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## **JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: ALBERT TUCKER**

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Bert, I thought we might start, not with the ones that we have properly in our collection, but with the ones that are going to come in within the next few years. They are all set out so well for us to talk about. We will begin with the group of very good early portraits that you did. We were talking a moment ago about the way you work on a portrait. Obviously, sometimes you paint direct from life—portraits and so on.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, the early ones, particularly the ones right through the thirties. This was when I was a rather confused and battling art student. I did portraits of people—of residents of the suburb where I lived. I was always trying to get people in so I could draw them. All those early portraits were painted directly from life, or from the sketches I did of people. This would often be quite a number.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Portraiture has been a big thing in your output for a long time, hasn't it?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes and no. It has been a recurrent theme, but I have never really painted a large number of portraits. I have never had any long run with it. On the other hand—it is one of those curious paradoxes—I do have an intense interest in it. I always have a little reservation in my mind that one of these days I will get a whole series of portraits going. I did this over the last year. I had some curious urge to record people I had known, who were all getting older or dying. I realised this was a slice of history that was slowly fading out and I felt a kind of responsibility. Plus I had known these people so well over their lifetimes that I knew that the images I had of them in my head would be a marvellous foundation for a portrait. As you would know, a portrait is not something that you do at a particular moment in time or from a particular percept, although that is your starting point. You may fill in that percept, but you are filling it in with all your knowledge. In the back of your mind you have a very generalised but accurate image of the sum total of that person. This is the thing one works from. But drawings and photographs are useful reference material, so I do not waste anything like that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I think that is portraiture, otherwise it is just a sort of hand-done, colour photography thing.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** The photography thing is an ambush for many painters. In a sense, it misleads you because it is so apparently complete for that moment, but it has no correspondence with the overall image you carry in your head. You are

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trying to reconcile the two—the particular set of data you have via sketches, the person, the photograph, anything—

**JAMES GLEESON:** The visual information?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** The visual information of the moment. You are trying to reconcile that with your long history with, or past knowledge of, the person. This is why I say that commercial portraiture is rather a non-artistic activity. If you just know someone casually or slightly or socially, and you are doing a portrait of them for commercial reasons, you cannot have anything but a fragmentary, one-dimensional image of them.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That is absolutely it.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** There is no hope of penetration under those circumstances.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Bert, the first one on that sheet, the first perhaps of the series, is *Self portrait* 1937. Do you recall any special circumstances?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** I was sitting in my bedroom, which I also used as a studio, working from a mirror. That was just a direct one.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You did a lot of self-portraits.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes; I was a cheap and accessible model!

**JAMES GLEESON:** But also, surely, you were interested in penetrating, in understanding, yourself?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. I have a rather curious thing with art. One of the initial distortions that takes place in your life is that you get a label attached—that is to say, 'I am an artist'. So you inherit all the social attitudes to the role of the artist. In a sense you create a terrific compulsion to conform to the role in which you have cast yourself, which already falsifies your real role as a real artist. Even then I use the word 'artist' in inverted commas. I would put it more that the artist—as with other people with specialised preoccupations and interests—has a specialised form of energy and, rather like spiders or bowerbirds or what have you, is a diagram-producing mammal. It is something you have to do because of the particular constitution of your mind, your feelings, your history—and God knows where we started and how the whole thing began. A peculiar balance of forces requires to be kept in balance, enabling them to grow and to develop meaning or significance, which enter one's motivations in life. So I try to get rid of this categorisation quickly and just say that this is a natural form of activity for me which is personally necessary. Society also finds it useful because it can either enter into the experience or use it as a historical record or for any other functions.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The next one is a *Self portrait* dated 1936/37.

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**ALBERT TUCKER:** That is a second one. I now see that there are two of them. The same thing would apply to the second one. I worked from the same attitude. These were simply mirror paintings. Or, if they were not of me, I would bring people in and paint direct.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Can we backtrack a bit? Where did you train?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** I didn't train, which I am rather pleased about. While I desperately wanted to go to the Gallery School or, out of my ignorance at the time, to go to some establishment, thank God I was never able to afford it. I am delighted.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So you trained yourself?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, completely—in every way. I left school at fourteen. I had to help support the family. Common to our generation—although most uncommon to the current one—was that you did everything for yourself. If you wanted to know something, you dug out the information yourself; you did not depend on schools or institutions or teachers. I think the worst thing the education system does for anyone is to create that dependency. If you are to get anywhere, you have to battle it out. You have say to yourself, 'I must know this', and then go out and fight the world to get the thing you must know. Unless you go through that process, you are receiving shallow or empty information.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The next one is one of the most famous and marvellous portraits in Australian art—the one of Adrian Lawlor. Tell me about that. You mentioned that you could not remember exactly whether you did it from—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, I have difficulty with that. It was at about this time—around 1939—that I was able to buy a little second-hand Foth-Derby camera. I knew absolutely nothing about photography, and I could not afford to get the darned things printed, but the film was relatively cheap. So I was taking photographs right, left and centre, but getting very little printed. In some cases I would get sheets of contact with a tiny negative and I would have to look at it through a magnifying glass. But I remember that I had this interest. I did take some photographs of Adrian at this time. I was seeing him at his house up in Broomwarren, in Warrandyte. I did some drawings of Adrian. He didn't pose for me. I remember doing memory drawings of him. Adrian had an extraordinary head. You would remember him, I think.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I don't. I never met him.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** You didn't know him? Adrian had an extraordinary head—a bald dome that went right up. You would know that from the portrait. He had sunken cheeks and these intense, close eyes. His most unusual head intrigued me. I remember making several drawings of him from memory after seeing him, but I found they were inadequate. The memory thing could not give me the data I

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wanted. I did have some photographs. I think it was a compound of my knowledge of him, the drawings, the image I had formed of him and some photographs that I had at the time. I have no direct recollection of using them. Later on I did use photographs more directly, but at that time?—I simply cannot recall.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You have in it, not only a monumental quality, but also a sculptural quality.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** You could not help that with Adrian's head. He had an enormously domed forehead. It hit you straight away.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What sort of person was he?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** He was one of the most intellectually alert people I know, but he was a man who was not quite geared in with life, like so many people with sensibility and intelligence. They find the mundane, everyday things, the survival things of existence, incredibly difficult because the reach of their mind is concentrated on so many other things all the time. Adrian had a volatile personality. He was incredibly articulate and highly intelligent. He came into the art thing in rather a curious way, both in a literary and artistic way. Not long before he died, about ten or twelve years ago, I remember seeing an exhibition of his work at the old Argus Gallery in Melbourne and I was astonished at how up to the moment all the work was. The forms and procedures he was using were more interesting, experimental and advanced than the work being done now. I still do not know where those paintings are, but he had a sister and I think it would be well worth investigation, and also worth trying to get a group of his paintings together for the collection.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I will talk more about that. He is certainly a name in Australia, but up till now he has been remembered mainly as the author of art books.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** As a polemicist, because of his vocal, highly articulate and energetic assault on all the things that were going on here. This is how he became known.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You were on close terms with him.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** I wouldn't say in a close personal sense, but in a fairly casual personal sense. I knew a lot of these men—the Arnold Shaws, the Jock Fraters, the George Bells and so forth. They all took a rather curious attitude to me because I was so young relative to them. I think they sensed that I was one of their possible successors or inheritors. On the one hand, I came from a very narrow suburban background, without any cultural extension whatsoever. I was untrained and unsophisticated. I was much less sophisticated than the average person involved in the arts, and this made them wary of me. But on the other

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hand, I had a certain articulate capacity. I also had a lot of the kind of aggression that comes out of fear and anxiety, which seemed to be my permanent state of mind through all those years. They had—perhaps I could describe it as—a concerned but wary attitude to me. Adrian had a degree of this too. I can still remember his face when he would suddenly shoot me a questioning look—a penetrating, sudden stab—and then withdraw. I would get that quite a bit. George Bell had this kind of thing—we just could not get a rapport going. But with various others I would, to a degree.

I was an old-fashioned Edwardian moralist, totally unsophisticated. In the early days I literally did not know what an artist was. There was a cartoonist on the *Herald* named Sam Wells. I always thought that it was the apogee of artistic achievement to eventually become the *Herald* cartoonist. I thought this right through into the early thirties. Then I started encountering colour reproductions of Modigliani and Van Gogh and I heard about people like George Bell and Jock Frater and Cezanne. I had this sudden extreme and rapid expansion of consciousness and vision around the middle to late thirties. It probably corresponded with a growth period for me. I had a sudden enormous expansion of horizons and possibilities. It was revolutionary for me. In the space of about three or four years I jumped from Sam Wells to Cezanne!

**JAMES GLEESON:** Quite a jump!

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Quite a jump.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Certainly in the Adrian Lawlor portrait you have turned up a real icon—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** I am glad you feel that, Jim.

**JAMES GLEESON:** An icon that sticks in the mind and stays there very powerfully.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** He was a powerful presence, Adrian. Another man who had that presence was Vassiliev—Vassiliev even more. They are the sort of men who, if you were in the one end of the house and they came in the other end, you instantly felt this presence come into the house. Some powerful thing came with them, particularly with Danila. My problem was that I was so bound up and so, shall I say, emotionally constipated, so unsophisticated, that I found it hard to relax and talk openly with these men. If I did get onto a theme with them I could only talk aggressively. Naturally, this would make anyone wary and withdrawn. After all, you don't want some young punk like this coming up and laying down the law and screaming and yelling. So I found it hard to get them to accept me on a personal level. They felt there was something going on there, but they were a bit withdrawn from it. So I would have little runs—we would get a rapport thing going, and then the thing would congeal again. Danila was the one whom I really got to know—this was the late fifties.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Did you ever do a portrait of him?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Oddly enough, no.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You didn't?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** No. For some reason I stopped painting portraits for two or three years, around 1939, 1940, 1941. I do not recall any. I think I jumped from the one of Adrian to that 1942 *Self portrait* there, the second one down. I think it was a jump like that, as my recollection works. I have to check dates and so on, but I know there would be big gaps, which were bigger at the time. A couple of years at that time was much longer than it is now.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Bert, looking at the sequence of the two *Self portraits*, *Adrian* and then the next three self-portraits, it strikes me that with the one of Adrian you have the effect of a definitive portrait, whereas in the other ones you are searching around with yourself. They do not have that kind of definitive quality, except perhaps that one might come close—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, it is very hard dealing with one's own image. I am experiencing this right now. Every now and then I look in the mirror and I realise that I am quite different now to what I was then. I am beginning to feel that testing thing, where I would like to do a sudden little run of self-portraits to try to show that there are forty years difference between the two. One gets trapped in a curious delusional state with one's own image, which is hard to resolve in a work sense. This one came out in the mid-fifties—

**JAMES GLEESON:** In 1954—that is the last one of that sequence.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** That is the last one of that particular sequence, yes. *Joy* is 1946. With this one—*New ideas* 1941—obviously I was preoccupied. I had heard about Cubism and all the things that went on then and I made my little experimental tries with it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Now, *Bride*. This is 1944; that's close.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes; 1943, I think, was the very first. There is one with a horse in it—this one. That is 1943.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That is No. 26.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** That one should be further over.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So it is out of sequence.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** But there is an interesting thing, though. Notice this correspondence?

