

# ART QUARTERLY

2012

SOUTH AFRICAN  
ARTIST ALBERT  
ADAMS IN EXILE

NICOLAS POUSSIN  
AN INFLUENTIAL  
VOICE IN HISTORY

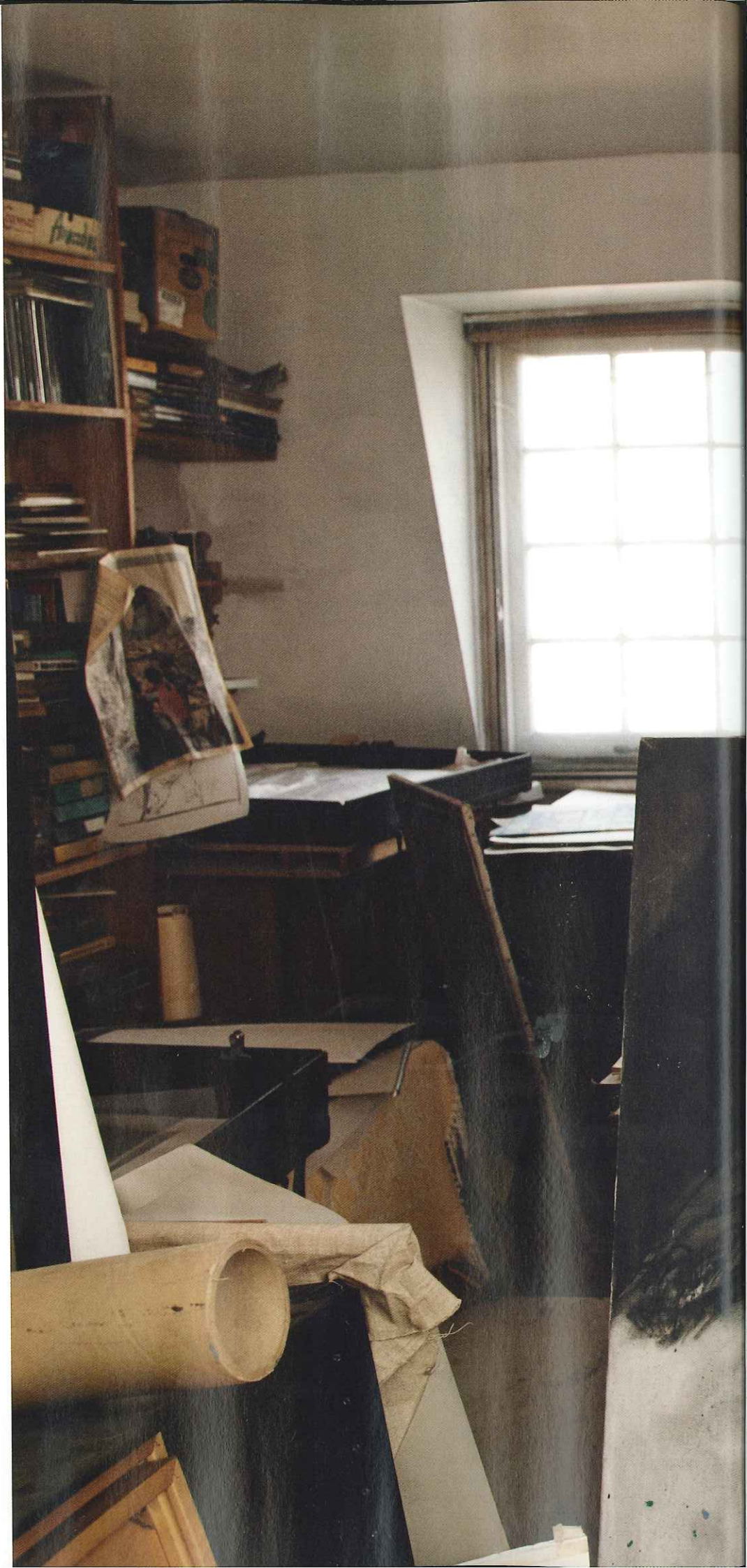
MARLENE DUMAS  
PORTRAIT OF  
AMY WINEHOUSE



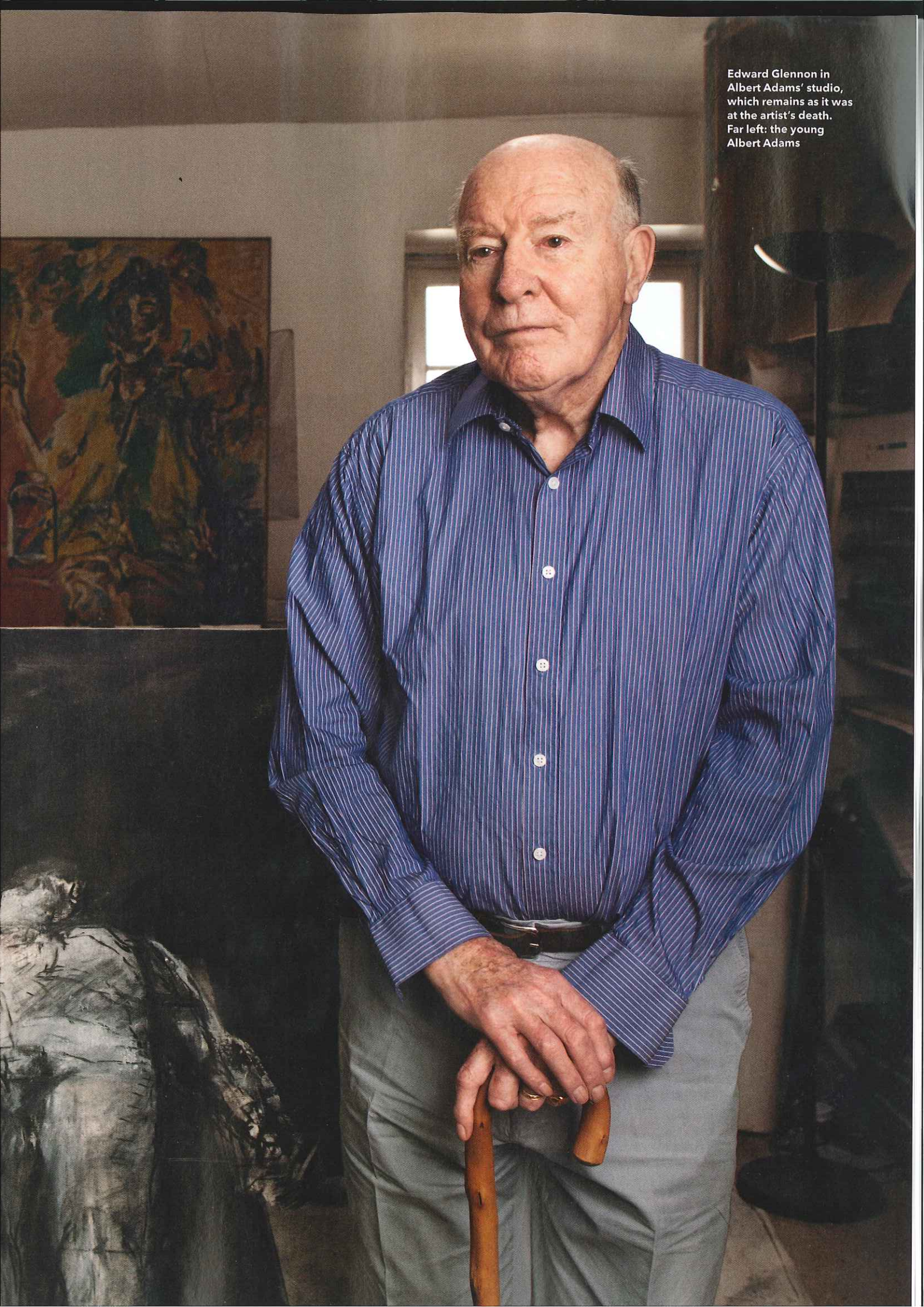
# FROM CAPE TOWN TO CAMDEN TOWN

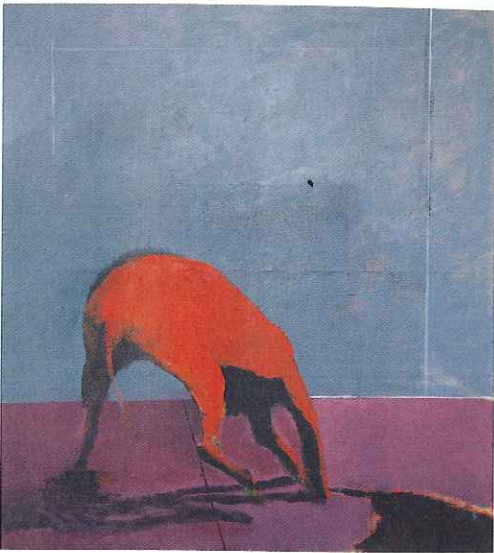


The late South African exile Albert Adams painted his experiences of apartheid and injustice in London. *Charles Darwent* went to meet his partner, Edward Glennon, who has presented a substantial collection of the artist's work to the University of Salford through the Art Fund. Portrait by Jillian Edelstein



Edward Glennon in  
Albert Adams' studio,  
which remains as it was  
at the artist's death.  
Far left: the young  
Albert Adams





Left: Albert Adams, *Wild Animal*, c. 1980, Albert Adams Archive, University of Salford, Art Fund Gift; right: Albert Adams, *South Africa 1959*, 1959, Johannesburg Art Gallery



Call to mind images of apartheid and they are likely to be photographic ones: the appallingly banal, black-and-white newswire shots of the massacre at Sharpeville, say. What you are less likely to recall – perhaps even to know, unless you are South African – is an image that preceded these photographs by a year and is, in its way, more horrifying than any of them.

