

The art of involvement

TODAY'S
WOMAN

ANNE TAYLOR

LOUIS Jansen van Vuuren's recent exhibition, at the SA Association of Arts Gallery in Church Street, reflected his involvement with Crossroads.

The pictures were of the dwellings there, corrugated iron shacks and the plastic shelters, which are probably the most ephemeral homes in the world. One series concentrated on windows, another on the daily repeated ritual of erecting and dismantling and burying the shelters.

Far from an ivory tower artist, Louis is involved in society, teaching both art students and handicapped children. He found it emancipating to come to UCT from Stellenbosch where he studied. UCT encourages, he says, broader, more open thinking.

Red Cross

Joining the Red Cross relief team, he went to Crossroads to deliver food parcels and building materials, then organised a fund-raising sale for hunger relief.

He was inspired by the ingenuity of the people in their struggle for survival and their management of a difficult way of life, and was fascinated by the details of their homes, sometimes including incongruous architectural decorations.

From this came the series of pictures of windows — a window with burglar bars in a wall of thin plastic, a blind window, round igloo-like openings that have been sewn up with bright coloured thread, windows into family life or out to the free air.

Aware

"One looks through these openings into life situations," says Louis.

Getting close to the people of Crossroads, learning of their needs and hopes and fears, Louis has used his art to try and make other people aware of what exists there.

One set of drawings and prose poems traces the day's activities from burying the elements of a house at dawn, through the fear and uncertainty of each day's survival, to the relief of night and safety; it drew more feedback than he had ever had from his work.

"People phoned, taking the trouble to find my telephone number at work. Everyone from high academ-

ics to people in the street thanked me because they had seen something in the pictures and they would try and do something about the situation."

Louis wrote the original copy in the home building series and it was translated by a friend at Red Cross, who suggested changes in concept and construction.

"My first copy was infinitely soppy and very dramatic. He (the friend) said that one should not get too hot under the collar. That was a nice lesson to learn, because the pencil is a more reserved medium than an evocative painting."

Ritual

He has used a cold blue in one of these pictures and gold in another to give them an iconic quality reflecting the ritual of opening the earth and taking out the houses.

Louis thought his previous work self-indulgent and looked for something more relevant.

"I wanted to show the intimacy of people living in shelters and one has to go up to them, rather than stand back from them. I think of Crossroads in shades from dramatic black to grey, with splashes of colour, and the biggest colour is usually the blue sky.

Reflects

"I like the fact that the glass over the pictures reflects the onlooker, in the series on windows; that became an interesting dialogue between the onlooker and the windows.

"One photograph, from right at the back of Crossroads, has a panorama of plastic and corrugated iron structures with the classic Blouberg view of beautiful, hazy Table Mountain. That is one of the starkest experiences — the dramatic contrast between the usual beautiful view of Cape Town and the plastic and iron shelters.

"The pictures which combine a colour print of a window with its surroundings drawn in pencil, show the amazing way in which materials have been combined and the importance of the windows. I never looked at a window with such empathy before — we all like windows for fresh air and aesthetic pleasure — but these were so much more, a

little view from outside into a world we know nothing about, and their view of the outer world.

"You may have a family of 10 living in those structures, and with happiness and suburban touches, with little net curtains strung over an organic hole, burglar bars used because of the beautiful pattern, a bag of sand with a geranium in — little touches of joy that gave me a positive feeling of their joy of survival."

