

Alex Wagner at work

Alex Wagner

By PAMELA REID

OF Alex Wagner it has been said, 'He is *par excellence* a contemporary artist but so utterly free from all doctrines that he cannot be classified. He has been called a realist and a surrealist but it is futile to attempt to label his work, for his creative power is his own.' On a recent visit to Alex Wagner in Greytown, Natal, I found that this description is still pertinent and I set about to try and understand why he came to reject the frenetic art world of the cities and achieve a serenity of mind and singleness of purpose away from the acclamation and controversy which have always followed him.

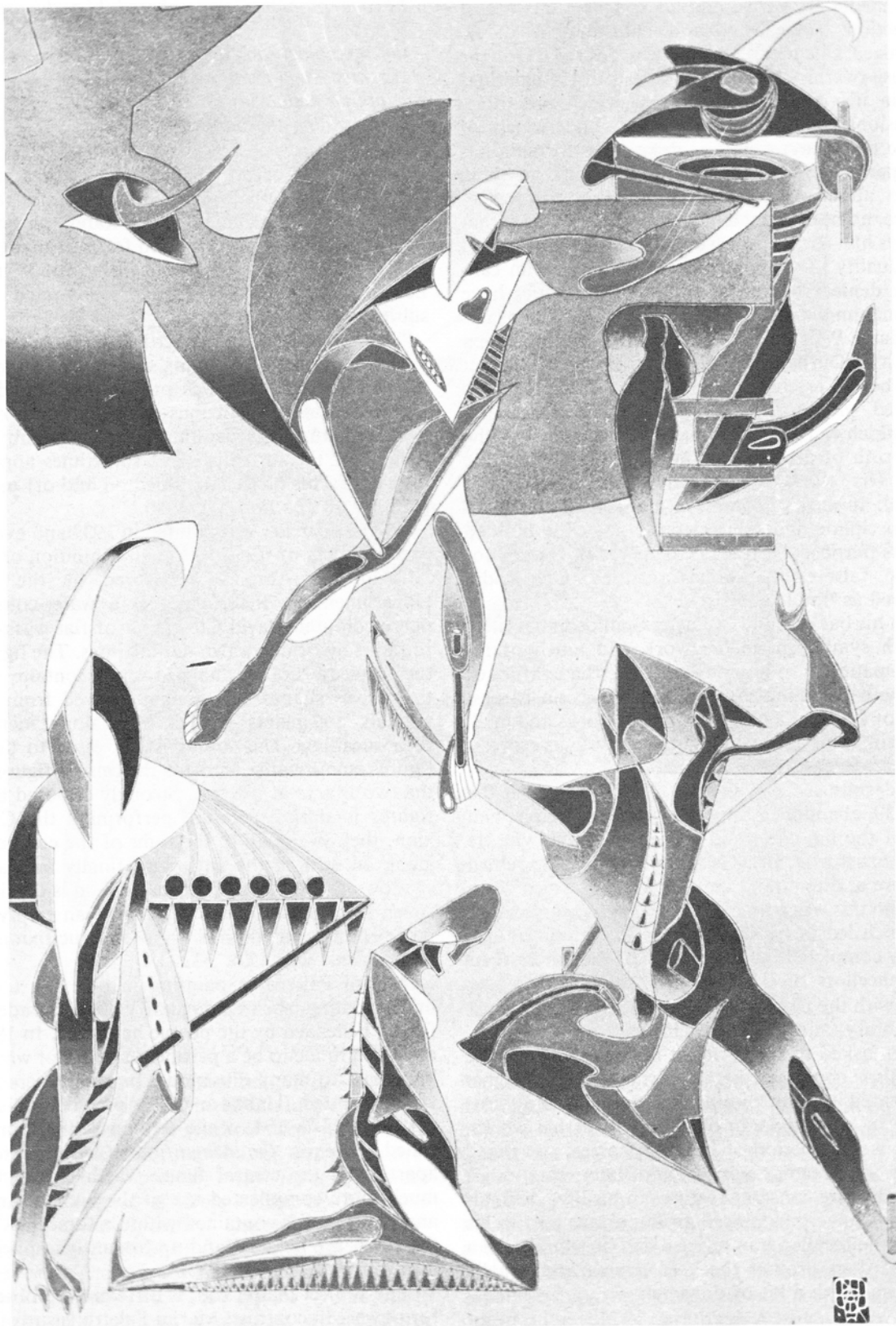
Alex Wagner was born in Durban 58 years ago, into a household where Hindu and Yoga influences abounded. His paternal grandfather had come under the spell of Eastern philosophies and it was in his care that the young Alex found himself; he was taught to develop and love the mysticism of the East and came to appreciate and understand the precepts of the gurus in the supreme path of discipleship. His maternal grandfather was a cabinet maker who had worked with Sir Herbert Baker and who conceived and wrought many of the carvings associated with Sir Herbert's architectural masterpieces.

