

PAINTER SIDNEY GOLDBLATT
Tradition, reality and abstraction

ART

This side of the rainbow

"I have no elaborate theories about art. My ambition is only to improve with every exhibition I present." These are the sentiments of 43-year-old Johannesburg painter, Sidney Goldblatt, and, from his first one-man show in 1948, to his eighth, which opened in Johannesburg on Tuesday, he has regularly succeeded in achieving his goal.

In the course of this accomplishment, he has pursued various avenues of expression, some more effectively than others, all the while acquiring a more intimate understanding of his craft. He has ranged between descriptive observation and totally abstract interpretation, but he believes that he has never allowed himself to exhaust the possibilities of these styles. Having made an experiment, he will set it aside until he feels that he has grown a little, and then, aided by increased maturity and greater assurance with his brush, he can pick it up and venture further. This practice probably explains the image of a multi-personality which emerges from his exhibitions. It is often difficult to reconcile the lyrical painter of romantic harbour-scenes with the expressionistic exponent of forms-in-space, but both exist behind the dreamy eyes and wispy beard of this unassuming and most un-Bohemian artist.

Pot-o'-Gold to paint-pot. From his earliest childhood, Sidney Goldblatt was interested in art, and his parents did nothing to discourage this. Only when he left school did an obstacle to his natural artistic inclinations present itself. As a member of a family with a big share in the OK Bazaars, a ready-made career awaited him, and parental pressure forced him reluctantly to enter commerce. He was thoroughly groomed for executive rank, trained in every department, and pride dictated that he do his job efficiently. But after ten years of uncomfortable conformity at the cash register, even a managing-directorship could not have satisfied him. The Pot-o'-Gold was within his reach, but he still preferred the rainbow itself, and at the age of 27, he bowed out of business, drew out his savings, and set out for London.

On the advice of Maurice van Esche, he enrolled at the Anglo-French Art Centre. Flushed with enthusiasm, he devoted, for the first time in his life, one whole week to his initial painting — a flower-piece. But, on the Friday morning, when the directors arrived to criticize student work, his picture was ignored, casually dismissed. Crushed by this rejection, he sought explanation, only to be told, without further elaboration, "It just isn't paint-

ing!" He spent the rest of the course discovering why, worked day and night, and exalted in the effort.

There followed a visit to Paris, with short periods of study under Andre Lhote and Fernand Leger. Each of these teachers, equally renowned but diametrically different, seemed to him to be dedicated to the mass-manufacture of carbon-copies of themselves. He emerged from their studios hopelessly confused, and went back to London. His return to South Africa was precipitated by the illness, and subsequent death, of his father.

Programme for Achievement. Home once again, he embarked on his professional career. His first exhibition was well-received, and, encouraged, he settled down to carry out his programme. For a solid year he concentrated on organizing colour-planes upon the canvass, and followed this by a year in which he studied tones — the relationship of black and white, and their effect upon other colours.

His decision to get married made it necessary for him to stabilize his income: this he did by teaching, which he still does to this day. His attractive wife, Wendy, went out to work as well, and their two-roomed flat doubled as studio and home.

Judicious saving made possible a year in Europe in 1957, and an idyllic stay in Marbella, Spain introduced the Spanish hillside houses and harbour themes of his highly successful 1958 exhibition, which return nostalgically, though much-modified, even in his current show. During the past four years, he has strengthened his reputation, and his work has been included in several representative South African collections overseas.

Finding a balance. Goldblatt values the discoveries of contemporary abstraction, but he is striving to find a balance between abstraction, tradition and reality. He feels that his experiments with abstract form are exercises, which have served to enrich his descriptive painting. There is no doubt that his brush-work today has a confidence which enables him to speak with greater boldness than in much of his earlier work. He has now dispensed with the characteristic black contour which framed his planes of varying reds and blues; he has passed through a later stage of restless, flickering brush-strokes. His forms today are more painterly, and they have escaped the flat surface of the picture-plane to wheel freely in an atmosphere behind the frame. His show presents a fine blend of descriptive and non-objective painting. Only when he hovers between the two, and the abstract forms are not sufficiently dominant to

appeal for their own sake, is the spectator left with an uneasy urge to seek the scene behind the mist.

Up to now Goldblatt has been romancing both Mother Nature and her non-objective offspring. One day he may find he has to make a choice, but for the present the arrangement serves to satisfy the two opposing facets of his personality.

Maid of the Mountains

Perched in the Swaziland mountains, the village of Piggs Peak is encircled by endless vistas of forest-clad slopes. The air is exhilarating; the pace of life is casual; flocks graze between the boulders that line the roads to Mbabane and Barberton; and every now and then a handsome tribesman, clad in traditional trappings, will appear, seemingly from nowhere, to add a touch of arrogant splendour to the scene. To the romantic, seeking a location for that age-old dream of an artists' colony, away from the city's clamour, where the ideal of dedicated craftsmanship can flourish, this site would prove a natural. But he would find that some-one had reached it before him. For this idyllic spot is the setting of a small industry that has provided Southafrican interiors with a glow of tasteful artistry for 15 years. Here, the busy looms of Coral Stephens have turned out hundreds of yards of the hand-woven mohair fabric, which bears her stamp, in the richness of dyes and faultless blending of colour, as clearly as if she signed each bolt.

