

Behold, the Man

"A nude Christ starts stormy art row," said Johannesburg's *Rand Daily Mail*. Hordes who had never visited an exhibition before flocked to Johannesburg's Gallery 101. Later, police removed Harold Rubin's drawing *My Jesus* and it has now been sent to Capetown's Board of Censors.

Naked and ugly. This was the second storm over a picture of this subject, favourite theme of artists for two thousand years. In the first case, the furore raged around a contrived and amateurish mural displayed in St. Luke's Anglican Church, Salt River, and painted by Ronald Harrison of Cape Town. It depicted a black Christ, with the centurions recognizable as public figures rather than face-

And his "Christ", by no means his most impressive work, merely reiterates his recurrent theme. With a little more self-criticism, and a little less catharsis, his talent could become a potent moral—even religious—force.

Truth and consequence. Overlooked in the excitement were several aspects: A Crucifixion, conceptually or pictorially, is not a pretty subject. Further, as pointed out by Brother Roger, CR, who opened Rubin's show, and was in no way offended by it: "Jesus was, according to the Gospels, stripped for his martyrdom. The idea may repel, but the drawing is not intended to appease the squeamish." Art history, too, is rich in precedent for both pictures. With the waning of medieval mysticism, which treated the Crucifixion only on a transcendental, sym-

heim, Alsace, the agony of hideous martyrdom is compellingly conveyed. Here is a Man, His skin ripped by thorns, His hands pierced by nails, open-mouthed and parched in his torment.

The message. Through the years, this torment has been employed as an indictment of man's blind brutality. There are surely few more tragic figures in the history of art than Rouault's eloquent "Christ Mocked by Soldiers". But the approach has varied: 16th century painter Pieter Breughel makes even the onlookers at the Nativity moronic and bestial caricatures of men, obviously incapable of appreciating the ultimate Sacrifice. James Ensor, who died in 1949, has satirised the stupidity of modern behaviour by showing the Saviour in his magnificent *Entrance of Christ into Brussels*, riding an ass, and surrounded by buffoons bearing ridiculous slogans and sporting grotesque masks. (The carnival hat in Rubin's drawing is not an original embellishment.)

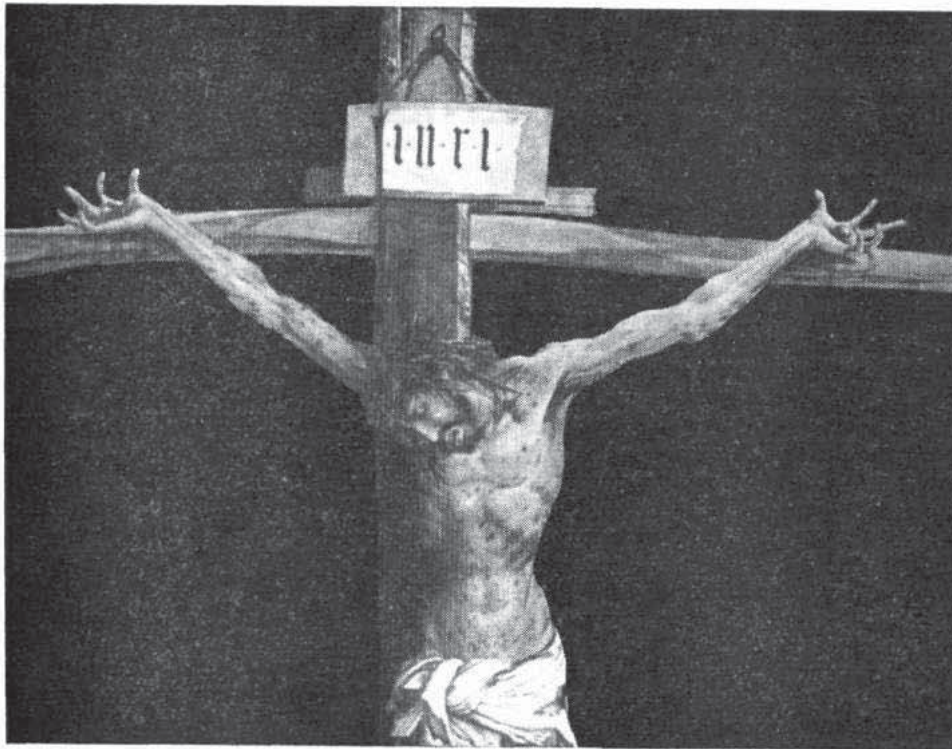
The outcry is not original either — Jacob Epstein, among others, faced it in 1933 for his *Ecce Homo*, a work of far greater value than either recent "offenders". Harrison's picture (and presumably Rubin's) must satisfy the Censor Board that it will not give "offence to the religious feelings of any section of the public".

