



Valerie Desmore (b.1925) THE FAMILY oil on canvas board 71 x 112cm 1958

Desmore was born in Cape Town. Both her parents were teachers and her father, Abe Desmore obtained a Masters degree in Education from Columbia University, New York, in 1936. Valerie was a gifted scholar and was the first coloured woman to hold a solo exhibition of her paintings in Cape Town, in 1942, when she was sixteen years old. She was also tutored by the long-time champion and friend of Irma Stern, Rosa van Gelderen. Due to ongoing racial discrimination, Valerie eventually went into exile, moving to London in 1946. This painting titled The Family, shows Valerie with her parents and was painted in 1958.

2005
Slebrits, W. Adams, Valerie Desmore & Dolie Borel - Thlay - Warren Slebrits

Slade School of Fine Art had Viennese expressionist painting later, when he attended there, may explain why their work is

Peter Clarke (b.1929) was in His talents were recognised in the early 1940's. Whereas A strongly by Mexican artists in paper. Over the past fifty years exhibitions and cultural events Richard Rive, along with his mentor to many aspiring artists published widely. This exhibition Fanfare series, which continues underline the importance of

Peter will fly up from Cape Town in a musical aspect to this exhibition provided the perfect recorded in exile and are their international acclaim as one 1934, and a product of the add to the experience of view

Warren Slebrits, Johannesburg

The hunger 1985

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Valerie who?

Mail & Guardian Dec 11-17 1998

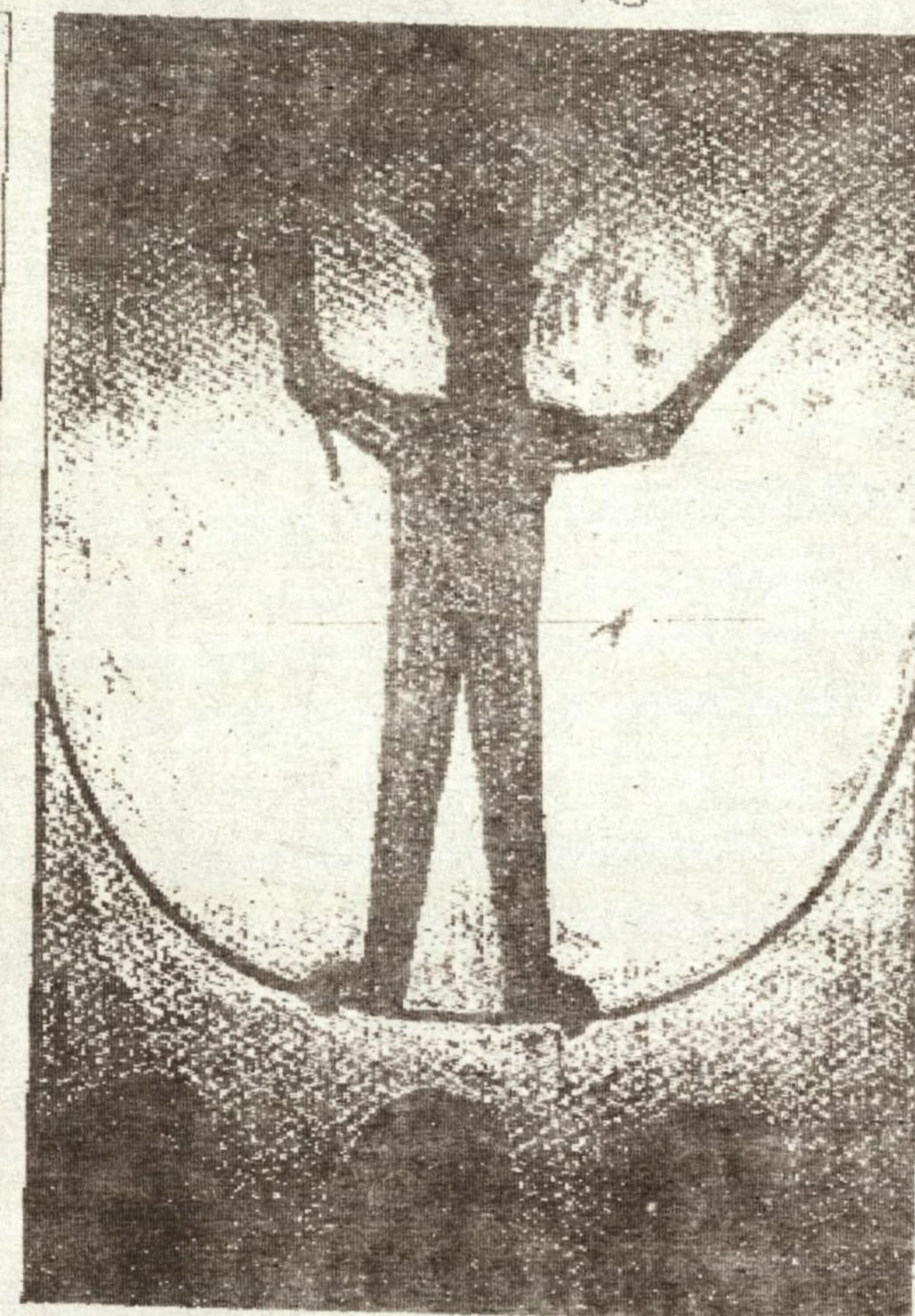
More than 50 years ago Valerie Desmore was the first black woman artist to exhibit her work in South Africa, but only now is she receiving the recognition that she deserves, writes **Tracy Murinik**

