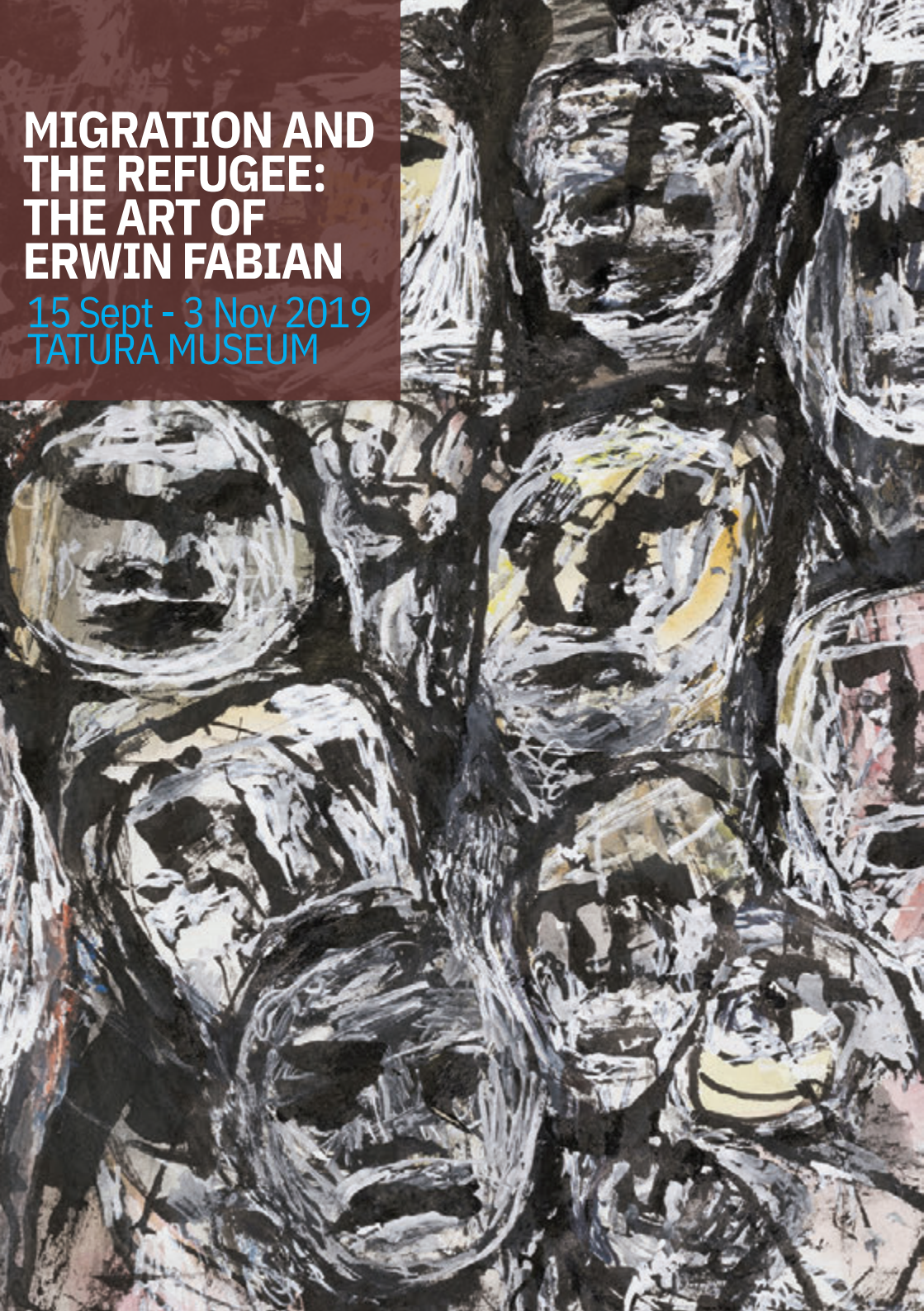






**MIGRATION AND  
THE REFUGEE:  
THE ART OF  
ERWIN FABIAN**

15 Sept - 3 Nov 2019  
TATURA MUSEUM





*Erwin Fabian in his North Melbourne studio.*

*Photograph by Viki Petherbridge*



## Erwin Fabian

Erwin Fridrich Alfred Fabian was born into a family of artists in Berlin on 5 November 1915. His parents Max and Else had met at an art class — Max the teacher and a well-known painter, Else one of his students. Art filled the home they made for themselves and their children.

