

Tuckson, John Anthony (1921–1973)

John Anthony Tuckson, artist and art-gallery administrator, was born in 1921 at Port Said, Egypt. From the age of 8 Tony was sent to boarding school in England and visited the Canal during holidays. After studying painting for two years at the Hornsey School of Art, London, he attended night-classes at the Kingston School of Art.

Enlisting in the Royal Air Force in 1940, Tuckson trained as a pilot in Canada, and flew Spitfires over Britain and Europe. In 1941 he was commissioned. He arrived in Darwin in 1942 with No.54 Squadron, R.A.F., and saw action against the Japanese. On leave in Sydney, he married Dorothea Margaret Bisset, a munitions worker and former design student, in 1943 at St James's Church of England, Turramurra. He served in a training unit as an instructor in Wirraway aircraft and continued sketching throughout the war, returning to London in 1945.

Tuckson was demobilized from the R.A.F. with the rank of flight lieutenant in 1946 in Sydney. He studied at East Sydney Technical College for 3 years under the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme, qualified in 1949, and began exhibiting with the Society of Artists and the Contemporary Art Society of Australia. Appointed assistant-director of the National Art Gallery of New South Wales (now AGNSW) under Hal Missingham in 1950, he was reclassified as deputy-director in 1957.

In 1949 Tuckson had been 'bowled over' by an exhibition in Sydney of the Berndt collection of Aboriginal art from Arnhem Land. He accompanied Stuart Scougall, an orthopaedic surgeon and art patron, to Melville Island and Arnhem Land in 1958 and 1959 on collecting expeditions for the gallery. Most spectacular in the Scougall gift was a group of carved and painted *pukamani* burial-ceremony poles: Tuckson installed them near the entrance to the gallery in 1959. He prepared a large exhibition of Aboriginal bark paintings, carved figures, and sacred and secular objects, which toured (1960-61) all State galleries. It gave rise to a book edited by Berndt, *Australian Aboriginal Art* (New York, 1964). Tuckson shifted Australia's perception of Aboriginal art. Whereas it had been exhibited as ethnographica in natural-history museums, he gave it the status of fine art.

Other curatorial innovations for which he was responsible included the introduction of Melanesian art to the gallery's collection in 1962, the major exhibition, *Melanesian Art*, in 1966, and the collection-display, *Aboriginal and Melanesian Art*, that opened in 1973. Following Tuckson's overseas study tour in 1967-68, the architect Andrew Anderson was engaged to upgrade and extend the AGNSW, which reopened in 1972

Tuckson exhibited a mere 9 of his own paintings between 1954 and 1962 and claimed that he was 'only a Sunday painter'. Until 1958 he had been a 'School of Paris' painter of figure compositions, nudes, heads, and occasional still lifes and interiors. The derivative style obscured the merits of this work. Tuckson always painted at home, from May 1949 in Gordon, and from 1962 in another new house at Wahroonga.

In 1970 Tuckson's first solo exhibition, at Watters Gallery, presented 1 new painting, with 64 from 1958-65. His next and last exhibition, of 22 large, new works, was held in 1973. Tuckson's late abstract paintings were a kind of self-portraiture, emphasizing an inner, subjective world. His work was exhibited by Watters Gallery until it closed in 2018.

Tuckson died of cancer in 1973 at Wahroonga. His wife and their son survived him. The AGNSW held a memorial exhibition in 1976. A survey exhibition *Painting Forever: Tony Tuckson* curated by the National Gallery of Australia opened in 2000. In 2018 *The Abstract Sublime*, a survey of Tuckson's abstract paintings opened at the AGNSW. His work is in all major Australian public collections.

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