

Sam Cairncross Shows a Year's Work

TO hold an exhibition that is opened by the Prime Minister with a representative of the Opposition present almost places the artist in the position of a national institution. Unfortunately for Sam Cairncross this sort of recognition does not put him on the payroll—his continuance as a full-time artist depends on his sales.

A small coterie of disciples regard Sam with untimpered admiration almost as if he were the despised Messiah of New Zealand painting. The majority of those who have any interest in art take up a strong, rock-bottom attitude of sitting on the fence. Someone might come along, they feel, and prick Sam's bubble and then what would people think of their artistic judgment?

There is no doubt Sam is a puzzle. He shows so many characteristics of the genius. He has come into the limelight from nowhere; he is deaf to the tongue-clickings of the shocked; he is ferociously industrious; he is confident that he has something to say in paint. Further, he shows that constant story-book quality of the "local boy who makes good" having thrown all worldly considerations to the wind to pursue unrelentingly a single thorny path. At least that is brave.

A year ago Sam came back from France with an array of pictures as formidable in number and aggressiveness as the eighty odd in the present collection. Stunned by his encounter with so much painting these earlier pictures were strongly influenced by one

or other of the artists with whose work he had become acquainted. Only an odd couple are being exhibited now.

With an undoubted talent for handling paint, Sam appears to be leaving behind his formative period. He is emerging from the closed-in isolation of the studio with its sheer delight in the handling of paint as paint. He is not yet quite through with flirtations and dalliance with his medium for its own sake. The pictures Sam likes best and rates most highly are the "painty" ones.

In two directions his work shows that he is freeing himself from the lure of the palette and becoming conscious of the world around him. There is much portraiture. Some of it is excellent—as in the "B. Parks Esq." which is strongly felt and successfully realised. Not all the portraits are good. Some even flashy, while in others he fails to master the strong primary colours which upset his composition.

Perhaps the greatest realisation of promise can be found in the pictures of a few suburban landscapes such as "My House." How refreshing not to see our medley of backyards, telegraph poles, cabbage patches

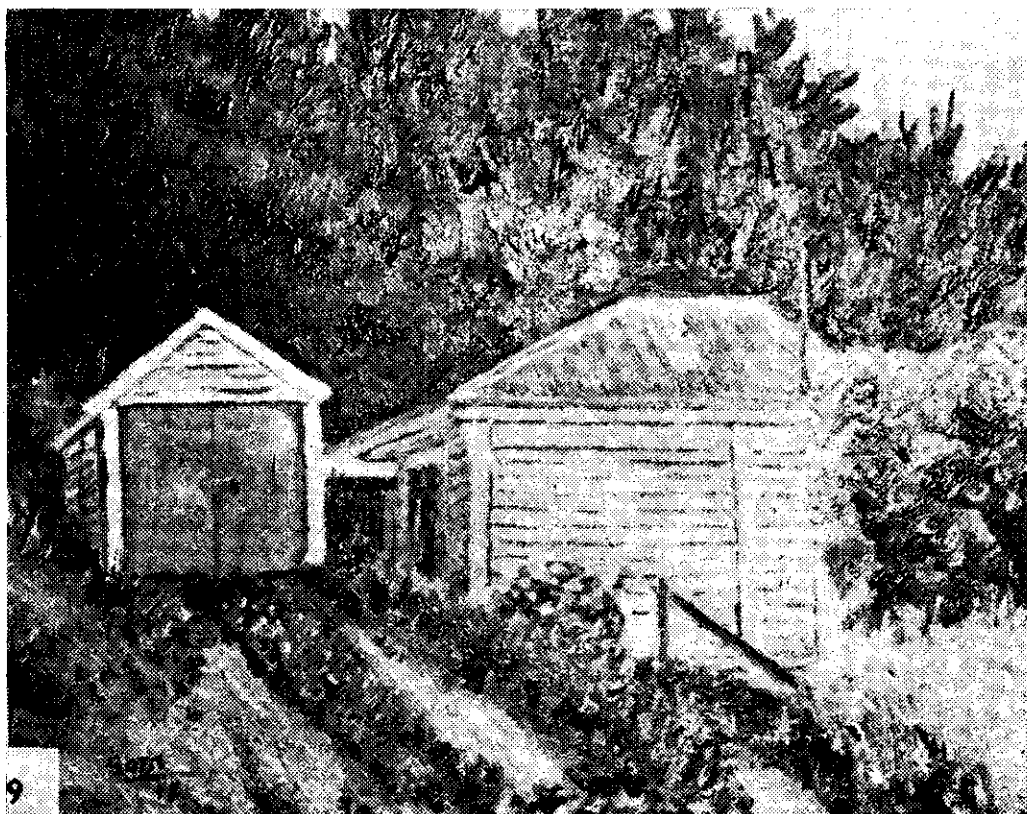
and bits of sea belied as dulcet English pastorals. Nothing dulcet about these! They are forthright, strong and brutal, as befits the typical hotch-potch of confused detail and garish brilliant colour. It is realism so bold and vigorous as to be startling.

This is a courageous and challenging exhibition. It is one of the few shows of paintings that are likely to bring notice from further afield than our own shores.

—E. C. Simpson



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ABOVE: "Elizabeth Hallam" (oils) — an unfinished portrait



LEFT: "My House" (oils) — "Perhaps the greatest realisation of promise can be found in . . . a few suburban landscapes"

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