As a boy Wagner studied art in Durban and Port Elizabeth, his particular mentor being Marriot Burton who gave him his first insight into the works of the pre-Raphaelites. At the age of 19 Alex Wagner was a student at the Fine Arts Department of the Durban Technical College and it was during this period that he exhibited publicly for the first time with the Natal Society of Artists. From this beginning the critics saw his potential and unusual ability and, in a preview of the exhibition and under a headline which stated, 'Four Pictures to make the Pre-viewer Blink', the reviewer said: 'Very few can get down to the depths, or is it the heights of Wagner. Even if you know or understand what Wagner is getting at, and even if his work is likely to give you a sudden jar with its almost advanced modernity, there is nevertheless something very pleasing about it. It is extremely well drawn, carefully designed, and has a genuine feeling of rhythm.'

Teacher and friend at this time was Professor Merlyn Evans and it was under his guidance that Wagner received training in various techniques which enabled him to become a commanding and versatile artist, though a controversial one.

An incident which was to be a great influence in the life of Alex Wagner occurred during his period of war service with the South African Air Force. A visit to the Egyptian frescos made a profound impression upon him and later at Termoli in Italy he met and became friends with the pre-war art historian Mason Perkins who had spent the war years in an internment camp. With Mason Perkins he studied the Giotto murals in Assisi and became intrigued by the work of restorers and artists which, in later years, he was to apply himself in his own field of art restoration.

Not generally known is that it was Alex Wagner who designed several of the war stamps of South Africa and who prepared presentation albums and illuminated addresses as gifts for His Majesty King George VI and President Roosevelt.



His media are varied and his style is a mixture of abstraction, surrealism, and cubism, but in no recognized category. To create a desired effect he may use overlays of silver and gold in his paintings and, in his many constructions, which are three-dimensional with overtones and undertones of mosaic and inlay, a unique descriptive formula has been perfected. There is nothing arty or anything pseudo about Alex Wagner: no beret, no eccentricities, no beard, just a man with an inner drive that compels him to compose works of rare excellence and individuality. That controversy surrounds him cannot be denied, but in all instances the critics have been unanimous in their respect for his craftsmanship.

Madame Wisznicka-Kleczynska, in opening an exhibition in Durban in 1968, summed up what must surely be the essential core of Alex Wagner. 'He is endowed with a strength of character and moral force which radiate from his work. He translates the inner truth of any object: the soul, the feeling, and the ideas. His work is expressive, purposeful, and truthful. It shows not only a maturity but tremendous discipline and every detail is logically built to serve its purpose. Nothing is tempered or marred for a cheap, false effect. He has qualities which Rodin described as 'the true artist'.

With his background in Eastern philosophies there is much symbolism in his work and much of his preoccupation is in human tragedies, the conflict of man, with the mind and politics. He is an earnest reader of spiritual and philosophical works and in all his paintings his absorption in metaphysics is expressed.

But despite success, in 1950 Alex Wagner, at the age of 30, abandoned the extravagances, frenzy, and fame of the big cities and retired to Greytown. He and his artist wife, Beryl Newman, resolved to return to nature and to 'stand and stare'. He farmed for a while and this was a time of much creative inspiration and which led to his interest in restoration. He has recently completed the restoration of the portraits of the chancellors of the University of Natal and he works with the Durban Art Gallery, the Killie Campbell Library, and the Town House.