From a young age Fabian hoped to be an artist. He painted and drew and took evening classes at the School of Applied Arts in Berlin. In 1937 he left Germany, having been warned that, as a Jew, he was not safe. From 1938 to June 1940 Fabian lived in London, where his artistic skills allowed him to eke out an existence working on the design of book covers and advertising posters.

On 28 June 1940, Fabian was arrested and interned, one of thousands of ‘enemy aliens’ in wartime Britain to suffer this fate. On 10 July, he and more than 2,000 other men, most of them refugees from Hitler’s Reich, and most of them Jewish, were herded aboard the HMT *Dunera* at Liverpool and deported to Australia, where they were to be interned for the duration of the war.

The *Dunera* docked in Sydney on 6 September 1940. For the next eight and a half months, Fabian was interned at Hay, in the New South Wales Riverina. In camp 7, he met emerging and established artists of rare talent and creativity.

The Bauhaus-trained artist Georg Teltscher lived in the same hut, number 26. Klaus Friedeberger, like Fabian an aspiring artist from Berlin, was in hut 23. Friedeberger and Fabian became close friends, and remain so eighty years later. Both men had sketched pictures on the *Dunera*, and they continued to make art in the camp, experimenting with styles and techniques. Their teacher was the distinguished artist Hein Heckroth, hut 25.

In May 1941, Fabian was among a group of about 400 internees who were moved to an internment camp in Orange, in the Central Tablelands of New South Wales. After two months there, they were transferred to Tatura in the Goulburn Valley, Victoria. At both Orange and Tatura, Fabian continued to create a visual record of his internment, using whatever materials he could find.

In early 1942, the *Dunera* internees learned that they would be allowed to join an unarmed labour company of the Australian army. To win his freedom, Fabian decided to enlist. Hundreds of *Dunera* internees made the same choice.

Art was a constant through Fabian’s army life. A vocation became a job when he was transferred from the 8th Employment Company to the Army Education Service, where his task was to illustrate

army publications. He was making his way as an artist, and as part of the developing modernist art scene in Australia. Daryl Lindsay, John Reed and Sidney Nolan all knew his work. In 1943, Lindsay purchased one of Fabian's monotypes for the National Gallery of Victoria.

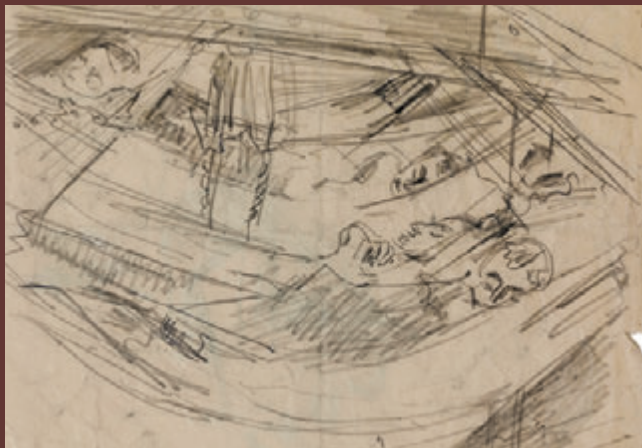
Fabian left the army in 1946. For the next fifteen or so years he made a living as a graphic designer, first in Melbourne and then in London. In 1949, nine years after being deported from Britain as an enemy alien, he returned as an Australian, having been naturalised in 1945. Of the many young Australian artists and intellectuals who made their way to Britain in the post-war years, few can have taken so complex a path. In London, work was intermittent. Among other jobs, Fabian designed book covers for Penguin, and taught at the School of Printing and Graphic Arts. The teaching job came courtesy of George Adams (formerly Georg Teltscher), his friend from hut 26 at Hay.

Fabian returned to Melbourne in 1962 and has lived there since, while remaining a regular visitor to Europe. Back in Australia, he turned from graphic design to sculpture, working mostly with metal, sometimes with wood, and occasionally with plastic. The different elements in his sculptures rely on friction and balance to form the whole, with welds and joins a last resort. He tinkers until he sees 'harmony' and is satisfied, at least to some extent. For a modest man and artist such as Fabian, there is potential for improvement in every work.

Since 1965 Fabian has shown in more than sixty exhibitions, in Australia, Britain and Germany. His sculptures, drawings and paintings are held in public and private collections in Australia and Europe. He works still in his North Melbourne studio, pushed by a continuing impulse to sculpt and draw, to make art. Exhibitions and sales have never been his motivation. In recent times, depictions of refugees in the media have impelled Fabian to sketch, many decades after he drew and painted his own refugee experience. At the age of 103, his creativity is undimmed.

Information taken from a chapter by Bill Gammage in Ken Inglis et al., *Dunera Lives: Profiles* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, forthcoming 2020).