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** I later found that this was the beginning of it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The Adrian Lawlor?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. He had a curious little twirl, or twist, to his mouth, which fascinated me at the time; I was quite preoccupied with it. Little did I know that it was going to—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Come through in so many different forms?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, it would come through and lead to all that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So the *Bride* relates to work done some years later.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** After then.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Now, this is a portrait of Joy Hester?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, and also this one.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So No. 8 and No. 10 are Joy.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, No. 8 and No.10.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And No. 9 is, again, a self-portrait.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** No, it is Martin Smith.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Martin Smith—of course.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** I have failed as a portraitist, obviously!

**JAMES GLEESON:** The shadow was over it and I couldn't see it properly. I can see it now.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** A complete failure! That is Martin. Actually, it is rather like Martin.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I never knew Martin.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** He was a poet who knew Nolan well in the early days, in a period when I did not know either Smith or Nolan. They were, apparently, close friends in the very early days, in the mid and late thirties.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Now, No. 11.

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**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, these ones are probably more controlled. This was a newspaper photograph of a man who had been charged through a court with kicking a small dog to death. I was fascinated with the utterly dissolute face of this man, who looked as though he had just crawled out from under a wet sack, and was all wrapped up in newspapers. He had that look about him. He had that collapsed kind of face—a kind of moral disintegration. I realised that it was not so much the person who was fascinating me but that he stood as a symbol for all sorts of things at work in the human condition, in the whole social set-up. I prefer to call it 'the human condition' now, because society is produced from people. Whatever we get in society came originally from conflicts taking place in the human soul, as it were. He had that kind of face of collapse and disintegration, which fascinated me.

**JAMES GLEESON:** 1946 was right in the middle of the *Images of modern evil* series—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, that was in the late phase of the *Images of modern evil* series. The same feeling works through—in this case, without that kind of ironic or cynical element, which is a strong—

**JAMES GLEESON:** This is a self-portrait—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** In a way, no. I remembered that, once I located the photograph. It is really nothing like it. I found that I had extracted the collapsed, disintegrating element from it and made another face out of it. This one was painted around the same period as No. 12, and I had that same thing. It was in a magazine. There was this portrait—a taut, baby face with dead eyes; a collapsed face. I read on and found that he was some fellow who had murdered his mother-in-law or something. I think his name was Sydney Fox. It was in England. The face, as with the other face, fascinated me because it was a key to a chart of the human condition, a kind of social psychological landscape. I think I called them 'psycho landscapes' at one stage—that is probably as good a term as any—rather than a particular person.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I suppose it is the sort of thing that led Brett Whiteley to concentrate on Christie. It was one of the very good things he did, that portrait of Christie.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. That was an excellent portrait Whiteley did, that one of Christie. To me, that portrait of Christie is a high watermark in his work. It's a small one—

**JAMES GLEESON:** But beautiful.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** It is rather spot on. I was trying to do a similar thing in these ones.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** That's very interesting. So in this sequence we have more or less direct portraits, self-portraits.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Direct portraits—substantially memory images. Whereas these are direct from the mirror, the one of Adrian there is bringing all the past knowledge, shovelling it up to the same point in time and then relating it to whatever reference material he would get at the time. So it stood more as a symbolic kind of portrait. That element entered partly into this one because I did it through the mirror.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No. 5.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** But then I worked on it a lot apart from that. I found I was doing that more and more. I would have a quick run in front of the subject, then take it away and work back and forth, coming back to it over a period of months, slowly doing more to it until finally it would leave. It is the same thing with this later one here. But these ones were tiny little photographs, which were just starting points. Once I got that moral despair and disintegration thing going, I just took off from there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And the two portraits of Joy were straight portraits?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Straight portraits again—with her sitting with a sitter.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This one is *Invention*.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** *Invention*, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Building onto this interest in a type of face.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** It was part of the flowing through from Adrian's mouth that flowed through into all these other ones—those 1943 ones, and this one. I rather imagine this would be early 1944. It is a pity I did not have months because sometimes a year makes—

**JAMES GLEESON:** A difference.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** It is significant in the way an idea evolves.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That is the first time that crescent mouth appears in that vivid red form.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, and with a face with it. The face vanished after that, and I lapsed back into this idea of incorporating it into a head, as it had begun in Adrian's head. But in the others it suddenly became a protoplasmic sort of gremlin, which to me embodied the whole feel of Melbourne in the blackout period. You had this feeling of the dark shadows of the sexual context of all of St Kilda Road, right down to St Kilda and from Princes Bridge—the GI thing, the

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Digger thing, the schoolgirl tart thing, the victory girls. This was all feeding me at the time. I was like a zombie. I hardly knew what I was doing. I often had the feeling, 'What am I doing here? This is not life as I have expected it to be. It is something else altogether. But I am here and I am breathing and acting and I have to produce an image of some sort. This is the only image I can see to produce'. In a way, that crescent thing became a kind of key; it was a hieroglyphic thing. I reached the point in around 1943 that, if I painted and I did not have that crescent, then I could not work. I would have to tear it down, throw it away, nothing would happen. But the moment I got that crescent image in, the thing would fill itself in. It was like automatic writing. Once I had that key form, the rest of the thing would fill itself in rapidly and immediately with whatever data was in my head at the time from wandering around Melbourne.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It was a touchstone—it released the whole flow of images.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Absolutely. It was a key. The key still operates. Even now I can still do it. You can see a couple over there, which are the later period. The moment I put that thing down I am animated. I will be creatively dead and scratching and struggling and can't get a focus on what I want to do there. When I put in that crescent thing there, immediately I am activated, immediately all my feelings coalesce and immediately I start producing an image with it. So it must be some deep thing. A Tasmanian writer, Norman Laird, wrote a book on the Ross Bridge—I do not know if you have seen it. Daniel Herbert, a convict, carved the Ross Bridge in Tasmania. He rang me out of the blue one night. I had never heard of him. He accused me of being Irish, of being Celtic. My grandmother was Irish—she was born in Richmond. Then he announced that he was going to use some reference to me in a book he was preparing dealing with Daniel Herbert. He said that the crescent form was an archetypal memory, or image, of the horned gods—Celtic mythology. Somehow it clicked into place that I have displaced it. It looks as though it is an archetypal horned shape, which I have displaced. I have made it serve my cynicism and fear and despair, which were the dominant feelings I had in the background. This is where an external eye is so useful at times. I used to get this with Sweeney; he would often provide his little external comment, which was enormously valuable.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's fascinating.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** This was another one. If one were to delve into its origins, there is a very good chance one would find that there is a Jungian archetype at work there or that it did come from some deep, racial Celtic memory thing—converted by the pressures of the time I was working under.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Bert, now we come to paintings that you did in the early war years. *Death of an aviator*, I think, is 1942.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. 1942 was a significant year because this was the year I was called up. I became a chocko for a while—until they decided I was no good

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to them, and threw me out. But I was there for a few harrowing months through 1942, which gave me a lot of insight into what was happening. We were bombarded with all the news media about everything going on with the war, so it was impossible to get away from war themes. Every now and then I would become very conscious of it. You would get this urge to try to get an image out of the things that you were being incessantly bombarded with. These came out of that.

With the *Children of Athens* ones I remember that I was appalled by a very graphic account of starvation in Athens; it really worried me at the time. You feel this terrific empathy with people. It was a graphic and well-written account of children starving in the streets of Athens. It really upset me. It produced this little series there, which I called *Children of Athens*. At the time I had started reading T.S. Eliot. My own cultural background had been so poor. I really only went to school when I left school. When I was 14 or 15 I discovered the public library in Melbourne and the Fine Arts room. They were a godsend to me. I would work all day in some awful job and go there every evening, with the marvellous, endless energy of the young. Wouldn't I like to have all that back again! I would go full bore from first thing in the morning till late at night, year in and year out. Most of the time I would be doing a full-time job but every evening I would go to the public library and also to the Victorian Artists Society. This was a terrific foundation for me—reading at the Fine Arts room and drawing at the Victorian Artist's Society. It wasn't a class—there were no teachers—but a model was provided. I remember drawing three nights a week for seven years. My God, that was the thing. It is only by incessant and continuous drawing that you can become a draftsman. At the Fine Arts room I started to branch out when I saw its marvellous and enormous collection of books. I realised how futile it was to hope to ever get anywhere near reading all of them, but I would start this disorganised and spasmodic reading. I came upon T.S. Eliot. Instantly I recognised a twin soul—he was full of horror, outrage, despair and futility, and used all the images that went with it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** He had a tremendous influence on everybody. He was one of the seminal figures.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Completely. He was dealing with the period after the First World War and all the disillusion and despair of the time. With his kind of sensibility, some of the imagery was superb, and it confirmed my own feelings. Also, in a roundabout way it became a source of my imagery because of the imagery that would involuntary come up while reading the poetry. So this one there I called *The wasteland*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That is No. 16?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** That was in, if I remember correctly, the first contemporary arts—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Quite possibly.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The very early ones—not perhaps the first, but one of the early ones. Was *Death of an Aviator* based on any particular incident?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** No, this was again a generalised thing. Obviously, I had been thinking about surrealism a lot then, which you would recognise. A few of these images came out at that time.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The next one is 1942.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes; they are both 1942, those ones.

**JAMES GLEESON:** *The prisoner*.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** That's right. And I think this is *The Wasteland*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No. 16 is *The wasteland*.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes—then *The bombing*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Then *The long road*. This is when I discovered—in around '42—the German expressionists, in the Fine Arts room.

**JAMES GLEESON:** In '42?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. I think it was '42. I painted the *Battlefield* one in 1943. We should really have the month. This was probably around mid- or late '42, and this would be early '43. I discovered painters like Grosz, Beckmann, Hofer, and Kakoshka and Otto Dix for the first time. They were a revelation to me. Dix and Beckmann were probably the two who had the most powerful effect on me. These arose out of that preoccupation.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That time must have a particularly vital period for you. You were discovering Eliot, and the German expressionists Dix and Beckmann.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. When I look back on it, it was a period when I was trying to go in every direction at once, not only socially but also with all the people I knew. Everything seemed to be seething with ideas and energies and experience. There's a curiously dead, placid thing now, yet the threatening disasters are even greater now than then. Nevertheless, at that time, probably we still had a belief in the human thing and that with human involvement we

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would come up with a solution. I am inclined to believe that people now think the problems are too big for them—

**JAMES GLEESON:** And they just close their minds?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, they just close them. But at that time we did get enormous energy from this. It was a hopeful and very fertile period. A cross-fertilising of this with that was going on all over the place. My own mind was a seething mess, but it had the energy, and this came out of it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It comes out in the paintings very vividly.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, 'a seething mess' seems to fit it, as I look across at these.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No. 19 has always struck me as being one of the most extraordinary images you ever came out with.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, this came out also; I think I gave it another name. I was getting a little more ironic in some of the drawings. There was a drawing for that, which I seem to remember giving another name—*No way out*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** *No way out?*

**ALBERT TUCKER:** That's right. I had forgotten about the title on the painting. In fact, I had forgotten about the painting then; it was stored away when I pulled this one out. It was only after I had set all this up that I came on the painting and recalled it. It had the title *The possessed*. I called that *No way out* because this ironic element keeps popping up in me. It was the conscription thing—'Report to your area officer with a cut lunch'. I realised that the whole thing was closing in on me and I would have to be right in it full bore. The key is 1942—that is when I was called up.