When asked to speak about his paintings and the symbolism contained in all of them Alex Wagner commented on the number of animals and birds which, in a secondary role, abound in his works. During a short period of farming, horses, cows, and poultry were regular subjects and, later, cats, dogs, and birds were constant features in his life. Animals and birds have thus played an important part in his life and he recalled how twice a day he would take a pack of dogs around the gold course and usually came back with a bit of doggerel:

*Two wet dogs panting,
A third sitting on her wet behind waiting
For the birds to glide back into their morning.
The wagging tail of time stilled*

*Elusive moments remembered like the transient
scents*

*On the cold winds dispelled
As three dogs flood across the fields
Rippling memories timeless pool,
And eroding the banks of a new day.*

'My paintings before 1938, while I was a student, derive from carefully drawn figure studies reminiscent of the Slade School under Randolph Schwabe but formalized when composed for paintings (mostly in tempera). Sometimes the influence of Wyndham Lewis or Edward Burra can be detected in the subject-matter.

'The first work to be described is *The Crucifixion* as it stands at the beginning of a series of paintings where the symbolism was precise and heraldic but juxtaposed against portions or backgrounds of very delicate naturalistic painting which no doubt is the reason for the surrealistic tag sometimes applied to my work. This phase continued on and off until the painting of *The Bomb* in 1950.'

The Crucifixion was painted in 1939 and exhibited with *The Fall of the Rock* on an exhibition of South African Art Abroad, sponsored by the Union Government in 1948-9. It is a water-colour on ochre-coloured David Cox paper of flat washes surrounded by firmly drawn red-ink lines. The figures in the tragedy are formalized and contain within themselves shapes and designs derived from birds, animals, and plants — thus, by analogy, increasing their meaning. The colour is also used to link the figures emotionally. Christ is the central figure, with the two Marys at his feet. Strongly opposed by two figures in darker colours, performing the Crucifixion, they sweep up to the right of the composition along an arm of the cross and finally into a huge shadow behind Jesus. The background is divided between a flat wash blue and ochre — an empty stage representing a gap in time while the Crucifixion is being enacted. Size 49 × 33

'Marini Faletro, a painting in oil on a tempera underpainting, shews a doge of Venice degraded and finally beheaded by the people he served. In 1945 he appeared to me to be a pertinent symbol of what had happened to many illustrious, brave, careers in the war just ended. (Unlike an earlier picture in this manner, painted in 1943 while serving in the army and called *Lorenzo the Magnificent*, where symbols, apart from the central figure which represented a much more complicated use of the human, animal, and plant motifs contained within a torso sinking in the sand, are detailed and up-to-date paraphernalia of a war in the desert.)'

'The subject matter too, is different, an obsession for power. In contrast, Marini Faletro is surrounded by straightforward symbols of his own time and of Venetian power. It is from a strongly painted head, slightly awry on its shoulders, that the sadness and resignation must be interpreted and projected for-



Marini Faletro. 1945 (See text on opposite page)

ward, to engage our sympathy today. Size 34 × 25

'The Bomb' was painted in 1950 and is the last of the heraldic pictures. The symbols used in this small oil painting are detailed, naturalistic, and miniature. They have already broken away from the more decoratively designed symbols of the two previous works. This painting derives largely from descriptions of the effect of the atom bomb as described by John Hersey. The upright figure on the left of the painting, dissolving under the effects of the blast, slowly through various stages to a crouching skeleton, has none of the horror familiar to us on television today but is yet the most telling and important symbol in the picture. The central, reclining nude figure could be dead or asleep yet giving a feel-

ing of hope, a resurrection, perhaps, from the holocaust. The little montage of plane and pilot and bomb release are dated but, like the other remaining details, are still relevant. Size 44 × 39

