

ART

by Jean Charlot



Paintings by NESTA OBERMER

This last Sunday, at the Royal Hawaiian Art Gallery, NESTA Obermer opened an exhibition of her recent paintings. Profits from sales are to be donated to organizations that help the blind.

Already the artist has worked towards the same goal in other ways. She is also a poet and a playwright, and gifted with a beautifully trained voice. She has recorded on tape classical dramas and other texts to help blind students in their college work.

With the frankness that is her characteristic, NESTA Obermer acknowledges the fact that she is an amateur painter.

That she finds time to paint at all, and on such a scale and scope, is astonishing. Indeed she is exceedingly busy at other pursuits.

Besides she is shackled to what mundane demands are made unavoidable by her social activities.

Art is nevertheless as intimately woven in her make-up as it is in the life of a professional, and even in more varied ways.

A mask of originality

If originality is not his by birthright, the professional artist must assume at least a mask of originality. Each one of his pictures must strike the spectator as uniquely his own. It also must call to mind visual memories of previous works by the same artist.

The mask he puts on when young is there to stay. The attraction of advertised name brands is as potent a sales point on the walls of an art gallery as on the shelves of a supermarket.

The amateur artist happily bypasses such dubious requirements. NESTA Obermer paints only when she wishes, and only as she wishes. Neither critic nor dealer may deflect her doings.

She paints because, from time to time, art is the one proven remedy to her need. The need takes many forms and the pictures many styles. Her game is played beyond the rules that the professional artist must obey.

It is not then the task of the critic to assess her works as if they were would-be museum pieces. Instead it is pleasant to realize that NESTA Obermer uses her gift of art only to suit herself. Even should the result go at times against the grain of present fashions.

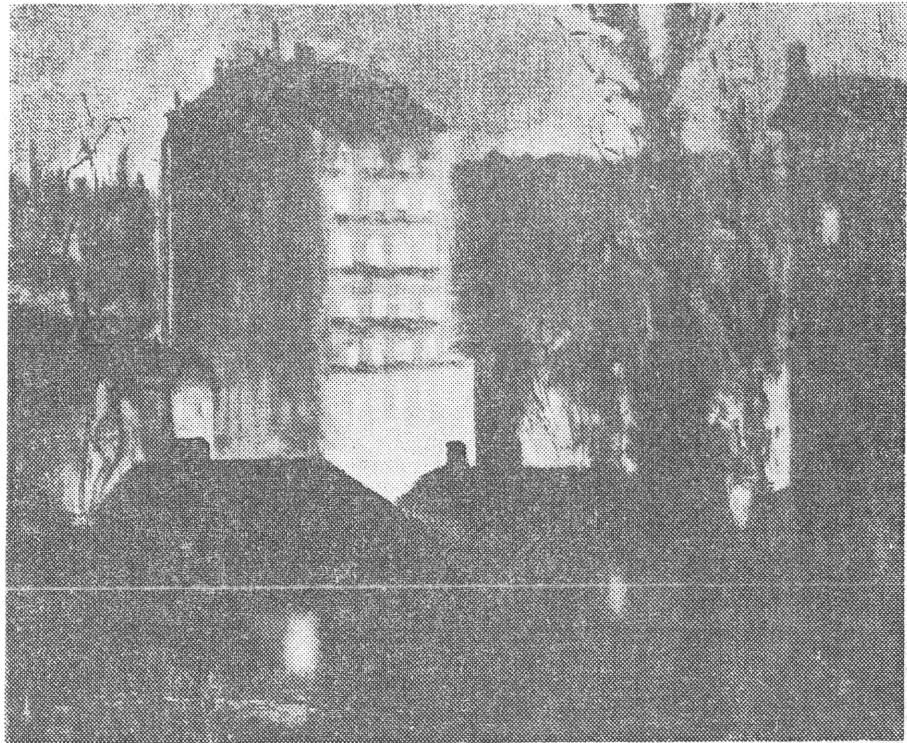
Somebody once remarked that people who boast of their taste have no taste whatsoever. Without going that far, it can be said that a man, to maintain perfect taste, must be on watch lest a false step trip him.

And that goes for artists too. To keep up to date with current styles is a tricky matter, even with the help of copiously illustrated art magazines.

NESTA Obermer has no such handicaps. She whizzes through styles, moods and modes, quite unaware of our so-called rules of taste. At times she conforms. At times she secedes. The frown on the brow of the critic will not stop her or slow her in going where she goes. She always is in a hurry!

Some of her pictures are painted for the simplest of reasons. Having traveled widely, the artist made a record of places seen. Rather, as few of them seem to have been painted in situ, of places remembered.

She leans to what some painters and critics would



Roofs of Neuilly (Midnight)

disdainfully refer to as post card subjects. The Cathedral of Chartres and its famed stained glass, Paris and its Eiffel Tower have no fear for her. It is true that the traveler adds to the well-known sights a mood and a moment, unique as far as she is concerned.

