



# ART WITHOUT REALITY

(A Review of the Academy Exhibition,  
written for "The Listener" by  
HOWARD WADMAN)

**N**OBODY can blame artists for painting what appeals to them, or an academy for hanging what is sent in to it. But when the painting and the hanging is concerned almost exclusively with one type of subject painted in one kind of way, your interest is inclined to flag. Of the 133 paintings in the autumn exhibition of the New Zealand Academy, 104 are landscapes, seascapes or flower pieces. And the reason, it is only too clear, is that these subjects sell better than any others.

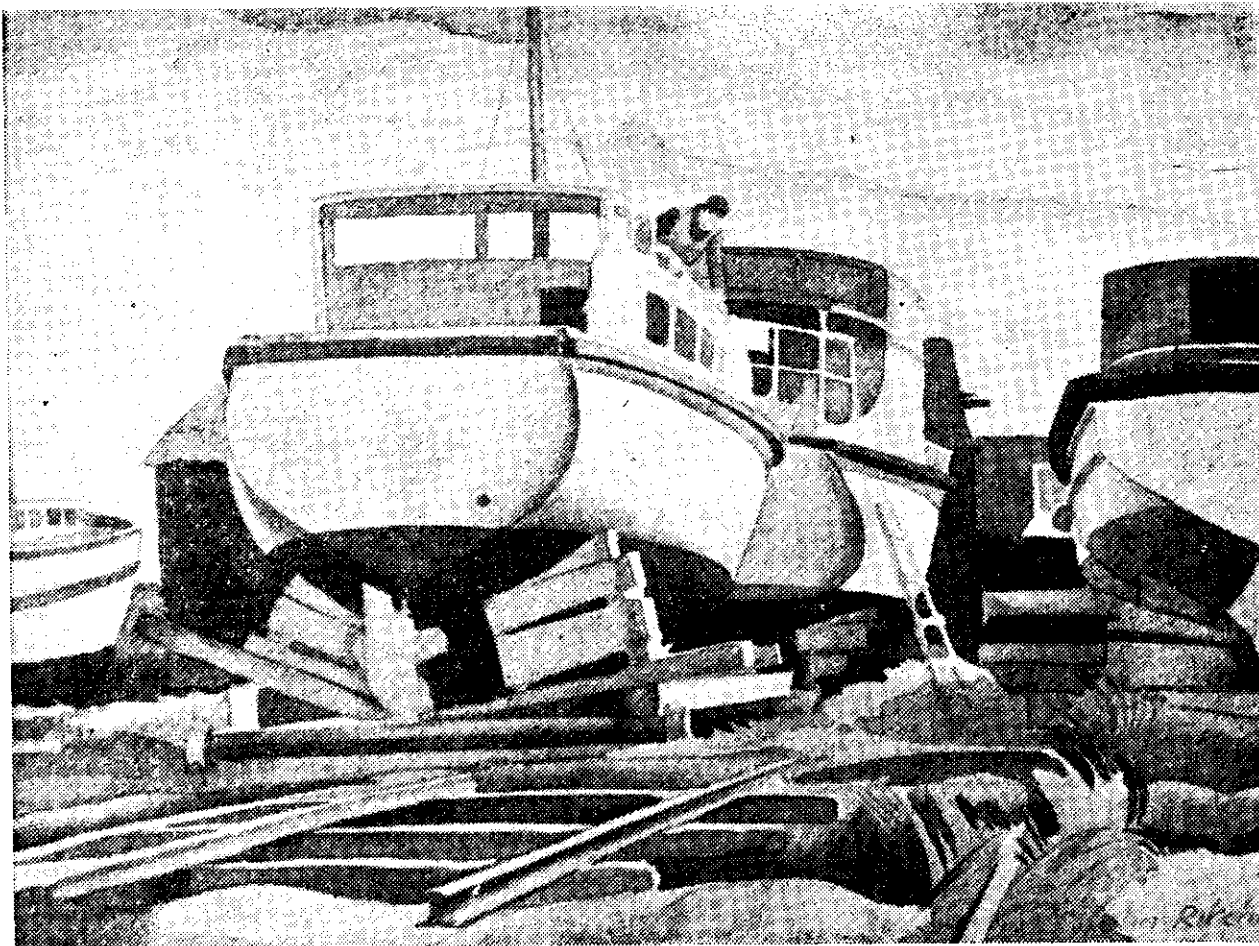
It is desirable that paintings should sell, but when works of art are produced of a type and style that is dictated by sales possibilities, then such work is Commercial Art. And then it is time to ask—Is the Academy merely a shop in which painters offer their wares? Is it a shop governed by the first law of merchandising—that the customer is always right—or is it a place where the explorers of consciousness and mediators of reality present their findings, to our general stimulation and increase in understanding? A rhetorical question, for no academy has ever been that. Academies are cursed with official status, with patronage, with the necessity of selling to those who want confirmation and not apocalypse. For the last century, at any rate, those who had anything to say have said it in holes and corners.

\* \* \*

**T**HERE is no point in belabouring the Academy for being academic, but, on the other hand, neither is there sense in pretending that its present standards are good and healthy when they are not. Those glossy lines of smiling landscapes where every prospect pleases are not as boring as hell, they are worse—as boring as the conventional idea of heaven.

I take the view that every work of art should be a revelation, small or large, and we have no right to expect revelation to be pretty. In fact, from John on Patmos to Picasso in Paris, apocalypse has tended to be disturbing and strange. You may or may not feel that life is so unpleasant as to deserve M. Picasso's hysterical derision, but neither is the world the sugar-plum fairy that most of our New Zealand painters pretend to believe it is.

You may well ask what it is that works of art should reveal. The answer to that would take us far into the sticky mess that is Aesthetics. At its highest, the function of painting has been defined



Left: "THE SHIPYARD, TAURANGA," by J. H. Ritchie. Not remarkable as a painting, but an affectionate evocation of a familiar New Zealand scene.

Top Left: "THE LAKE," by S. B. MacLennan. A brilliant piece of design in dark blue, olive green and white