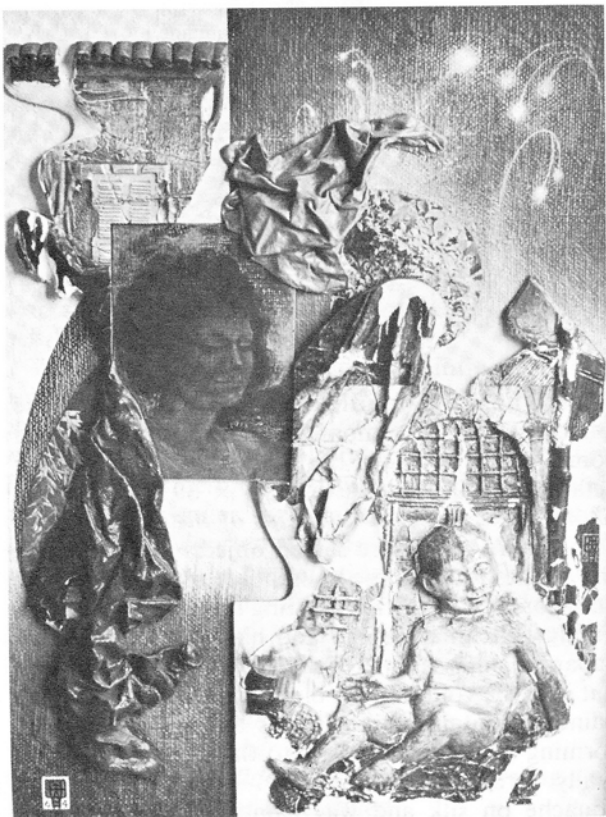
Shōryōbune: Little Straw Ships of the Dead

'These in reality are sacred objects placed among the shrines in Japanese households to commemorate ancestors. I have in this painting linked them with the Flying Dutchman legend and have depicted ghostly Japanese ships sailing together and entwined for ever out into the void of dark blue. A bright centre to the painting contains three figures adapted into spray, forming comets sweeping into the universe to eventually form stars in a galaxy. This painting is in gouache on silk and was painted in 1954. It is a



The Sunbird

Roman Carnival



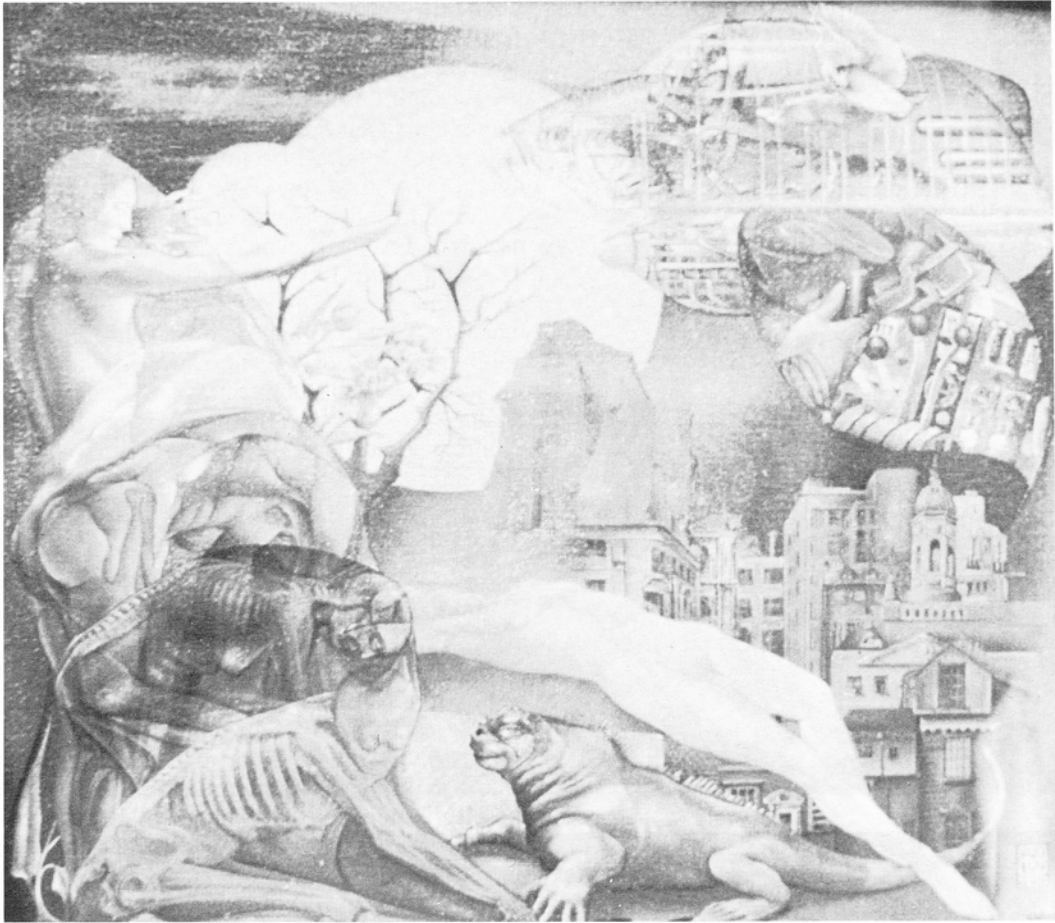
breakaway from the previous group of paintings. Size 54 × 40

