

'The Beast and The Burden'

an appreciation

by LIONEL ABRAHAMS

1962 gave South Africa Athol Fugard's marvellous play, **The Blood Knot**. It also gave a second work of art, of comparable newness, relevance, and power, which has not yet been so widely acknowledged. This was Harold Rubin's monumental series of drawings, **The Beast And The Burden**. It was shown at Rubin's last South African exhibition, but its importance, in fact the importance of the whole exhibition, was obscured by the unprecedented uproar over the satirical crucifixion, **My Jesus**, on account of which the artist was tried for blasphemy. The charge failed, but the almost inevitable result of the affair was that Rubin, having just given proof that he could make a major contribution to our art, emigrated from the country.

The Beast And The Burden was the main substance of that proof. I mention **The Blood Knot** alongside it because the two works come curiously close to one another in a number of respects. Both present the relationship between (essentially) two 'persons' hinging on the power of the one over the other, both concern the theme of human inter-involvement, both could be described as charged with irony and anger, both are in seven parts, and both make a rich use of symbolism. The parallels could be drawn further and deeper, but this is enough to show up the mysterious coincidence of two powerful artists independently catching the same general vision, as though they had approached the same inspiration from different sides. The suggestion is that this double utterance originated from somewhere deeper than conscious thought, somewhere broader than individual minds — that here was something the times required to have expressed for all our sakes.

Compared to Fugard's play, Rubin's picture sequence is more nakedly symbolic, abstract, stark. It does not 'tell a story' which can stand on its own and be enjoyed at face value for its own sake. Here there is no face value. Looking at these pictures — even if they did not carry the abstracting titles they have been given, **The Vindictive**, **The Decadent**, etc. — anyone would know that these figures are not meant to be individual characters involved in a realistic drama, but symbols, representatives of types, classes or ideas. Rubin's intention is very plainly to preach some kind of sermon.

So much is this the case that when Harold Rubin showed me his preliminary sketches for this series — the mere swift outlines that noted the ideas he intended to express — I was left dubious and disappointed. The project seemed so thin and inartistic, such a comedown after the wit, intimacy, warmth and substantiality of the work he had been doing. I couldn't understand the imaginative lapse that could permit such a sloganish treatment of the theme of 'man's inhumanity to man'. It seemed a yielding to a peculiarly South African temptation, a conscientious gesture of protest that would move none except a few with equally disturbed consciences, the already converted.

The finished work marvellously proved me wrong. It was a triumph of technique which wiped away the distinction between technique and art. I had always known that Rubin 'could draw' magnificently. Now, not only had he drawn more powerfully and richly than ever, but he had taught me that the drawing, the execution, was part and parcel of the meaning and truth and importance of what he had to say. For the technique had not merely carried the meaning; it had immensely enlarged and enriched it. A whole range of contrasted qualities had been used to make the ideas that were indicated in the preliminary sketches actual and visible.

Light versus shade, roundness versus flatness, naturalism versus distortion, realism versus abstraction, solidity versus transparency, smoothness versus faceted jaggedness, crowdedness versus breadth — all these effects play across the pictures to produce distinct, living images, heavy enough with actuality to break through from the icy realm of ideas to the dark waters of association and dream and feeling beneath. Look, for example, at the feminine shoe and drooping flower and complacent waistcoat of the effeminate burden-figure in **The Decadent** — at the smug bearded dwarf of intellectuality, unconscious of what he dangles from, in **The Esoteric** — at the milky breasts and averted face of the burden-woman, and the melting jelly-like aspect of the demoralised 'beast', in **The Sanctimonious** — at **Exorcism**, where the curve of the back and the fall of the closed featureless head express both the spasm at the climax of affliction and the dehumanised emptiness that follows this breaking of the spirit.

The last example lies across the border line between the ideas and the emotions that go with them. The latter have also been most forcefully rendered. Look at the face of the

'beast' from picture to picture: in **The Vicious** crude brutality screws it into a mask of physical agony and something more, weariness, incredulity, which declares the humanity of this 'beast'; in **The Decadent** it crumples with a more abject pain; in **The Esoteric** the eyes pour dark tears and the mouth opens in a howl of grief and misery; in **The Vindictive**, where the 'beast' is chained and imprisoned, the face expresses the pathetic calm of exhaustion and apathy; in the final, terrible **Communion** the 'beast's' face is for once truly bestial with sadistic glee, while the face of the 'burden' makes us positively hear his screams of horror.

Awful and passionate as Rubin's warning is, **The Beast And The Burden** is as far from being in itself just a scream of horror as it is, after all, from being simply a pious sermon. Again it is technique that is responsible: everywhere the passion is held in place by the pattern, everywhere firm geometric shapes come to light, arcs, circles, crescents and spirals, straight lines, parallels and rectangles, everywhere formal shapes are repeated and balanced against each other.

The result is a sense of great control to match the extraordinary energy, and what follows from this is a compelling authority. We have to give our attention to this message, it is given in the tone of prophecy – the message is that we inherit, we share with our victims, whatever hells we build or permit to be built for others.