

OK art

The show was opposite the cafeteria of Johannesburg's main OK Bazaars in Eloff Street. Corny place to have an exhibition? Not so corny. This try-out exhibition was neither loftily professional like the gallery shows nor anxiously amateur like so many open air ones. It fell nicely between the two, and maybe of the hundreds who go to the cafeteria for coffee, a few had their horizons broadened.



GOLDREICH'S "EQUINOX"
Critics know what they like . . .

Who was hung? The tone was set by the OK's dividing the entrants into amateur and professional (Amateur = no one man show, Pro = a previous one man show). As it was a test case, the artists were limited to artists from Johannesburg and the East and West Rand, the intention being to try the scheme elsewhere if it worked. Nearly 300 entries were sent in, and from them 47 professional, and 61 amateur paintings were chosen and hung.



BURNETT'S "WINTER IN SALISBURY"
. . . so does the public

Pros in shirt sleeves. Most of Johannesburg's up-and-comers (Abrams, Nel Erasmus, Sher, Golblatt and Goldreich, Meerkotter and Mylchreest) were represented in the professional show, but none of them at their absolute best. Could it be that they were holding back? or take the exhibition casually? Whichever it was, there was an air of Johannesburg painting in its shirt

sleeves, with maybe some tiredness.

No new talent. The amateur selection was chosen by a jury (Harold Jeppe, Lionel Abrams and Sydney Goldblatt) who either played very safe, or had to choose from entries by well-trained, ex-art school Sunday painters. If in this section there might have been found the unexpected talent no-one has seen before, he was rejected or had not the nerve to submit. Perhaps the liveliest was Andre Strauss, a determined follower of Paul Klee, but except for the arbitrary rules of the exhibition, Strauss is no other way an amateur.

What it likes. The OK, for whom, after all, this was much of an extramural activity, generously backed up their intentions with money. They nominated five prizes: R300 for the best professional painting, R150 for the second-best; exhibition expenses for an exhibition at Johannesburg's Lidchi Gallery for the best amateur; R50 for the runner-up; and R50 for the painting the public, as estimated from a poll, liked best. One thing this settled: judges and public are not yet one. The judges voted Goldreich's *Equinox* best: the public still knows what it likes, and likes what it knows. They chose a straightforward picture of a winters morning in Salisbury, by Madge Burnett (see cuts).

Who is professional? The OK's experiment, neither enormous nor particularly representative, brings up several interesting points. The first is obviously that within any accepted use of the term, professionalism in painting is meaningless. (Van Gogh and Cézanne were in these terms amateurs all their lives). The confusion gets worse in South Africa where unless a painter is very bad he can always, if he can afford to hire the gallery, get a one man show; while on the other hand, the professional (in the sense that painting is his whole occupation) is a very rare creature indeed. Certainly some other method of identification will have to be devised, or the classification dropped altogether. Then either judges or submitting artist must be encouraged to be catholic — there are still tucked away heavily-breathing part-time painters who paint charmingly every detail without pre-occupation with design and all the jargonry of art. The OK Bazaars have hit on a pretty bright idea, though: it is to be hoped that from these modest beginnings will come other exhibitions as thought-provoking (even if the thoughts are tinged with melancholy) as this one.