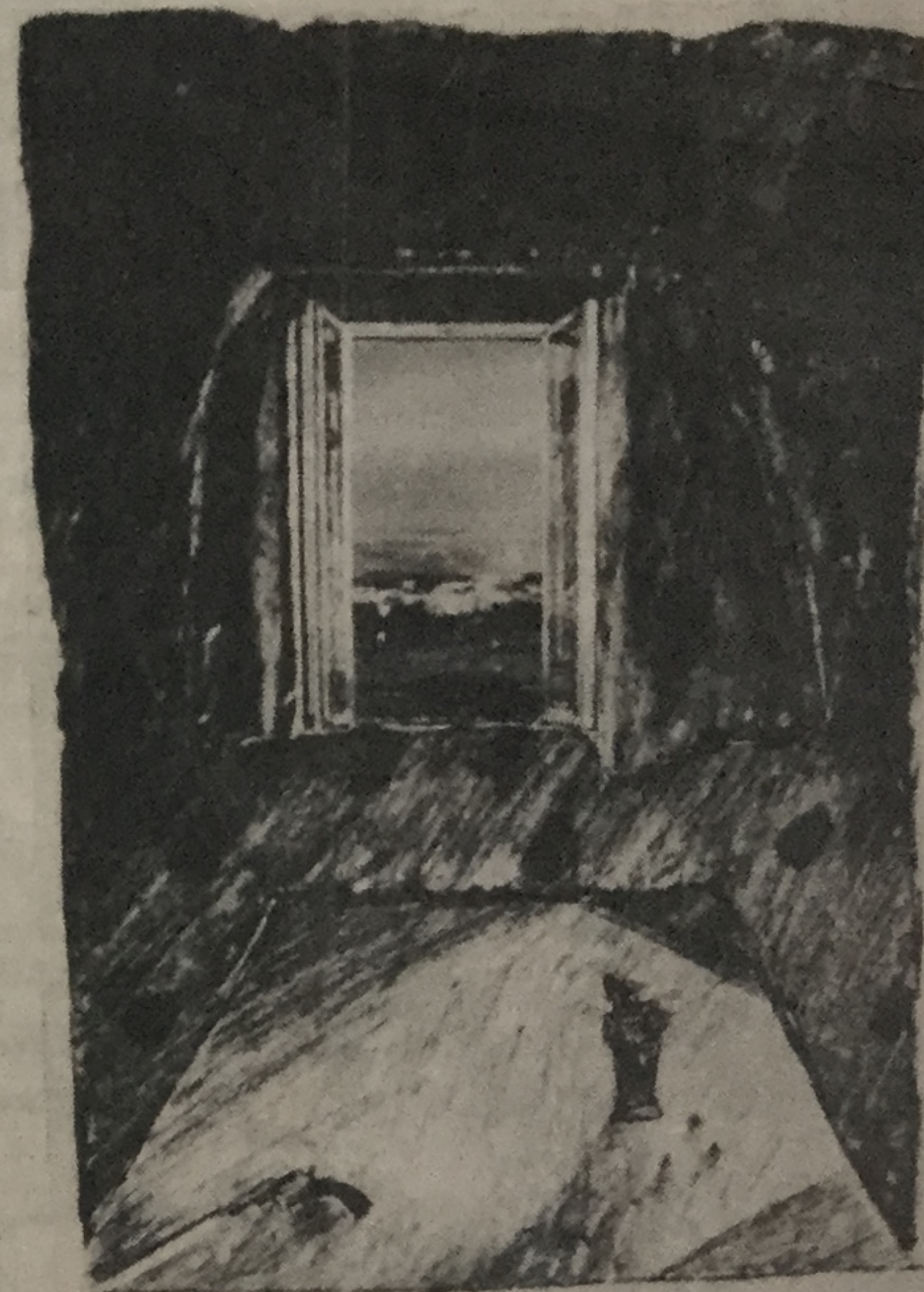
He watched the breaking-down of houses in the morning, the singing as the women spent the day in tasks like washing, and the anticipation, towards the evening, as they got ready to rebuild the shelters again.

"I was so impressed by that because I was depressed by the situation. The people had such strength in a life so transitory, of non-existence during the day. They would sweep the sand around the shelter and set a little hedge. The spontaneity was so fresh and uncontaminated."

Motives

He was accepted as a helping person because Red Cross is seen as caring. But he sensed the underlying anger and distrust among some of the people who asked him about his interest and his photographs.

It made him search his own motives, wondering if he was taking advantage of the situation, seeing it from the periphery, but he wants to get people more involved on even a small scale with the realities of Crossroads.



Looking out ... a picture from the "window" series in Louis Jansen van Vuuren's recent Crossroads exhibition.