



# INTRODUCTION

## Sylvia and Tony Convey – Two Practices; Two Hearts

I am interested in how they met.

Arranged according to the laws of chance, it seems.

Their first encounter in 1967 was comfortingly mundane – and brief. It might, though, have contained the seeds of a shared epiphany; perhaps enunciated visually in Sylvia Convey's chthonic double portrait from the 1990s, in which the two artists seemingly grow from or into the landscape of which they are as integral a part as the tumescent, red flowers that surround them.

Here they are, talking separately, in 1989 to the German writer Ulli Beier about their coming together. Tony Convey: "My life really changed when I returned to Melbourne and met Sylvia again. I had gatecrashed one of her parties a couple of years earlier. ... We fell in love and soon moved to Canberra. She gave me a canvas and I painted my first picture."<sup>1</sup> And Sylvia Convey: "Before I went to New Zealand I had met Tony who was a musician and writer. ... We sensed some kind of bond between us at the time; however, it wasn't until a couple of years later, after both our relationships had ended that we came together and moved to Canberra. We had three young sons and our life was very full. My paintings poured out."<sup>2</sup>

The words of the poet and founder of Surrealism André Breton seem highly relevant here: "From this point everything starts afresh; from this point there radiate – we must keep silent – too many reasons not to mingle into the tale all the tenses of the verb *to be*."<sup>3</sup>

If visual art is the shared outpouring of their creative endeavours, it is what I would call a visionary sensibility that is the shared driver. For Tony Convey, this has its roots in earliest, settled childhood in a Melbourne suburb: "My early life was idyllic. I lived in a magical world where I was connected to everything."<sup>4</sup> This animistic sensibility was suppressed through years of schooling, only to be reawakened in adulthood. His often-teeming paintings of figures and fantastic creatures, crammed in shallow pictorial spaces, such as 'Sacred Song of the City' (1992), or 'Moonlight' (2009) speak

eloquently to the visionary traditions of William Blake, Samuel Palmer, Richard Dadd, Arthur Boyd and Donald Pass, which all arise in large part out of an experience of place – in Tony’s case south eastern Australia. “I spend my time seeking visions,” says Tony, “visions that sometimes haunt, startle, puzzle or console me. ... Visions can’t be planned or anticipated. They arise effortlessly or with great difficulty from the process of manipulating materials. Often the process is akin to play, but at other times it is hard physical labour.”<sup>5</sup> The secret is in the ways of looking. In revealing his own method, Blake contrasted the finitude of organic nature with an eternal realm beyond mere appearances: “I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning a Sight. I look thro’ it & not with it.”<sup>6</sup> There is something of this in Tony’s approach to his painterly subjects. Much more than Blake, though, he also relies on the communicative capacity of his materials, regarding the very act of art making “as a potentially revelatory process.”<sup>7</sup> He shares this in common with many expressionist artists, themselves inheritors of the Romantic visionary tradition exemplified by the likes of Blake and P. O. Runge. Emil Nolde, for example, declared, “My aim was that colours should be transmitted to the canvas through myself as the painter, with the same inevitability as when nature herself is creating forms, just as minerals and crystals are formed, just as moss and seaweed grow.”<sup>8</sup>

Sylvia Convey attributes the source of the outpouring of imagery that has continued since earliest childhood to “inner world, dreams, visions and submerged memories of wartime events.”<sup>9</sup> Where Tony’s childhood was settled (albeit marred by his tortured experience of school), Sylvia’s was disrupted by geographical upheaval and family tragedy. Born in a German displaced person’s camp three years after the end of the Second World War, her family’s emigration to Australia was meant as a new start. However, the deaths of her father and two infant siblings, followed by her mother’s marriage to “a deeply unpleasant man who blighted all their lives”<sup>10</sup> set the scene for an unsettled childhood and early adult life. Little wonder then that Sylvia should turn inward. Her art has always originated in that liminal space between the unformed unconscious and everyday experience. In many ways, Sylvia’s art shares the romantic primalism of artists like Paul Klee, who argued that there were alternative ways of ‘seeing’ to the purely retinal, which operated by way of the cosmos and inner depths. He states this in typically lyrical fashion in his Pedagogical Sketchbook: “Symbols of the static area are plummet (position) and balance. The plummet aims at the earth centre where all materially-bound existence is anchored. But there are regions with different laws and new symbols, signifying freer movement and dynamic position.”<sup>11</sup> As Sylvia once said, “I explore the female psyche, the embodiment of magical/spiritual powers and intellectual/emotional struggles. I feel a direct connection to the world of the past and the world of the future.”<sup>12</sup>



Page 18: 'Double Vision' (detail) by **Sylvia Convey**. Oil on board, 60cm x 40cm, 2003.  
 'Sacred Song Of the City' by **Tony Convey**. Oil on board, 84cm x 74cm, 1992.