

MASTER CRAFTSMAN OF THE

PROFILE

Question: Before we discuss your life as an artist, can you tell us about your family?

Ben: "Well, my father, whose name was Fred is dead. Nice rhyme eh? Fred, dead, (laughs). My old man was a builder, but I like to say he was a house sculptor. (Laughs again).

(Then seriously): My dad slogged and slaved for some White man who paid him a pittance while he made all the money. The work was too much and he quietly said goodbye to my mother, Dora, and my two sisters and two brothers. One brother followed him to the grave.

We lived in Albertsville. A lovely quiet township, lying at the bottom of Sophiatown squeezed by the

White suburb of Northcliff. It was a peaceable town and people knew whose son was after whose daughter or whose husband was lying all hoosed up near Aunt Amie's shebeen.

Then, (the fire returns to Ben's eyes) Then, the overlords told us to pack and move. Like they were telling everyone all over the country. My school days at Albertsville primary and at Coronationville High School, lost their beauty and my family bore the stain of my youthful bitterness.

Question: Bitterness, Ben? Why bitter at such a tender age, surely you were not all that sensitive?

Ben: When you're young and somebody tears and pulls at your dream, the people you love and all those things that are dear to the heart, you hate mister, you hate bitterly even if you don't understand what it's all about. The bitterness is in your mama's womb.

Question: Then you must have started early in your life as an artist and sculptor. Did those early experiences have any bearing on your work?

Ben: It's hard to say. I guess everything I felt, saw and craved. The pain I heard my family speak of, their joys and prayers, all these were reflected in my work. Even the Christ I painted was a member of the family, someone in the community.

If there was bitterness, then it must have come out. I loved painting as a kid, but it soon dawned on me that I was more pronounced as a sculptor.

Dumb

People saw and liked what I did, but nobody saw the artist in me. Just some dumb kid whiling away his time in paints and dirt.

A man that really spurred me on, was my father. He wrote letters to many artistically inclined people and "authorities" on art.

Then a man called Cecil Skotnes heard of my works from my dad and he invited me to study at the Polly Street Art School.

Skotnes showed interest and taught me

the technicalities behind art. He could not teach me art. No one can do that, because art lies deep within a person. Part of his soul, you might say. And no one, but no one can know another man's soul.

All the school did was teach me the technical side of art the side that attracts the buyers. The side that tells you there is only one form of art. No art of the free and the unfree.

But I am grateful for what Skotnes and many other Whites did for me. They also made me realise that artists can become their subjects. I became someone else's subject. A machine for making money. A sucker. A Mickey Mouse. And dammit, I am just sick of being a Mickey Mouse. Ben rubs his chin now and there is a look of defiance and anger in his face.

Rich

Question: You have been painting and sculpting for a long time. In fact, you gained fame as far back as 1959. How is it, if you will pardon me saying, that you aren't the rich artist so many of your colleagues are?

Ben: That is another one of the Mickey Mouse scenes I had played for the benefit of others. Why am I not the rich, fat bellied tycoon? A good question. But the reason began with my father's first letter to a White guy. A cheque of £10.

"Mr Arnold, for your son's work" then selling it for £60. Then a small fee in appreciation of Ben's effort.

Money coming in small bits, for a home that had to send four kids to school on a tight budget, because my old man's boss was draining the life from him.

Material, rents, time and labour put into a major work, only to be handed a pittance. Mickey Mouse, brother, from an early age.

I wasted too, which young kid would not. If he was excited about handling a few crispy bank notes given in recognition of his work.

Later I was commissioned by churches to work on religious themes and African-orientated murals. The money came, like it always did, cut bare by percentages, interests and deductions for materials. Mickey-moused because I thought I was becoming famous and did not pay much attention to money.



OLD BLACK ART

Today, there are too many commercially inclined Black artists. Men and women who go for the fast buck, the tycoon complexed painter, the cheque-book sculptor, all doing their thing, because of money.

Question: It seems that you have a grudge against making money. How can an artist live without it? Or do you see some sort of evil in hoarding cash?