"The Listeners" evokes a Paris public park. Even though no bandstand is seen, the two people seated there, amidst a sea of empty garden chairs, may be listening to music.

If there is no bandstand and no music, then they are listening to the birds that nestle in the chestnut trees, should this park be the Luxembourg.

And if there are no birds, then they are listening not to each other, but to the surrounding airy silence.

NESTA Obermer paints impressive portraits. The secret is the same that gives zest to her other paintings. She is not a professional portrait painter.

Sargent, in a fit of revulsion against his own successful career, defined a portrait as a face with something a little wrong about the mouth.

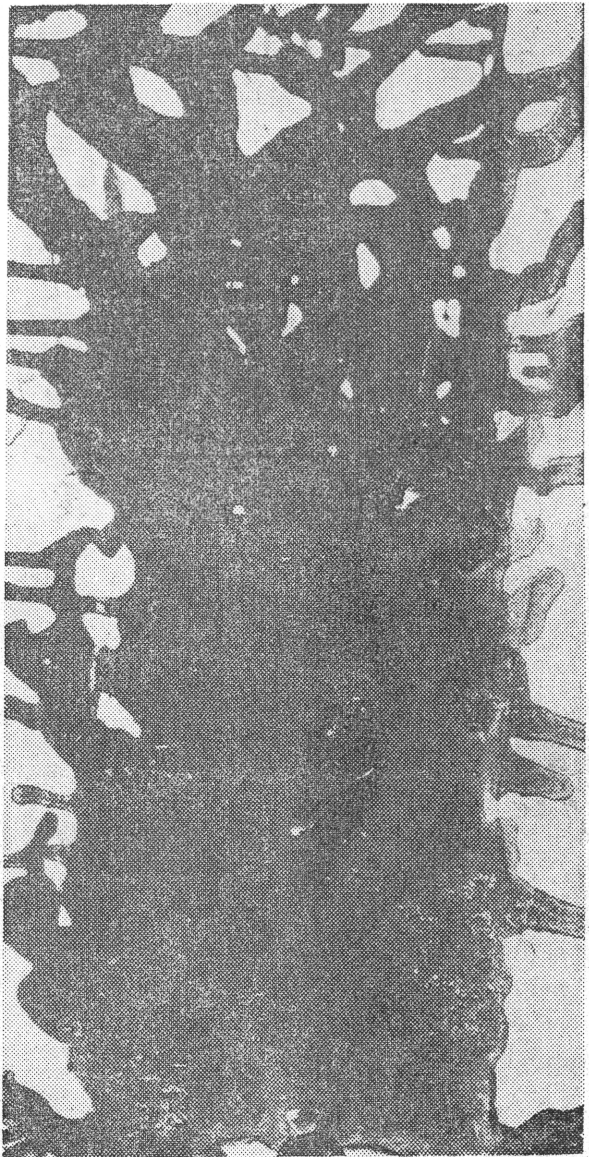
You see, Sargent sold his portraits, and it was his job to please.

NESTA's portraits are of another kind. She paints them with true humility, intensely awed by the recurring mystery that is contained within each individual model.

In the best of them, picture making is not the goal but intense and loving definition. In this show, "Louisa" is such a portrait.

Mood pictures, meditations that verge on the metaphysical, contrast with this factual style. Was the artist aware of a public, I would say that it takes courage to paint a dream: her younger self watching the visionary flight of a blue bird, perhaps Maeterlinck's fabled one, its features Madonna-like. And it takes courage also to title the picture, "Such Stuff as Dreams are Made Of!"

A companion piece, "O! Fragile Human Hopes!" describes a festive street, its facades decked with the flags of many nations. Children's balloons of many colors, having left their fragile moorings, rise out of reach and



Banish the Blues

disappear in space.

In these pictures, sophistication, which is NESTA Obermer's by birthright, rejoins absolute innocence. Wisdom is on her side. Like proverbs, clichés embody the universal better than would more personalized statements.

The technique of these dream paintings approximates at times automatic writing. The whirlings and splashings and drippings of pigment are definitely contemporary.

Of all the genres that compose this show, each tailored to fit a purpose or suit a mood, the one that touches me less is paradoxically the most esthetic.

To record a face, or a place, or a mood, to paint as

an escape into silence and into infinity, these seem to me truly valid purposes.

To paint to 'faire de la peinture' — to fabricate a painting—seems a weaker reason.

Two or three paintings in the show cross this borderline. They exhibit no technical flaws. The brushstroke is bold and much in evidence. But here the artist watches her public. Matters of taste have had their say.

As an art critic, I should applaud the gallant demonstration. As a human being, I return to have another look at other, less assured performances, whose charm at times skirts awkwardness. To use in my turn one of the meaningful clichés that NESTA Obermer loves to use, her heartbeat is more clearly heard in these amateur paintings than in those of a more professional cast.



Veronica's Veil