were to remain in the CAS it was essential that their

work be clearly distinguished by the public from that of the Reed group.¹³

When the CAS annual exhibition for 1943 was eventually shown in Melbourne, Harold Herbert, then the *Argus* art critic, panned it. 'With few exceptions' the show was 'exceedingly unwholesome', many of the exhibits were 'revolting' and reflected a morbid viewpoint which filled him with despair and disgust. Most of the work shown, Herbert said, had no place in 'the category of art' and recommended his readers to read Lionel Lindsay's recently published anti-Semite diatribe entitled *Addled Art*¹⁴. This despite the fact that artists of the calibre of Fizelle, Friend, Preston, Wilson, Arthur Boyd, Bergner, Nolan, Perceval, Tucker, Wigley, Black, Hick, Pugh and Smart were all well represented. Yet Herbert was the artist who had joined with Counihan in calling for a unity congress of all artists in support of the war effort. The call for unity was creating its own tensions.

In Sydney the left minority in the CAS sought to avoid such head-on confrontations. It seemed contradictory to many there that the differences between the *Angry Penguins* and the Realist Group should become increasingly polarised when a serious attempt was being made to develop a united front of all artists for the effective prosecution of the war. In such a situation did not the work of Nolan and Tucker deserve as much tolerance as the work of Harold Herbert and Max Meldrum? Admittedly neither Reed nor Harris possessed intellectual equals in influential positions in Sydney's art circles; by contrast Peter Bellew, the president of the Sydney branch, and Paul Haefliger, the *Sydney Morning Herald* art critic, were sentimental romantics.

In other ways the Sydney situation differed from that of Melbourne. Apart from the annual CAS shows there was little contact during the war years between the art of the two cities. In Melbourne both the 'Angry Penguins' circle and the Realist Group were far from enthusiastic about the quality of the art of William Dobell and Russell Drysdale. In Sydney most contemporary artists, including those on the left, held their work in high regard. John Reed approved of neither: Dobell was not a contemporary artist; Drysdale had been the favourite student of George Bell and detested what he perceived as John Reed's art world intrigues. This is clear from the letters he exchanged with Bell.¹⁵ When Dobell won the Archibald Prize for 1943 with his painting of Joshua Smith it was quite some time before the CAS in Melbourne got around to passing a resolution supporting him and the New South Wales Gallery trustees in the ensuing court case.

Dobell had been drafted, with Herbert McClintock and other

artists, into the Civil Construction Corps of the Allied Works Council in 1941. Dobell was never a political man, but the advance of the German army across the Ukraine distressed him, and he produced his one overtly political painting, *Russian Incident*, in 1942, a sombre painting with Goyaesque affinities. His portrait of Joshua Smith, despite its distortions and expressionist vigour, still owed much to his training in a naturalistic tradition. McClintock was quick to support the award in an article in the *Tribune* on 3 February 1943, when the controversy the painting developed was at its height. I followed in the next issue with a short article on Dobell's art. Both articles were influential in reinforcing a favourable climate of opinion for Dobell's kind of expressionism among the left in New South Wales. The *Tribune* editorial, aware that party support for Dobell carried with it support for its 'expressionism', invited Drysdale to write on Dobell (10 February 1944), introducing him as 'the famous artist whose work has been bought by the Metropolitan Museum of New York and other leading galleries'. Drysdale noted that the award to Dobell was popular, that many people with little experience of painting supported the judgement. He was critical of 'a body of people living in Melbourne, who solemnly denounced a painting which they had never seen'. He was clearly thinking of J. S. MacDonald, who, as art critic for the *Age*, had trumpeted abuse without ever having seen the painting. But there were others, much less reactionary than MacDonald in Melbourne who were reluctant to support the award. Counihan and O'Connor, after some initial doubts, began to give their support to the Dobell camp. Others on the left in Melbourne could never bring themselves to admire anything as 'modern' as Dobell's art. Writing to me at the time, Rem McClintock, then one of the most highly regarded and influential activists in the party in the cultural field, wrote:

I read your article about Dobell and must confess I thought your praise a little lavish. I agree that we should fight for his right to win the prize and it's also the sign of a great retreat on the part of the Lionel Lindsayites. However I feel that all that bunch gathered round Ure Smith are a lot of precious, self-centred and contemptuous scum floating on the surface of decadent bourgeois intellectualism. They're clever and good craftsmen most of the time though their contempt for all comers shows in some very slovenly work in some of their painting. They all have a lively contempt for the 'ordinary man' . . . and a gargantuan admiration for the inmates of their own little clique. They may laugh at the more odious facets of bourgeois life and the more ridiculous specimens of society and social climbers like the 'Duchess' in her bath,^[15] but they don't attack the best people and their ways, they don't champion the underdog; they don't glorify the worker. Josh Smith won't transgress when he paints Rosevear.^[17] This is what Dobell's portrait says to me. 'Here is Josh Smith, a friend of mine. He is what you might call a

