

Albert Tucker's Grotesques

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Guest Curator: Tim Andrews

HEIDE
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ART



Cannibal Pierce 1968

Early in his career, Australian painter Albert Tucker (1917–1999) developed a repertoire of dark and disturbing imagery to express his apprehension and mistrust of the modern era. He was inspired by the history of art and particularly by the revival of grotesque motifs in European culture, as progressive artists and writers looked for ways to convey their responses to rapid modernisation and societal upheaval, and to the horrors of total and mechanised war. Bolstered by the startling novelty of modern art movements, the grotesque provided a forceful and shocking means to communicate the turmoil of the times.

The human body, distorted, exaggerated and mutilated, provided Tucker with a focus for his unsettling images. His idiosyncratic visual language linked his paintings across time and a range of subjects, and included a red crescent mouth, disfigured nose, stigmatic wounds, and truncated, protoplasmic torsos. This interest in the corporeal was applied to the mythological anti-heroes of his later works, and also became his entry point to Australian landscape painting in the 1950s. His depiction of open wounds scarring the ancient desert channelled feelings of despair and anxiety, and generated a uniquely antipodean adaptation of the grotesque that has made his work highly distinctive and identifiable today.

Albert Tucker's Grotesques

by Tim Andrews

In the early 1980s Albert Tucker arrived in Manila on a trip to the Philippines to be treated by one of its famous psychic surgeons. Conscious and with a clear view of the healer's technique, Tucker recounted his memory of the experience in graphic detail:

all of a sudden he lifted one hand up in the air with a forefinger pointing downwards and then suddenly plunged it right down into my chest and it struck me ... his entire finger, right up to the knuckle, a good four to five inches, sank right into my chest and I could feel a tearing sensation ... with blood oozing out around the edge, he just twirled his finger around in the chest like that, and then pulled out a great hunk of pink irregularly shaped tissue.¹

Tucker's curiosity and openness to alternative viewpoints, along with the delight he took in recounting such gory details, provides a window into his fascination with the macabre and his attraction to myth, the occult and enchantment. This preoccupation enriched his approach to his art and translated into a lexicon of grotesque imagery. The transgression of the human body was a focal point for Tucker and by means of distortion, exaggeration and mutilation, he used it to communicate his discomfort with the modern age. This interest in the corporeal also became his entry point into Australian landscape painting, where his depiction of open wounds in the ancient desert environment channelled feelings of despair and anxiety. With an eye on the European modernists, Tucker employed this visceral and unsettling vocabulary to generate a uniquely antipodean adaptation of the grotesque.



Albert Tucker at Notre Dame, Paris, 1948
Photograph: John McHale

The Grotesque

The modern concept of the grotesque first took shape in the nineteenth century, though the origins of the term reach back to the Renaissance, when it was used to describe the decorative motifs of fantastic anthropomorphic creatures and beasts in the emperor Nero's *Domus Aurea*. Over the centuries the meaning of the grotesque lost some of these more playful and bizarre sentiments and gained a darker and disturbing quality. This shift in meaning coincided with the permutations of the Rational Enlightenment and the onset of the Industrial Revolution. In comparison to the religious and mythological sensitivities of its precursors, the grotesque of modern art and literature responded directly to the conditions of everyday life. In this setting, the genre spoke to the unease, anxiety and fear associated with the era. The destabilising effects of modernity—rapid modernisation, societal upheaval, and the horrors of total and mechanised war—all combined to undermine the experience of a stable reality. Artists and writers adopted gruesome, monstrous and uncanny imagery to confound our sense of reality 'from what we "know" into

what we fear it might be.² They responded to the world taking shape around them and created a new vocabulary that examined and reflected the uncertainty of the times.

Major visual art movements of the era, Symbolism, Expressionism, Cubism and Surrealism, all featured examples of this grotesque aesthetic. Combining it with the striking novelty of the modern visual form, artists devised a forceful and shocking means to communicate the disquiet of their times. The human body, exaggerated, deformed, distorted, and metamorphic, became a common theme. Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)*, 1911, illustrates the potency of this modern reimagining of the grotesque. The convergence of a radically destabilising form and structure with its disturbing subject matter made the painting both startling and disconcerting. Likewise, artists who spent time on the front during the First World War used this language to both describe what they had experienced and to make sense of a postwar society. This was the case for Otto Dix, whose depiction of disfigured soldiers in *The Skat Players*, 1920, blends both the gruesome repercussions of war with potent social and political critique. With more distance from the front, Salvador Dalí's *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War)*, 1936, responded to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, recasting Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Son*, 1820–23, in a surrealist horror show of reconfigured body parts steeped in symbolic metaphor. Blending new ways of thinking with innovative visual tactics, European modernism pioneered an approach that responded to the upheaval of its times that was striking in its contemporaneity and tapped into the rich history of the grotesque imaginary.