Home thoughts from abroad

Off again to Europe after 10 months in her hometown is Johannesburg-born Maud Sumner, Southafrica's perennially peripatetic artist. An old building, once surrounded by farmland, now encircled by the streets of Paris, provides her winter studio and home. With the summer, her neighbours open their windows, and raucous and rowdy children drive her to London.

Well known on three continents, Maud Sumner still comes home to exhibit and rest, but in the growing ranks of expatriate Southafrican artists there are many who seem unlikely to return.

Douglas Portway, 40, whose Johannesburg exhibition of five years' work comes to an end this week, lived for some time in a 16th century house on Ibiza, in the Balearic Islands. When the routine of ferrying car and canvasses back and forth between the Spanish mainland and his island home lost its fascination, he bought a house in Figueras, in the north of Spain, and feels he has found a tranquillity he was unable to achieve in Southafrica. He has a contract with London's Drian Gallery, and with a firm repu-



CRUCIFIXION
A suffering Man

less members of the crowd. The more recent uproar centred on the fact that Christ is shown naked and ugly in his anguish. It, too, is now in police custody.

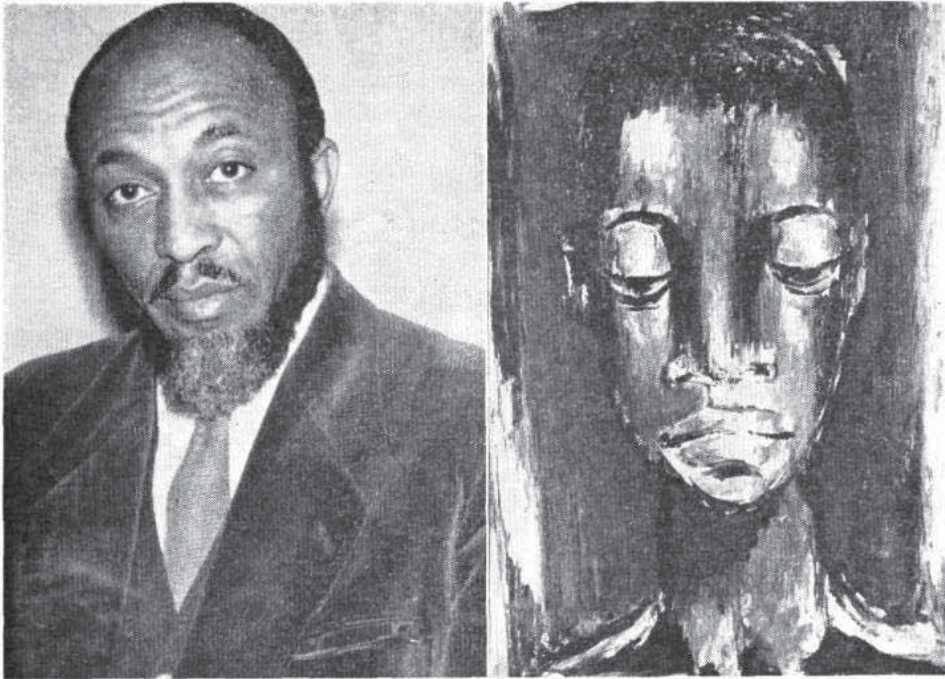
In both cases, aesthetic considerations were obscured by hot-air, and the pictures subjected to sensational press treatment far in excess of their actual importance. Rubin, whose drawing is frequently powerful, is almost masochistically sensitive to man's inhumanity to man. He is equally often victim of his own uncritical urge to expose his soul.

bolistic plane, an increasing humanism entered the handling of this subject. Frequently during the Renaissance, well-known figures were used as models in many scenes of the Christian story. By his own hand, Leonardo records the use of one Count Giovanni for the figure of Christ in *The Last Supper*, and a certain Pietro Bandinelli is said to have posed for its Judas.

