Looking for something other than art magazines to occupy my time while travelling to the survey exhibition of Peter Tyndall's Daggers: Definitions - Selected Works 1962-1987 at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, I snatched from the shelves a copy of William Beckford's Biographical Memoirs of Extraordinary Painters.

In his introduction, Robert Gemmell presents several versions of the book's origin, which, he says, "suffer from a certain degree of imaginative distortion." According to one early account it was inspired "partly by the imaginative descriptions Beckford's housekeeper provided when showing visitors the collection of fine paintings in the galleries of Fontainebleau, the mansion owned by Beckford's father. With the confidence of an expert, she was in the habit of exalting on the lives of the artists and the merits of their compositions when she knew nothing about either."

In another version we are told that "when he was 15 years old the housekeeper told her something about the artists who painted his fine pictures, as visitors were always questioning her and she didn't know what to answer." Whereupon Beckford instantly complied by producing Memoirs of Extraordinary Painters, a witty parody of those 18th century biographies of artists by writers such as Walpole, which was more an assured fantasy than fact.

Later, says Gemmell, when told by his housekeeper that many of the artists doubted the truth of her explanations, Beckford said: "Ah, that's because it is only in manuscript. Then we'll have it printed. They'll believe when they see it."

It was published in 1780. I have a hunch that there is much in Beckford's account of the extraordinary lives of such bogus masters as Blunderbussian Watersoucy, the Italian painter Insigni, and the "encourager of the arts," Baise-le-main, who combines "the greatest wealth with the most exemplary politeness," that would appeal to Peter Tyndall.

As Pamela Hansford observes in the excellent monograph that goes with the exhibition, "Tyndall uses laughter as the stuff of his art because it is a medium which shows us as beings who can enjoy dissolving our own meticulously constructed rules." In this context, she also refers to an Australian critic's complaint that Tyndall's work was tedious "because one could hardly enjoy a joke told over and over again.

Humour in art is risky business, especially if the joke is to survive over a period of time and repeated viewings. It is one of Tyndall's achievements that he is able to do it with an almost obsessive insistence on ringing the changes with a narrow range of images and symbols - of which the square with two support strings (representing the hanging painting or object) is the most common. In a way he is like the TV comedy writer whose ingenuity is constantly challenged by the need to create successive permutations of the one joke.

Tyndall's suppression of his biography, in exhibition details and bibliography tend to put the viewer in a situation not unlike that of Beckford's housekeeper. There is one large picture of a group of children and two adults standing in front of a painting with an ornate frame, which is being explained by a gallery guide (a la Beckford's housekeeper). Having witnessed this sort of scene many times, I am sure that the guide is aptly demonstrating the truth of the motto on Beckford's title page: "The Fake word may mirror the truth."

As many of Tyndall's works are about multiple exchanges between art and its audience, it is no surprise that one small girl prefers to gaze at it rather than pay attention to the guide.

Tyndall was born in 1931, we know from the date of a work that features a photograph of the artist aged 1. (In another version it is overlaid with the outline of a hand holding a cube with a dagger in it.) Autobiographical references are scattered throughout the exhibition. The recurring image of a 1930s family looking at a work of art apparently comes from an early college of Christmas illustrations, while in other works childhood images - the quartet of Noddes and Pinky the Elephant, for example - are put to less innocent purposes than they would inside the nursery.

Gerry Gee, too, was once manipulated by the artist. Tyndall is both ventriloquist and puppet master. His paintings come with strings attached and his imagery is loaded.

Since the late 70s, Tyndall has given all his works the title detail: A Person looks at a work of art: Someone looks at something. The meaning of these words should be clear to all, yet for some people this strategy seems to create a barrier between the work and the viewer. I am tempted to think of this as something akin to the "ha ha" in 18th century landscape gardening whose purpose was to ensure that the cattle kept their distance. This, in turn, reminds me of the Tyndall-like image of the gale in Beckford's lithograph in which St Denis holds his own head at arm's length before him. The artist looks at something which happens to be himself without a head, ha, ha.

Tyndall's paintings are executed with all the cold, hard perfection of a mechanical illustration. On the rare occasions when he is painterly, as in the work subtitled Imagining that all the elements have collapsed, the gestures from his past as a lyrical abstractionist are subjected to a systematic loss of energy. Tyndall's art-painterliness and entropy go together. An impressive exhibition.