

WAGNER Alex (Quinn)

1920—

b Johannesburg

STUDIED Natal Tech Art School under OJP Oxley and Merlyn Evans.

SUMMARY BIOGRAPHY Influenced by Eastern philosophies in his parental home. 1938/9: as a student, assisted Merlyn Evans* in executing a large mural in the Refectory of Durban Tech. 1939: aged 19, exhibited jointly with Nils Solberg and again later the same year at Durban Art Gal; caused a stir with his 'surrealist' paintings in wax encaustic; joined SA Forces, served in N Africa and Italy; designed SA 4d and 6d postage-stamps. 1945: married former fellow-student, Beryl Newman*; they established an art-school in Jhb; subsequently decided to move into the country. 1950: settled in Greytown, Natal, farmed and established a workshop/studio in the town; early use of technique of collage; frequent exhibitions, usually jointly with his wife. After settling in Natal, became interested in restoration work; during the Seventies was kept active in that field with commissions from Univ of Natal, Dbn Art Gal, Killie Campbell Mus, etc.



WAGNER Alex *Herne, the hunter* Collage 55 x 42 DAG.

EXHIBITIONS 1939: joint-exhib as student, Dbn. 1946—: joint-exhibs with Beryl Newman. 1948: Overseas Exhib of SA Art, Tate Gal et al; New Group Exhib, Jhb. 1952: Van Riebeeck Tercent Exhib, CT. 1959: Jointly with wife in Edinburgh and Glasgow. 1960: first one-man show, Jhb. 1966: Rep Fest Exhib, Pta.

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS Durban Art Gal.

Alex WAGNER established himself as a controversial artist with his very first exhibition in 1939. At that stage his strange, symbolistic compositions were taken to task for their obscure 'modernism'. However, though they may indeed have struck viewers as obscure, they were not specifically modern in outlook or technique.

In his general intention the artist has changed little since that time and such following as exists for his work is founded, primarily, in personal emotional response to his literary, highly-mystical symbolism, and secondly, in irrefutable acknowledgement of the excellence of his craftsmanship.

In respect of technique, Alex Wagner is obsessively perfectionistic; his drawings are immaculate, his individual method of collage — which employs innumerable carefully matched coloured fragments cut from periodicals — is almost mechanical, so meticulously is it crafted. He introduces metal inlay and gemstones into his compositions — not in the manner of contemporary assemblage, but as ornamentation to enrich the splendour of his visions.

Although his illustrative fantasies have been identified with the irrational musings of Surrealism, Wag-

ner's choice and composition of pictorial imagery is a highly conscious, deliberate activity. He does not attempt to establish a new reality within the painting but constructs an allegorical narrative out of precisely and objectively described symbolistic images. The cabalistic nature of his vision is a product of his inclination toward mystical and quasi-religious philosophies; he incorporates themes from legend and mythology and symbols from astrology, esoteric Christian sects, Egyptian and Oriental cultures and beliefs. For his methods of depicting them he borrows from sources as diverse as Wyndham Lewis (presumably via Merlyn Evans), William Blake, Renaissance realism and modern mechanistic abstraction.

Selective additional reference

'Lantern' Dec 1979.

Reference:

Alex Wagner in "Art & Artists of South Africa" (Berman) (Balkema), 1983, pp. 482/3 ill