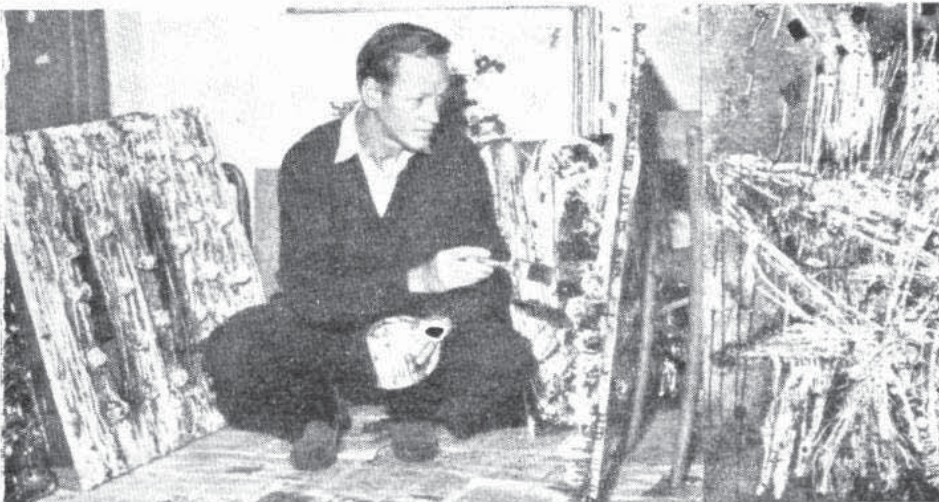
Increasingly, the beauty of eternal sacrifice, as expressed in the Crucifixion, was replaced by the image of a suffering Man. In the Grunewald altarpiece, completed in 1515 at Isen-



SUMNER
Perennially peripatetic



SEKOTO
Never left home



COETZEE
Ping-pong balls and bicycles

tation developing in Europe, he is almost certainly there to stay.

Refuge for rebels. There are many like him, with varying reasons for their exile. Some go to study, and remain from habit; others, the *avant-garde* particularly, find they have success abroad that they could not hope to achieve at home. This applies especially to the London group, led by John Coplans, 42, and Denis Bowen, 41, whose direction today is tachism—also commonly described as “drip-and-dribble” or “action-painting.” Whether this style of painting will endure or make any valuable contribution to art, it is enjoying a vogue in London, and Bowen is a director of the New Vision Gallery, at which more recent emigrant, Minnie Fry, also shows.

Another rising member of the *avant-garde*, is talented 32-year-old Christo Coetzee. He now lives in Paris where he is under contract to the Stadler Gallery whose all-too-successful promotion may be to blame for his blossoming out into barbola-work, or “structural painting,” with such gimmicks as ping-pong balls and suspended bicycles. Coetzee is a leading-light of the “Informal Group”—it is not difficult to see that this brand of informality would hardly be at home in Alberton whence he stems.

Also a long way from home is Gerard Sekoto who was born in Pietersburg in 1913 but has spent most of his adult years in Paris. He has never altogether left in spirit, however, and even his most recent work is redolent of Africa. He was not caught in the abstract stream, and is happy to continue painting nostalgic heads of his own people, alongside views of the Bohemian life which surrounds him.

Road to recognition. Causing controversy in South Africa does not automatically spell success beyond its borders, and many artists who have no ties with galleries or groups know the meaning of struggling. Charles Argent who received much notoriety as the “bus-ticket” artist here has returned to England after 13 years as a South African and is still seeking a niche; while less spectacular, but sound painter and teacher, Wim Blom, is securely installed as research-curator of Canada’s National Gallery.

Most of the younger South African painters now in Europe are receiving good reviews—but good write-ups abroad are one thing, good sales another. Many artists who deserve a wider reputation eat better in South Africa. For those who seek international recognition, the shortest route is via the Common Market, however.