# Exhibition Artworks



**1. Untitled (1940)**  
Pencil on paper



**2. Untitled (1940)**  
Pencil on paper



**3. Untitled (1941)**  
Watercolour on paper

**4. Untitled (23 July 1941)**

Pen on paper



**5. Untitled (24 October 1941)**

Charcoal, pen on paper



**6. Untitled (date unknown)**

Charcoal on paper





7. Untitled (date unknown)

Charcoal on paper

8. Untitled (1942)

Ink on paper



9. Untitled (date unknown)

Ink, pen on paper





**10. Untitled (1941)**

Ink, pen on paper



**11. Untitled (1941)**

Ink, pen on paper



**12. Untitled (1941)**

Ink, pen on paper



13. Untitled (1941)

Ink, pen on paper



14. Untitled (date unknown)

Ink, pen on paper



15. Cover for the *Current Affairs Bulletin*  
(12 March 1945)

Print



**16. Untitled (c. 2016–19)**

Ink, correction fluid, watercolour on paper



**17. Untitled (c. 2016–19)**

Ink, correction fluid on paper



**18. Untitled (c. 2016–19)**

Ink, correction fluid on paper





**19. Untitled (c. 2016–19)**  
Ink, correction fluid on paper



**20. Untitled (c. 2016–19)**  
Ink, correction fluid on paper



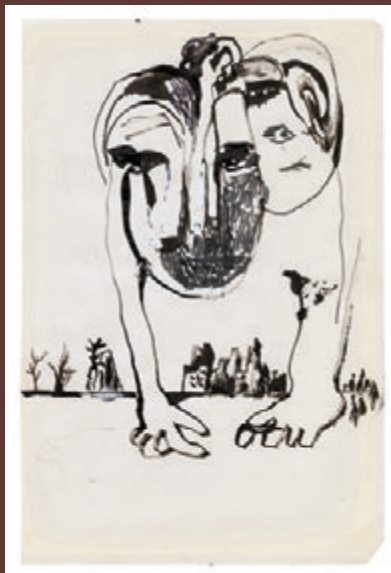
**21. Untitled (c. 2016–19)**  
Ink, correction fluid, watercolour on paper



**22. Untitled (c. 2016–19)**  
Ink, correction fluid on paper



**23. Untitled (c. 2016–19)**  
Ink, correction fluid on paper



**24. Untitled (c. 2016–19)**  
Ink, correction fluid on paper



**25. Lampedusa (c. 2017)**  
Steel

## Migration and the Refugee:

### The Art of Erwin Fabian

The artworks in this exhibition capture the creative and emotional response of visual artist and sculptor Erwin Fabian to the plight of refugees. Some of the works depict his experience of forced migration when he was one of about 2,000 male 'enemy aliens' transported from Britain to Australia on the HMT *Dunera* in 1940.

Beginning with images of the cramped quarters on the ship, the works guide us through Fabian's first years in Australia, interned in camps at Hay and Orange, New South Wales (1940–41) and then Tatura, Victoria (1941–42). Sketches and paintings conjure the chilling inaction of internment. Rudimentary camp buildings rise from bare landscapes. In figure 3, the stillness of water and sky at Hay is striking. But even in Hay's desolate landscape, Fabian gives us life in the form of shrubs. The possibility of growth.

Fabian portrays the internee variously in his work. Sketches from aboard the *Dunera* capture anonymous sleeping men, their portraits divorced from the external environment of the ship. In the camps, Fabian's subjects smoke, smile, sit despondently and gather to play cards in an environment of makeshift entertainment and perpetual boredom. The works evoke a sense of lassitude. Yet there is also a dynamic energy to the inner life that Fabian expresses: while the body is still, the mind wanders down creative paths. In figure 4, Fabian depicts outsiders looking in, well-to-do couples strolling past the camp with a vague curiosity. Figure 8 is shown out of chronological order, to allow for its grouping with works of a similar style.

Figures 9–14 show a slow transformation into the surreal, perhaps a creative antidote to the stasis of internment. In figure 9, we see a man playing a musical instrument, a dog sitting by his side, in a bizarre seascape with naked bodies in the background. The lack of concrete boundaries in the image poses a question: does the man exist at all? Figures 10 and 11 show man as half tree, morphing into the stark natural environment in the background. Fabian positions the men in these images atop a glass chest that contains miniature camp buildings, an allusion perhaps to the artist's temporary escape from internment to the realm of dreams. Figure 14 signals a full transformation. There are no buildings in sight: man and woman emerge from the sea on hands and knees. Somehow, humans and shells fit together in this image of the Australian beach.