decadent freak. He is different to all you common people in intellect and culture, and I've shown his difference in appearance, which is his stamp of quality. You may think I'm poking fun at him but I'm not. I approve of him, and if he doesn't look like this I wish to goodness he did. We artists of the precious type often dress strangely to give this effect. We like looking odd, and what's more you can go to hell for all I care about *your* opinion. Ure Smith will be able to find a market for this stuff; he's been preparing for this for a long time and so has Tas [i.e. Drysdale] . . . To hell with the lower orders, they don't buy pictures anyway. Perhaps I'm a little hard on that bunch but I'd have to see a lot more Dobells to make me change my mind.¹⁸

It was spoken from the heart; and much that he had to say possessed a powerful truth of its own. But it also revealed the presence of an immense gulf between Australia's art world and the common people.

In Sydney many artists on the left were coming around to the view that the need to do something to bridge this gulf was of more importance than defining the stylistic differences between realism and expressionism or a 'correct' Marxist line on art. There were still problems about the relationship of art and democracy that had not been fully thought through. Late in October 1943 a large exhibition of the art work of the employees of a munitions factory in Sydney had been displayed in the workers' canteen. It was organised by Hayward Veal, a Meldrum-trained painter, then working in the factory. It was not his idea initially; several workers had approached him with the idea. It was about as spontaneous as anything could be. Widely publicised in *Pix*, the popular illustrated weekly, its success inspired the establishment of the Encouragement of Art Movement (EAM) a few weeks later. Members of the CPA and its sympathisers played a major role in the growth of EAM. Scores of exhibitions were held in factories during the first half of 1944, the works displayed including not only oils, watercolours and sculpture, but also photography. Neighbourhoods became interested, and exhibitions were organised on a suburban and regional basis. In Kings Cross, Sydney, works by Gleeson, Fizelle, Joy Ewart, Herbert McClintock, and Sydney Ure Smith were hung with the work of amateurs and local children. The munitions factory exhibition was a landmark exhibition in the prominence it gave to photography, and a civic (as distinct from a services) mix of professional and amateur.

By July 1944, largely as a result of the activity of Rem McClintock, the EAM had spread to Melbourne.¹⁹ The inaugural meeting held in the Melbourne Town Hall and chaired by the lord mayor, Councillor Nettlefold, was addressed by Daryl Lindsay, the director of the National Gallery, Professor R. M. Crawford, James Quinn, Alan Marshall, the popular writer, and McClintock.

The Victorian branch of EAM was particularly successful in organising regional exhibitions at Heidelberg, Ferntree Gully, Mornington and Kew. This new popular interest in the arts was an expression, among other things, of the war being seen as coming to a successful end. After the widespread feeling of defeatism that had prevailed in influential circles early in 1942, the great naval victory of the United States in the Coral Sea of June 1942, followed by the military victories of the Soviet armies at Stalingrad, and the British and Australian forces at El Alamein during the second half of 1942 and early 1943 brought a new confidence to the nation. Thoughts began to turn increasingly to the quality of life that Australians might lead in the postwar period.

Meanwhile in Melbourne the argument with Tucker, Reed and Harris about art and politics sharpened the rift between the Realist Group and the CAS. The realists now felt that the CAS was dominated by the clique around *Angry Penguins*. They began to seek other venues for their own work and sought to exhibit as an independent group. Victor O'Connor wrote to me: 'Counihan, Bergner and myself have come to the conclusion that we should show more of our work and the work of our fellow-artists, contribute to more public exhibitions'.²⁰ Was there any chance of staging a realist show in Sydney?

For instance—the matter of support, the working-class interest the show will have, can it be fostered at all, are there any galleries in which we could show . . . and in which the problem of a manager etc. would be solved without much expense . . . I doubt if our show will have much fashionable support in Sydney, as no doubt . . . it will be a fairly grim show.

Counihan was out of town, 'has been for a couple of weeks, as he was a bit off colour again'. Counihan had in fact gone to Wonthaggi to draw in the coal-mines. He was planning to produce a series of drawings and paintings that would celebrate the miners' contribution to the war effort. He probably also had in mind the forthcoming Australia at War exhibition, another initiative that had been launched by the Artists Advisory Panel. He remained in Wonthaggi for about four weeks during March and April 1944.

His experience of the silver-lead mines of Broken Hill in 1938 stood him in good stead. But the Wonthaggi coal-mines were a completely new experience. Black coal deposits had been known to exist there since the 1850s but it was not until 1909 that the Victorian government, seeking to be independent of New South Wales for the supply of its railways coal, established a state mine at Wonthaggi. Although it could not supply all the coal the Victorian

Railways needed it did provide a considerable proportion, and the mine maintained continuous production during the war years.