We're met and led through the dark, cool passages of the house on the old family farm of Lekkerwijn, just outside Paarl, to the courtyard where Valerie Desmore sits waiting for us. She preens herself lightly for the camera, stylish and understatedly elegant. At 73, she is quite stunning, with a wicked sense of humour.

Desmore began painting at the age of 11. The first time she was filmed was when she was interviewed about her first exhibition at the Argus Gallery at the age of 16. She was touted as a kind of *wunderkind* and the excitement of it led her over and over again to the cinema where it was showing to see herself on screen.

It seems tragic that it has taken more than 50 years for the local spotlight to shine on her again. Two of her early paintings feature on Elza Miles's exhibition *Land and Lives: Pioneer Black Artists*, currently showing at the South African National Gallery. This is one of the reasons why Desmore has returned to South Africa after such a long time.

She left South Africa in 1945 at the



Unrecognised: Only last year did the Johannesburg Art Gallery buy four of Valerie Desmore's works.

age of 20 to continue her art studies abroad. She also studied fashion design at St Martin's in London.

It is in Miles's catalogue that she is finally acknowledged as the first black South African woman artist ever to exhibit her work in South Africa — a title which Desmore is passionate about, especially since it has gone unnoticed for most of her life.

Desmore describes herself as an expressionist, and found herself bored and frustrated with the type of academic canon being taught in many of the art schools when she got to London. She was far more attracted to more "anti-establishment" avant-

gardists, and particularly the German Expressionists and Vienna Secessionists who, by the time she arrived in Europe, were being demeaned as "degenerate artists" by Hitler.

She also delved into the new thoughts in literature, psychology and music at the time — Freud and Jung, Kafka, Rilke, Stravinsky, Prokofiev. Spunky and fearless, she sent Oskar Kokoschka a fan letter. She even went to visit him while he was still living in England. She was on personal terms with many of the people who inspired her thinking. But, with a great wariness of art dealers and a recognition of the economic hazards

of living by her art alone, Desmore pursued a career in fashion design for many years. She hoped that she could return to her art committedly later on without the fear of being forced to compromise. This she did.

She continued, however, to produce work all the time. Much of her work looks at the intricacies of families; sibling rivalry — spidery — armed sisters wrestling one another to the ground; and of women trapped within the restraints of patriarchal living. A particularly striking series from the late Eighties explores situations in which men become dependent on women's sexuality. Closely

related are her themes on hunger — astonishing images which intuit hunger on many levels. She still paints to this day.

The fact that Desmore has gone unnoticed and unacknowledged in South African art history up until now, stands out as a glaring and embarrassing omission. Only last year did the Johannesburg Art Gallery acquire four pieces of her work. No other national institutions or collections have followed suit. It would be a further insult and great loss if this were not rectified during her lifetime. We can only hope that one of our institutions has the vision to do this.

GUARDIAN

THURSDAY, APRIL 8, 1943.

PLEASURE for the PEOPLE

VALERIE DESMORE

A thrill—that is how I describe my visit to Gainsborough Galleries, where paintings and drawings by Valerie Desmore, Cape Town's talented 16-year-old artist, were on view from March 29 to April 3.

From 90 exhibits a young mind could be seen inquisitively probing possibilities moving forward by devious paths towards its suited medium—now in brilliant colours of exuberant spirit—again in sombre shades of deep thought.

"In the Wings" impressed me most. Several ballet dancers are seen loitering off-stage, while another dancer can be seen on-stage, and the warm flood of footlights imparts an amazingly realistic reproduction of stage atmosphere. Other outstanding efforts were "Self Portrait", "Malay Gossips", "Cape Flower Sellers", "Yellow Dahlias", "My Studio", "Boy's Head" and "Gamblers in District Six".

Miss Desmore has a decided leaning towards the sensual and taste for the fantastic. Versatile as she is, it is impossible to discern yet the lines along which her future works will travel, but it is encouraging that she shows no disposition to pander to glamour. She is not squeamish about depicting sordid aspects of life in this country — we possibly have in Valerie Desmore a potential pioneer of a school of characteristically South African art.