**JAMES GLEESON:** When was the date of the drawing—much later?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** The date of the drawing was also '42.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So the painting followed fairly closely after.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Fairly closely after, yes. I knew it was saying something that corresponded to my feelings then. As you can see, that kind of concentrated total despair thing was probably as extreme as I have succeeded in getting because there is no humour in it. In ones like this you can find a humour element at work. It escapes into an ironic social comment in one aspect of it, plus the Celtic archetype is working and the quaint thing of Melbourne in a blackout. One of the lovely things about being Australian is that we have a new mixture of elements. I

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have always loved the tension between Victoriana and the primeval bush, which creates a marvellous, ready-made surrealist irrational displacement.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It certainly does.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** And a marvellous tension. Can you imagine a Victorian balcony in the bush? It's a beautiful idea.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Bert, at this time there was the important anti-fascist exhibition.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. What date was The Anti-fascist show? I can't even remember which paintings I had in it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I am not sure.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** 1942—that would be it. I just had a quick recollection that these were the paintings I had in it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So 14, 15, 16, 17, 18—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Jim, I can't recall.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You can't remember? Would that have been in it?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** No; that's a little later.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. No. 23; we have talked about—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** I have a vague idea. No, I am afraid I can't recall which ones I had in that show. In a way I disapproved of the show. I knew instinctively, without knowing clearly in my mind, that it was being held for a political purpose. To me this debased art, but I did not have it clearly in my mind at the time. I was in a state of confusion about responsibilities and social issues, about the attitudes one should take, and about one's obligations as a painter. It was only a bit after that that I made the very clear division that art is its own world of formal principles; that it is a valid and almost self-contained principle of reality, and that politics and other activities are also self-contained. To make one subject to the other is false.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This must have been an important decision to arrive at.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. I was going through what could be termed a 'socialist realist' phase then. I had this general sort of romantic leftism that people—

**JAMES GLEESON:** So many did at that time.

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**ALBERT TUCKER:** Just about everyone at that time. I was also filling it in by my close association with Vassilieff and then with Yosl Bergner, who came over again as a kind of living symbol of a human being oppressed and rejected by these vast social and national forces. I felt, obviously, a terrific involvement and responsibility in that area. Bergner's paintings of that period were very powerful and directly based on his own sense of oppression and persecution, and stated that very well. This gave much more reality to those things. That is why I exhibited in the Anti-fascist show. Most of us produced work that had this social orientation to it; there was some stab at the social problems. But I quickly recovered from all that and saw that I was getting all my issues scrambled. I pulled back from it and ceased that involvement.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That was a big step to arrive at. No. 23 is *Battlefield*.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. With that one I had Beckmann; it was clearly in my mind at the time I painted that. I remember I was at the height of being interested in and enamoured by the expressionists. As you know, interest does not occur necessarily in a flash. You might see something out of the corner of your eye. You treat it casually when you look at it frontally. But then the thing stays there and after a few weeks or a month the sting is still buzzing away in the back. So then you turn around and put more attention onto it. This is what happened with the expressionists. After a while I suddenly went straight into the expressionists and researched them as well as I was able with the material that was available. This was part of the love affair with them.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No. 24 is *The pickup*.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. That was rather a nasty little painting. It is more in the Grosz area. It is almost social caricature. In one sense I disapprove of it, but on the other hand it is close enough to the whole spirit of the other things to justify being part of it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It has its place in it.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** It has that nasty intensity about it and the very nasty but accurate kind of sexuality that one felt in the air then.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And in the crescent mouth again, the smiling is a characteristic—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, again in the full form, as it did in the *Easter bride* one. They are some of the very few paintings that still related it to human forms, or human physiognomy.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The next one is No. 25.

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**ALBERT TUCKER:** Eliot had something to do with that, because intermittently through it all I was reading Eliot. So I was getting this great melange of things. I had some kind of nostalgic thing at work there. At same time I was evolving this very reduced protoplasmic form that developed later in these. This is why I was astonished with these. They are so highly developed for a very early stage. This is where historians can be tricked. Sometimes you get a flash, where you bring a bit of the future into the present; you put that down and slowly grind along, and then you build yourself up to doing that again some years later.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No. 26. Now we come to the beginning of the night images, *Night image* No. 1.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** This would be it. Daniel Thomas corrected me on that one quite accurately, because I hadn't put the date in clearly and it was partly obscured by the frame.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So '43 is correct?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** 1943 would be correct, yes. It couldn't be '41. Having organised things a bit better now, and knowing the work I was doing then, it could not have occurred then.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This was the one you were talking about in which these—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** This protoplasmic gremlin form there appeared full bore then, but still tied in with other more figurative forms in the background and other elements. You can't help it. It is a bit like Velasquez paintings. You will get stick figures, and then you will get an incredibly sophisticated rendering of a buffalo and horses.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Bison.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. It is a question of attention, really. If the attention is on a certain thing, that will have a different level of artistic sophistication to something your attention isn't on, which may be a secondary, or filling in, element in the back.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The *Night image* series was a long series. You first called them, if I remember correctly—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** *The images of modern evil*. I was still the outraged Edwardian. I probably still am! I seem to have gone through my whole life in a state of moral outrage, which is probably puritan nonsense.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You never gave any particular images a specific name.

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**ALBERT TUCKER:** I think it might have happened in one or two, but then I dropped them because I am not a very good organiser. I have a mind like a grasshopper that is trying to go in several different directions at once. I just couldn't differentiate them. If you get a sudden run of things, and they are all on the same theme, you have to make quite an effort and business of differentiating. Some painters can do it. Some have a good sense of titling, and they will come up very quickly with a very suitable title. Oddly enough, I do have a literary thing in other areas, which I more or less killed off because it got in the way of painting.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Bert, looking just generally as they are laid out here over these *Night image* ones, there is a whole flood of different sorts of images coming through them now, and yet so many of them are related. There are links going through—crescent forms, amorphous shapes, ectoplasmic shapes. Did this arise spontaneously?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** As I said, I had put the key down. The rest of it would be a chance thing, where I lived. For example, here I lived in Agnes Street in Jolimont, and looking out the window—

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's No. 29 and No. 30?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. I looked across the Jolimont railway yards towards the city, so there are the Jolimont railway yards. There's the city and St Paul's—a very free interpretation of them. The particular background I was in would fill in. This would be along St Kilda Road.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's No. 32.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. In this one, this blackout thing, you get these kinds of lighting effects. This, again, was Jolimont—you see the same thing out the window. This one, for example, going across a bit later—

**JAMES GLEESON:** It is in 1944?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** In the middle forties. This was the interior of a house I lived in, in Robe Street, St Kilda. That was the stairway as you came in the front door. This was the end of Fitzroy Street in St Kilda.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That is No. 40.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** At sunset. There's the Australia cinema.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's No. 35.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, it was built there not so long ago. This was where I was getting all this stuff going on in my head. Occasionally I would go in to see a film. I got this light effect going on the carpet and all of a sudden I had this double

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reality thing. Later on that developed where I would have something going on on the screen, and then something outside. So you got a double layer, a reality layer going. There's St Kilda beach.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So it is an extraordinary mixture of fantastic imagery from your mind, from the way you were feeling, and the reality of—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Of simple daily existence, yes. In that sense I was almost an impressionist, even with that one in Paris, when I was there. That's Barbes Rochechouart, where the Underground comes out on the street level.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's No. 51.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. I remember sitting in a café across from there and looking out and making notes for all the overhead girders and these pillars and so on. This one was *Luna Park*, No. 46. They had a figure—this isn't the figure—up on a stand that screams with mechanical laughter. This really bugged me. Again, there is this correspondence. I realised that this was a destructive, mad side of my mind that was linking up and I had to flee from it. It became one of the crescent figures in the little cubicle thing that they had up on the platform. There is Luna Park in the background there. This one is along Flinders Street. See Hoyts Cinema—

**JAMES GLEESON:** No. 41.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** And the old Aspro signs.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So they have a real local character about them.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** There's St Kilda Road—No. 36.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No. 38 is an extraordinary one.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. This was one of the later more evolved ones. That is '46, getting to the climactic stage of all those images. Again, in those I wasn't dealing so much with specifics. I was concentrating; I had the notion of moths fluttering under a light. They turned out, as these things so often did with me then, to be of interest to all psychiatrists. Just as well we are our own doctors—I would hate all this stuff to be coming out in some destructive form. I would see these clouds of moths there and instantly they became all these little gremlins, going full bore. This floating thing developed a lot then. I remember it came out earlier; it happened with a few of the painters at the time. I remember that Nolan used it in his Stringybark Creek paintings; I think it was in 1946. That is '45 and that one is '46. So perhaps this floating thing became a communal image. Certain things did, in a curious way. With a painter like Nolan or Vassilieff or Boyd or myself there was this incredible contact, but in a curious way we kept totally separate from one another. This was rather interesting because you would

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think that one personality would tend to dominate, and the others would be affected. But even though there were sometimes common elements, the painters had no connection with each other.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Bert, I believe there is such a thing as a 'zeitgeist', the spirit of the—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, the spirit of the time.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Time that comes out in modified, different ways.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, it did.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And it all links up to something that is happening in the air at the time.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. We know that with scientific inventions sometimes at a certain point two people in two different parts of the world will invent the same thing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, having had no contact.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Neither knowing of the existence of the other. There's a kind of telepathy, almost—'zeitgeist', as you call it. It was a wavelength or sheer energy system that we were all plugged into. This form of energy flowed through us all and then was translated out through our personalities and life experiences into differing images, but occasionally these common elements would crop up. That floating thing happened a lot. I remember I had that in '42, in the army. It is in one of the drawings. You can see it in the psychiatric ward one. I think that is one they bought in the second lot. It isn't in this lot there. It is one where there is a close-up of my head and then two figures in dressing gowns floating down the corridor.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I remember that; we have a photograph of it.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** This is from when I was in the military hospital in Heidelberg. I had been sick so much while I was in camp that they sent me down to the hospital. I applied for a job while I was down there with a plastic surgery unit. You see how these things happen. Again, the external eye comes into play here, which was so useful years later, in this case, with Robert Hughes. They set me to work drawing some of these characters who had dreadful mutilations. My visit to that ward was hair-raising—given the state they were in. They gave me the job of doing a detailed drawing of one chap who had had his nose neatly sliced off with a shell fragment. It nipped his nose clean off—a neat, clean slice. This poor chap was sitting for me and I was drawing away. He didn't have a nose to blow and so the cavities in his face just kept dribbling. He was apologising and mopping his face all the time, and I was doing my detailed drawing. Years later Bob Hughes

