

## A conversation between Moya McKenna and Jane Devery

*Animal Instincts: Moya McKenna & Albert Tucker* brings a selection of paintings made over a twenty-year period by the Melbourne contemporary artist Moya McKenna into dialogue with works by Albert Tucker (1914–1999). The idea for the exhibition began with a painting by Albert Tucker in the Heide collection, *St Anthony in Australia* 1987. The temptation of St Anthony, a subject that has fascinated artists throughout art history, recounts the story of the 3rd century Christian hermit who spent twenty years living in solitude in the desert where he resisted the devil in the form of animals, beasts and erotic visions. In Tucker's late 20th century rendition, where St Anthony is seen in the Australian outback, the emaciated saint is reduced to a skeletal form. Sitting hunched in a cave, he grins outward with a deathly stare. The cave is a slit; blood-tinged and sexual. A red sun blazes overhead in symmetry. A spotted lizard claws its way towards the entrance to the cave. A large snake approaches from the other side. Symbols of temptation. Animal instincts.

The following conversation between Moya McKenna and the exhibition curator Jane Devery took place in October 2022.

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**JD** When I first thought of your work in relation to Albert Tucker's painting and the story of *The Temptation of Anthony*, a few things struck me as points of connection: the hallucinatory quality, the presence of animals, and sexually charged imagery. The exhibition title *Animal Instincts* alludes to these ideas but also a sensibility that I see you and Tucker having in common: one that is instinctual, intuitive and pre-lingual. Your respective works also reveal a gutsy and visceral approach to painting. Are these ideas that resonate with you, and the way you see yourself as an artist?

**MM** I'm not sure if I'd use the word gutsy but I like taking risks and stepping into unknown or difficult spaces when working. Often the outcomes can be unexpected or evoke uncertain feelings which I find engaging—activating the painting with an energy which is alive, curious, and not fixed. As you suggest, instinct and intuition are integral to my work but I also like to take time weaving and un-weaving connections. The visceral feeling in my work is probably an outcome of the paint or painted surface and the bodily forms that often appear in the imagery. I think painting is a sensual activity but it's also fraught with challenges. On one hand, the act of painting is sensual, but it is also clumsy, awkward, and frustrating. I need to be quite physical and playful with the surface—there's a continual cycle of applying, scraping, wiping while I'm searching for the forms and trying to get the paint to sit purposefully.

**JD** For me, there were a number of surprising formal correspondences between your works and Tucker's that become apparent as we began to put this exhibition together: the repeated forms of apertures and circles, for example. I'm thinking about the repeated dots on Kusama's hallucinatory pumpkins and the spotted skin of the leopard in your works; and similar patterns on animals and in the form of the sun and flowers in Tucker's paintings. Then there's the aperture of the cave (overtly sexual in Tucker's painting), and the open handbag in your early still life paintings, one that gives birth to a mannequin's head. There are other formal resonances, such as the repeated striation of bones, rib cages and skeletons in both your works, but also the central composition and use of symmetry. Were these correspondences also surprising to you?

**MM** I was surprised by some of the corresponding elements, especially the rib cage form. The rib cage has appeared recently in my work like the painting *Bite Back*, 2019. Tucker has used this form continuously throughout his practice. And as you indicate Tucker's painting *St Anthony in Australia* and my painting *Birth* share similar shapes and formal compositional qualities. It's curious to see how things can have similarities but the outcome and feeling have different sentiments. For me the Tucker painting of St Anthony describes a landscape with an emancipated, dying figure taking refuge and comfort in a vaginal shaped opening of a cave—almost like it's returning to the womb. And in contrast my painting *Birth* describes an interior space with a head protruding from a handbag. The painted shape of the head is soft, almost bird-like, feathery. It's unclear if the head form is alive or dead but it protrudes into the viewer's space as a strange offering. It's interesting to think of the vaginal shape and how it can signify multiple sensations feelings, or anxieties—ranging from comfort, disgust, empowerment, lust, anger etc. Obviously, the form resonates with people in very different ways depending on your sex, sexuality, and experience in life.

**JD** There are, of course, many ways in which your and Albert Tucker's works are very different from one another. The sexuality in your works I see as latent and not so obvious, for example, whereas Tucker's is more evident and aggressive I would say. Difficult even. Do you agree?