Wartime in Australia

Grotesque imagery showed up early in Tucker's art. Fuelled by T.S. Eliot's poetry and inspired by Giorgio de Chirico paintings, Tucker's youthful representational works of the late 1930s quickly gave way to several experiments with Surrealism. One of his most successful paintings of this series, *We*

are the Dead Men, 1940, was a prelude to his embrace of grotesque themes. In this image, grotesque caricatures, straight out of the sketchbooks of George Grosz and Otto Dix, oversee a melodramatic wedding littered with allegorical imagery derived from Eliot's *The Hollow Men*.



We are the Dead Men 1940, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

The influence of the Grosz and Dix, and German New Objectivism more broadly, had a significant impact on Tucker's art. Poring over a copy of Carl Einstein's *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* at the Melbourne Public Library, he instantly recognised in their paintings the sense of anxiety, hysteria, negativism, and disaster that was shaping his own work.³ Their examples of sinister realism, vulgarity and satirical exaggeration helped Tucker to find a visual language that could account for the turbulence of the era. From his perspective, the war was a total disruption of life, a time of fear, discomfort, and apprehension.⁴ As the war drew closer to home and Tucker himself came into direct contact with those returning from the battlefield, he began to develop a style and methodology that aided his catharsis.

After evading his first call up in 1941, he was drafted the following year. He was initially posted at the Wangaratta Training Camp in northeast Victoria, but soon gained an admission, with the help of a sympathetic superior, to the Heidelberg Military Hospital.

There he witnessed returned soldiers who were both physically and mentally damaged by the war. In later interviews, Tucker often recalled the shell-shocked men trembling and twitching violently.⁵ He was disturbed by the treatments that they were subjected to, the systematic injections of insulin used as a sedative and repeated air force flyovers (or recorded simulations) that would set the damaged soldiers off in fits of screaming, triggering their traumas as a method of therapy and normalisation.



Image of Modern Evil 27 1946, location unknown

Tucker's use of the severed nose motif began around this time, and it was to become an iterative symbolic form across multiple images. Examples include paintings such as *Death of an Aviator*, 1942, and the haunting *Vicissitudes of War*, 1943. Tucker had secured a posting in the plastic surgery unit where he encountered and sketched severely disfigured soldiers undergoing corrective surgery. One soldier whose nose had been shorn off by a shell fragment had a profound impact on Tucker, who recalled: 'while I was drawing all the nasal cavities and so on, he was apologising that he couldn't blow his nose and all the phlegm was pouring down his face and he kept wiping his face and apologising'.⁶ The exposed orifice is both degrading and vulgar, a malicious grotesque encapsulating the human consequences of military battle. Appearing on the faces of the GIs and victory girls of Tucker's subsequent works, the motif becomes a powerful moral critique and conspires alongside the sinister

crescent mouth in the dark cityscapes of his *Images of Modern Evil* series. In *City*, 1944, the nose establishes an air of censure emerging in silence from the night of the eerily triumphant city.

The City at Night

In the mid-forties the city became the setting for Tucker to explore the social anxiety of the time and, more broadly, the unease and moral transgressions that he perceived of modernity. Eliot set the tone for this period of Tucker's career. Where earlier surrealist experiments such as *We are the Dead Men* and *The Waste Land*, 1941, made explicit references to the subject matter of Eliot's poems, his *Images of Modern Evil* rendered Eliot's fragmentary style and bleak view of modernity into a visual form. Likewise, the psychoanalytic theories of Jung and Freud set foundations for his artistic inspiration. With growing maturity, uncanny and symbolic imagery energised his work and established the conventions of his creative approach. The influence of Picasso also became increasingly apparent, providing Tucker with the confidence to evoke a more convincing and authentic Surrealism in his painting.