Albert Adams had been back in his native Cape Town for two years when he painted *South Africa 1959*, a work known as the ‘South African *Guernica*’. His oil-on-board triptych bears the same relation to the horrors that occurred in Sharpeville as Pablo Picasso’s masterpiece does to the bombing of the Basque town some 20 years before. *South Africa 1959* is not the literal representation of an event – Picasso never went to Guernica, and Adams painted his picture before the infamous shootings in the Transvaal had happened – but it does something that photography cannot do. It makes the horrors of war universal rather than specific, finds in maimed limbs and howling mouths a history that repeats itself. It is at the same time a memory and a prediction.

If you have never heard of *South Africa 1959* or the man who made it, then you can blame

it on that same history. Born at the Crown Gold Mine near Johannesburg in 1930, Adams was the illegitimate child of Indian and Cape Coloured parents. When his mother went home to Cape Town in 1934, she took a job as maid to a white family. Black domestics were not allowed to have children with them. The four-year-old Albert was sent to live with his grandmother, who also raised the offspring of her seven other sons and daughters.

Although this particular grandson showed a precocious talent for drawing, there was never any chance of him studying at Cape Town’s Michaelis Art School. Under apartheid, black students were not allowed to sit with white ones, and seeing nude models in life classes was thought likely to inflame their passions, even though the models themselves were usually black.