The fact that most of these works are untitled indicates that Fabian never intended to show them. The art is certainly deeply personal. At the same time, the works speak to global themes of forced migration and the experiences of refugees. The contemporary pieces, drawn seventy years after Fabian's internment, evoke a feeling of crisis. Images and news reports of men, women and children incarcerated on Manus island and Nauru prompted the works. The artist returns to the most basic of materials, using ink and layers of correction fluid on paper to depict refugees as indistinct black figures and their guards as creatures with horrifying grins.

These works show the desperate circumstances that refugees experience, and the



persistence of global attitudes to refugees, which divide, police and displace. Fabian's subjects travel in groups, yet they are separated from each other, and the rest of the world, by location or sensory deprivation. Some are faceless; some wear identical expressions of pain. The abstract style distorts size and perspective, communicating an unsettled anguish, stronger perhaps than that conveyed in his earlier works. Fabian offers a vision of a dystopian world, his pictures all the more vivid and confronting when we remember that this art was not made at a distance: the artist has known the refugee's life.

At the centre of the exhibition stands Fabian's sculpture *Lampedusa*, named after the Italian island in the Mediterranean Sea. Since the early 2000s, when Lampedusa became a major transit point for African migrants seeking to enter Europe, it has been associated with tragedy: 1,151 migrants have drowned in the Mediterranean since 2018 alone. In that time, more than 10,000 others have been forced to return to North Africa. In June 2019, Italy introduced strict measures regarding foreign boats in its waters, and ports were closed to rescue boats carrying migrants. By attaching the name *Lampedusa* to this stark metal sculpture, Fabian invites us once again to think on the perilous and unforgiving circumstances that all too often blight the lives of migrants and refugees.

The works in this exhibition are compelling meditations on refugees' experiences. While the pictures from internment capture but one moment in the artist's extraordinary life, they tell of a recurring theme in Australian history. Perhaps it is this that Fabian wants us to consider. What have we learned?

## Poetry: Franz Philipp

Fabian's artworks are accompanied by the poetry of Franz Philipp (1914–1970), a *Dunera* internee originally from Vienna. After the war, he lived in Melbourne, forging a career as an art historian. His book on the work of Arthur Boyd, published in 1967, remains a landmark text in Australian art scholarship.

The excerpts of Philipp's poetry come from a notebook he kept between the early 1930s and the mid-1940s. A deeply diffident man, Philipp never intended his poetry for other eyes. It is published here with the permission of his daughters, who retain possession of the notebook. The translations are by Kate Garrett.

As with Fabian's art, themes of displacement and uncertainty form the backbone of much of Philipp's poetry. The verses explore the trauma of his past: fond memories of studies in Vienna, cut short; internment in Dachau; escape to Britain; and ultimately deportation to Australia. In July 1939, one year before deportation, we see the world through his eyes, those of an outsider:

***Can I truly hope for more, than to stand  
at the edge of the dream?***

Profoundly personal and yet expansive in scope, Philipp's poetry is a raw expression of what it is to be persecuted, to be displaced. These lines were written more than seventy years ago, in 1946:

***When the day's slaughter is over  
No one asks, have we lost? have we won?  
When the horror, exhaustion are over,  
who cares 'bout the war's outcome?***

Philipp's words, like Fabian's art, have lost none of their relevance.

---

**The artworks in this exhibition are for sale. Enquiries through:**

**Australian Galleries**

35 Derby Street, Collingwood, VIC 3066  
australiangalleries.com.au

or

**Robin Gibson Gallery**

278 Liverpool Street, Darlinghurst, NSW 2010  
robingibson.net

---

*Thanks to the indefatigable Erwin Fabian for offering his artworks for show, and to his friend and colleague Emil Toonen, whose help was vital to staging this exhibition.*

*The exhibition was made possible through funding from Monash University, Gandel Philanthropy, the Besen Family Foundation, and the Gordon Darling Foundation. The organisers are grateful for their generosity.*

*The wonderful volunteers who staff the Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum have worked tirelessly in support of this exhibition. Their dedication ensures that the Museum will continue to grow as an important cultural institution.*

*Our thanks to Jana Wendt, for opening the exhibition, and to Carol Bunyan, Andrew McNamara, Kate Manton, Lisa Mitchell, Patrick Rychner, Helen Spark, Julius Stocky, Rhiannon Tanner and Christina Twomey.*

*Kate Garrett, Emilie Jeffreys and Georgina Rychner have brought ideas, enthusiasm and inspiration to this exhibition. It is richer for their involvement.*



MONASH University



Besen Family  
FOUNDATION

