

## Counterpoint

One evening last week two groups of people gathered, to sip sherry at two similar events, in two Johannesburg buildings not more than a mile apart. For all they had in common, the gatherings could have taken place in two different worlds.

At the South end of the city (mining and finance), in the plush surroundings of the Pieter Wenning Gallery, business moguls mustered to salute 14 paintings of the bushveld by imperturbable old artist, Cecil Thornley-Stewart, 81. When the last glass was emptied, nine pictures, at prices between 175 and 500 guineas\* had quietly changed hands.

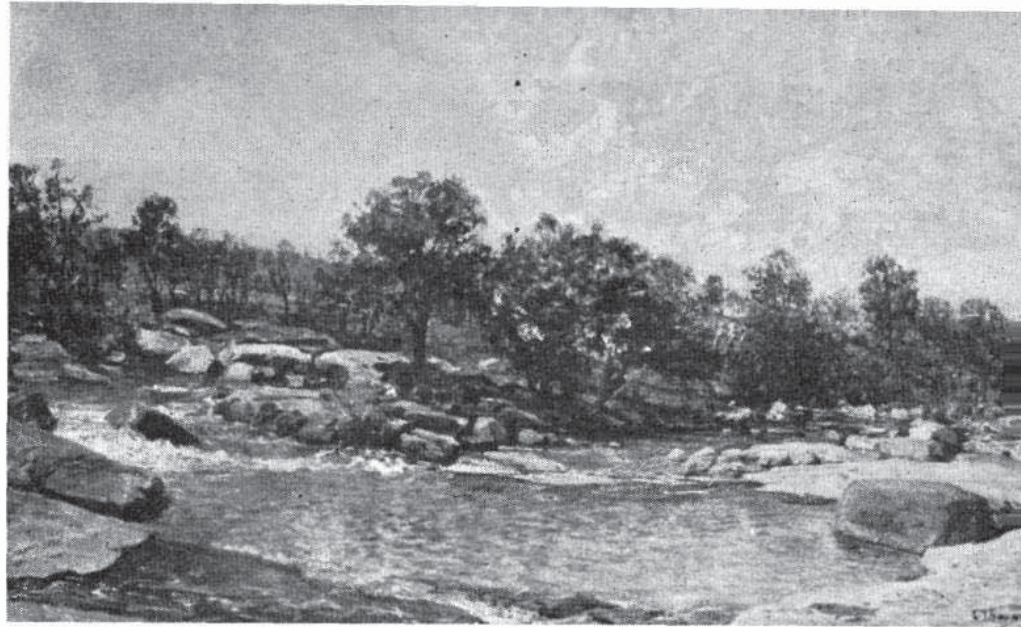
At the Northern end of the city (department stores and doctors), in the small, more austere Egon Guenther Gallery, a clutch of burgeoning intellectuals clustered to view 25 abstract paintings and drawings by provocative young artist Anna Vorster, 33. When the last ash-tray was filled, two pictures had been sold, for R80 and R30 respectively.

**Comparison.** Both exhibitions were the outcome of an artist's quiet communion with nature, but the observations of each were so dramatically different that the spectator who accepted the canvasses of the one could hardly but reject the work of the other. Cecil Thornley-Stewart began to paint professionally at the age of 61, in 1942, when Anna Vorster was still a gangling schoolgirl. He had preceded this endeavour with a life rich in experience, successes and failures, and at an age when most men would be satisfied to live out their remaining years in mellow inactivity, Thornley-Stewart embarked upon a new career. For the past few years he has been reaping rich rewards: his last three shows have been complete sell-outs, and in 1960 he established a South African record by selling R16,000 worth of pictures within a week of opening.

His paintings are uncomplicated, faithful records of the South African landscape, meticulous in detail, and calm in effect. They require no effort to recognize the subject, and no hint of complexity or human emotion ruffles the serene surface of the scene.

**Contrast.** How far removed in every way from the intense and cerebral Anna Vorster. On graduating from university with a degree in Fine Arts in 1950, she won a two-year scholar-

\*Rands have not yet imposed themselves upon the traditional kid-glove barter of this world.



"SABIE RIVER" BY C. THORNLEY-STEWART

VICTOR DELAPORT

*The surface of nature*

ship to study art in Europe. Since her return, she has devoted herself to becoming familiar, through analytical exercises, with the artistic function of every segment of the canvas. She has explored the visual scene, and penetrated beyond superficial appearances in a search for the essential nature of the subjects that she paints.

In a way, these two artists represent the now-ageing schism between the abstract and the figurative in art. In

the eyes of the average laymen, Thornley-Smith upholds the sensible world of every-day experience, while Anna Vorster epitomises a bewildering esoteric world they cannot share.

**Representation.** They do not notice that Thornley-Stewart sees only the surface of nature; that he makes no attempt to seek an underlying order, but paints it as it comes, haphazardly distributed across the range of vision; that he reveals no human reaction to the scene—where nature is grand, he efficiently records the grandeur, but when the scenery provides no obvious drama, the paintings are commonplace.

**Interpretation.** There are flaws in Anna Vorster's painting also: she has not completely crystallised her style, and the tension that vitalises her line-drawings does not always carry through into her brush-work. But she is not prepared to assume the functions of an animated camera. While Thornley-Stewart faithfully renders the appearance of an outcrop of rock, she analyses the fissures and formations, picking up the underlying rhythms which run through it, and which provide the life-force of the landscape. His pictures present the features of the world as all can see them, she offers a personal artistic vision, an interpretation of the elements which make up the scene.

**Reaction.** It really all boils down to how one likes one's nature served. Abstract art, like condensed space-age rations, possesses all the vital ingredients, but the average man is not so easily convinced. He still prefers the good old familiar, recognizable shapes and forms. That way he can be sure that nobody is trying to take him in.



"CASCADING ROCK" BY ANNA VORSTER

*The underlying rhythms*