'*The Sunbird* was painted about 1946 and, although it falls within the heraldic period, the figures being extremely distorted and designed, they still convey a feeling of complete naturalness. Composed from sketches made in Assisi during the war of places most clearly identified with St Francis it is painted on a silver panel in enamel and the detail, incised like silver filigree through the brilliant colours, giving an effect rather like an illuminated medieval book of hours. The central figure of St Francis in brown habit, hands raised in prayer, gently supports a sunbird. His head is divided under the cowl — on one side the saint of the canticles and on the other the saint of the bitter struggles which came towards the end of his life when he approached nearer to God. St Francis is supported on either side by two archbishops kneeling and, although appearing to worship, they look doubtful about the place of the saint in their hierarchy. Size 53 × 43

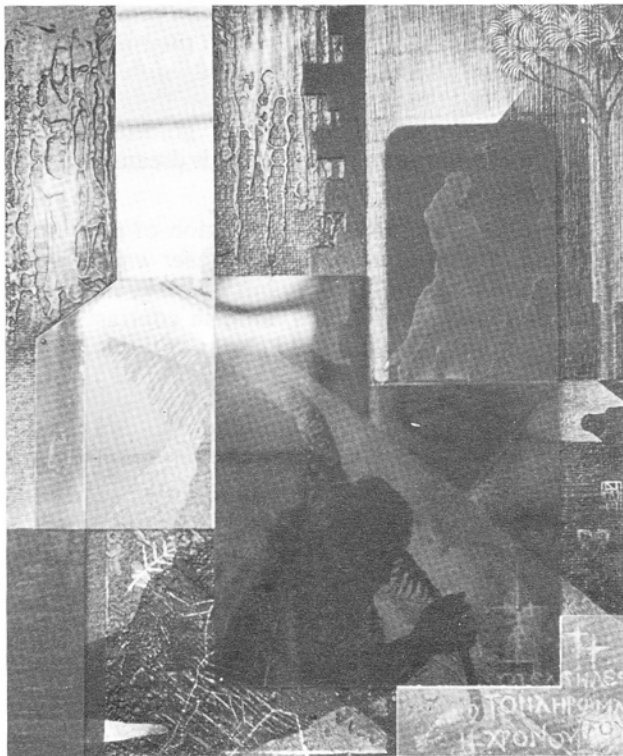
'The sixth painting is also religious in theme, done particularly for an exhibition of religious art held in Johannesburg in 1961 *Palm Sunday* is an oil painting done on a gesso ground, slightly modelled. In the background the painting is divided into two incidents. Mary on her donkey with the child Jesus and Joseph, escaping into Egypt, while on the left Jesus rides towards Jerusalem. The entire foreground is taken up with the shadows of disciples carrying palms, cast against an old wall covered in Roman graffiti and bearing the text predicting the coming of the Messiah. The only colour is conveyed over the monochrome background by a series of delicately coloured Perspex sheets acting like a glaze to separate the various incidents taking place. Size 60 × 44

