

The Waterbabies

On a cold evening last week, the directors of Johannesburg's Adler-Fielding Galleries provided dry towels for the fourth person to fall into the ornamental fishpond since their gallery was opened last November. This time, however, the plunge was taken deliberately—in the service of art—by actor Bill Brewer, playing Falstaff in a performance of Shakespearean excerpts which accompanied the opening of the 1962 Artists of Fame and Promise Exhibition.

The show, which has become an annual feature of South African art, displays the works accepted from entries in a national competition, first prize being a return airticket to Europe, and R200. Previous award winners: 1959 — year of the show's inception, abstract sculptor Edoardo Villa; 1960 — abstract painter Giuseppe Cattaneo; 1961—no award. This year, objective sculpture carried off the prize.

To Eone de Wet, previously better known as a creative metalsmith, go the plaudits, and the problem—of what to do with husband, two children and one ticket. Runner-up is 20-year-old Ray Berman, now touring Europe on a bicycle.

Pride and Prejudice. Over the four years an increasing number of amateurs, and decreasing number of major artists, have entered the competition, but the dearth of nationally known names in the current show underlines a phenomenon of South African art. With the first signs of commercial success the average South African artist tends to wash his hands of competitions.

Cynics suggest that with success our



EONE DE WET
Arrival

artists become greedy, pointing out that a ticket to Europe is a prize usually not lightly dismissed. "But," asks prominent artist Cecil Skotnes, "what do I live on, and how do I support my family if I win the trip?"

There are, of course, far too few major art commissions offered in the Republic under competition rules for it to be possible to assess the full extent of the reticence. It does not appear to hold good among the architectural profession: witness the haggard hordes of architects, currently baggy-eyed after six months of wrestling with their entries for the R4.7 million Johannesburg Civic Centre free-for-all.

The official commission provides not only income but prestige though many question the prestige value of competitions sponsored by commercial galleries.

Tender-hearted gallery-owner Egon Guenther denounces all competitions as being unfair to the bulk of entrants — only one artist can win first prize. Deciding who this will be has its own headaches: snorted Giuseppe Cattaneo, one of the three jurors in the Fame and Promise affair, to Johannesburg's *Star*: "Please point out that the responsibility for choice of the first award was that of the gallery-owners, and not of the panel!" Cattaneo, standing in for old-hand adjudicator Walter Battiss (laid low with a slipped disc) only agreed with fellow-jurors Anton Hendriks, Director of the Johannesburg Art Gallery, and painter Sydney Goldblatt, on a short list of five artists: Eone de Wet, Ray Berman, Ne! Erasmus, Nina Aleksander and Helen Conradie. Wisely or not, gallery-owners Adler and Fielding intervened to prevent stalemate, and the winner was chosen by majority decision. Four artists came within reach—and yet lost in the ultimate selection. This is in the nature of competition, but many artists fear that by the same hairbreadth process, a master may be defeated by his pupil. (There is a precedent — legend has Andrea del Verrochio vowing to lay down his brushes for ever on observing the superior handiwork of his apprentice, Leonardo da Vinci.)

Loss of status is an important consideration to the artist, and the directors of Adler-Fielding Galleries, wondering whether it is indeed desirable to pit Fame against Promise, are considering a future policy of inviting recognised



GIUSEPPE CATTANEO
Departure

major artists simply to exhibit alongside the competing newcomers—an equally tricky task of selection!

The status seekers. Nevertheless, they query the validity of this fear of loss of status. An artist is judged on the merit of the work he submits, and every effort is made to encourage artists to work specifically for each competition. In this case, letters went out to practically every known artist, art college and university six months before adjudication. Entrants had choice of subject-matter, medium, style and scale. (The winning entries were the smallest on the show!)

Complains Aubrey Fielding: "What does the average entrant do? Shortly before closing date, he scours his studio for a couple of recent efforts, submits them and hopes they will carry him through."

Importance of being earnest. It has become almost a repeating pattern in South African art that periodically there erupt young artists who have promise of outstanding futures: they are greeted with ovation and fanfare—too much, too soon—only to fizzle out after a few years, and dwindle into mediocrity. In the past, the excuse was offered that there is not enough stimulation or incentive on this Continent. Critics, today, suggest that apathy and arrogant self-satisfaction in the artists' ranks would be nearer the truth.

They are asking why it is that, in the Fame and Promise show, numbers of amateurs who until recently were only Sunday painters, should be showing progress and development while many professionals barely achieved selection. Awaiting answers: Why could Gordon Vorster, who once promised to be the outstanding interpreter of the African landscape, not manage to pull off a winning entry? Where were Higgs, Sash, van Essche, Preller, Anna Vorster, Baldinelli, Kumalo, Ormiston, Labuschagne, Goldreich, and others?