Instead, Adams went to a teacher training college, paying his way by working as a low-rent department store sign-writer. (Cape Town’s grandest shop had turned him down as being too dark-skinned for the job.) When not painting price tickets, he sketched. One of his drawings, a head of Christ, was spotted by a German client who, with his Jewish partner,

was a refugee from Hitler’s Germany. Recognising Adams’ talent, they helped him apply to the Slade School of Fine Art, London, from where, in 1952, he won a scholarship to Munich’s Akademie der Bildenden Künste and then spent time in the Salzburg studio of Expressionist painter Oskar Kokoschka. ‘I had ten weeks with Kokoschka,’ Adams would later say, ‘and it took me ten years to shake him off.’

Which takes us, improbably, to a brick-and-stucco house in Camden Town, north London, where Adams lived with his partner, Edward Glennon, from 1967 until his death on New Year’s Eve 2006. (‘Albert was always tidy like that,’ laughs Glennon, an amiable North Countryman. ‘He would wait until the very end of the year.’) The house, too, is part of the history of apartheid. Apart from producing *South Africa 1959*, Adams’ last attempt at living in his own country in the late 1950s had confirmed that it was no place for black or mixed-race artists. In his student days he had insisted on riding in the whites-only carriages of Cape Town’s commuter trains, until the police called on his grandmother and threatened to have him locked up if he continued. Three of his cousins were not so lucky.