'*Roman Carnival*, except for a few rockets lighting up a menacing sky and the memory of a haunting passage from Berlioz's *Overture*, this painting presents nothing festive and is the most disturbing of the paintings described. A modelled relief in plaster of a mother hanging out washing in the backyard of a mean Roman dwelling, a naked child at her feet, was done from drawings made during the war in Italy. But it lacked impact and I decided to destroy it with the intention of recovering those portions which satisfied me and combining them into a painting-collage construction. The present painting attempts to convey the distress of Italy after the war. Surrounded by heavy modelled drapes in reds and blues, the head of the woman, painted in oil, (the Madonna perhaps), symbol of a tired baroque culture, looks sadly down at the child playing in the squalid yard. Behind is a broken door leading to a shuttered palazzo and, in the sky, the transitory gay light of a few rockets. Size 60 × 44

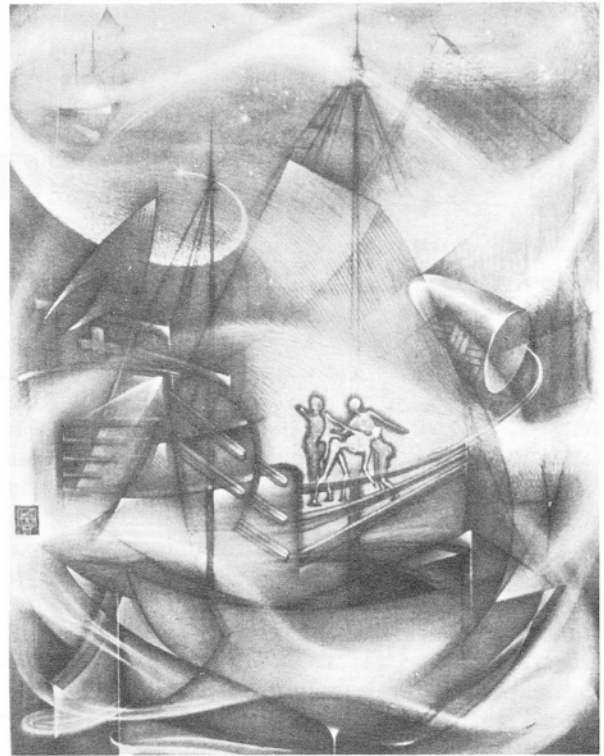
'*Action* is a gouache painted over a manuscript with a fine geometric border in water-colour. The text, a page of poetry from the Greek, done in black



