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Executive Style

Passion in the frame

Lawrence Money
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Twelve-year-old Alma Tirtschke was murdered in Melbourne on the last day of 1921, 61/2 years before artist Charles Blackman was born. The man accused of her murder, Colin Campbell Ross, was hanged in 1922, six years before Blackman was born.

So it is a curious chain of events indeed that resulted in Blackman's famous schoolgirl series of paintings, based on the Tirtschke case, leading to an unprecedented posthumous pardon for Ross from the State Government three months ago.

Blackman began painting this series in 1953, more than 30 years after the murder. What sparked his interest? Blackman art curator Walter Granek says it was probably the 1950s redevelopment of the site where the crime occurred, the now gone Gun Alley, where the Southern Cross Hotel - since replaced by the SX office tower - was built. "It was probably in the newspapers of the day," Granek says, "and Charles became fascinated with the case." Thus

began the schoolgirl series that, more than anything else, defined Blackman's high-flying career.

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The crucial link in the chain that led to the pardon was librarian Kevin Morgan, who was intrigued by Blackman's works of innocence and foreboding and began reading about the crime that inspired them. It is now history that Morgan cracked the case: tragically, the evidence had been faulty, two witnesses deceptive, and Ross had been hanged an innocent man.

But back to Blackman. The painter turns 80 today and is not in good health. He had a heart attack and stroke 14 years ago; he no longer paints though he still draws. He also has been diagnosed with Korsakoff's syndrome, a memory disorder associated with heavy drinking.

None of which will prevent him from flying to Melbourne today to launch perhaps one of the most important exhibitions in his life: a retrospective of more than 100 works from his personal collection, most of which have not been seen publicly before. "These are the last unseen works from the artist's studio," says Paul Sumner, director of Mossgreen Gallery, which is hosting the show.

The exhibition, Charles Blackman 80 years, marks eight decades of art-driven bohemianism.

Says Granek: "Actually, it's a miracle Charles is still with us after his heart attack 14 years ago. But he was revived and he's got stronger."

Indeed, it has been 80 years of triumph and turmoil. Blackman married three times, first to blind writer Barbara Patterson, then Genevieve de Couvreur and finally Victoria Bowers. The three marriages produced six children. During his 27-year marriage to Patterson, he won a travelling art scholarship and moved with his family to London, where he mixed with Australian expats including Brett Whiteley, Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd.

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The Mossgreen catalogue says that, after Blackman's stunning success in the 1950s, the critics cooled towards his work and his "poetic realism came to be viewed as anachronistic". Nonetheless, he continued to work hard and won renewed acclaim in the 1970s when he held his first major exhibition in Tokyo and more than 20 exhibitions in Australia. In 1977, Blackman was awarded an OBE.

In the 1980s he kept widening his boundaries: painting in the north Queensland rainforests and the cane fields of Buderim, delving into astronomy, embarking on theatrical projects.

Blackman himself has described his art this way: "The image is foremost to me. In my world it is the line and the dream, a direct attack on the senses. My task is to inform and it is obsessive. I've always painted out of myself to illuminate the picture plane. From what I see it either is or it isn't. That's life."

Says Granek: "The schoolgirls are his key works and there are only 30 or 40 of them, tops. A genre in their own right. Charles has had a hard life but greatness doesn't come from sitting around nine to five. It is a great struggle and a great passion for him."

Charles Blackman 80 Years is at Mossgreen Gallery, 310 Toorak Road, South Yarra, until August 30. Details from mossgreen.com.au or 9826 0822.

Scenes from a life in art

*In 1990 a Gold Coast couple found a painting in a junk shop called Portrait of Thelma, supposedly signed "Shackman". Familiar with Blackman's signature, they realised it was by Charles Blackman and bought it for \$15. It has since been authenticated and found to be near-identical to a photo of Alma Tirtschke.

*In the late 1970s Blackman and his first wife, Barbara, put out a book, Barbara and Charles Talk about Food. Charles had worked as a short-order cook for restaurateur Georges Mora (husband of artist Mirka).

*Blackman's eldest son, Auguste, 51, relaunched his own art career in 2002. He originally set out as an artist but says he "ran out of ideas" in his 20s, got hooked on drugs and booze and ended up running a pizza business.

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