There were difficulties at first. The general manager of the Victorian Railways, who knew that Counihan drew for the *Guardian*, thought that he might be planning to get into the mines for subversive purposes. He could not believe that in his paintings Counihan wanted to pay a tribute to the miners for their work during the war. So Counihan appealed to the Miners' Union, and a message went back to the mine management: unless the artist bloke was allowed down there would be pit-top meetings.²¹ That settled the matter. In the end he was allowed to go wherever he wanted to go. That was important, because there were certain mines regarded as VIP pits, where even the governor and his lady might walk in perfect safety, where everything was clean and proper. But he wanted to go wherever miners had to go, knowing there were underground lakes, underground fires, and all kinds of dangers. It was not the most sensible thing for a man just recovering from a second major bout of TB to take on:

but I felt that it was important and I badly wanted to do it . . . wanted the experience . . . and I crawled wherever they crawled. I know that in the narrow seam, for example, the lengths of timber used to prop up what they'd call the ground, we'd call the roof, were only eighteen inches long . . . That was called long-wall mining.²²

They gave him a miner's helmet with a lamp to see where he was going and what he was drawing; he held his sketch-book in front of him as he peered over its top to look at them at work. Some places were very wet, with the miners lying on their sides swinging a pick or shovel for eight hours in a confined space, the water dripping on them. At times where the coal-face lay deeper they worked in small ponds of muddy water.

He stayed with the Webbs. The miner's wife made up his crib and he ate it sitting with the miners, a multinational group of Irish, Scots, Welsh, hard-to-understand Geordies from Northern England, Australians and Italians—the last the most experienced lot. He filled his sketchbook with drawings, made portrait sketches of different types. He asked one of the men who among them all could be said to be the typical miner? Whom would he choose? 'Big Chris,' the man said, 'Big Chris, the Italian.'

Chris was a huge fellow. He had worked in iron and coal-mines in Italy and northern France, in gold mines and in silver-lead mines at Broken Hill. Chris was the complete miner. He took Counihan home to lunch so that he could draw him. His wife, also

Italian, prepared an excellent Italian meal. Chris must have been in his forties, a big fellow, but bent. He did not, he told Counihan, have long to live. He was 'dusted'. He had taken part in the opening up of a lead mine. They had to make a 1000-foot drive through sandstone and during the whole time Chris was breathing coarse sandstone dust. His lungs were coated with sandstone. He took it all philosophically; he was a victim of the industry he loved and of the poor working conditions that prevailed.

While Counihan was in Wonthaggi the Victorian branch of the CPA, aware of the growing number of artists and scientists who had joined the party in recent months, decided to establish an Arts and Sciences Committee.²³ At the centre of it were Victor O'Connor and Rem McClintock. The object of the new committee was to work out, if possible, an agreed line on the arts and sciences. 'The Arts and Sciences Committee,' McClintock explained, 'has had a devil of a hard row to hoe here because all the cultural workers hold thousands of positions in branches etc. and all are deeply involved in routine matters and the districts squeal whenever it's suggested that they can be used more effectively elsewhere.'²⁴ At that time the committee contained about twenty-five artist members. It was occasionally addressed by party functionaries whose duty it was to convey the party line to 'intellectuals'. The line was usually expressed in the most general terms, such as the need to use art for the defeat of fascism and the need to bring art to the people.

Political work took its toll on the time available for painting. 'The last few weeks have been fairly hectic with the Arts and Science Committee and lately banners etc. However, it will soon be over,' wrote O'Connor. 'Bergner and I have both painted a couple of things since I last wrote. Yosl is painting some really magnificent pictures of Warsaw. They are terribly grim, but are sensitive and positive work.'²⁵ Counihan 'has painted over most of his works and has sold one of his last paintings. We want to exhibit together so this will mean waiting.'²⁶

The Tucker-Counihan exchanges in *Angry Penguins* widened the gulf between the Reed group and the realists within the CAS. In April 1944 contention between the two groups focused upon James Quinn, the talented painter of an older generation who, Counihan and O'Connor believed, had been victimised by the art establishment. Quinn was in difficult circumstances, and O'Connor moved at a CAS meeting that a fund be set up to assist him. It was passed unanimously because Quinn was widely respected. When Tucker heard of the decision he called for a special meeting to rescind the motion and threatened to resign if the decision were not

reversed. One major factor was that Quinn was a member of the Australian Academy of Art, in opposition to which the CAS had been brought into existence.²⁷ With the help of Max Harris, and the Adelaide members of the CAS voting by proxy, Reed and Tucker were able to get a rescission of the motion. The rejection of the proposal to assist Quinn was an indication to O'Connor that the Reed, Harris, Tucker group in the CAS would oppose 'any progressive action which does not fit exactly into a sectarian aesthetic category'.²⁸ The Realist Group began to feel increasingly that it was time they left the CAS.