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picked it up. I was telling him about some of the early incidents I had done with a big crater thing going right down the middle and he made the tie. I realised that this was where a lot of those subsequent cratered heads came from—it was from that. It was a buried memory thing that kept surfacing, and I didn't identify it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Nothing that happens to you is ever lost. I think it goes into the mind and it comes out—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** It goes in and works its way out somewhere.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Exactly.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Again, this is where putting things together and having someone else looking at it can be very valuable.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Bert, the *Night image* series goes right through to '48.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** 1948 was that phase. I have done several stints in little bursts and spurts, but the initial original group of them ran from 1943 through to 1947 or 1948. That was the last you could see there. Already you can see what is happening to the crescent there—it turned into the antipodean head that evolved later. This was probably a seminal one for the *Antipodean head*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's No. 51?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And with No. 52 we are in another area again?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. That one, again, was a memory thing. It is almost portraiture. Again, the external eye, if you bring it back. I never know these things until afterwards. Cynthia Nolan saw that painting when I was in Rome. Nolan was also living in Rome at the time. She looked at it and immediately said, 'Oh, that's a portrait of John Reed'.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Goodness!

**ALBERT TUCKER:** When she said that, I also realised it was him.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. That is No. 52.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Again, I had regurgitated a composition, which is possibly unfair to them in certain ways. I was having this nostalgic melange of 'winter is coming up' and how the stronger and most powerful ones would emerge. So something went on there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You did that in Paris?

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**ALBERT TUCKER:** This one was painted in '51. I think I started painting that when I was in Germany, in Frankfurt. This one is when I was in Frankfurt. It is a joined one. I remember—it was joined in the middle and I had it in two pieces for transport. I had to lug all my stuff around under my arm. As you know, if you are poor and in a foreign country, transporting things is one heck of a problem. I always seemed to be battling with bundles of paintings and painting gear and so on.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And Cynthia recognised the portrait?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** She claimed it, and again I had that little click—'She's right'. You get that recognition.

**JAMES GLEESON:** 1953.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** That was *The old eve*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** *The old eve*.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** That one has a specific origin. About sixty per cent of Frankfurt was bombed to the ground. I lived for a few months in a little place called New Eisenburg, a few kilometres outside Frankfurt. I would hop on the train and come into Frankfurt about once every week or so and just walk around. Most of the old part of Frankfurt had been bombed to the ground and at that stage, 1950 to 1951, the rubble still had not been cleared away. I remember locating a painting of Beckmann's across a bridge. I tried to find his studio, but his studio had been destroyed; it was gone. They put bulldozers through and cleared the streets. Walking around the streets, you would see piles of rubble on each side. So these horror images would come into play. When you were there in the winter, all was well. But I remember that in spring I noticed in the air this curious, all-pervading stench in the air as you walked between these piles of rubble. Later on I was told what it was—bodies were laced through the rubble. The bodies would refrigerate through the winter, the processes of decomposition would pick up every spring and summer, and then they would refrigerate again and so on. So one got this background.

Against this background, particularly in the evening, you had all the old prostitutes. This reminded me of Princes Bridge during 1942 and 1943—the period with the Victory Girls. All these old prostitutes, the poor old things, would be right along these streets. They had little tracks beaten back, and their pimps had built them little shacks behind the piles of rubble. They would take their clients behind the rubble into these little shacks. And these mounds smelled of death. So again, you had these awful, hair-raising images, which I could deal with only through humour, and with ironic detachment. *The old eve* came out of that, because I remember one of the prostitutes was rather like that—with purple mouth and red hair, this baggy, old figure standing there. Again, I had this terrific horror and compassion and empathy. It becomes so agonising that one has to

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retreat into humour to cope with the image. So that is where *The old eve* came from.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That is a fascinating story behind it.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. This is a trip down memory lane for me in that. As I look at each painting, the circumstances under which I painted them come up. Then I remember all the things that fed the painting.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Bert, No. 54 is a very important one.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** No. 54 is Fitzroy Street, St Kilda.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Not a *Night image* one?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, *Night image*. It was painted in 1945. This was a little more elaborate in the treatment of tram lights. I notice that I have converted them into warning signs—always a symbol of anxiety for me. The green Melbourne tram was a perennial part of one's background if you went through Melbourne a lot. All the trams were these green ones, which still run, so they became a familiar image. I remember once, some time before then, being very keyed up in one of my late adolescent/nearly adult stages. I was in one of those mad, nervous states one gets into. I remember being briefly caught on the tram tracks by traffic. Before I could cross there was a tram bearing down on me, with a great rattling roar. I went into a state of complete terror and panic and leapt off the tracks. It always stayed in my mind—this green tram bearing down on me at night. It is a perfect symbol of fear and anxiety—there is the sight of it, the threat of atrocious mutilation, and the rattling roar, getting louder and louder, of the tram bearing down on me. The human figure sometimes seems to assume a demonic element. For example, in that one it has assumed a certain demonic element as it bears down. It became almost a stock image of threat, of impending disaster, of fear.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I notice you have painted the lights with rays coming out of them, almost like explosions, like something bursting in the air.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes; again, the violence thing. Then again, this is what happens with these rays of light as they come out. They are developed in that later one there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No. 55 is another one that leaves a strong impression on you.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes; that was at 47 Robe Street—I think that was the number—a Victorian house I lived in. I had the top balcony room, and the balcony had the iron lace and the street and streetlights down below. I used that as the background locale for this figure. Often, when I feel I have worked a form

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to death, I enter into a kind of wrestling contest with it, trying to get the thing to modify or change. I did it in this Barbes Rocheouart one, No. 51. I had to use the crescent, but I was determined not to use it. I was in this contradictory thing. I had to get that crescent form, but then I could not bear to leave it because I was sick to death of the darned thing. So I would start fooling around with it, trying to keep the energy that came from it to do the painting, but at the same time trying to modify or alter it or move it in some other direction. In this one I made a desperate effort to make the wretched thing turn round. So I managed to get a twist; I managed to get it to move. Oddly enough, I have been doing a similar thing with the Antipodean head; it is always on the side looking to the left. I have got him to turn to the right and look round. I almost have to beg them to do this—like, 'For God's sake, turn round, will you!' Then I have made efforts to get him to turn round and look at me three-quarters of the way round or front on. This is a most awful wrestling match. I suppose some of the energy gets into the thing, but you are dealing with a real entity. I have the feeling that they are invisible, that—

**JAMES GLEESON:** They have a life of their own.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** They have a presence, with an independent life, and I am begging and imploring them, and fighting and wrestling with them to try to get them to modify or alter their position.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Your models have a life of their own.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Unfortunately, yes. Sometimes I wonder who has whom by the throat.

**JAMES GLEESON:** We jump from—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** I see an interesting thing there. Again, I can work out this one. This one is a later one that you have in the Canberra—

**JAMES GLEESON:** It is No. 56, I think, 1969.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** The *Armoured faun*. Again, the crescent has to get in. It seems as though it is an energy source for me. This is rather curious. I have just thought of it. This is what I am using it for—I have to put it in somewhere to feed off it as I paint. It is a kind of energy source.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It is remarkable how it works for you.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** It is. It does do that. It is distinctly an energy source. If I don't put it in, the painting is dead and all my responses are dead and I do a lousy painting. I tear it up; it is no good. I put it in and instantly there is a focus, as a breeding ground, and the painting almost completes itself.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's remarkable.

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**ALBERT TUCKER:** Here you see the chap who had his nose shot off. This was a transference. There are two sources of this. In Rome, in the Villa Julio of the Etruscan Museum—you would know that—do you remember the Etruscan double-headed axe?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, of course.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** That bugged me at the time. Instantly this form came out of that one. It related to another community stock image—to the armoured bushranger idea. This became the Etruscan double-headed axe. It also could work as an armoured bushranger form, where it has occurred. Also, the cratered landscape moved into it, which in turn came from two sources. One was the plastic surgery unit experience, the plastic surgery ward. Another source just flashed into my mind that was important for that. No, it has completely slipped and I have suddenly gone blank on that. I had spent some time in Italy. Sometimes you are overloaded or engorged with a certain kind of image. I became engorged with the Saint Sebastians, the Christs and the martyrs and so on, all bleeding from wounds and gashes and suppurating sores and that kind of thing. Finally, you become almost desperate. I connected—as I found out later—the plastic surgery experience with mutilation, and then the cratered Australian landscape. I was having these nostalgic memories of Australia then. I was remembering the dryness and the dried gum tree trunks and the bits of the Victorian Mildura desert area. Some of those things, although I had only had brief experience with them, stay in one's mind. I had that sense of dried out, cratered forms, which were also volcanic landscape things. They could also be wounds and gashes. All this mixed up and then came into the Etruscan double-headed axe and the armoured bushranger. So this became an Australian form. All this cross-fertilisation—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, so many strands of experience coming together.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, I only worked all this out later. It comes through. Then the parrot became the tearing form—

**JAMES GLEESON:** A scissor-like—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Like a pincer-like beak will do; it can rip and tear the claws. Then there is the paradise reference in the plumage, where one has this great conflict of destruction and creation. You can't help but refer to those, with the way the images work.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It is extraordinary, the way experiences lay fallow and then come out combined with—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. It is all effect here. The painting is an intersection. It is an intersection of all the things from your past life. They all of a sudden intersect

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and gel into a composite, which then becomes a single image. You feel better after you have done it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No. 56.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** The straight *Sunbathers*. I had the ectomorph thing, combined with seeing all the sunbathers. Again, you become engorged with certain perceptions. There is a lot of it there. If a certain kind of perception keeps repeating itself, all of a sudden one day it does that to you: 'You've got to do something about me, mate. If not, I will turn nasty'. This is what I mean by the diagram-producing mammal. If you do not do that, you can get into trouble with it. You have a form. They almost have an independent life. It is something that you then start working on. It is bugging you and attacking you, and doing all sorts of things.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Wanting to get over—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, wanting to get out. He is already out, and he is menacing from the outside. I get it as an outside thing, which builds up. It is almost as though we are generating forms of energy which can resolve themselves into very primitive life forms which still do not reach our sensory thing, but we can feel them in our minds. Probably we have other sensors in there, which we have not discovered yet, which pick them up. Finally they reach a point where, instead of being a passive by-product of your own life, they start developing a kind of independent existence and start leaning back on you. This is why the act of painting is so important—because with it you are disciplined, in control and you remain boss. I remain boss. When I produce paintings I control them, I put them in a system, my system of reality. There is nothing they can do from there. I have them safely dealt with and confined within the frame. It is a form of demonology, I suppose.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was it Bressmore who said about Ernst that he had the 'most magnificently haunted mind of his time'? It seems that you are in that category too. This little drawing—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** I remember Daniel wanted this one. It was two explorers, these armoured forms. I sent that along and I made that note there to show that this one went with that group. I think they were all '58, '59. What's that number?