Tucker's keen attention to the innovations of European modernism provided him with the tools he needed to document the social drama of his times. Emerging from the fractures of urban streetscapes, amongst the alleyways, the city lights, trams and amusements of the city, he painted lesser devils, eerie wicked creatures of moral transgression. As Richard Haese described, 'everyday surroundings, prosaic and seedy inner urban streets became settings for the fantastic and bizarre'.⁷ Tucker turned to more allegorical imagery that tapped into the unconscious and found its strength in abstracted 'hieroglyphic forms.' The crescent mouth, the upturned nose, distorted protoplasmic shapes, and cyclopic eye were persistent devices throughout the *Images of Modern Evil* and other works of this era.⁸ Robert Hughes put forward that Tucker's use of the crescent form 'introduced the idea of an abstract symbolic form into Australian art' and set the scene for Sidney Nolan's

celebrated Kelly mask.⁹ Tucker suggests that this symbolism, in particular, the crescent mouth, was crucial in generating and connecting his pictures at the time: 'I found that this was curiously potent in that I couldn't paint unless I put that crescent form in first and then the rest of the painting would irradiate out from it, and in a sense almost do itself.'¹⁰

The defining features of the grotesque often play on the boundaries that make our world tangible, destabilising the norms and conventions that construct our sense of reality and 'making the contours of the familiar and "normal" visible to us, even as it intermingles with the alien and unexpected'.¹¹ Throughout his *Images of Modern Evil* and his experiments in symbolism and figurative abstraction, Tucker distorts, deforms and assembles bizarre creatures from familiar forms and evocative symbols. He juxtaposes humour with darkness and frames his creations in familiar settings. 'There's a sardonic, a sort of ironic quality that goes through them all,' Tucker acknowledged about the series. 'Humour is obviously necessary to make despair and horror palatable and this can always point to something.'¹²

Both Tucker's dark humour and his focus on the body—the crescent mouth, upturned nose, cyclopic eye, and the protoplasmic form—are suggestive of Russian literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's commentary on the grotesque. For Bakhtin, the body in graphic description, the portrayal of bodily functions, and the exaggeration of its excrescences and orifices are fundamental features of the genre. Bakhtin celebrates the body and laments the tightening of social norms around portrayals of bodily imagery. The grotesque body 'is the act of becoming',¹³ he argues, an expression of both birth and renewal as well as death and decay. Bakhtin's point is to pitch traditional life against the modern: in contrast to the fixation on progress in modernity, traditional life, rich with its vulgar and humorous elaborations of the body, is bound up with the cycle of life. In Bakhtin's account, the grotesque concept of the body expresses

a 'living sense that each man [and woman] belongs to the immortal people that create history'.¹⁴

Wounds and the landscape

A period based in Italy during the early to mid 1950s opened new pathways in Tucker's expanding repertoire. While staying in the village of Noli on the Ligurian coast, he turned to Christian iconography and first trialled a new symbolic lexicon. In these works, the intense moral outrage of his earlier images appears to have worn off somewhat, replaced with an air of resignation and anguished despair. His newly formed half disc face—developed by turning the crescent mouth of the 1940s works sideways—appears to be writhing in exhaustion from a lifetime of internal torment, an expression typified in paintings such as *Job*, 1953. Under the sway of the Italian masters of the medieval and Renaissance, the open wounds, gashes and stigmata of Christian tragedy¹⁵ that Tucker inflicted on his figures in this period brought forth an invigorated grotesque to his painting. He next set about reworking this imagery into his vision of the Australian landscape. This was a pivotal moment in his career. Here, the gruesome violence of biblical imagery crosspollinated with his nostalgia. The combination was an unlikely one but paid off with a striking new vocabulary and modality for inventing his own Australian mythology.



Albert Tucker and Sidney Nolan in Italy, 1954
Photographer unknown

During this time Tucker pioneered the cratered face of his Antipodean Head—half landscape, half face—and extended this trope of wounds and craters to the landscape itself. His introduction of new materials and techniques accentuated the corporeality of these images. In Italy, Alberto Burri had introduced him to polyvinyl acetate (PVA) which allowed Tucker to build up the surface and bind other materials, such as sand, soil or even feathers, contributing to the rich and varied textural surfaces of his canvases.