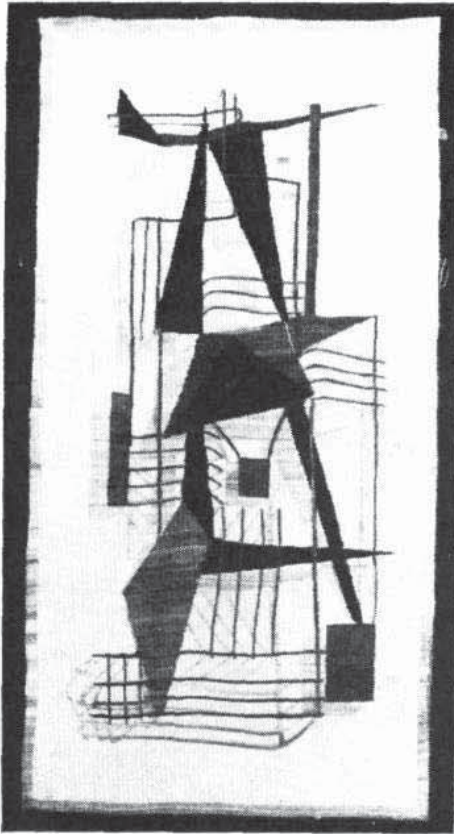
Fair exchange. Now a second generation of the weaving Stephens family has entered the scene. Marguerite, Coral's 27-year-old daughter, has embarked on the production of tapestries—a craft as old as weaving itself—and she brings to it the same excellence of craftsmanship and tastefulness of design that has characterized her mother's work.

As with many artistic ventures, this one began with a chance encounter. Charmed by a Cecil Skotnes wood-block, on exhibition two years back, Coral Stephens suggested that her occupational-therapist daughter should attempt to weave the design into a tapestry. The artist was interested, and they arranged a swap—the block for the hanging. The weaving was successful beyond expectations; even the complex variations in wood-grain were reproduced with consummate skill. Marguerite Stephens was launched on a new career.

Working in the Gobelin technique, she first threads the loom with the neutral vertical warp. The cartoon, a full-scale design, is fixed behind the frame,

and, working in wools, she proceeds to weave the colours and shapes as they appear in this plan. The pattern is thus established in these horizontal threads, known as the weft.

Recognition. Thus far, Marguerite Stephens has worked only from designs by Skotnes and sculptor Eduardo Villa, and three of her tapestries, now dis-



ANOTHER WEAVING STEPHENS
Design by Villa

played publicly for the first time, indicate how admirably these designs adapt to the medium. She is presently engaged on her first commission, a hanging for the altar-wall of the new Anglican church in Piggs Peak. A rare case of talent receiving its earliest recognition at home.

Haenggi, get your gun

It is the common practice of better-known commercial art-galleries in Europe and America to assemble a selected group of artists, who work under contract to them. Considerable sums are spent on publicly promoting these protegés, all of whose output must be handed over to the gallery. Frequently, this work is retained in stock, and only released for sale in small taste-whetting samples, the art-dealer manipulating the market in much the same way as his counterpart in the diamond business. For him, his stable of talent is his investment; while it is in his interest to spare no

expense in establishing his group on the map in order to insure his profit, he is understandably reluctant to sponsor unknown newcomers whose commercial value is untested. Thus it is no easy job to break into the art-world abroad.

A matter of commission. Until recently, no such system obtained in Southafrica. Contracts were not common, and an artist could get a show, without much difficulty, simply by booking a gallery and paying the standard commission on sales. A sort of rough-and-ready loyalty existed between artist and dealer, the former invariably continuing to associate himself with the gallery of his original success.

During the last few years, a subtle change has taken place. Of late one or two dealers have begun to follow the European trend, and to adopt certain painters and sculptors, whose work they exhibit exclusively. These artists, in turn, abstain from entering competitions, and do not participate in mixed shows outside the group.

One such dealer is Johannesburg's Egon Guenther. He maintains that few Southafrican artists acquire world reputation because they tend to seek it as lone wolves. His aim is to build a powerful group of talented Southafricans, and to promote this group on the world market. He has certainly chosen his stable well and has kept the names of his gifted few before the public eye. For this no-one can criticise him. However, when his band of artists receives official recognition to the exclusion of many equally accomplished talents, whispers of an unholy alliance begin to circulate.

A matter of omission. This week the whispers grew to a shout. The students of Witwatersrand University, resurrecting their moribund annual Arts Festival, presented as one of the items an exhibition of art. A more impeccable display could not be wished for; certainly no better show has previously graced the John Moffat (Fine Arts) Building. But, to the experienced exhibition-goer, one fact stood out: apart from Guenther's team, not another soul was given wall- or floor-space. This was altogether too much for rival gallery-owners to stomach, and dealers Adler and Fielding, and Haenggi of Gallery 101 became reluctant allies in a jointly-signed, strongly-worded letter, calling for an explanation from the University—three of whose staff-members were represented on the show. Oddly enough, nobody seemed at all perturbed by the fact that in a Students' Arts Festival not a single student work appeared.