**JAMES GLEESON:** It is 56.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** No. 56? They haven't put a number on that. If that is No. 59, then that must be No. 60. I have already got the numbers wrong.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So you don't trust me to count them? It is a terrific No. 56.

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**ALBERT TUCKER:** I feel terrific opposition to this whole basis of our culture and civilization, measuring everything—

**JAMES GLEESON:** I know.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Quantifying everything, putting a slide rule against everything—when the vast bulk of the things that we see are immeasurable. It is not possible to measure them. How do you measure misery, joy, happiness, elation, despair? These fat heads are rushing around with their silly little slide rules, trying to pin things down with labels and words and little rational systems. They think they can then stand off from that and say, 'I am God; I understand and control it'. This is the great blasphemy of our time.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Exactly.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** It is essentially a blasphemous attitude. It is saying to God, 'Get out of the driving seat; we're taking over'.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Taking control of things.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** This is an awful impertinence and presumption, and it underlies our whole way of life. What has completely been given up is this sense of faith, belief. I could not survive if I did not have an immeasurable kind of faith in some benevolent and invisible but vast and omnipotent power that is there and that helps make sense out of everything that is happening to us in this life. If I did not have that sense, I would give it all away. Of course one cannot, I don't suppose, but one would do one's best.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I think in your painting you present that argument perfectly.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** I hope so, because it is wrestling with the demons that are generated by false assumptions and attitudes and the day-to-day minor blasphemies in our natural stance in life. We generate all the demons, and this is slaying the demons—getting rid of them. It is like wiping a glass clean. Once you get that out of the way, once you clean it and load them all, you can see the face of God coming into view. You get through it. It is cleaning the glass or the mirror or whatever it is; it is inside as well as outside. I don't like to deal with a God concept as something that is external to our souls—it is all-permeating. So this is my own private battlefield, where I have fought it out. I am still in the process of fighting my own demons. You can see Vassilieff in that gouache over there fighting with his demons in the same way but in different terms.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Seeing these all laid out—58 or 59 of them—and with the other ones we have, I think we have your story pretty well told.

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**ALBERT TUCKER:** A visual autobiography. Like I say, I will be holding psychiatric conventions in Canberra. It will make a very interesting case history, this one—to see diagrams of his condition all the way through!

**JAMES GLEESON:** It is going to be a most impressive group of works. One great thing about them is that they are not all on enormous sizes—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Easel paintings.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It means that they can all be put together, you can read them in sequence and they can make their total impact, rather than being spread out and dissipating—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** I have felt a certain gratification with this because only recently, in the last two or three years, have I been able to get that sense of totality and see it all laid out like that. This has been important because it has told me a lot of things that I wanted to know about myself. Not only that, but it clears the air for the next stages in my own work. I am a bit tired of wrestling with the demon thing, even though that will always take place to a degree. I feel that I am moving to a cleaner approach, to a sense of wonderment and awe and acceptance of other far more transcendental things in existence, where it is possible to drift into a state of serenity and bliss—in short, where one is moving on to a more developed state in the same terms as a spiritual evolution. One would hope so.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Bert, if we could go back to some of your paintings that we acquired at an earlier date. Of those, the *The Victory girls* would be—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, there was a watercolour for it, which I think Sweeney had, and this is the painting. When was that one painted?

**JAMES GLEESON:** On the other side it says '1943'.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes; 1943 would be right. That is rather interesting. It puts it in the first year of the development of the crescent mouth, but I have broken it up with the teeth thing, whereas later I tended to leave the crescent form rather pure and unbroken. We were talking earlier about the little revelation for me when I stumbled on some of these forms being a key which unlocks an energy source. I am inclined to think it brings into play, probably, some older personality that lies buried in the deeper regions, and is probably with us all the time in this multiple layer personality thing. The crescent thing became a key, unlocking the kind of energy which, apparently, is the picture-forming element. I will have to do a lot more thinking about it now that this one has come up. There are a lot of rather interesting potentials in this concept of an archetype being conceived of as another personality, a separate personality or a facet of personality so old—that is, if Laird's view is right—that it is the horned god image, basically. This is part of one's personality that is tremendously old and continuous and that is still

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informing the present. This is the fascinating thing about it. One can go back, with the horned gods—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Years.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Way back. So I am fascinated with this one. This particular one is where the crescent form is still a little imperfect. It still ties in with certain social realist concepts. I remember reading in the *Truth*, I think it was, the Melbourne newspaper, a story about some girls up a back alley with some Diggers doing stripteases for them. They were great old fun and games we had there. This image stuck in my mind and formed the point of departure for this particular one.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What date did you say it was?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** This one is 1943.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You call them *Victory girls*.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** That one was *Victory girls*; that is the title of that one.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Had victory occurred in '43?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** No. We called them 'Victory Girls' because shiploads of GIs would be dumped on Melbourne at this time and all these schoolgirls—14 or 15 years old or what have you—would rush home after school and make skirts out of flags.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Goodness!

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Red, white and blue. Didn't they have this in Sydney?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Not that I was aware of.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** It was a predominant sort of image, or it was to me here. You would have all these little girls there with their red, white and blue skirts. They were tarting along Princes Bridge and St Kilda Road and so on, with all the GIs and the Diggers. The Diggers could not get a look in because they were all poor men compared to the Americans. So the girls became known as the 'Victory Girls'. It didn't relate to the event..

**JAMES GLEESON:** I thought they were girls who were celebrating the victory of war.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** No; it was because they wore Union Jacks. They had mini-skirts—very short little Union Jack skirts. They were quite a feature of the Melbourne blackout, and so there they were.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** That clears up a point for me; I was misconstruing the title. The next one chronologically is *Portrait of Ruth*, 1945.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** *Portrait of Ruth*. You have her full name there; I had forgotten that. She was an American girl who was part Negro and she had these marvellous features, a Negroid element there—absolutely wonderful. I painted about three portraits of her. One of them has vanished. All painters have certain paintings that vanish. One has vanished. One her husband bought. He was an American army dentist. We did the trade. He gave me army blankets and all sorts of gear like that for the painting. I would like to see it again. I have not seen it since those days. She was one of those incredibly beautiful girls. This one was simply painted direct when I was living in Robe Street, St Kilda. It took about an hour or so and was one of those direct things—I developed a run with it and went straight through from start to finish. So I was rather happy with the way that worked.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What would come next in this group?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** The other one in this group is No. 58. This one is not dated; it would be later. This *Antipodean head* would be earlier, because I started it when I was in London. This rather grey, bark-like head is 1958. I was still struggling with this particular image. This one developed rather a nice quality to it. It comes from it, so I am glad it is in the collection. There is little more I can say about that. I did do some work on it here. As I remember, I had some paintings when I was in London in very early 1960, and then I came out here for some exhibitions and I have been here pretty well ever since. I completed here some of the paintings I started in London. There is one in the Melbourne Gallery, which does not seem to ever be on view. It is *Explorer attacked by parrots*. I think it is quite a good painting, but apparently they do not think so because I never see it. This one would be in the middle sixties, but we haven't got a date there. It should be on the painting itself. It is a big one, a 4 by 5. It is a fairly straight monumental, perceptual type thing. I was still in my stage of being completely overawed by the old-fashioned gum tree. After thirteen years absence you realise what a unique, prehistoric beast it is. It had all these marvellous qualities. I had a fresh view of it, and so I started painting gum trees when they were extremely unpopular. They were regarded as an academic idea to be avoided at all costs.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This one was very heavily done, with real bark—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** I stuck bark on it. I did everything to try to get the sensation of this coruscated, tactile-rich quality that was in there at the trunks of these trees, so I built the thing right up here. These are built right up in great loads of acrylic and bark. I just had to keep piling it on till the feeling of it corresponded with the feeling I got from the real thing. It gave it a certain monumental tactile thing, but basically it is a direct perceptual painting.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Thanks, Bert. That completes that section. Now we have drawings we got from you and, I believe, an additional group which I have no photographs of, but which came in from the Tolarno Gallery recently.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes; 27, I think. I think they have been added to it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** We have not had those photographed yet.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** They still have to be organised.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That means another visit, I am afraid.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** That's all right. We can do that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** With this group, we have photographs of nearly every one of them. I think one might be missing. Could you run through them and give us any information at all. I have all the factual information, if you would just identify them with the title.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** *Self portrait in a room 1940.* This is No. 1, the first one on that list. It is a rather romantically tragic and sad little self-portrait. There's this berserk looking character there, stuck in the shadows in the corner, about to explode. That is sitting in the room in Jolimont, near East Melbourne. One can say little more than that because it is a note; it has a certain repressed, violent, explosive element to it, with this bug-eyed character there. The next one is rather horrific—*The Joie de vivre 1942.* That was when I was in the army and we were put in cattle pens at Wangaratta Training Camp. There were these enormously long cattle pens with loose floorboards, and rats would come out in the night and gallop over us when were asleep on our straw palliasses. A lot of the boys would get over the fence and come back roaring drunk in the middle of the night. A fairly common episode was the Diggers, in their baggy army clothes, coming back pie-eyed and performing. There were some marvellous conversations, which I wish I had been able to record. This is rather a grisly one of a drunken one losing some of his beer. The next one is *Psycho 1942.*

**JAMES GLEESON:** It is one of a series?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. There is a series of these drawings. I was sent down to the Heidelberg Military Hospital. I was in the nerve ward part of the time. Oddly enough, they sent me down because I had chronic and continuous sore throats, colds in the head and flus. I seemed to have had permanently high temperatures. They sent me down to the hospital. I think the CO then decided—and he was probably right—that it was probably just a psychosomatic thing. I didn't know the word then, but I am quite sure it probably was something of that nature. But he was a doctor, and he decided that I could use a rest. So they put me down there. I used to wander through the wards looking at all these characters. In the ward opposite they had mental cases. It was rather extraordinary because often, in the

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middle of the night, ambulances would bring in patients in various stages of acute desperation. They would also bring in prisoners of war. They would bring in Nazis and Italians who were still in their uniforms. Apparently, when they captured them in the Middle East they would herd them straight down to the ships and ship them straight back to Australia, to prison camp. So they would be unloaded there in full Nazi regalia, which was fascinating. I was a bit overwhelmed by this, but it didn't get into my painting, unfortunately. When I look back and think of the nature of the situation, I only wish I had got more of this data into the work I was doing.