In these images, the transgression of the body again took centre stage. In contrast to the destabilising interventions of distortion, the wounds and craters expressed a violence and severing of the body's threshold. These stigmatic connotations imbued the wounded faces and landscapes with an eschatological flavour—alongside a sense of moral despair there is also the suggestion of salvation. One is also reminded of Tucker's enthusiasm for faith healing that he discovered later in his life. Under the rapturous hand of the psychic healer, the wound becomes surgery, and the incursion of the body's boundary becomes a site of healing. Viewed from this perspective, Tucker's wounded landscapes and figures are not only a commentary on the state of the world, but can also be interpreted as a tentative search for redemption.



Untitled (Desiccated Horse Carcass Sitting Up), 1952
Photograph: Sidney Nolan

His turn to Australian themes was in part triggered by Sidney Nolan's visit to Italy in 1954, his compatriot sharing with Tucker his experiences in central Australia, where he visited areas affected by drought and took a series of documentary photographs. Paintings such as *Apocalyptic Horse*, 1956, and *Mummified Horse*, 1961, were taken directly from Nolan's images, but the encounter also inspired in Tucker an interest in the landscape that we see in his reimagining of Uluru, *Wounded Mountain*, 1955, and *Lunar Landscape*, 1957, the painting whose sale to the Museum of Modern Art in New York marked a turning point in Tucker's career. He also introduced his own take on the bushranger theme, initially as a parody to Sidney Nolan's acclaimed series, but inflected with a distinctively Tuckeresque sentiment, with a playful yet sinister demeanor. This armoured figure, part Pan, part fawn and shaped like the double-headed axes he had seen in the Etruscan Museum, paved the way for the creation of a unique take on the Australian colonial experience interwoven with an emergent mythology.

Return to Australia

Tucker's return to Australia in 1960 was as transformative as his return to Australian themes just five years earlier. Back at home, he settled into a more stable period of his life. Shortly after returning, Tucker met and married his second wife, Barbara Bilcock. He was now more financially secure having established himself as an artist and, with Barbara, he settled on a bush block in Hurstbridge, in outer Melbourne. In striking contrast to the nearly monochrome Australian landscapes he was painting from Nolan's pictures and his own imagination, Tucker's work in the 1960s and 70s exploded with the rich and at times colourful palette of the Australian bush. His immersion in his new environment, and on forays to Kelly country, to the Dandenongs, and further east to Gippsland, inspired an almost mystical relationship with the natural landscape. With lush imagery of temperate rainforest, eucalyptus forests and waterways, populated with Australian fauna, broilgas, swans,

cockatoos and kangaroos, the grotesque was notably absent from many of these pictures.

At the same time, in this renewed vision of the Australian landscape Tucker discovered a setting for his interest in mythological entities and spirits. Echoing the urban devils that he painted in 1940s, the natural landscape became a theatre for emergent mythological creatures. Earlier and more playful experiments in figurative abstraction, such as those we see in different versions of *Totem*, 1948 and 1955, established the foundations of a visual language that morphed into the sinister 'ikons', 'entities' and 'intruders' that manifested in dramatic desertscapes and chromatic forests. In parallel to his earlier examination of the moral contradictions and transgressions that were intertwined with the wartime experience, this time he focused his attention on the broader conditions of modernity through the lens of the settler colonial experience in Australia.

Antiheroes in the Bush

Stories of defeat and submission to the harsh conditions of the Australian wilderness were Tucker's go-to during this period. His mythological antiheroes, based on the legends of those that suffered and ultimately perished during their adventures, embodied Tucker's fascination with the collision between European colonisation and Nature. The legends of characters such as Burke and Wills, Harold Lasseter and Alexander Pierce placed archetypes of moral corruption in the landscape. His antiheroes, writhed and anguished, play out the drama of human suffering in the harsh Australian outback. Textured with the same craters and wounds that Tucker had been rehearsing since Italy, their bodies were testament to a process of mutual transformation between human and Nature. Parrots became a recurring feature of these pictures. Vividly coloured, they channelled the devilish energy of the crescent mouth in early works. Their menacing forms dart across the paintings, attacking the flesh of the already scarred explorers. The parrot is both friend and foe, the violent mascot of the unholy unity of the intruder and the wilderness.

Tucker's major innovation during this period was to blur the boundaries between his settler colonists, the intruders, and emergent spirits of the natural landscape. Rather than pitching the settlers and modernity against Nature, Tucker instead sought to articulate their tragic and foreboding creative synergy. Just as his wounded landscapes and antipodean heads bled into one another, there is no clear distinction between the colonising intruders and indigenous spirits. The collision is one of mutual transmutation, the site of a new mythology; comical and malicious, it is a vision rich with the apprehension and unease that underpins the modern grotesque.