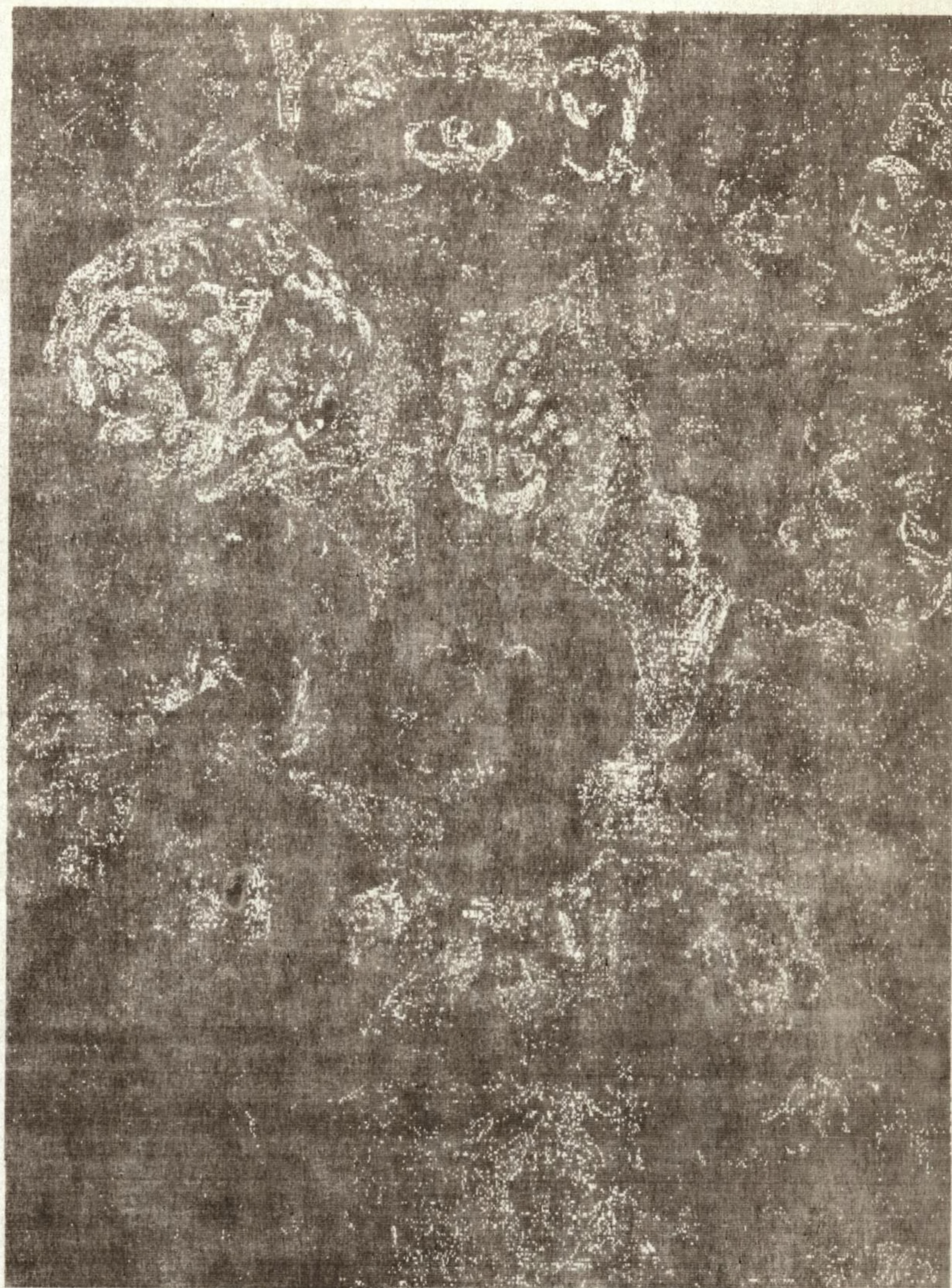
Valerie Desmore

Valerie Desmore's exhibition of 1942 at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town was overlooked by the media which acclaimed Gladys Mgudlandlu as the first non-European woman artist to hold an exhibition in 1961 in South Africa. Desmore, then only 16 years of age, showed work of exceptional versatility. Her paintings of people were strong expressions of the human dilemma. This exhibition, held under the auspices of the New Group, was well received by critics like Rayner Prebble of the *Cape Argus* and *Trek*.

Valerie Desmore was born on 29 June 1925 in Cape Town. Both her parents were teachers and her mother also painted. In 1936 the family went to New York where her father Abe Desmore, who was principal of Trafalgar Junior School, obtained a masters degree in education at Columbia University. At the time Valerie won a scholarship to Horace Mann Experimental School where she was exposed to informal and stimulating education.

Back in Cape Town, two years later, she started to paint and the hazards of racial discrimination began to mar her life. Being 'coloured' she was con-

Street Accident 1959, Valerie Desmore. Oil on board, 61 x 91,5. Johannesburg Art Gallery.



Street Accident 1959, Valerie Desmore. Oil on board, 221,9 x 91,5. Johannesburg Art Gallery.

stantly turned away from schools. She enjoyed a brief but exciting period of creativity at the Girls' Central School where Roza van Gelderen, a dynamic teacher and friend of Irma Stern, conducted stimulating art projects for schoolchildren. Again racial discrimination forced Valerie to leave and Roza, pretending to be Valerie's mother, enrolled her at a convent. Yet this worthy effort proved emotionally unsettling to Valerie