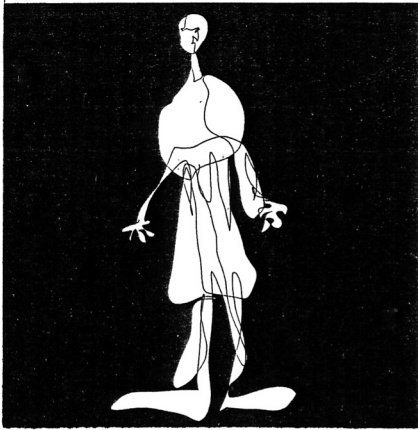


thelma chait



On group shows occasionally, among the stridencies of oils and acrylics, a work of hers will be seen. She has a drawing on the current S.A. Breweries Art Prize show touring the country; she was seen on the Republic Festival art show; now and then on a Fame & Promise or a Quadrennial one of her unaggressive black and white drawings will make spectators stop and look and wonder Who is this Thelma Chait? Who is the woman behind these very odd drawings with their passionate attention to detail, their obsessive finish, line upon line, which at first sight appear to be no more than doodlings?

Up here, north of the Vaal, the mystification grows now that she has had (in November) her first one-man show in Pretoria.

But in Cape Town, too, which is her home base, art followers ask themselves the same question, even though Thelma Chait is sometimes seen at openings in Joseph Wolpè's gallery . . . and, pointed out, turns out not to be the sort of person one expected at all.

Somehow she should be entirely different: Somebody tall certainly, probably gangling, with wrists dangling out of cuffs and hands restless as a basket of kreef; somebody finicky, probably even a bit touched, to do those drawings with their mad meticulousness.

Yet there she is: small, neat, delicately built, with glasses, hair functionally dressed, intent but not forbidding, bird-like but not fluttery, articulate but not anxious. And highly switched-on.

The mystification grows when the surface facts of her life are pointed

out. The wife of a busy and responsible doctor, the mother of three sons who tower over her, a qualified architect. This is the woman who is the creator of a gigantic body of work which has been raised by years of single-minded dedication into an art form utterly her own.

To look at one of her drawings is to think of Isaiah's line, 'For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little . . .' The entire construction is a complex of line. The background which appears to be solid is in fact made up of myriads of single lines; a line which appears to wander purposelessly as a fly in a windowpane is in fact tracing out a face, a figure, a group of people, on and on without end, line upon line, line upon line . . .

What is she doing, this small woman who spins lines as a spider a web, out of her very being?

Thelma Chait is drawing Time.

Approach one of her drawings from any angle and you will end up with Time itself. Think of the hours she has spent on each drawing with its intricacies of planned lines and the the sense of hours coalesces into something larger than the sum of its parts. Think of the balance between the lines, and the pendulum of harmony begins to swing. Follow one of her wandering, soliloquising lines and you begin to be lost to the world you knew, where the eye is led on and on, without end. DAG

