

With RICHARD CHEALES

ART

Book needed to do full justice here



FABIO BARRACLOUGH
A sketch by Richard Cheales

TO DO any kind of full justice to Professor ("Call me Fabio!") Barraclough, you'd need to write a book. A thick book. Even then, to keep pace with his tremendous flow of words, you'd either need a photographic memory, or be immensely energetic and first-rate at shorthand.

In a few hours, this charming man with the volatile mind touched on so much of vital interest, that I dizzily wondered why he'd never thought of a broadcasting career. The poised immaculacy of his cultured mind, is instantly arresting. A second or so he'd ponder some point (of art, of life), then like a bird with the freedom of a tree with thousands of twigs, his remarks and impressions would skim and dart in all directions.

Occasionally he became abrupt. So he was very definite in feeling that for a long time in England and America, there has been no dividing line between good commercial art and fine art. This hyper-professionalism in both art spheres has consequently stressed the very clear dividing line between amateur and professional.

"The professional shows — demands of himself — 100 percent involvement," he said bluntly.

Fabio is fascinated by Pop art. He claims it virtually passed-by South Africa, though we are feeling its overseas influences in the fact that Pop art led to the rediscovery of Realism and Surrealism. These art forms have immense appeal to him as they allow him to seek

metaphysical depth in his paintings and drawings.

He felt there is no yardstick of competence in South African art, suddenly suggesting we are 40 years behind the times. Swiftly, he changed his mind (through tact?), and murmured, "I rather should say, 20 years."

His decision that our art often lacks the control and discipline that is an essential part of overseas artists training, he bases on the fact that uninitiated eyes, here, cannot distinguish between the work of amateurs and professionals.

Was he politely saying that our professionals are seldom called upon — with a public unable to tell the difference between sound painting and Sunday effort — to give the full weight of their attention to their art? I wondered: but knew I couldn't expect him to stick his neck out too far about the definite lack of something in much of our art.

Although Fabio's maternal grandfather was dead before he was born (in Madrid, of a British father and a Spanish mother), from early childhood he felt close to this distinguished Spanish artist of the past.

His grandfather had designed and painted backdrops for opera and ballet performances at the Theatre Royal, Madrid. Young Fabio saw much of his work — at home, apart from the large pieces housed in various Spanish theatres and Museums.

The grandfather he'd never seen influenced his yearning to express himself artistically and his highly intellectual mother aroused

his love of writing and literature.

His father, a businessman, half-heartedly urged Fabio to train for a "safe" profession — as a chartered accountant. Studying for this at Madrid University, more often than not Fabio was sneaking into art classes. "after two years, I failed the accountancy exams — but had an arts degree!" he laughed. So the "safe" life was gone forever . . .

For the next eight years, Fabio's whole existence was dedicated to art — four more years at Madrid University, then two years in England, gaining a diploma in sculpture and design.

Two further years followed, as an extra-mural student, to gain his Associate of the Royal Society of British Sculpture. Then, with his typical enthusiasm and fervour, he began trying to earn a living from his art.

At the time, hundreds of other artists had the same idea — young people trained just before, or during, the last war. He soon realised that there then were only about four full-time creative artists in Britain. In order to hope to promote their talent, the others all needed to teach, write, or do some other form of work.

He lectured on art, at Rugby, for a long spell, also teaching at a town 25 km away. Barraclough's SA career started with three years at Wits, as Professor of Fine Arts, in 1973.

He'd also edited about twelve important overseas books on art, as well as three British art journals. One book that greatly involved him was of the life of Bain-

bridge Copnall, sculptor and portrait painter, who was born in South Africa and became Britain's foremost sculptor for about 30 years.

Fabio worked with Copnall on numerous commissions, including an aluminium figure, 7 m high, that stands in London's Stag Square. Copnall's speaking of the wonders of South Africa influenced Barraclough eventually to come here with his delightful, girlish looking wife, Pam, and their five children.

Although not appearing too obviously so, you could call Barraclough an intense person: when he shakes your hand, he almost crushes it: when he starts his car, he leans forward, as if to urge it forward faster.

You feel his energies are a well-controlled but galvanic force that — now released, for he began to concentrate full-time on art only a few months ago — has started an immensely productive period of artistry.

Presently, he seems consumed by his art. Perhaps this is linked with his passionate assertion that art only becomes significant with a deep understanding of life and a tremendously alert eye for the visual wonder of everything.

What you could call an intense hunger for expression — his eyes smoulder as words pour from his lips: yet his body, his hands, are relaxed and not "involved" with his talk, as happens with many enthusiastic, vulnerable people — is nonetheless dedicated to gentle, lovely, tasteful and civilised subjects: nudes, portraits, flowers, and so on.