

## Stir of a new tradition

Painting and sculpture have the curious feature that although they are often produced in the liveliest possible manner by primitive nomads (Bushmen, Australian blackfellows), once a society reaches a cultural level above the hunting-nomadic one, it is not till it settles in one place that it again begins to produce the plastic arts. Hence the Southafrican Bantu has never, beyond a few minor crafts like pottery and beadwork, till now painted



"STILL LIFE," JOHN HLATYWAYO  
*Creating without a history*

or sculpted. But in recent years, urbanisation has produced a generation of African artists who are increasingly to be taken seriously, and are perhaps founding a tradition in the Republic.

**Either, or.** With no indigenous art behind them, the Africans of Southafrica tend to turn either inwards to the life of the townships, and produce an illustrative art as detailed and descriptive as a Breughel (though as yet none has shown a pictorial control of his details); or, and this was inevitable, to take their cue from white Southafrican artists. It is in Johannesburg that the contact between white and African artists has been most effective and men like Cecil Skotnes, Harold Rubin and George Boys stand behind the new African artist. It is to their credit that though they have passed on their own Europe-based pre-occupation with strict drawing and control of shape and technique, they have not imposed their personal visions on their pupils, who as

a result show more individuality than might be expected of men learning a completely new way of expressing an interior vision. Already there emerges a particular handling of form and colour which is the property of the urban African artist, which though it tends to be a variation of Euro-Southafrican painting, seems certain to produce an art with an individual character.

**An African shape.** All this is apparent in the current exhibition of John Hlatywayo at Johannesburg's Adler-Fielding Gallery. The 55 drawings, monotypes and batiks that Hlatywayo is exhibiting range from careful European pencil drawings of birds and still lifes through all-over patterned batiks that may perhaps take their ideas (though not their colour) from the blue batiks of Nigeria. But it is the monotypes that reveal the distinction between the pure European traditions of precise drawing and the (in Hlatywayo's case clumsily handled) rawer primitive traditions. Though the manner in which the shapes are assembled within a rectangle is still reminiscent of the bland European still-life tradition of Cezanne-Matisse-Braque compositions, the objects themselves are translated into a particular round-cornered fatness, stand at angles slightly from the vertical, and colours are kept to neutral browns and reds and greens. The result is to give what might otherwise be art-schoolish compositions a relaxed life of their own, a cheerful indifference to the rules.

**Getting there.** But this apparent disregard is hardly arrived at. Hlatywayo who has exhibited here and in Salisbury during the last five years, went through a period in which, partly under the influence of the action painters of Europe, and partly, paradoxically, to break with European influences, he used the accidental possibilities of medium (spilling inks, running liquid media into puddles of water) that led him into a *cul de sac*. The new exhibition shows him disciplining himself to using the acquired knowledge of Euro-Southafrican art, and finding through that discipline a manner at once personal and of his own national character. At its worst (or to be exact, at its least good) this try for a synthesis is tentative. At its best it is lively and subtle, strong and free moving, all at once. Though the backing for African artists in the Republic has been for a kind of pictorial naivete, men like Hlatywayo clearly express that their direction must pass through Europe rather than Southafrica.