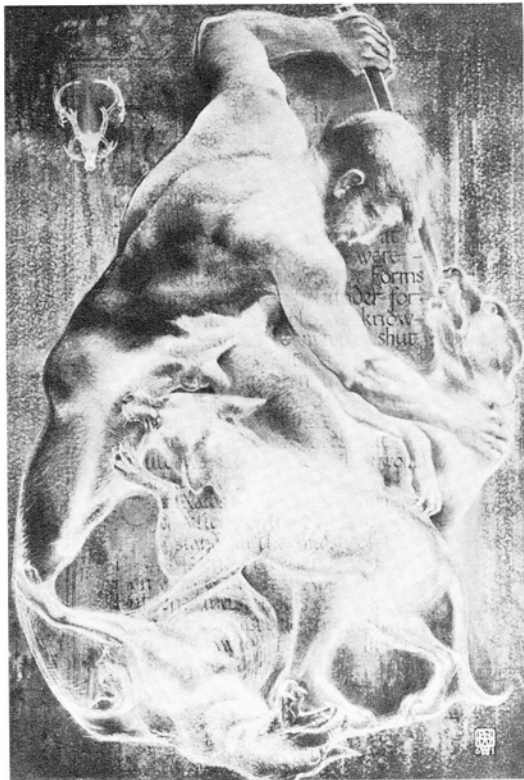
The Bomb



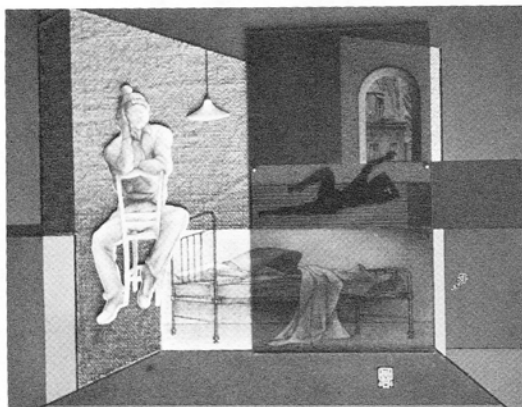
Palm Sunday



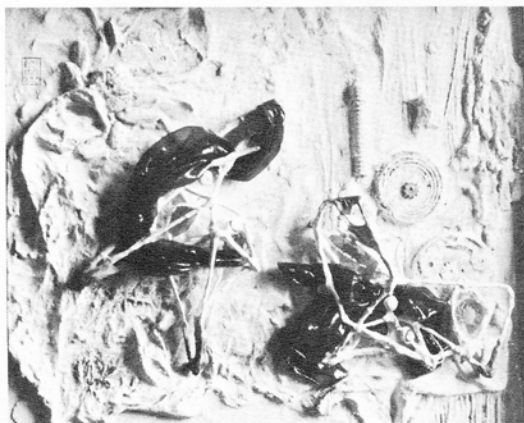
The Little Straw Ships



Actaeon



The Cage



Sobre Los Angeles

letter, was unfortunately damaged beyond saving so, after toning it down and sanding it till it had a pleasant granulation, it made a good background for the present painting, indicating very exactly within what context the painting must be accepted. The central figure of Acteon, still in human form, is fighting with his three hunting dogs. The whole is a ripple of muscle combined into a tense unity. The colour is derived mostly from the background which has been tinted. The detail, laid in with transparent through to opaque white washes, creates a ghostly feeling which tends to heighten the viciousness of the attacking animals. A pair of antlers behind Acteon's head are the only symbols connecting it with the myth of Diana. Acteon was painted in 1961 and like *Carnival* is one of several paintings done in the sixties containing material which had been torn or broken up to be used with more effect in a composition. Size 36 × 38

'*The Cage I* is the first in a series of paintings done in 1964 which tried to convey very simply the depression, anxiety, and frustrations created in people's lives by the environment in which they live or in the work they have to do. The painting is built up from a background of flat intense colour, proportionally divided. A dark Prussian blue and a crimson brown occupy most of the field with flashes of brilliant yellow and a strip of verdant green. An escape from the city is depicted by a block of neutral colour in perspective and black-ended and creates the immensity of a high-rise building. There are four main objects in the composition. A young man in blue monochrome sitting reversed on a chair, his arms over the back, dreams wistfully under a dim light. A white oblong on his left contains an ink drawing of an unmade bed. This is his cave. To the right of the composition a young girl suns herself before an open window. The colours here are altered by a sheet of orange Perspex which suggests a golden curtain which divides the young man from his dream. Size 53 × 33

'*Sobre Los Angeles* is a construction of pure fantasy and is made on a base of *papier mâché* into which have been cast grasses, bits of bark, seeds, insects, and some small crabs, and, in contrast there are springs and cogs from old clocks. All this, when painted in flat white and subtle touches of colour, creates a disturbing jungle. The two main figures are made on a carefully designed wire armature and integrated with the background by being slightly modelled and similarly coloured. Solidity and action are achieved within these figures by carefully arranged brown silk firmed by plastic. The important compositional points in the arrangement are also indicated by using precious stones. The whole conveys a strong feeling of menace as if two Samurai warriors, confronting each other, are waiting to ambush the little golden figure entering from the right-hand top of the composition. This painting lends itself to endless interpretation. Size 46 × 38 ○