I was finding it difficult to get any work done under the circumstances. I would do these surreptitious drawings sitting up in bed or creeping around the wards. I would watch these fellows. In one of the wards you would get a lot of the shell shock cases, or 'bomb happies' as we called them. There was this particular one, *Psycho*. He sat there with his hands spread on the coverlet, like this, and with his mouth open. There was a nerve in his neck that was throbbing and ticking away; it drove you mad just looking at it, let alone if you were the poor fellow who had it. So that image stayed. In the other *Psycho* here—I have called them all *Psycho*—they unloaded out of an ambulance a chap who had been in camp up at Seymour. Apparently, he had laid into his officers with a rifle. He was swinging a rifle and did some damage before they subdued him. It was a matter of luck whether he went off to jail or to a psychiatric ward. They sent him down and shut him up in a mental ward. I remember when he got out of the ambulance. Drawing this one is a memory—he got out of the ambulance; I was standing in the doorway of the ward opposite and I was watching them unload the ambulance. This chap came out with eyes absolutely bugged out of his head, in an awful state of tension, and was held on each side by guards and escorted in. That image stayed in my mind. Straight away I went off and did this pastel of it.

This other one was, I think, pre-army. I have also called it *Psycho*. This *No way out* one is later on in that series. This is a room that has the billowing, tent-like thing with it. This other one was just one of the patients there whom I was able to get to sit for me. This No. 6 sat for me. This one was later, after the army, 1943—*Happy chocko*. I suppose you remember the term 'chocko'; it was short for 'chocolate soldier'—those who are conscripted, who were involunteers. Needless to say, I was a conscript, so I was a 'chocko'. This one rather pleased me, and still does in that I got this nice, free, abandoned wash thing with the crescent thing emerging from it, which I converted into a reference to myself. It had this mad, happy look about it, and this 'swimming in a fog' look. So I thought, 'That's it—*Happy chocko*'.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You have already mentioned *No way out*.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** We have talked about that. As I say, you are told to report with a cut lunch. You try every way to get out of it, but you still have to report with a cut lunch. The next one, No. 9, 1943, was Angry Penguin days up at the offices. I saw quite a lot of Sunday Reed and John Perceval then and I remember them sitting at a desk there. I went home and did this memory thing of both of

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them, and that is how that one emerged. This is also 1943, and a similar theme. There was a Tivoli phase then, when Angry Penguins were preparing a book on Mo called *Mo's Memoirs*. They asked me if I would take some photographs of Mo. I was still using my little Foth-Derby camera then. So I went back stage to the Tivoli and took some photographs of Mo. I never did anything of Mo himself, although I got to know him briefly as a person. Like so many comics, when he was not performing he was a tragedian and a melancholic.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Really?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, a terrific hypochondriac, with his legs bound up for varicose veins. He was in a very sad and sorry state, but he would bounce out on the stage and put on one of these marvellous performances. So there is a penalty for being a comedian. These two are *At the Tiv*. You know the old Tivoli. Did you ever go there?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, in Sydney.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. This is the Melbourne one, which has well and since been demolished, unfortunately—a few years ago. Our friend with the puppet thing with the crescent came into play then. They are an interesting little pair there, which Sweeney took to with great joy when he saw them. These are the ones he was ripping out and externalising, which was so important. This *Saturday* one was a follow-on with that Australia Cinema one. This was rather a grotesque one. In the Melbourne streets then there was a heck of a lot of drunkenness and violence, as you can imagine, because of blackouts—full of troops, full of everything. Unfortunately, the drunken Digger was an over-familiar image there. So this was a rather biting comment on that—the Digger, and the empty cinema. Then there is *Night out*—a similar sort of thing, with the Victory Girls theme. Then there was the famous Ern Malley episode. I had lunch once with James McAuley and Harold Stewart—a rather disputatious sort of lunch, and we parted not the best of friends. I insisted on telling them that a lot of the Ern Malley poems were good poetry, which was an impertinence on my part as I wasn't a poet. They were not going to be told by some rank amateur what was good and what was bad. Perhaps they were right to take umbrage. Nevertheless, we did not get along too well. It makes an interesting reference, by the way, to my earlier thing of the crescent evoking an older personality. The Ern Malley hoax idea could do the same thing. How do we know that Ern Malley was not some real entity who, by the peculiarity of these circumstances, was evoked and brought to life again for a short period? He wrote damned good poetry.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I think so, in a real flow of spontaneous—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Some of those images were under the endless parody of the idea of the hoax. Some of the lines are superb. The poems are the incomplete circle and the straight drop of a question mark. You see endless references such as 'I am the black swan of trespass on alien waters'. This is poetry.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** Of course it is.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** You see it all the way through—well, not all the way through; they deliberately scrambled things and made nonsense out of passages of it. But they couldn't help themselves—there was a poetic sensibility at work. It brought another aspect of it, or part of it, into play. The energy thing obviously came into play because their claim was that they did it all in one afternoon. I have often doubted that; I felt they were gilding the lily a bit on that one. I think of the way a thing like this can trigger another energy level. It is possible that they may have brought a third invisible character into play, who wrote the poetry through them. They may have done it all very quickly—possibly.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That is a very interesting idea.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** It is an unpopular one, I know. I probably sound like a coot when anyone hears those sort of things put forward, although I understand physicists and psychologists are coming around to this. I accept the idea of multiple personality. I am simply putting them in a different order of time. I am saying that some of them could have come from a long time ago. I do not doubt for a moment that, quite unwittingly, Malley and Stewart conjured up a third personality that they still don't know about.

This other one there is a rather nasty self-portrait—I must have been self-critical then—*Malevolent self* No. 16, 1946. It looks like a pretty nasty character. That is the way I looked, and still look today sometimes. It certainly has all the malevolence and demonology in it. The figure was one of these. The next one is No. 17, 1947. I did a whole series of these small pastels and drawings. There was something about having this crescent form as a piece of sculpture. There was almost an archeological sense in this, which only came out a lot later when I did a few small plaster statues which I have had cast in bronze. With those ones there I realised that there was an archeological idea trying to express itself, as though a broken form was lying around but still grinning at you with this crescent mouth. There was some obscure thing that I was not able to bring to a complete focus. I was, in some roundabout way, trying to refer to some great lapse of time in the form.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, I see.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** This other one gets more like the *Malevolent self* one, No. 18. It was a fairly demonic one, with a sense, almost, of mutilated distortion. The *Back Alley 1947* gouache, No. 19, is this back alley concept—the Digger and the ladies of the back alley there in the blackout. In *Totem*, the form sitting on a rock in the ocean there, a bit isolated and sitting in infinity, is probably some reference to the time thing again. I am beginning to read these things differently after this little notion of the crescent evoking an earlier energy source, which in turn can be called a more primitive personality thing—or an earlier personality; perhaps he was not so primitive. It seems to know more than I do know, or is able to do the

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paintings better than I can when he is not present. The next one is No. 21, when I had that phase in Japan in early 1947. I went with Harry Roskolenko, the American poet. We moved around quite a bit and I went to Hiroshima on two occasions. This was a fairly straight watercolour of the shanty town thing and the ruins in the Hiroshima area. Whilst there I also met Foujita, the Japanese painter, the Westernised one, who was a friend of Modigliani in the early Paris school. I was fascinated to meet him and he allowed me to do this drawing of him, which he also signed for me.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It is not in your characteristic style. Was that deliberate?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** It was the travelling thing—only having limited media, a pencil and a notebook or a sketchbook and also the speed thing you are under in another painter's studio. It was a brief period and I wanted to get some sort of record of the encounter. I made this quick line pencil drawing of it. I have produced line drawings like that; if you look through early nudes and so forth, it is not unknown with my work to have a straight line thing. The next two get back to the Tivoli—No. 23 and No. 24, *Form* and the *Dancer*. That was a reference back to the Tivoli dancer idea in a more abstracted way. This was Paul Klee's wandering line making something out of that. I was getting more sophisticated as time went on—in my range of reference, anyhow. *Seductive woman* is my favourite mix of elements of the sexy protoplasmic form and the crescent and the high Victorian setting. It always gives a nice set of tensions to me; it is almost a jellyfish. By the way, this form also relates to jellyfish walking along the beach. I remember looking at a jellyfish and the four corners of it. The thing there definitely entered into the super sense of the transparency and the primitive shape. You entered into that. I was trying hard for some reason to get rid of the perceptual references and so on. I wanted to get back to some very basic and strong form, apparently, that would match the crescent mouth, that could work with it. Probably the thing that was nudging me all the time was the old personality at work there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I notice that in that one and in this one and in a large number of your works electric light seems to feature as an element, and naked bulbs or street lamps, lights—

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. I was rather disturbed many years later when I read Huxley's *Doors of Perception*. I think it was in the *Doors of Perception* that he had one of his what he called 'hell' experiences with the drug LSD, which he was taking at the time. I was rather disturbed when he described hell as a place lit by yellow-green naked electric light bulbs. So the correspondence of images is rather interesting. I have always felt it was rather an evil kind of situation—a closed, dark room with a naked electric light bulb, and this naked yellowish-green glare. It always became greenish. When this came out at Huxley I thought, 'That's it. I recognise that one straight off'. This one *Bus stop* was in London.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This was the electric light—

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**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, in a different form. It is rather interesting that the formal disintegration is keeping the crescent but trying to break it up. I have just noticed that one on that figure on the right. We are still a crescent but I am desperately trying to break it up and fragment it, and it fought back all the way. That one referred to an earlier painting I did in Melbourne, which was *Tram stop*. This one was called *Bus stop*. This was when I was in Paris and I was discovering collage and things like that. It was an experimental collage thing—

**JAMES GLEESON:** It included 27, did it?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes; it is a watercolour. I don't think there's gouache. I think it is all watercolour. There might be a bit of gouache with it; I usually did. Likewise, this is rather interesting. Those heads almost always had to lie horizontally, and I had to be still moving towards that other thing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** With the next one, the crescent is still there but it is blue.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, the crescent came back but with the disintegrated body. You will notice a lamp that came into play there. Again, we have in No. 30, *Breakfast*, this tormented horizontal form. It is rather interesting that. I was again disturbed because I had very little money, and all the worries that went with that. All the work I did then was on a small, furtive scale in the corner of whatever little room I had, wondering whether I could pay next week's rent.

**JAMES GLEESON:** A proper studio?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** No. Proper studios only came into existence many years later. Just about all of it is painted in your living bedroom. You would only have one room. That one was a fairly straight portrait. No. 31 is *American student*. I forget his name, but I knew him for a period of a few months. I got him to sit for that. That was just a direct pencil portrait. The next one is No.49, *Sitting woman*. Back to my Victoriana and sitting and light bulbs and crescent and so on. That is another where I was possibly getting nostalgic. You get these things where suddenly, if you drop a set of preoccupations for a while, it is as though the little bag invisibly fills up and then you have another fresh supply of energy to do that kind of thing. This is why it is an energy with its own formal principles. It can only express itself in a specific way.

