

ART

Homo Ex Machina

The art of any period or place, being the most intimate expression of the psychological needs, beliefs and aspirations of the time, is documentary evidence of the inherent spirit of the age. Those whose eyes are trained to read the clues provided by the plastic and graphic creations of mankind can learn more about a culture simply from looking at these works than often can be deduced from all the dates and physical facts and personal achievements, which constitute the external shell of history.

Today's spirit. Though debates may rage, and the man-in-the-street remain unconvinced, there is little doubt that the abstract art which is an international product of this century, will, in time to come, communicate the subtleties of the contemporary climate of thought to future generations with equal effectiveness. These unfamiliar forms, regardless of their inacceptability to die-hard clingers to past convention, reflect, even in their strangeness, the spirit of the present age.

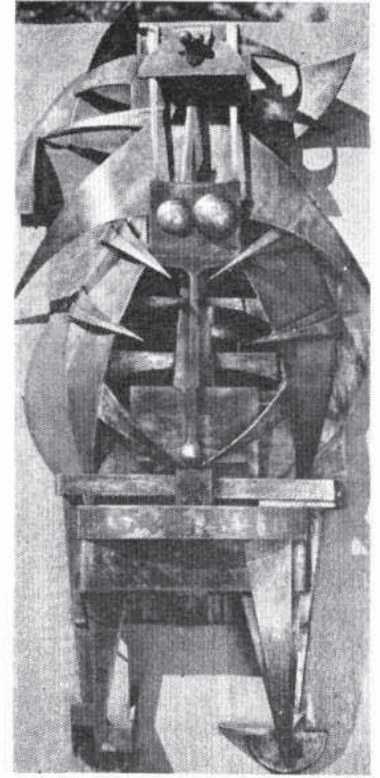
. . . in today's idiom. South Africa has many artists who use the abstract idiom, but, in common with the larger body of world art, most of these do not get beyond mere pattern-making. One of the few for whom abstraction is a language and not merely a style is sculptor Edoardo Villa, whose exhibition of recent work opened at Johannesburg's Egon Guenther Gallery this week.

Villa, Italian-born, but now a long-time South African, is a vital, volatile human being. His staccato, sometimes incoherent, Latin-accented speech

is punctuated with the earthiest of Anglo-Saxon expletives, and, from the top of his well-sculptured, leonine head to the base of his short, well-tailored frame, he vibrates with virile energy. His favoured material is that most resilient of metals — steel.

Metamorphosis. In his current work, he makes use of various mechanical sections, which he bends, welds and transforms into plastic spectres of this mechanical age. Nails, bolts, and machine-turned parts assume in the progress a new, organic identity. Though he incorporates ready-made elements, these sculptures are not the "ready-mades" in which the Dadaists exalted in decades past. The separate elements are fused by the artist's plastic powers, and emerge from this gestative process modified and integrated segments of complex three-dimensional and relief forms. Though Villa thinks of these forms only as sculpture, and endows them with no literary symbolism, he has nevertheless given each a name (see cuts), and these names provide useful crutches for those who stumble in their attempts to get to grips with abstraction. The titles are apt, for despite his lack of concern with subject-matter, there is a very definite, underlying, human quality in these totally undecorative sculptures. These mindless mechanical frames reflect the image of an age in which man blends with machine even to perform the previously solely human operation of thinking. There is humour in them too, a wry wit, which counteracts the sharpness of the jutting forms and the stern geometry of the metal shapes.

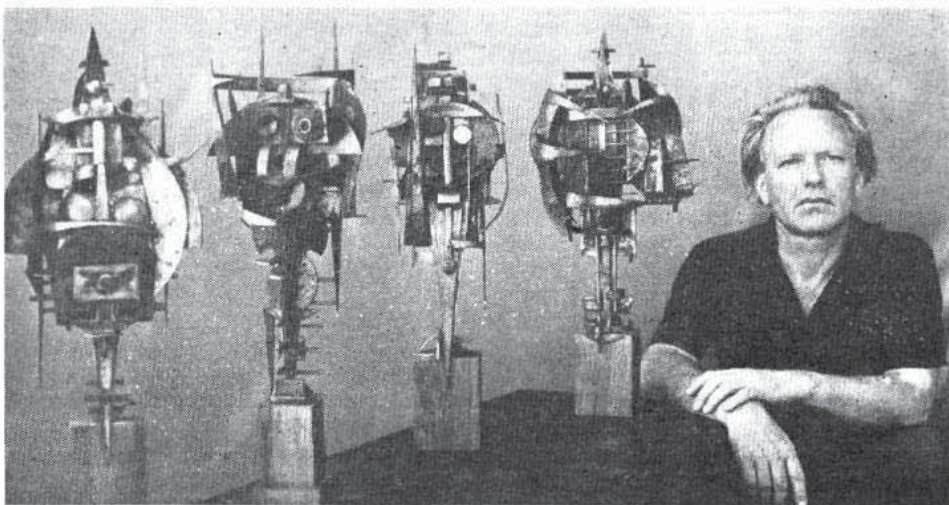
Reduced scale. With one exception, all are small, and meant to be more intimately displayed than much of Villa's past sculpture. A few have been cast from clay models, but most are created from manipulated metal. There is far greater complexity and movement of form within form than was to be seen in his earlier monu-



VILLA'S "CRUSADER"
Man blends with machine

mentally-scaled work, and the interpenetrating shapes create a variety of shadow which gives added colour to the sculpture. Colour, in itself, is beginning to play an increasing role in Villa's work, and variations in treatment of patina, as well as his customary introduction of the different tones of brass and copper, enhance the appeal of the forms.

Theme and variations. As with all Villa's work, the craftsmanship is beyond reproach, tremendous discipline is evident, and the sheer physical effort involved is masked by the precision and clarity of presentation. The entire group is linked by a rhythmic unity: each exhibit is a variation on a theme, and infinite variations are still possible. But Villa is well aware of the pit-fall of becoming repetitious. Having sustained this theme through 24 mutations, it is inevitable that he will now shed some of his restraint, and, following the pattern of his creative evolution, initiate a new phase of freer, more lyrical expression.



"HEAVENLY MESSENGER," "PEEPING TOM," TWO "HERALDIC FIGURES" AND VOLATILE FRIEND

Clues for future culture-sleuths