

The Arts

SOME FINDS IN SÃO PAULO

From Our Art Critic—SÃO PAULO

In theory the São Paulo biennial is modelled closely on the Venice archetype, but it has an entirely different ambience. Venice runs its course with a certain sedate equilibrium, the city co-operating in the sort of smoothly run piece of cultural entertainment it is so used to. In São Paulo it is quite different. The exhibits are contained in one enormous ultra-modern concrete building with soaring ramps in white and grey, designed by the most imitated architect of Brazil, Oscar Neimpyr. This building, which is part of a widely flung complex near the edge of the city, was formerly a gallery of machines, and there is plenty of room for lorries to drive in among the exhibits, putting down huge pots of tropical vegetation.

It struck me that the biennial hardly makes a dent in the life of this enormous city. Most of the taxi-drivers have no idea where to find it. In fact São Paulo itself seems to have little time for such things. It is growing so quickly that people who go away for a year or two can hardly recognize it when they return. Compared with the gentle convenience of something like the Coventry shopping centre, São Paulo is a ferment; the incredible confusion at ground level of the ferocious traffic, unreachable squares and neglected corners, is only accentuated by the refined grace of the best architecture, with its blazing white concrete and rows of sun filters. Yet the biennial and the city are united in being an expression of the vitality of the Brazilian people.

This exhibition is centred on Brazilian and South American art, just as Venice is on Italian art. Again the same contrasts operate. On the whole South American art has none of the cultured smoothness of European art, with its continual contact with the past, and the work of contemporaries. The British section, for instance, which contains Patrick Heron and Victor Pasmore, has this professionalism in abundance, but it remains very much in a middle position. The works in the huge Brazilian section downstairs range widely in quality on each side of it. On the one hand there is the work of Sérgio Camargo (who won the National Sculpture prize, though he is not as highly thought of here as he is in Europe), and one or two others including Mira Schendel and Helio Oiticica—and on the other the tritest limitations of internationally fashionable styles. The installation of Camargo's white reliefs hardly does justice to them, but his works here give an unmistakable impression of clarity and certainty, and are a joy to see again. The drawings of

Mira Schendel and the sculpture of Helio Oiticica seem little known even here yet, but are certainly of great interest, and I hope to write about them in detail in a later article.

The biennial as a whole is weakened by the lack of any clear guiding conception, which is surely necessary even if it is left to each country to choose its own artists. This is particularly evident with the business of prizes. An unwieldy jury of 19, which consisted mostly of representatives from the various countries rather than objective critics, have made some very doubtful choices. The Grand Prize was given jointly to Vasarely and Alberto Burri, which strikes me, in the case of the latter, as a rather unadventurous choice, especially as the Americans featured the excellent paintings of Barnett Newman, which have been too seldom seen outside the United States. The forceful hard-edge paintings of the Japanese, Kumi Suga, was an interesting choice for the international painting prize, but the choice of the Chilean Marta Colvin's stone pieces for the sculpture prize remains to me a mystery. If the jury is good, a great deal can be said for the idea of giving prizes. But it is really leading to the crazy kind of categorizing when Jean Tinguely is given a prize "for research".

In spite of this there are good things here which should not be missed, and several exciting discoveries whose work may be eagerly awaited in Europe. Besides the Brazilians I have mentioned, I was also struck by the optical painting of Gerd Leufert in the Venezuelan section and a lone sculptor of great elegance from Colombia, Edgar Negré. The American section (containing Newman, Frank Stella, and others) is easily the best managed, beautifully lit and hung, and Barnett Newman's paintings—one a thin vertical strip of red painted canvas only an inch or two wide—one hopes will travel widely. The biennial also contains some of the best machines of Tinguely we have seen, and they form a rallying point. One of the best has a gigantic corkscrew-shaped arm which in motion produces a continually ascending spiral.

It only remains to mention the "theme" exhibition of "surrealism and Fantastic Art" which forms part of the biennial, though it does not dominate it. Works by all the major surrealists are included, and their presence in this part of the world may be unprecedented. It only seems that an exhibition of surrealism is somewhat mistimed, because the character of much of the most vital South American art at the moment is in the tradition of abstract and dynamic art, which badly needs an historical exhibition.



"Ofano", relief by Camargo.