

DUMILE'S

by Prof. E.J. de Jager

Dumile's large charcoal drawing **African Guernica**, which measures approximately 2.5 x 3m, must be one of the most expressive pieces of art to come out of contemporary indigenous Africa. It immediately calls to mind Picasso's 'Guernica' by which it was obviously inspired—it is a subjective variation on the same theme. However, in spite of some similarities the comparison should not be carried too far. Many paintings exist in the 'Guernica' idiom, which testifies not only to Picasso's greatness but also to his ability to inspire others. It certainly illustrates that contemporary African art is not completely free from the influence of western culture. Dumile's 'Guernica' is original in execution and sufficiently so in concept to stand as a powerful and meaningful piece of art.

Technically the drawing is far from perfect. However, its spontaneity and the passion and conviction with which it was painted is obvious and almost overwhelming. Clearly, the work was planned in a moment of intense emotion.

The drawing creates the impression of two vertical surfaces. The forward surface contains strongly drawn figures superimposed on a second surface containing vague figures, of which, in some instances, there is only a suggestion. There is a complete lack of perspective and depth which eliminates any sensation of reality. The central dominating figures are almost apocalyptic in appearance, precariously balanced on the backs of two

cows. The distortion and contortion of these two central figures, strongly dehumanized, heightens the sense of agony and horror. These figures ride into the modern contemporary scene and world in which we live, screaming their message of warning and doom. Everything about them, their twisted and grotesque bodies and limbs, demagogic eyes and contorted mouths, all proclaim their single purpose: protest, in terms of horror, suffering and agony. A bleak, neurotic environment is created around these two figures. It is expressed by a number of strong figures and groups which include two young people obviously smoking pot, a white-collar minister of religion to whom nobody pays the slightest attention, a gambling table, a jazz-prophet playing his trumpet, a harlot lifting her dress, a child forsaken by its mother, feeding from a cow, and others. The canvas also contains a number of cow figures, one of the oldest and most significant of African ritual symbols, as well as several fowls and birds. These animal figures seem to appear as archetypal symbols, arising spontaneously from the subconscious.

The size of the canvas is in itself important. Dumile's portrayal and what he wants to tell us gains expressive power by enlargement and the effect is inescapable. The sheer size compels response. 'African Guernica' has excellent composition and is harmonious in its entirety. There is no superfluous detail to encroach upon the essential elements of the drawing.

'African Guernica' testifies to Dumile's awareness of the relationship which exists between art and life, beauty and violence, love and death. It is life as seen and experienced by Dumile. The poet Horace once advised the artist: "If you want me to weep, you must first grieve". Dumile conveys his emotions in an understandable language, based on a universal experience with which we can identify.

The drawing is undoubtedly a serious comment on the black man's life in South Africa. The environment Dumile creates is African township life, and more particularly a reflection of the specific African township culture that has come into being. In this context, for example, the child feeding from the cow has more than one meaning. It is symbolic of mothers who are forced to leave their children to supplement the family income, and others who forsake their children for the pleasures of city life. At the same time it is symbolic of the almost subconscious yearning for the past. Township life is a very real experience for many African artists. They feel concern about its hardships, they want to portray it as a reflection of the life of their people and they want to protest against it. They have grieved and they want us to weep.

At the same time 'African Guernica' transcends its immediate environment, it becomes a universal reflection, a visual narrative of urban life and its ramifications. As such it explodes through all barriers of time, place and race. It comments upon the human

social order, the human dilemma:—our inability to live with ourselves and our fellowmen. It becomes an indictment against our time. The 'social situation' or 'social image' is thus universal, but the 'social identity' is African, specifically as experienced in urban life in South Africa. More than anything the drawing generates feeling: indignation, despair, protest and violent emotion.

African Guernica displays a vitality which Dumile seems to draw from his subconscious mind. It is free from the exercise of reason and aesthetic

preoccupation. It clearly grapples with human rather than aesthetic problems. Yet it is not nihilistic. Its aim is not despair and negation as such. Dumile clearly shows that destruction is no substitute for creation; it is not violence for the sake of violence.

'African Guernica' time and again entices the viewer back. It has a deep and sincere purpose, requiring one to think, reflect, search the conscience, feel, and then know. Ultimately it is a search for truth—the most noble purpose of all art. Dumile does not prescribe the answer; that everyone must find in himself.

'AFRICAN GUERNICA'



Dumile's Massive 'African Guernica' (in part).