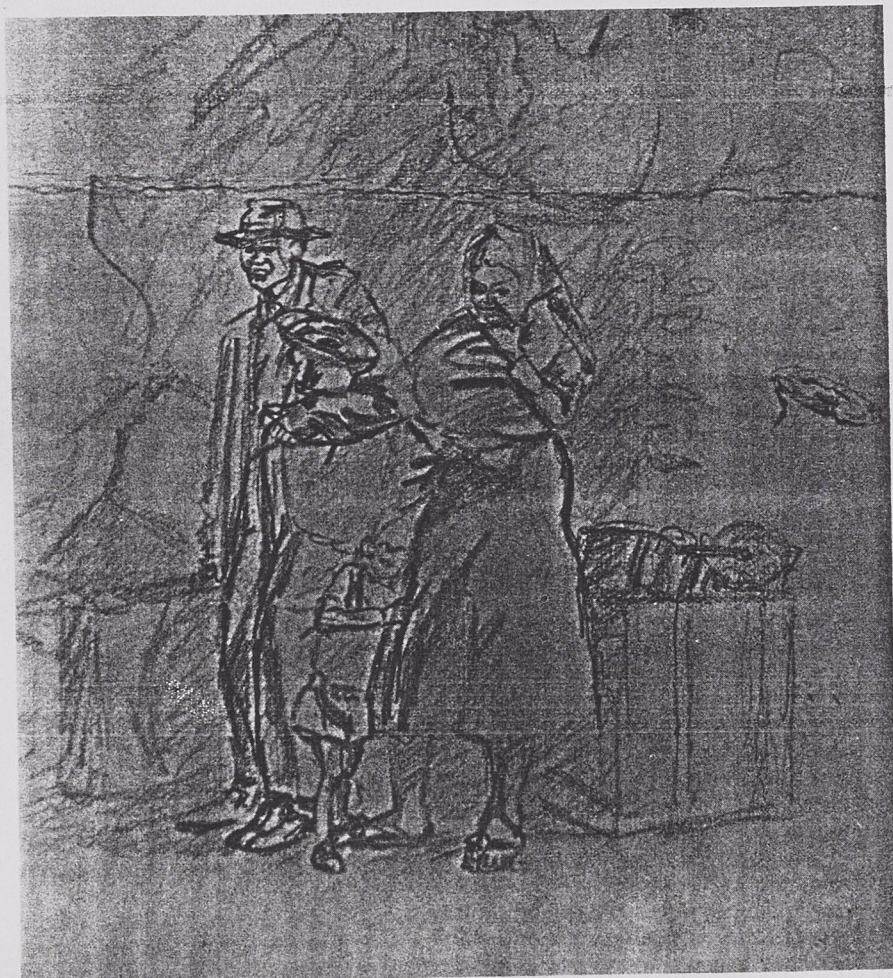


Pencil studies for the interior of a third class railway carriage



Pencil study for 'The Evicted'

a large, young family and piles of lessons to prepare and mark, this must be seen as an act of generosity and immense loyalty. Her concern is swift and deep.

Beck's first sculptures were realistic in style; but this soon gave way to simplification of form. In his most recent works, *The Musicians*, forms have been reduced to volume and plane. All this has taken place intuitively in the artist. He has had no formal training in this field. His works have a Barlach-like freedom from extraneous elements and depiction of basic emotion. All this has been achieved by careful observation, wide reading and an innate sense of form and balance.

The drawings and rough sketches which act as studies for these, all portray his people in their daily activities. They sit or stand and wait a lot; 'my people have to be very very patient — it's part of our way of life — long queues . . .' They are depicted playing cards, one of the few recreations open to them. They are shown in various stages of inebriation — another activity open to them under certain social conditions. At a neighbouring compound the miners spend their recreation making music — this too has been the subject of many works.

Interestingly, many of the final drawings are strongly sculptural in style. They look as if they could well have been worked in relief. It is the sketches on tiny bits of wrapper, cardboard, envelopes — that give the full vitality of observations. They record dispassionately, but always with a sense of strong identification on his part.

Of his aspirations, Sidney has this to say; 'I'd like to start my own group in Boksburg where I live — I'd like to get those kids in off the streets — a sort of art centre. I'd make myself available to teach these kids (over and above my duties as regular school teacher) to give them something special. There's a lot of talent in those children. It just wants bringing out.'

'I did a series of drawings of Edenvale township — the shanties with bits added on — the way these people have to live over there. I always add people to these drawings — it gives them life. I like to include a really ugly face or two — it usually makes for a good drawing!' Although many figures have been added for their compositional value, they always relate realistically to the general scene. Beck's drawings are never forced. Their subject matter always presents a coherent aspect of the Coloured man's world.

On June 15 an exhibition of Sidney Beck's work opens at the Nedbank Gallery, Killarney, Johannesburg. The show is open for two weeks during banking hours.