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Arrested under the Suppression of Communism Act, they served 12-year sentences, one of them with Nelson Mandela on Robben Island.

And so Adams returned to London in 1960, although he remained adamant that this was not a political act: 'I wanted to go back because I missed my friends,' he said, simply. Talking about him to Edward Glennon, you feel the weight of Adams' honesty.

'People wanted to turn Albert into a crusader,' Glennon says, 'but his crusade was his work.' If his late partner's views were sometimes unfashionable, they were always insistently his own. 'He said that people were always making a hero out of Nelson Mandela, but that, actually, Mandela had had it relatively easy on Robben Island, certainly towards the end, when he had become a star prisoner,' Glennon recalls. 'Albert always maintained that it was Winnie Mandela who was the real heroine, who had had to bring up her children under house arrest for 20-odd years, being hassled by the police day in, day out.'

Adams' own politics were heartfelt but pragmatic. Glennon chuckles: 'He hated Blair and Bush, was fiercely against the war in Iraq. But when he marched against it, well on in his

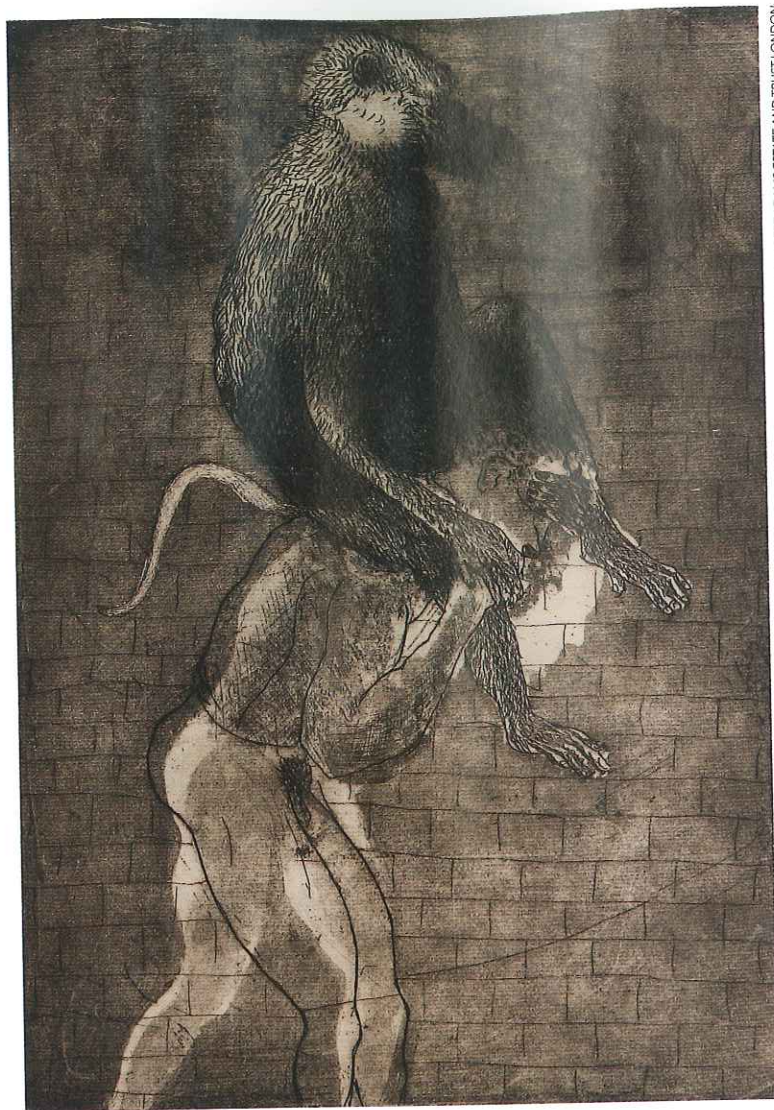
seventies, he found the procession too slow as it went up Piccadilly. So when it passed by Fortnum & Mason, Albert left the march, went inside and had afternoon tea. Then he came out and joined it again.'