With the other ones, obviously, I was looking at Picasso a lot there. With that No 33 gouache thing I did a whole series of experimental things. Like so many painters, I was getting half convinced by the abstract theme—painting as music, get rid of the image thing. I made my little essays in that direction. Some of the images I was using were disturbing and painful. Somehow or other the notion of a nice clean abstract image, where it was just pure art, had its appeal. But years later you realise that you cannot make an image without using images. With any image, no matter how abstract it is, you will project an image into it if you are not

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given one. There is no escape. Even then the crescent got in there standing on its end.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That one.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** That's another one again. I am adding more. The iconography is getting more sophisticated and elaborated in No. 34, the *Female gouache*. The next one, *Girl* No. 35, is the same; an experimental thing. Again, in a lot of this, I was transferring the Victory Girls image to Paris because they had their own night street life there, with all the girls up and down the boulevards. The two images just flowed in together and so this was produced in Frankfurt later. One becomes aware of this. Somehow or other, the girls being around like this is a primal sort of thing. This is sex in its simplest and most primal form. It is as old and as ancient as the human race. It is traditional. One is in a sense grasping at a kind of continuity that goes back through the entire history of the race. Looking at it in its sexual and fertility aspects, it creates an endless field of fascinating images. These are the other ones at the *Café* one series. These are probably the girls in the street plus all the people and students sitting at the cafes. They become disembodied, floating, fragmented forms, which are rather interesting. There are things there that I could continue with. See how the abstract lesson came into play there? I had had the courage then to separate elements of the body: the head and the breasts and the stomach, the hips and the buttocks. They are all separate and free-floating, which I have not noticed before. Then I disperse them around a sort of naturalistic space and let them float in their own sort of medium, which is rather an interesting point.

You are putting me in a corner by my having to talk about them as I go along. It becomes a voyage of discovery. With this one I was in Frankfurt in 1950—*Man and street*. The odd thing is that in Germany you tend to get very masculine imagery, whereas in France you get very feminine imagery. In Germany I started the *Antipodean head* thing. I was trying to push myself towards other forms because I was sick of my reliance on the crescent form. I didn't say it in these terms then, but as I would say from this point of time now, there have to be other sources of energy for your work to discover the forms to gel into. I think the energy is there—scratch it, get it moving, and then it gels into its own form. You are just an attendant, a kind of midwife to it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes; I understand.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** From Germany I went to Italy in the early fifties and I went into a phase of a wider range of experimentation. For example, the pan form could hardly help coming up in Italy because of all the Etruscan Roman pots and statuary and so on. It was an image there that started to preoccupy me. It became a male pan form, which is rather interesting to switch over to.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This is a monotype, this *Pan* of 1953?

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**ALBERT TUCKER:** That is just on smears glass with printers' ink. You turn a piece of paper around and draw on the back with a hard point. Then you trust to luck as to what happens. There are a lot of failures, but every now and then an interesting image would come up. I was beginning then to discover the role of the recognised accident, which ceases to be an accident when you recognise it. Once you recognise it and make use of it, then it ceases to be a recognised event, a natural event. Around that period I started to explore a greater range of things.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was it an oil based printing ink?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** A resin, mainly. I made up a mixture of resins that I would get—just the little painter ones you would buy in the art store—and mix in a small amount of oil colour with it. I did several like this. Then I would thin it down with turps and dammar and use it like a wash. Then I found that I could do monotypes or that this would print well. I forget the mix or resins I used, but it would be easy enough to find again. I think that is the first felt pen drawing I ever did, in 1953. I think they were only developed around that period.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I think so, yes.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** That again got my up-ended nostril thing, which was a form that occurred earlier.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, right back in the psycho ones. Now, *The Aviator*.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** This is a self-portrait. Sometimes I would be working away in the mirror and I would find myself looking up my own nose, and that would get into the drawing. With *Looking out a window*, No. 43, I was also at this point, getting a little preoccupied, probably, with less realism in stuff. They are doing it now in photorealism, but I think it is technically dependent. Hence they are debasing themselves into part of a technological process. Where that background is put in that is not photorealism. But using this close-up notion and this tactile rendering of the stonework, which interested me, is a problem. Then the romantic *Italian landscape* came into play, and inevitably in No. 45 the *Christ head*. Your bag gets full of these things—of the wounds and gashes and Christ heads and martyrs and crosses and virgins with a thousand swords plunged through them. If you constantly get these things in your attention, you are building up an energy field, which finally gets overloaded and then it has to burst out. It has to be discharged.

Again, that is in these ones, No. 46 and No. 47: *Figures watching ball* and *Small planet*. Again, there is that preoccupation with the stonework I saw looking out the window. I got involved in that. There is all this cross-fertilisation. You make an observation, a perceptual thing. You might deal with it as a straight perceptual experience, but then the moment you master that little perceptual thing, it starts combining and cross-fertilising with earlier preoccupations. This one is related

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back to this and then relates forward to my attempt to get this male figure, which became the Antipodean form. It is not tied down to the present point in time as a perceptual experience is, but is going backwards and forwards all the time. There is a scanning process, backwards, where you are breaking the time barrier to a degree. There is enormous scope for work in these areas. I only wish to God more painters were working on it. There do not seem to be enough of them working in these areas.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Which came first of these two?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** This one, *Figure watching ball*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And *Small planet* came second.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. They became romantic surrealist. Again, I used something I borrowed from photography—the close-up. Then there is a very distant thing there; that is where you get a tremendous depth in the thing. This little group reverts to the Pan thing, with the fairly straightforward little Pan essays. In *Self*, again, I played experimentally. I read somewhere that someone drew something by dipping a bit of string into a bottle of Indian ink, so I got a piece of string and dropped it into the ink—and there was a mirror; so that came out of that one.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. So it was drawn with a piece of string.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** On the spot, with a piece of string. With *Glenrowan* I was getting preoccupied with the Kelly thing again. When I say 'Kelly', I withdraw that because when I deal with these events I am not so interested in the specifics. I was interested in the armoured bushranger idea. That to me is much more interesting than, say, a Kelly thing. Nolan had dealt with the Kelly thing in a lyrical, narrative way. Again, the different temperaments came into play. I also had a community image thing, which I played with in a few little touches every now and then. Nolan got his big rebuttal report on the Kelly trial from me. I got it from the Salvation Army Old Men's Home. He took it off me and I haven't seen it since. I had this focus thing, so when I saw this Etruscan axe—this was a form, possibly because it was horizontal—I had to have that horizontal form. It had to follow—the axe-like form in No. 58, the seated one. I called that a faun. They became armoured fauns at first. I remembered an old postcard I had seen in Australia of a pile of Kelly armour after the Glenrowan thing. There were piles of armour sitting in the field. That little image just stayed in my mind. That was a reference to it there; that's why I called it *Glenrowan*. Notice how I had to lie that one down like that? I cut that piece out there and it becomes a squared crescent. I am hunting for this everywhere now that I have realised this was happening. *Female forms* was playing with the fertility idea again—obviously the fruit and so on, and notation. With *Head*, obviously I had been looking at Henry Moore.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Those two are closely related, aren't they?

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**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, often these are technical experiments like the string. I read that Moore often used to scrub his paper down with candles of tallow, and then he would work over that and rely on an accidental thing—the way the ink sat on the greased surface. I didn't have any candles then, and didn't bother to get them, but I thought 'Waxed crayons or something will do just as well'. So I did a couple of experimental things using the wax crayons. Even then I fitted in my little crescents—even on a small scale. You must agree that I am persistent. They have a couple of bulbous female forms there. Here they started to depart from the Henry Moore kick-off very quickly, which I think is fair enough. I think it is good to get stimulus from other painters' work as long as you don't stay with it. You look at their works and there is an aspect of it that stimulates you. It might be a technical procedure, it might be a form, or it might be a colour relationship—anything. These are valid starting points always because there is no such thing as art out of empty space, out of a void. We all depend on one another; we are all interconnected and interrelated. This is how all these interconnections show up. This is a valid way of how one can cross-fertilise all other painters.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Absolutely.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** This is a completely valid process. This figure here, No. 55, again uses the Moore's crayon thing but I had instantly reverted to exploring this Antipodean form. It is a complete crescent on its end.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, it is.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Again, I persisted and persisted. I reverted here, in *Marilyn Monroe looking for her father*. This was fairly straightforward. There was an Italian magazine that had a photograph of Marilyn Monroe at the age of two. In it there was a large photograph of the Italian Prime Minister at the time, a man named Fanfani. I think he is still around in Italian politics. Fanfani had this mouth and moustache; it looked like a father image to me. There was Marilyn Monroe, and there was talk underneath about how she was an orphan and all these things. I thought, 'Marilyn Monroe, looking for a father'. So I cut them both out and stuck them down into a landscape. *Laughing landscape* was as simple. There was a dental ad there of people showing their teeth all over the place, and there again my satirical aspect came into play. These were all notations, you remember. These were all in trunks for years and years, and Sweeney dug them out. He isolated them and started treating them seriously. It was only then that I started to look at it in this way myself. I had enough time to look back on what I had done. I wanted to fill in the picture. I was finding sheaf after sheaf of drawings. In many cases I had totally forgotten all about the whole phase of things. So when these came out they were filling in the picture, and I realised they were an essential part of it all, all these exploratory things. Happily, a lot of them are able to stand on their own. I am probably talking too much too fast, but when I get on these themes away it goes. With *Gallop ing faun* it is the armoured bushranger again, but he is back to being the faun, and just became a kind of

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image. Again, it is a slightly totemic form, a resin one. No. 60 was one of those monotype type ones I was telling you about.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** I would quickly work it with a resin on some art paper and then do a pressing on top of it. Sometimes the pressing would come out; sometimes the original one would work better. So I would use either one or the other. It was a matter of speed and the way you pressed it. Sometimes I would quickly shuffle the image to blur it a bit timewise, to stop this excessively delineating confronted image, to use a deliberate accident, a well controlled accident, to blur that moment of time thing. The other one, No. 57, is *Female head*. That was when I was living in Craven Hill and I had life classes with Frances Lymburner. I knew a girl who would pose for us and a couple of others, and we would draw. This came out of that little phase. With *Female totem* we are getting into another departure—a monumental female thing. This would be a hangover from the Henry Moore experiment earlier. With No. 58, *Bushrangers*, I am getting more together, with the armoured head and Antipodean head joining up and becoming a composition thing, equipped with rifles and cartridge belts.