**MM** Yes, I agree. Tucker's use of female shapes, figures, or faces is difficult at times. Often the female forms appear vulnerable and disembodied. It's an interpretation that appears early in the Images of Modern Evil paintings and continues into his later work. I suppose this representation of women exposes Tucker's ideas of gender power dynamics but maybe also his anxieties and fears about women, somewhat reflecting the times of Tucker.

**JD** There's a pairing in this exhibition that I particularly like between an early work of yours, *Birth*, 2003, and one by Tucker, *Rebirth*, 1951. There are formal correspondences between the two works but also the subject of the cycle of life. How do you see these works relating to one another?

**MM** *Rebirth* is one of my favourite works from the Tucker Collection at Heide. I like how Tucker has repurposed the crescent shape into bones. Originally the crescent shape appeared in his earlier Victory Girl images where the shape describes the mouths of women. *Rebirth* is a small painting compared to Tucker's usual standards—the bones and skull are laid out in the foreground creating an intimacy which I don't often experience in Tucker's work. The sexual, fecund green and red growths feel resolute and lush in comparison to a stark white and black palette. Also, I like the rectangular stripes which activate the pictorial space with an unknown energy or force. Being born and dying are the bookends to the mystery of life. As individuals we come into the world and then begin wrestling with the notion of death. It's

a natural cycle but it continues to preoccupy the subject matter of artists, writers, musicians and of course philosophers. Interestingly the physical act of giving birth hasn't been depicted a great deal in paintings even though it's the way we enter the world.

**JD** Some of the earliest works of yours in this exhibition, from 2003 and 2005, were painted from props you assembled in the studio, made from found objects and painted over the course of a day—objects like domestic furniture, the limbs and head of a mannequin, a handbag, makeshift legs made from stockings filled with crushed newspaper. How do you see the subject of time operating in these works?

**MM** During this period, I was working from a studio in Northcote, a two-storey red brick factory called *Rula*, formerly a furniture factory. It was a run-down building, but the Greek owner George would often appear with his wife who had this magnificent blonde quiff hairstyle, to do dodgy maintenance. Northcote is a different place now but luckily the building is still occupied by artists. During this time in my practice, the objects were integral as I needed something to observe and paint from, forms in front of me. My studio had north and west windows, and the sunlight would stream into the space. In this light, I'd playfully arrange and rearrange the objects you mention until I felt ready to begin documenting the arrangement into paint. I had a loose mantra of attempting to arrange the objects and then begin and finish the painting in the one day. The sense of time and the unfolding of the day, of shifting light and shadows, became embodied in the paintings. There was a performative element to it, but I suppose the act of painting is performative. Marlene Dumas has a beautiful quote on the subject:

*Painting doesn't freeze time. It circulates and recycles time like a wheel that turns. Those who were first might well be last. Painting is a very slow art. It doesn't travel with the speed of light. That's why dead painters shine so bright.*

**JD** At the time that you made these paintings, you were also making Super-8 films. How would you say working in the two different media influenced the other?

**MM** I'm not sure they influenced each other in any definite way. The Super-8 has a lovely soft, muffled visual quality and the objects became very animated in a clunky manner. Also, like old fashioned photo film, the outcome of the filming session is delayed with the processing time—when you eventually receive the processed film, it's magical re-entering that capsule of time.

During this period, I was engaging with filmmakers like Jan Svankmajer and Maya Deren, also the photographer Francesca Woodman. I think looking into the camera lens, cropping, and framing the scene, had the most direct influence on my paintings; having the ability to control the edge of the frame instead of trying to do this with my own eyes. I did make some direct paintings from watching the films on an old box TV, pausing moments in the film, and recording them in paint.

At the time I was taking a lot of photographs as well. The photos were satisfying given that the outcomes of the paintings were very hit and miss. Segments of these photos continue to be re-used, repurposed in my subject matter.

**JD** Many of your paintings have a hallucinatory quality or destabilised sense of space. They are not grounded images, which is one of the reasons I liked the idea of linking your work to the subject of St Anthony's temptation. Objects float and seem suspended in a dream-like or indeterminate space. This has perhaps become more apparent in your work over time. Do you agree?

