

'Culture & resistance'

A NEW term was introduced into the South African art world last week which reflected the overtly political nature of the "Culture and Resistance" symposium held in Gaborone, Botswana.

Over 800 artists, photographers, filmmakers, writers and dramatists from all over South Africa met at the five-day symposium to debate the role of the "cultural worker" in the "struggle for a free and just South Africa".

Artists were told by a succession of speakers that they could not turn a blind eye to the "realities of oppression".

In his opening address exiled author Keorapetse Kgositsile, Professor of Literature at the University of Nairobi, said the artist could not afford to ignore the society he was a part of.

"Outside of social life there is no culture, no art."

And while all fields of the arts — film, painting, photography,

Gaborone reflections by MIKE van NIEKERK

writing and theatre — were debated during the day the evening performances provided a rich affirmation of local culture.

Drunk with music

It was an historic occasion when Wilson "Kingforce" Silgee, a pioneer of the township sound in jazz during the 30s and 40s was joined on stage by contemporary greats such as exiled musicians Hugh Masekela, Dollar Brand and Jonas Gwangwa: By the end of the week I was drunk with music.

The problem was deciding which film, play or musical event to attend. Productions ranged from *Marabi*, a musical dealing with the eviction of inhabitants from Johannesburg's Western Native Township to *Sibenza*, a

play about migrant workers by a group from Langa.

The most popular production was a mime developed by a group of actors from Cape Town's Community Arts Project and the project's director Derek Joubert.

Titled *Die Groot Baas* the performance involved clever and skillfully executed mime and an often brutal use of slapstick to relay a message about the need for solidarity among workers.

Cape Town provided one of the largest single delegations and was represented in all facets of the festival/symposium, including author Richard Rive and poet James Matthews who delivered papers alongside novelist Nadine Gordimer and poet Wally Mongane Serote.

Confrontation

On a wider level the political nature of the discussions was underscored by the flaring up of open confrontation between proponents of an exclusive black consciousness and those who argued for a "fully non-racial and democratic" approach to the issues at hand.

While most of those present agreed with the main theme of the symposium that art and politics could not be divorced, these two opposing ideologies provided the main source of tension.

Differences of opinion often spilled out of the main hall into the courtyard outside where groups of people stood locked in heated debate. The approach that won the day was simply summed up by Profes-



● Dollar Brand

sor Kgositsile who said: "If you get clobbered over the head by a black policeman it doesn't hurt any less."

But while militant and often unrealistic views calling for the "harnessing of art to the struggle of the people" were expressed, many articulate speakers asserted that historically the artist in South Africa was at a point where he could not turn a blind eye to "the war raging around us".

Exiled Cape Town artist Gavin Jantjies stated: "I cannot begin to argue the art for art's sake argument in a situation where chil-



● Nadine Gordimer

dren are being shot and killed for protesting at injustice.

"If this should upset conservative South African opinion then let us say to them what Picasso said to the Nazi officers who walked into his studio, saw the painting *Guernica* and said, 'This is horrible. Did you do it?' 'No,' Picasso replied, 'you did'."

Several silkscreens by Jantjies, who grew up in District Six and went into exile twelve years ago after studying at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, were amongst the most striking artworks on display in the "Art To-



● Richard Rive

wards Social Development" exhibition.

On the whole the exhibition, mounted to complement the discussions, was a varied and uneven collection of work falling mainly into two camps: On the one hand sophisticated and cerebral work by university academics and on the other the "township" kind of art at its best in Enock Tshabalala and traditionally patronised by white commercial galleries.

If the intensive discussions of the past week served any purpose it was at least to expose many artists from all over the country to each other.