This was painted in New York. There was a larger painting of this, a 4 by 5, where I lived in an area in the Greenwich Village. There were blocks of what the Americans called brownstone, which was a stone they quarried on Manhattan Island and did a lot their building with. There were some blocks of this brownstone in the backyard. I remember some of it was chipped off. It was a fairly soft stone, so I took it up and I ground it up. It was a pinky brown colour. I was attracted to the colour and I ground it up. At this point I had had acrylics. Around the early fifties I got this from Alberto Burrie. We are selling a kind of acrylic—one of the earliest polyvinyl acetates—in an industrial form called polyvinyl acetate; at least, they called it polyvinyl. When I was in Burrie's studio he had all these cans around, and I said, 'What's this?' He spoke English quite well, and he told me all about it. So I rushed off, not to miss out on these things, on new media. I found this was ideal for the Australian image, which I could never get out in oil. Where you could have a dried out, mortared effect it gave you tactile possibilities that were almost impossible to get with oil. I had been doing it earlier, loading the oil with wax and sand and sawdust, but it was never quite satisfactory. But once I got on to the acrylic, where I could use it full strength and load it with virtually anything, I was home and away. Little innovations like this could have launched a whole thing. This was a note for the bigger painting that I did using this brownstone mixed with acrylic.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was the *Antipodean head* which we have done with that acrylic?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** That was polyvinyl acetate. I got that in London. It was a variety I got from one of the big chemical firms in London. I forget the name of it. This was when Nolan did his *Leda and the swan* thing. I put him onto the

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polyvinyl acetate. He dropped all the medium he was using, his ripolin and so on. When he went out—he is a more organised man than I am—he quickly tracked down one of these firms and got this in. He threw out all his other stuff and then embarked on the Mrs Fraser things in acrylics and then later in the *Leda and the swan* ones, which actually flowed from Alberto Burrie through me to him in this particular case. I am only mentioning this as a little historical note, as something of some worth. In *Armoured fauns fighting* I was hesitating between fauns and bushrangers. I saw the armoured bushranger as a kind of Australian faun or a pan figure—something that came out of the elements and was fighting for truth and justice. The whole Kelly episode was nothing more or less than a continuation of the Irish wars in Australia. Kelly, if he was interpreted correctly, is not so much a gangster bush larrikin, as he is usually and conventionally interpreted. He was an abortive revolutionary. He was part of a revolutionary thing that did not focus or move into that stage—happily, of course. Who wants revolutions if they can avoid them?

In *Explorer* No. 66, 1967, we are moving on there. In No. 67 here, the *Armoured fauns fighting*, we are getting back the Australiana and those coming into the back. I was back in Australia at this point and the explorer idea was beginning to work with me. I was beginning to feel that rather strongly and I was again altering these forms. For quite a while I developed this triangular form, which I seemed to get a fair bit of energy from, though it probably has some extra mileage still in there. The other *Explorers* are there—*Explorer* and *Antipodean figures*—which are still functioning with me. And *Explorer resting*—

**JAMES GLEESON:** They were done in New York?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** The '67 ones are. This one was Australia, I think. I went to New York in '67 and I spent about eight months working there. This was Australia when I came back.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The *Explorer crossing river*?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. My demonic cynicism came into play again with the *Acrobat*, No. 72. I was satirising myself, in a way. This launched a series of beach ones. The crescent form was varying then; it was flattening and becoming longer and thinner. While I was able to get some mileage out of that, it didn't last very long. I had to have that positive. Now I realise that this had to have that horned shape to function. For example, this *Death form*—

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's a very powerful drawing, I think.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** It does include the crescents quite effectively there and in a fairly disguised form.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Why the title *Death form*?

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**ALBERT TUCKER:** The teeth in it and the eye socket—I had a reference to a skeletal element coming into it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It is very sinister.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Plus a memory of the abstract forms, of my earlier protoplasmic forms. Also, a touch of the Henry Moore thing came into play there. That is *Eliza*. There is a little group of those *Elizas* which have not really been looked at yet. I will show you a little group later of a series I worked on that I could not complete. Only a couple of weeks ago I suddenly had a mad burst of energy, and I went right through them and got them done, the little bush fellows. It is the same principle as the female convict in the bush thing. A bag empties—it might hibernate for years—then all of a sudden it fills up and activates. There is something in the outside environment that you might not even recognise that triggers it. It triggers this bottom level that is below and outside our level of awareness. There is so much that we are aware of that is impinging itself. This one, again, is playing around. I did use a narrative element there, a preoccupation with Eliza Callaghan. This again was purely through my friend Bob Close, the author who wrote the book *Prends-moi Matelot!* He was put in jail for writing it here, fled Australia and is still away. He lived out of Australia ever since, once he got out. I knew him in Paris. He came to stay with me once when I was living in London. He was researching Eliza Callaghan. He went out and came back with great photostats of the whole thing there—the charge against Eliza and the sentence.

**JAMES GLEESON:** She was a real person?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes. She was the wife of John Batman. There is a lot of our Melbourne history there that comes from under the rug. I could tell you a big story about Eliza. She was a female convict who was transported here. She escaped in Tasmania, found her way through the bush and encountered John Batman, who was a free settler with a property in Northern Tasmania. She became his secret mistress. All this sort of stuff is officially very unpopular. It will be a bit long in the telling. It did sidetrack us a lot. But it is a very interesting story, this one of Eliza. There are a few Eliza drawings and paintings of this nature. Some of those forms are rather interesting—see the convict arrow. I found I had a lot of energy locked up in it and I used that, the triangular form and the black and white—

**JAMES GLEESON:** And the crescent is still there?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** The crescent, yes. Inevitably it comes in whether I like it or not. That is *Sunbather*; you can see the spot and the black sun. Another straight drawing there is *Figure in the dark*. That is No. 79. That, again, is a reference back, a nostalgic one. Then there is *Sur la plage*. Again, there is irony in the French title. There is this demonic little lady prancing around on the beach and here she is getting her comeuppance with the environment there. This parrot is

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having a go at her in No. 81, *Woman attacked by parrot*. It is interesting the way the arms developed there into curious kinds of things. So long as you do something, you don't know where the heck it has come from or what it is all about, and sometimes you only make the connection a heck of a lot later on. *Lying figure* goes back to that little archaeological reference. This one is *John Perceval*. He was up here. I took a series of quick Polaroid photographs. John was up here one day and he seemed to be moving his head. It got this curious distortion in the eye, so I arrested the rest of the face and worked on this thing that brought that one out. It is quite like him.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It is; it is very recognisable.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** The other one is jellyfish protoplasmic sex—*Totem on the beach*, No. 84. You get the jellyfish reference much more overtly in that one. With the *Female faun* pastel, our light comes back again and the demonic aspect moves into it again. Again, it is a prancing figure, but all the parts of the anatomy are jumbled up and you are definitely getting the paw thing, which is rather an alarming little addition. The cloven hoof touch is moving into play there. This is the voyeur, *Love at first sight*—again, an ironic reference. It is trying to make the little Victory Girl there a sexually tantalising lady, which is pretty hard for her to be. *Rainforest* acrylic is the bigger reproduction we have over there, or is it—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, it is.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** That one was when I was in Springbrook, in Queensland. I did some painting in some of the patches of rainforest around there and went out for a few days. This was a direct one from the direct painting. It was one of the very rare times I would take things out and work outside. This again was a bit like the *Love at first sight*, the *Flirtation* one. But I am working in the male form, in the Antipodean male form, as a foreground dominating presence. The female form starts getting coquettish and prancing around and trying to entice him there. I think it does work, whereas it could not have worked earlier, with those factors coming into it. With the two *Seated nudes*, I had had bursts of using the model again directly. These are direct ones straight from a model: we have No. 90, No. 91 and No. 92. This is a later city one, including some of the elements of the cloven feet/hands thing. There is a very clear demonic reference there. The same *City* crescent form is a later version. No. 92 was again the *Explorer* image, which is fairly self-explanatory.

It sounds like a tour guide, doesn't it? It is the sort of thing you swear you will never do, this sort of thing. But as long as one can chat about the circumstances around the painting—you are not trying to explain things—and then make connections, which you do backwards and forwards, I suppose it is fair enough.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I think some good should come out of it.

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**ALBERT TUCKER:** Let us hope so. I don't know. I have just rambled on and let things fall where they may.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Bert, you have travelled a lot all over the world. Could you tell me when you were where and the approximate dates.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** In early 1947 I went to Japan with Roskolenko for three and a half months. When I came back I broke up with Joy—or she broke up with me, would be truer to say. I left, in the confused state of mind I was in, for Europe in October; I managed to borrow money from two sources to get away. I was bent on getting to Europe. I was still in the grip of the romantic image of Paris, which you would know—life was so desperate and I couldn't count on being alive next year, so I was going to see Paris before I died, come hell or high water! This is 30 years ago or more. So I left in '47. I was in London for a while, then I went to Paris.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I think I met you in London.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Yes, that's right, at Cock Fosters. That was the time I was there. I was almost going to live at Cock Fosters—I had made arrangements—and then all of a sudden I had one of those mad things which, in looking back, saved my skin. I had applied also for a job as a schoolteacher, an art lecturer, with the London County Council. Then I felt that I couldn't do it, that it was impossible, that I just couldn't stand it. So I sold whatever things I could get my hands on, including Australian winter underwear. I got 19 pounds together and fled for Paris, determined I would see it—'Even if I starve, I'll see it'. I got to Paris and I did manage to survive there. I was there intermittently for about four years, in all.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Were you going to come back to London?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** I was in Germany. I was able to come back to London occasionally. When I look back, I have no idea how I managed these things, because the risks were tremendous. You would pay the fare with the last scrap of money you had and you would have enough to live on, enough for a meat pie afterwards and then nothing else. It was a really desperate period. I got to Germany for nearly a year, then down to Italy, back to Paris, and back down to Italy. I was in Italy, in Liguria, for nearly a year and in Rome and near Rome for about three years. Then I went back to London for two years, and from there to New York.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What year are we up to now?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** We are up to New York, in 1958. I was there for two years. I went back to London for a show at Waddingtons in early 1960, and then came back to Australia for a series of Museum of Modern Art shows.

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**JAMES GLEESON:** So you were away a long time?

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Thirteen years in that one stretch. I remained in Australia until 1967. I went over and spent a little time there—not terribly long; I think it was about a four-month trip that time. I managed to arrange some exhibitions in New York and Mexico City and returned to Australia and worked hard for the best part of eighteen months. I then went over again and stayed for nearly a year this time. I did quite a lot of work in New York and stayed in New York for about eight months. I then came back; I think it was in late 1969. I have been here since, except for a couple of short quick trips to Bali and the Philippines. Otherwise here I still am. So I hope I will be able to go out and do something, have another look around, because I could probably use the stimulus.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Bert, thanks very much indeed. We'll be back to you when we get the photographs from those other drawings.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** Thanks, Jim. I just hope I have not rambled too much.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Not a bit.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** As I say, getting these little points of stimulation one keeps being recharged and going on and on. A lot of it is probably boring, but still—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Not at all. It is all very useful.

**ALBERT TUCKER:** All bits and pieces.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Thanks very much, Bert.