Ben: No evil, mister. Everybody needs a slice or so, but when artists want to own the bakeries, let alone the grain fields, then, old man money, sure has them. Then they're no longer moved by vocation. No longer out to record, those things that affect their survival.

Power

The things that mean heritage, tradition and culture.

Not being a channel through which generations can look back on. Only money-eyed artists chasing green power and forgetting the call of Negritude.

The elements I speak of were always in my early work. They were more pronounced in my later years, as I became aware that artists have a positive role to play in the political and cultural freedom of their people. In 1960 I participated in a student group art show. Then, if you can recall, the spirit of our people was high. As an artist, although

young, I drank of the fever of those times which left an indelible mark on my work."

Question: I see from your record that you have had a number of group and individual exhibitions. Can you tell us how it feels to feature in an exhibition.

Ben: "It's like going to receive the holy sacrament for the first time. A fever burns your insides as you hear the remarks. The critics are damned good at telling an artist what he or she portrays, or lacks or attempts to say.

I guess it's all in their wallets. Money gives them a critical eye. But it sure is a nice feeling seeing your work displayed, getting the usual favourable nod. The pat on the back. The offer.

Then those Mickey Mouse directors come and spill the contract thing. How much you owe for this or that. The interests, etc., I've got nothing against sharing.

Desire

In fact, I am social being, but this commercial thing has got us Black artists by the neck. It's one way of being subverted from those values that should mean so much to us.

We get bullied by our desire for money and soon become culturally stripped artists without a desire to conscientise our people towards a common awareness of their rights.

You might ask me why I didn't rather

become a politician. If I'm squealing much about being free. Well it's not all that easy to jump on a political platform and denounce those who govern you.

I have chosen to be a channel of Black Consciousness through the medium of art and culture.

Our people have been robbed of their old values, religion and way of life, thus giving them no impetus towards change, towards a better life, free of repression. They sit, pray and hope for betterment and stagnate spiritually and culturally.

Question: Of all your successes, tell us of the one that pleases or pleases you most. What is the most treasured thing for you?

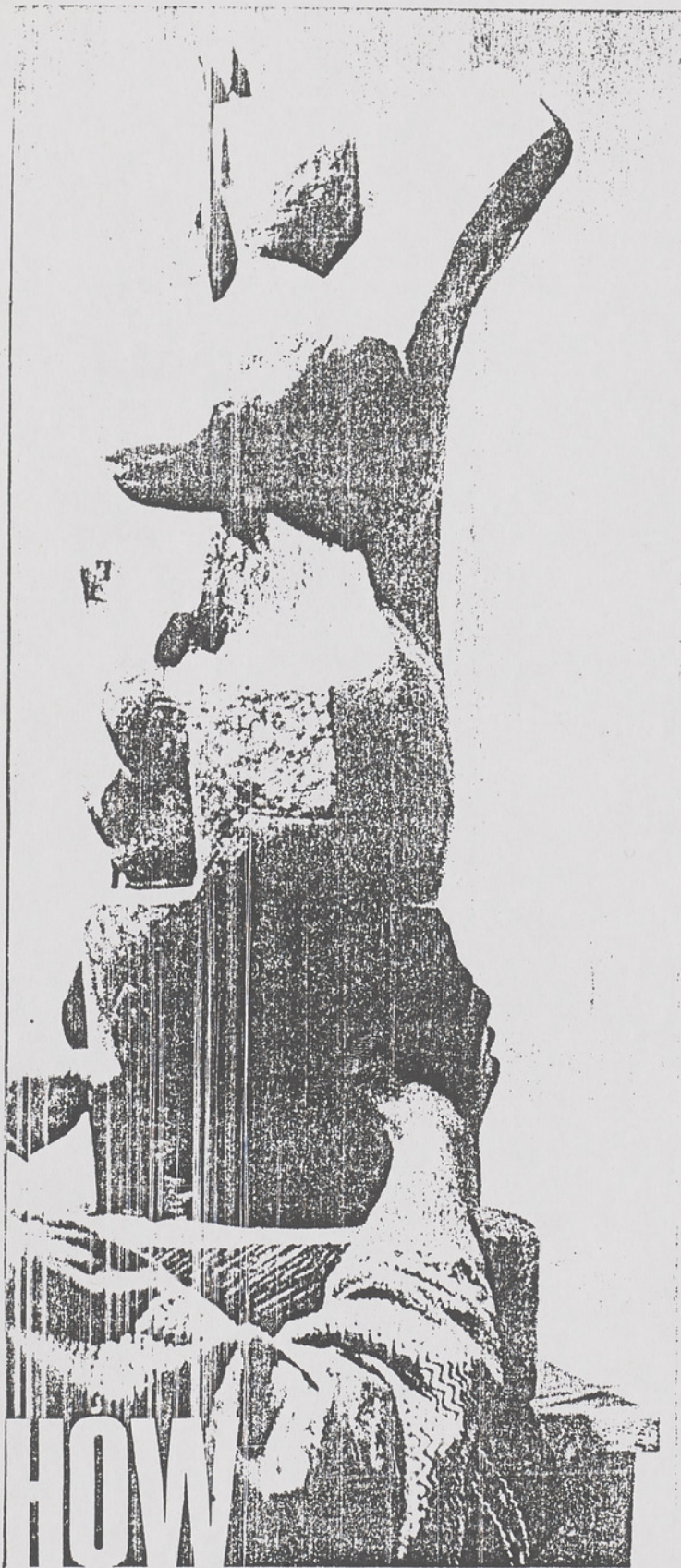
Ben: How does one speak of success. What yardstick is there, to measure joy? Frankly, I don't know, but right now, the thing that makes me very, very happy, is that I have finally found out who I am and what it is that I want from life.