Central Australia, 1952
Photograph: Sidney Nolan

An earlier painting, *Encounter*, 1954, neatly sums up the sentiment: a group of Indigenous figures stand in front of the scattered remains of a European explorer. Rib bones, accentuated by the ochre landscape and rendered in the symbolic form of the crescent mouth, channel the sinister air of the devils that populated Tucker's earlier urban cityscapes. Animated and grinning, the death that they represent marks the moment of a new foreboding creation. The suggestion is that something of modern humanism dies through the violence of settler colonialism. While no tears are shed, what troubles Tucker is what comes next. As with Eliot, Tucker's anxiety did not reside in the devastation of his own times but in the uncertainty of what will emerge from its ruins.

Tucker's painting rarely sought to please. Much of his art spoke to his own experience

of apprehension and anxiety in a turbulent century. Blending both personal catharsis and social critique, Tucker's vision was mostly grim and unsettling. He took as his starting point the innovations of the European modernists and found his own footing in the rich textures of the Australian landscape. Different expressions of the grotesque emerged throughout his oeuvre. The eerie, mythological and allegoric set the tone of his narrative, whereas his distorted, wounded, and disfigured bodies elicited the visceral experience that underpins the grotesque. With this approach, Tucker painted the weight of European modernity as it fractured throughout the twentieth century. His vantage was distinctly antipodean and captured experiences of unease and apprehension as they manifested in the Australian context.

Tucker's adoption of the grotesque was never a cynical venture. He was well known for speaking plainly and his painting followed suit. His attitude towards his practice was earnest. For Tucker, art was about the enrichment of human life. His intention was not to indulge feelings of dread and anxiety but, rather, to expunge them: 'I'm trying to exorcise my own particular devils', he explained, 'and I suppose some of them get into the painting. I hope they do, that's where I'm trying to put them, and get rid of them. But once out, of course, one can then feel this kind of relaxation, the affirmation flows in, and the devils in the painting can sometimes turn into angels.'¹⁶

Notes

- 1 Albert Tucker in interview with Barbara Blackman, 14 July 1988, National Library of Australia, Canberra, transcript p. 207.
- 2 Bernard McElroy, *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1989, p. 5.
- 3 Albert Tucker in interview with James Mollison, Albert Tucker Archive, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, transcript p. 10.
- 4 Albert Tucker in interview with Barbara Blackman, p. 76.
- 5 Albert Tucker in interview with Barbara Blackman, p. 21.
- 6 Albert Tucker in interview with Barbara Blackman, p. 22.
- 7 Richard Haese, *Rebels and Precursors: The Revolutionary Years of Australian Art*, Allen Lane, Melbourne, 1981, p. 200.
- 8 Albert Tucker in interview with Barbara Blackman, p. 165.
- 9 Robert Hughes, 'Irrational Imagery in Australian Art', *Art and Australia*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1963, p. 154.
- 10 Albert Tucker in interview with Barbara Blackman, p. 165.
- 11 Frances S. Connelly, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2014, p. 11.
- 12 Albert Tucker in interview with Richard Haese, Albert Tucker Archive, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, p. 43.
- 13 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1984, p. 316.
- 14 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 367.
- 15 Christopher Uhl, *Albert Tucker*, Lansdowne, Melbourne, 1969, p. 52.
- 16 Albert Tucker in interview with Hazel de Berg, in the Hazel de Berg Collection, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 1961, Audio 2:46s – 3:11s.

List of works

This catalogue is arranged chronologically then.
Measurements are height before width before depth.