Dina Katz

# Sidney Beck - Social Commentator



'The Cardplayers' Charcoal

'In all my drawings you will find that the people are doing something — even in the ones of people who are just sitting and waiting. They're doing something — they're waiting . . . And in this one — 'The Evicted', — it's a subject I don't like — the people just stand there. When I was still small we found some people, you know, with all their furniture in the street; another time, with other people it happened and then it started raining cats and dogs . . . it happens daily with our people.'

As a Coloured artist working in SA Sidney Beck has found himself in the position of chronicler of his people's lives. His drawings, sculptures and strongly evocative rough sketches record daily events — mundane, tragic, joyous, unjust. His is social comment without the exaggeration of expressionist devices. It reveals a milieu seen with an often agonised eye but recorded with a bias toward closely observed human form and gesture.

The context is always there. One is aware of street-corners, townships,

tatty shebeens. But one is never dragged into these by means of visual emotional blackmail. One feels in Beck identification with his work; but the anguish, the resentment, the pity he must feel, manifest as compassion.

Sidney Beck was born in 1936 in Doornfontein, Johannesburg. He attended the Coronation Primary School, then the Eurafican Training Centre Vrededorp. After completing his training as a primary school teacher at the Rand College of Education, he held teaching posts at various schools. Ever since he can remember Sidney has done drawings. While at high school he bought himself his first box of paints.

'In those days I did a drawing and started painting — you know, to give the drawing colour. I didn't know about building up a picture; mind you, I didn't have any trouble with arranging colours. I thought I was a painter because everybody loved my work! My people and people who came visiting — they all thought, 'gee whizz, this is the greatest artist!'

After that I started painting on the

walls at home. I did all 'my' great historians, like Napoleon and his rival Nelson, Charles Dickens and Shakespeare, I had them coloured — life-sized paintings. I used just the ordinary black enamel paint; the colours too were household paints. My teacher friends used to admire these 'masterpieces' a lot . . .'

Sidney married in 1962. His wife, Lilian, is a teacher too. He was commissioned to do work by the Principal of the Kliptown Primary School at which he was then teaching. He painted portraits of Prime Ministers past and present and other dignitaries.

In 1965 Sidney Beck joined up with Artists under the Sun. 'I started mixing with the artists and they were all very nice to me, and helpful too. I started selling a lot of my work. But that wasn't enough and I thought I must branch out into the galleries. But I wasn't very successful — my paintings they didn't accept. But, along the line, one of the gallery owners tried to get the idea of technique over to me. He really tried to teach me.'



'Musician' Bronze



'The Tired Servant' Bronze

Beck held a highly successful exhibition of his charcoal drawings with the Adler-Fielding Gallery in 1967. Much of the work was sold before the show, a fair proportion going to visiting Americans. Beck however, had no respect for his drawings at that time. He wanted to paint, and his efforts in this direction were being rejected.

In 1971, in an attempt to find a medium of expression other than drawing, Sidney Beck tried his hand at sculpture — after a second successful exhibition of drawings. He was going through a period of distress and frustration, at which point a friend brought him a piece of wood with a view to making a carving. Sidney had little success with this.

'Then she brought me my first packet of clay. That's how I got started again . . . When I was a kid I used to play around and make interesting faces out of the clay. I started making models. Not knowing anything about it, I let the wire remain in the clay for drying and the whole thing cracked.' Sidney battled

for a while then gave up the modelling. He was later given advice by sympathetic people who knew and liked him and his work, as to where to have his pieces fired and cast; this encouragement was fruitful.

In 1970 Sidney Beck won the commission for a mural in the Coloureds Representatives Council buildings in the Cape. 'In 1971 I did a drawing from my children that I had in class . . . the way they come to school — not well-off or anything like that. We also have our own fund to send children to the sea; well I did a drawing like that, the children seeing the sea for the first time with their eyes popping out.

'I had this drawing in my pouch up to the last day for entries to the Star Seaside Competition. After school I decided that I'd send it in just for the fun of it. This was my lucky day for I won the competition in the realistic section.' As the prize for winning Sidney Beck went overseas in January 1972. It is significant that he won an open competition with a work that integrated with his working world.

Also, as he points out, the sea 'happened to me in the same way as a child, and that is how I must have looked!'

Until the present time, Sidney Beck has had no form of sustained art training. He has been helped intermittently; he has also signed on for courses in various fields, such as wood-carving, batik, etching and painting. His skills he would like to be able to pass on to his pupils, but funds for materials are insufficient for execution of his ideas. Much of his problem stems from the fact that he is Coloured. As such he falls into the no-man's land well-known by South Africans to be the lot of the Coloured.

Invariably, each 'break' has been made possible by the Becks' White friends. Artists too, when approached, are generous with their time and expertise. Beck, in turn, responds with warmth and keenness. Any interest shown in his work definitely encourages him. Lilian has been solidly behind him all along. She even takes time off from her duties after school to pose for Sidney. For a woman with