As you'd expect, there are no easy political answers in Adams' work. Like his hero, Francisco de Goya, he saw the horrors of war and repression as generic rather than specific. Although he was delighted by the end of apartheid in 1994, he did not see it as proof of an abiding triumph of the human spirit: 'Albert always said that apartheid collapsed for economic reasons and nothing else,' Glennon notes. He was against Archbishop Tutu's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, reasoning that simply saying sorry would not wipe out half-a-century of murderous injustice. 'He said, "Things have happened and nothing has changed";' recalls Glennon. Adams was equally appalled when, post-1994, black South African friends accused him of treachery for showing his work in galleries run by white people.

Climbing to Adams' top-floor studio, left as it was at his death, Glennon goes through a group of canvases leaning against a wall. One of a man's head hanging downwards from the



Left: Albert Adams, *Self-portrait*, 1958; right: Adams, *Man Carrying an Ape*, 2001; facing page: Adams, *Ape*, 2006. All from the Albert Adams Archive, University of Salford, Art Fund Gift



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top of the picture with something spewing from its mouth seems to hint at institutional torture. When *South Africa 1959* was first shown in Cape Town in the year it was made, a recorded speech sent by Kokoschka was played at the opening. The job of the artist, Kokoschka said, was to extrapolate from the particular to the universal, 'to see the misery we make on earth', and Adams' work did this. You might think of the vomiting, upside-down man in the painting as a specific image, a blast at apartheid. In fact, it was made five years after Mandela's release, when South Africa was apparently free.

Towards the end of his life Adams was particularly drawn to the image of an ape, a subject that recurs again and again in his paintings and also in his works on paper. A group of these, together with over 70 drawings, prints and canvases covering his entire career, has been recently given by Glennon, through the Art Fund, to the University of Salford. Salford's College of Arts has a well-known printmaking course and is popular with South African students. The collection includes *Ape Baring its Teeth*, *Man Carrying an Ape* and *Ape on a Skeletal Figure - Darfur*. On one level,

these works could scarcely be more private, or more autobiographical. When Albert's mother, Emma Adams, left Johannesburg in 1934, she bought her small son a toy monkey to keep him entertained during the thousand-mile train journey back to Cape Town. In one sense, the ape series tells us, Adams outgrew his past; in another, he did not.

But the story the series tells is also a wider one, of apartheid, South Africa; of the horrors of Darfur and the Holocaust and Guantanamo; of human inhumanity. *Man Carrying an Ape* is one of a sequence of etched aquatints in which the monkey (or, perhaps, baboon) grows ever bigger, the man on whose back it sits more and more bowed. The Goya-esque images have the feel of those evolutionary charts in which an ape learns to walk upright and use tools, then nimbly moves from *homo erectus* to *homo sapiens*. In Adams' *Ape* series, though, nothing evolves. Man still carries his ape-ness with him, is always and only an animal.

And yet that story is not so simple, either. For all the evident horror of the etchings, there is something funny about them, something carnivalesque. *Ape on Skeleton* is instantly followed by *Skeleton on Ape*: which of their

two characters is the villain of the piece is a moot point. And Adams' work is often beautiful as well as grotesque.

In one of his paintings, *Celebration* (2004), now in the collection of the National Gallery in Cape Town, a legless figure in evening dress and a wheelchair sits in front of a red wall. His made-up face shows him to be a reveller in the Kaapse Klopse, still known to English-speaking Capetonians as the Coon Carnival. The name makes you wince, and so does Adams' painting. How many levels of cruelty are bound up in it? And yet the picture's colours are lovely, and the sun shines down on the man. It is an extraordinary image.

'Albert always said that he didn't want to be famous,' says Edward Glennon, and outside South Africa he has largely had his wish. But not for much longer, perhaps.

● Throughout 2013 works from the Albert Adams Archive, University of Salford, will tour nationally. T 0161 295 5000, [www.salford.ac.uk](http://www.salford.ac.uk)

*Charles Darwent is art critic of the Independent on Sunday. His book, 'Mondrian in London: How British Art Nearly Became Modern', is published by Double-Barrelled Books.*