Albert Tucker

born 1914, Melbourne, Victoria.
Lived and worked Melbourne. Died 1999



City 1944
oil on plywood
61 x 76 cm
Heide Museum of Modern Art
Gift of Barbara Tucker 2005



Luna Park 1945
oil on composition board
53 x 81 cm
Heide Museum of Modern Art
Gift of Barbara Tucker 2005



Tivoli Clown 1945
oil on composition board
61 x 45.5 cm
Heide Museum of Modern Art
Gift of Barbara Tucker 2005



Image of Modern Evil 31 1947
oil on composition board
50.5 x 37.5 cm
Heide Museum of Modern Art
Gift of Barbara Tucker 2005



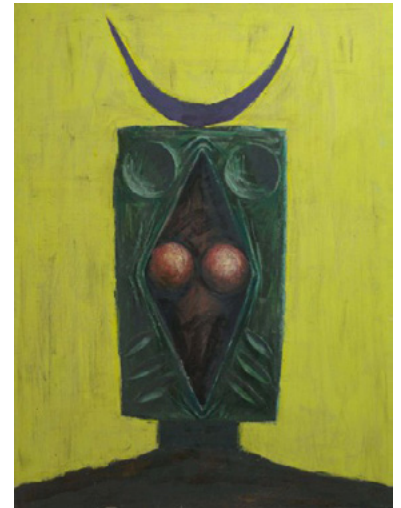
Encounter 1954
oil on composition board
63.4 x 93 cm
Heide Museum of Modern Art
Gift of Barbara Tucker 2005



Killing 1954
oil on composition board
81 x 62 cm
Heide Museum of Modern Art
On long-term loan from the Albert &
Barbara Tucker Foundation



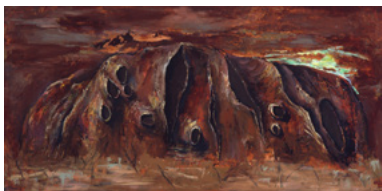
Street Accident 1954
oil on composition board
35 x 45.5 cm
Heide Museum of Modern Art
On long-term loan from the
Albert & Barbara Tucker Foundation



Totem 1955
oil on composition board
129.5 x 96.5 cm
Albert & Barbara Tucker Foundation,
Melbourne



Wounded Man 1955
oil on composition board
80 x 60 cm
Albert & Barbara Tucker Foundation,
Melbourne



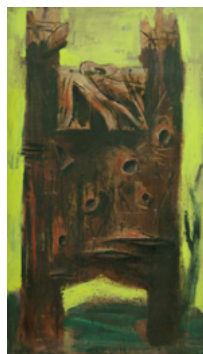
Wounded Mountain 1955
oil on composition board
66 x 131 cm
Heide Museum of Modern Art
Gift of Barbara Tucker 2008



Cratered Head 1958–60
synthetic polymer paint on composition
board
122 x 101 cm
Heide Museum of Modern Art
Gift of the Albert & Barbara Tucker
Foundation 2019



Explorer III 1958
synthetic polymer paint and PVA on
composition board
203 x 81.5 cm
Heide Museum of Modern Art
Gift of Barbara Tucker 2005



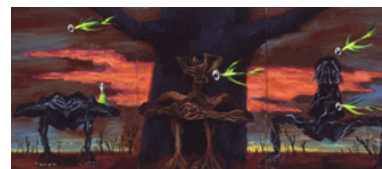
Surrender 1958
oil on canvas
76.5 x 45 cm
Albert & Barbara Tucker Foundation,
Melbourne



Mummified Horse 1961
oil and synthetic polymer paint on
composition board
90 x 121.5 cm
Heide Museum of Modern Art
On long-term loan from the
Albert & Barbara Tucker Foundation



Parrots in Landscape 1961
synthetic polymer paint on composition
board
60.5 x 81 cm
Heide Museum of Modern Art
Gift of Barbara Tucker 2008



Arrival at Cooper's Creek 1968
synthetic polymer paint on composition
board
59 x 135 cm
Heide Museum of Modern Art
Gift of Barbara Tucker 2005



Cannibal Pierce 1968
oil on composition board
61 x 76 cm
Heide Museum of Modern Art
On long-term loan from the
Albert & Barbara Tucker Foundation



Intruder and Bush 1968
synthetic polymer paint on composition board
105 x 136 cm
Albert & Barbara Tucker Foundation,
Melbourne



Parrot Attacking 1975
oil on composition board
90 x 70 cm
Albert & Barbara Tucker Foundation,
Melbourne



St Anthony in Australia 1987
oil on composition board
91 x 122 cm
Heide Museum of Modern Art
Gift of the Albert & Barbara Tucker
Foundation 2021



Janus 1988
oil on canvas
71 x 91.4 cm
Albert & Barbara Tucker Foundation,
Melbourne



Soldier and Victory Girl 1995
synthetic polymer paint on composition board
93 x 122 cm
Albert & Barbara Tucker Foundation,
Melbourne