Women have not been part of it, except my sweet old mother. I discovered that there are things which must transcend fame and money.

Fought

One of them is commitment to a cause and far greater love for that cause and for those, in whose concern

(Next week read Arnold's views on art for liberation).



sit for hours listening to it and all sorts of images enter my mind." The young artist lives in an isolated cottage on the beach near Capetown. Preferring to be alone with nature in its starkest form, his paintings and drawings often depict gaunt, somewhat frightening but deeply moving human figures. They reflect a troubled soul, for Stone is a searching and sensitive critic of society.

The soft-spoken young man says, "I never imagined that I would really gain recognition. Now that I have had my first breaks, I intend working in the country — living with the people, studying them and finally painting them."

The two young artists met shortly before they presented their two-man show. They became close friends and saw similarities and contrasts in their works. Both men hope to travel outside South Africa to study the works of other artists, but they both profess a sense of rich creative stimulation in their own country. □



Trevor Stone studies arrangement of works at Johannesburg exhibit. Above right is his drawing, "Give My Child Some Food or He'll Die;" at left is his painting "The Adulteress; The Adulterer; The Husband."

BY CHRIS HENZE

TWO TALENTED young artists, Ben Arnold and Trevor Stone, who have been gaining popularity in South Africa for their powerful statements in sculpture and painting, joined forces for a two-man show at the USIS auditorium in Johannesburg recently.

Arnold is a 27-year-old sculptor whose growing reputation is based on numerous group and one-man shows and on recent commissions for several bas-reliefs in Johannesburg. His work is characterized by massive, angular forms. Stone is a 20-year-old painter from Capetown, whose works in conti, charcoal and pastels are just now attracting wide attention.

For several years Arnold studied with Cecil Skotnes, founder of South Africa's first art school for Africans in 1951. The young sculptor's work displays a mastery of modern technique combined with easily recognizable local motifs. Having tasted success, he is especially interested in encouraging other young artists and school children who visit his showings. "These young people are the artists of tomorrow," Arnold contends. "I feel that if I can explain to them what I am trying to say in my sculpture, they will grow up with a better understanding of the relevance of art to their daily lives."

Stone is a self-taught artist who draws his inspirations from the jazz artistry of his friend, the well-known South African musician Dollar Brand. Brand's music, he says, provides the atmosphere which stimulates him to find full expression. "My love for jazz has influenced me greatly," Stone declares. "I can



"Striding Figure" (above) is striking example of the dynamic style of sculptor Ben Arnold, shown at right as he readies another of his works, "Awakening Form," for exhibition.



SOUTH AFRICANS PRESENT TWO-MAN'S