MM The indeterminate space isn't a deliberate thing. I think initially when I was working from objects, the paintings presented a snippet or segment so that things weren't totally revealed. Also, the paint itself adds a veil over the subject matter. Over time my subject matter has moved away from referring to objects in a still-life manner. Now I'm referencing collages, photographs and drawings. But the subject matter or pictorial space also shifts and evolves in the physical process of painting. This way of working no doubt contributes to the destabilised sense of space.

Overall, I think that the paintings draw you into a psychological, rather than a purely literal space that might seem dream-like. I like the paintings to contain contradictions and a complexity of feeling that are hard to verbalise. I can't remember who said this but maybe I'm describing more of a felt reality as opposed to an external one. It's complex to articulate all the mechanisations that contribute to a painting, but I like how I remember Amy Sillman describing it. This is paraphrasing: "You paint, you wander. You want it to be unknown. There are ideas versus feelings. You're looking for forms that surprise but you want it to feel right and wrong at the same time." These are notes I wrote down when I was reading her book *Faux Pas*.

**JD Painted in 1987, *St Anthony in Australia* is a late work in Tucker's career, but its composition appears in an earlier drawing in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria, *The Cave*, 1976–77. It appears to be the same image, but in this case, Tucker applied it to a completely different subject: the mythologised gold prospector, Harold Lasseter, who died while attempting to find gold in central Australia during the 1930s. Recycling and repurposing imagery is something that artists often do, and in your work there's a continual circling back over time to repeated subjects and forms. Could you talk about the ways images and ideas circulate and reappear in your work, sometimes over long periods of time? Would you say this happens unconsciously?**

MM In a general sense, I think when you work in the world of pictures and paintings you realise lots of imagery and ideas are reused or resurface and often repeat themselves. I've always worked within limitations: the subject matter, paint colour and the size of the paintings. The limitations aren't put in place as a perimeter to work within, it's just that I get overwhelmed by choice and I need time to consider things so I can't have too many elements otherwise you're skimming the surface. Also, the limitations offer constraints which can push the work into unknown spaces. It is an unconscious process of how imagery reappears. The studio is a playful place, this play ranges from serious to goofy, but the concerns are around those constants in life not so much the transient—if that makes sense. I probably have a slow burn approach to things and it's important for the imagery to be distilled in a knowing way.

**JD Lastly, I'd like to ask you about your newest painting in the exhibition, *Two Bridges*, 2022. Part of the composition is a quotation of an earlier photographic and performance-based work of yours called *A State of Being Held*, 2008. When we spoke recently, we talked about the self-referential aspect of your painting as well as its performative function. Could you elaborate on this?**

MM *A State of Being Held* is a series of photos—it's my body lying over some chest of drawers and I'm holding an image of Kane's Bridge which crosses the Yarra at Studley Park. At the time, I was playing with the idea of being a bridge and an object, like the other objects in my studio. The idea came after reading Kafka's short story, *The Bridge*, and looking at Bruce Nauman's piece, *Failing to Levitate in My Studio*. The idea of being a bridge was spontaneous, something that felt necessary at the time and luckily a studio friend, Helen Anderson, was available to take the photos!

The painting *Two Bridges* combines Kane's Bridge, my old Northcote studio and me as a bridge with more recent material of a lion eating the entrails of a zebra. It's a complex painting in that you can look at it from multiple perspectives. It could be read as about the anxieties of self-representation or possibly a protest against power dynamics. Obviously, power in nature is a given, but humans have the ability to control that imbalance yet so often don't. The painting also suggests transformation.

After making the painting I was reading an article about Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin's painting *The Ray*, 1728. The writer was suggesting that Chardin's visceral still life was a response to him having to exhibit in a major Salon prize. I found this interesting and for me the two paintings share similar elements, particularly the paws and the enttails.

But going back to your question, my work is self-referential in that the paintings playfully explore ideas, elements, or feelings of the self. Maybe the imagery is arrived at through me but not from me. I've always gravitated towards books of this nature too. Early on I read stream of conscious writers like Violette Le Duc and Virginia Woolfe. Recently I'm reading writers like Deborah Levy or Rachel Cusk. I enjoy other people's perspectives, especially when they're delivered in a sensual, honest way. It's a shared humanity, that adds a deeper layer and understanding to our day-to-day lives.