

B/N

'Ghetto Mother' Edna Manley's



EDNA MANLEY'S GHETTO MOTHER'

"I'M WORKING like mad. I don't believe in old age," says 83 year-old sculptress, Edna Manley, O.J. as she knocks on wood. "I think it's foolishness, and I find that I can work so much more easily, get so much more work done with less wear and tear. The only thing is, the older I get, the bigger the 'babies' get."

She refers specifically here to her sculpture, "Ghetto Mother", which took nine people to carry out her studio. A 46-inch work of stark black ciment fondu, displaying a massive mother-figure with four frail children huddling around her bended knees, the sculpture evokes the horror of poverty and fear. The mother's large face is anguished while her hollow-eyed children, mouths agape, cringe in terror, clinging to her for succour.

"The 'Ghetto Mother' is in despair", says Edna Manley as she describes this work of art now on display at the National Gallery. "Everything was just too much at the time, children being shot and starved." When asked if the time to which she is referring was during the last election violence, Edna Manley replies: "Yes, That's the subject. She's like this" - the artist throws her head back, raises her shoulders and demonstrates how the burden of the mother is resting on her stiff arms--" and the children are half-starved, hollow-eyed. It's formalized, the children are very formalized." By this she refers to the highly stylized

but extremely effective gestures of hands raised in horror, bodies bending backwards, eyes hollow, mouths open.

"Ghetto Mother" was created in 1981, as far as the artist can remember, in fact she has done three works since its creation, but she only agreed to allow its public display recently. She explains: "It had been such a terrific experience doing it. It took the mitty out of me. It took about six months to create but I was so sensitive about it. I knew it might cause a controversy. We'd just come out the election and felt I couldn't take the controversy over it. It's a very emotional thing."

When asked why she changed her mind about exhibiting the sculpture this year, Mrs. Manley said: "Well, I felt I could cope. Most people who have viewed the sculpture love it. Says the artist: "It's extraordinary. You never can tell because I was expecting the blow to fall. I don't let criticism unduly worry me, but this I felt so sensitive about."

Asked if politics often intruded on her art, Mrs. Manley replied: "Oh, Well... yes" and then laughed good-naturedly.

An inspiring woman whose erect bearing and vibrant spirit are betrayed only occasionally by an asthmatic cough, Edna Manley lives surrounded by the works of fellow artists with whom she had shared her vision of life as it is and ought to be:

She brings out a photograph of her most recent work, a magnificent bronze, much smaller than its predecessors, only 27 inches tall, a seated, semi-nude woman of exquisite form, arms stretching high above her head.

"I just can't account for it," she says. "I've called 'Praise' because out of all these last years I've lived through, I've done a work" ... the artist searches for the right words. "She's young! She's thanking God for everything! She's stretching right back, glad about life, with fire coming up her back!"

Is that the way the artist feels now? Edna Manley muses, "I think it's a sort of therapy." And what marvellous therapy. 'Praise' is now being bronzed and art lovers will just have to wait to view it.



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