

ART

The Lonely Road

"Beauty," according to the platitude, "is in the eye of the beholder." The same might equally be said of pathos or romance, of justice or cruelty—it all depends on who is doing the looking. To illustrate this thesis, one need seek no further afield than Capetown, where the artist Wolf Kibel lived from 1929, and died, at the age of 35, nine years later.

If one finds romance in the image of the hungry artist doing daily battle to preserve his artistic integrity in the face of the assault and rejection of an unfeeling world, then Wolf Kibel was a highly romantic figure. If one sees injustice in a young man's dying in poverty and despair, only to be appreciated and applauded after death, then Wolf Kibel was yet another victim of the irony to which human affairs are prone.

Hardship and hunger. Kibel's life was not an easy one. Born in Grodziska, near Warsaw, in 1903, the son of a Jewish cantor and ritual slaughterer, he was orphaned at an early age, and deprivation soon became the pattern of his life. Even in these unpropitious circumstances the desire to become an



"NUDE"
In three inches, a jewel

artist grew within him, and at the age of 20, encouraged by a painter friend and teacher, he left Poland and made his way to Vienna to pursue his dream. If he had known hardship before, he discovered hunger now, and for many months he was sustained only by the wealth of art his eyes could absorb, and his ambition to reach eventually the mecca of the art-world, Paris.

The modern movement. He never did get to Paris. After two years in Vienna, he set out for Tel-Aviv, and

there he entered a circle of young artists who were very much alive to the latest developments. He became caught up in the modern movement, that exciting renaissance in expression and style which had swept across Europe, and when he received a South African visa several years later he brought the lessons of Cezanne and Renoir, Matisse and Soutine, Chagall and Picasso with him to Capetown in his painting.

Scorn during life. Though these developments, which had shaken the structure of art, were firmly established in Europe, South Africa was not yet ready for them. The exaggerated colour-contrasts and hallucinatory distortions of Kibel's expressionistic vision were more than the public were prepared to accept, and he was treated to vilification and contempt. He was fortunate in possessing a devoted wife whom he had met and married in Palestine, and from the time that she was able to join him in 1933, she encouraged him with her support, and acted as a buffer between the ailing artist and the alien world. In Frieda Kibel's words: "The grim battle for existence continued until his health gave in. After his last exhibition in 1937 he was removed to hospital . . ." There he died of tuberculosis ten months later.

Appreciation too late. In the years that have followed, Kibel's paintings have soared in value. What he might have become had he lived to realise his full maturity will never be known, but what he achieved in his short creative life has gained ever-increasing recognition for its outstanding merit. Three memorial exhibitions of Kibel's work have been held, the last in 1950. Last year, Harold Jeppe, the distinguished critic and writer on art, who will be directing Johannesburg's new Lidchi Gallery, finally prevailed upon Frieda Kibel to release the cream of her late husband's remaining paintings and drawings. This week, auspiciously marking the opening of the gallery, the exhibition was formally introduced by Jean Welz, doyen of South African art.

Formative forces. The show presents Kibel in several media and several moods: subject-matter ranges freely through still-lives, nudes, portraits and landscapes. The work spans a period of several years, and reveals clearly the influences which shaped his style; some of the paintings and drawings could, in fact, be tributes to the modern masters of Europe. There is a nude study which speaks of Renoir, and a portrait strongly reminiscent of



"BOY"
Tribute to Soutine?

Chaim Soutine. One sombrely-toned picture of a seated page-boy seems indeed to be a personal translation of a similar subject by Soutine, and shades of Matisse and the early Chagall haunt areas of the exhibition.

An eloquent talent. The drawings are done with positive black lines, and the oils epitomize, in their expressionistic distortion and alternately agitated and caressing brush-work, the wealth of feeling with which Kibel conveyed his vision. None of the paintings is very large: one tiny nude on a canvas no more than three inches square (see cut) glows like a small jewel in the collection.

Although those intimate, animated interiors for which Kibel is justly acclaimed are only incidentally suggested, and the familiar pink-orange-blue-green palette flashes but briefly in some of the figure studies, this exhibition is important — historically, artistically and from the collector's point of view. Historically — because it re-emphasizes the places of the sincere and gifted artist who arrived too soon and died too early to realise his rightful position in South African art; artistically — because it provides a rare comprehensive view of an eloquent talent; and finally for the perceptive collector — because it is likely to be one of his last opportunities to select the Kibel of his choice.