

Becalmed

The Early, Middle, Late period classification of an artist's work is no easy dodge of art historians. Leaving out Picasso, who has periods, period, the normal course is an intensification of a style towards a fuller use of its powers within narrow limitations (Rouault) or a logical development of its intellectual possibilities (Cézanne). With the Grand Old Men of South-african painting this seldom seems to happen: Pierneef ended painting pictures that though they might defy the three-colour process, are essentially posters; Battis pursues with more anxiety than understanding the latest *dernier cri*; Welz's surfaces get



VAN ESSCHE FEMALE HEAD
What does it say to the future?

creamier while his forms get weaker; Boonzaaier and the Cape artists turn out amiabilities of picturesqueness; and as evidenced at the most recent show in Johannesburg, Maurice van Essche, once one of Southafrica's hopes for a conciliation between technique and emotion, has settled for a repetition of old successes.

Two of a kind in a way. The new canvases are painted entirely in the last three years, play the familiar colours (scarlet, white and an intense blue) against each other or against heavy black, exploit the same themes — a simplified female head (see cut), and groups of standing Africans or Coloureds against a landscape. At first glance, this is nothing more than the mixture as before. But a walk

in the streets near Johannesburg's Lidchi Gallery, venue of the exhibition, presents evidence that the mixture is not quite as before. From a half-a-dozen furniture shop windows there glows a van Essche of precisely one of the exhibition's dominant themes — a group of Africans in a landscape. Technically, even in reproduction, the reds are stronger, confined in areas so that their red achieves heat where the present reds are merely cheery, the shapes are larger, seem to echo each other and buttress the position of each to the other like trees in a forest, where the new groups hang together with the flaccidity of the fingers on a slackened hand. Belonging to this technical superiority, as skin to flesh, is a clear and strong emotional impact, for which the latest paintings can be searched in vain.

So it need not be. It is one of Pieter Wenning's considerable claims to being the best painter Southafrica ever produced that though he early found a style that was technically and theoretically sound, even sensuously beautiful, he was still developing it when he died, and in many of the late oils, there are hints of a later generation to come, decades afterwards. But van Essche and those of his weight of authority point to what?

Possibility unexplored

Johannesburg's City Council recently spent R28,000 on art for its Joubert Park Art Gallery. The shopper: long time curator, Anton Hendricks. He returned with four oils by second-line painters, a number of graphics by first raters. There were the usual complaints of "not enough", and for the richest city on the Continent, R28,000 was indeed not much. Old masters, even when they are available, are out of Johannesburg's budget, and even new ones run into more thousands than the City cares to contemplate spending. But these are for the established masters or the young men that the big galleries decide to push. What no-one ever asks is, why does Johannesburg not risk its neck by buying the 1963 equivalents of Renoir, Cézanne, van Gogh *et al* at the 1963 equivalent of their 1890-1900 prices? They almost certainly exist, and following the gambler's motto — If you can't stake big and safe, you have to take a chance — might give Johannesburg the equivalent of the impressionist collection in the London Tate.