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| Australian Social Realism |
| **[Enter any *variant forms* of your headword – OPTIONAL]** |
| Throughout the economic depression and the Second World War, progressive artists in Australia were closely aligned with the international anti-Fascist cause. Social realist artists such as Noel Counihan (1913-86), Vic and Ailsa O’Connor (1918-2010; 1921-80), Jacqueline Hick (1919-2004), Nan Hortin (1916-71), and Roy Dalgarno (1910-2001) drew upon realist and expressionist tendencies in European and American modernism to depict universalised expressions of human suffering and hope. They felt this influence most directly through the expressionist canvases of European émigrés like Josl Bergner (b.1920), Danila Vassilieff (1897-1958), and Sali Herman (1898-1993). Many artists in the Social Realist group were active in the left-leaning Melbourne Contemporary Art Society, where they engaged in heated debates about the social role of modern art. The Social Realists saw themselves as creative witnesses to current events, employing accessible, figurative, and often narrative forms to depict the Australian character, the nature of work, poverty and labour relations, freedom of speech, anti-Semitism and wartime experiences. Expressive realism was the most economical and creative way to connect directly with audience emotions, and functioned to persuade individuals to change their minds and to take action. |
| Throughout the economic depression and the Second World War, progressive artists in Australia were closely aligned with the international anti-Fascist cause. Social realist artists such as Noel Counihan (1913-86), Vic and Ailsa O’Connor (1918-2010; 1921-80), Jacqueline Hick (1919-2004), Nan Hortin (1916-71), and Roy Dalgarno (1910-2001) drew upon realist and expressionist tendencies in European and American modernism to depict universalised expressions of human suffering and hope. They felt this influence most directly through the expressionist canvases of European émigrés like Josl Bergner (b.1920), Danila Vassilieff (1897-1958), and Sali Herman (1898-1993). Many artists in the Social Realist group were active in the left-leaning Melbourne Contemporary Art Society, where they engaged in heated debates about the social role of modern art. The Social Realists saw themselves as creative witnesses to current events, employing accessible, figurative, and often narrative forms to depict the Australian character, the nature of work, poverty and labour relations, freedom of speech, anti-Semitism and wartime experiences. Expressive realism was the most economical and creative way to connect directly with audience emotions, and functioned to persuade individuals to change their minds and to take action.  Image: lateshift.jpeg  Figure 1 Jacqueline Hick, *Late shift workers* (1945), oil on canvas 51.0 x 61.0 cm stretcher; 66.6 x 76.7 x 5.0 cm frame, AGNSW  [http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/7826/]  Through rendering ‘typical’ characters and everyday scenes, Social Realist artists could express and recuperate the fragmented and alienated nature of life under capitalism. They created new and challenging perspectives by painting from the point of view of workers and other marginalised groups such as women, migrants, and aborigines. The challenge was to depict recognisable social scenarios and social types that were also richly individualised, as in Hick’s *Late Shift Workers* (1945). In a similar vein, Counihan’s *At the Start of the March, 1932* (1942) features an abstracted memory of a family at an unemployed workers’ demonstration during the depression, and connects two dark periods in history (the Depression and the Second World War) through the unifying figure of a stoic Australian family pulling together in troubled times. Like many Social Realist figures, the family in Counihan’s painting are simultaneously an individual family group while also representative of a collective Australian spirit and generalisable humanist values. |
| Further reading:  (The Dictionary of Australian Artists Online)  (Haese)  (Hayward Gallery)  (Merewether)  (O'Connor) |