

## **London January 2005**

*(quoted in the University of Antwerp Exhibition leaflet 2005)*

*"Ever since the Europeans discovered South Africa, a system of separateness, keeping various Ethnic groups apart existed.*

*In 1948, this system was entrenched in law by the first Afrikaner National Party government. This system became known as 'Apartheid'.*

*Apartheid brought about conditions of great suffering, imprisonment, and in many cases death. It also brought about rebellion, 'Dictators create artists, artists rebel'.*

*Because it was forbidden for me to further my art studies at any of the South African Universities, ('Black' art students were not allowed to work next to 'White' art students, especially in nude life classes) I came to England to study. I have lived ever since in the United Kingdom.*

*My work is based on my experience of South Africa as a 'vast and terrifying prison' - an experience which even now, after a decade of democracy, still haunts me."*

## **Baggage art: Albert Adams Self Portraits An interview**

On a wall of the South African National Gallery, in a series of etchings the figure of a man is depicted stumbling under the weight of a baboon. The hairy animal is exhausted by catastrophe but carries on with antique strength and intrepidity. At times the baboon seems to be the man's salvation, and at other times his doom. Sometimes one notices fear in the eyes of the man and at other times he seems hypnotised and blinded by his animal baggage.

Albert Adams (72) a South African artist but resident in London for more than forty years wears a soft smile as he shakes hands, it is only his silver hair which is an indication of his age. His skin is smooth, his mind open, his clothes classical European and his accent "warm-potato-in-the-mouth, British."

He is temporarily back in the Mother City for his exhibition in the South African National Gallery and also to settle his mother (99) in a nursing home for senior citizens.

*"I do not know how long I will stay, as I shall not rest while my mother is still feeling strange in her new environment. She visited me almost each year in London. But as for me, as I walk through the streets here I feel the passers-by regard me as a visitor. I am no longer a South African. I was never a South African."*

## **Self Portrait I South Africa**

*"I was born in 1930 in Johannesburg. At the age of four I travelled with my mother and sister, a baboon soft-toy and my comfort blanket to Cape Town. I had to live with my grandmother*

*because my mother had obtained employment as a living-in domestic. I never knew my father.*

*I was amazed to see how many children lived in my grandmother's house. Sometimes I sneaked away to sleep where my mother was employed I had to be quiet as I arrived when they had their evening meal, and be gone in the morning before the household awoke. This has had a great influence on my life. I found myself constantly alone in my mother's outside-room, the feeling of confused abandonment. I had to amuse myself, and happened to find a pencil.*

*My political awareness began in District Six. Yes. it seems as though District Six is now a very popular subject in that one or other person claims to have lived there at some time. This political awareness continued when I attended the Livingstone High School in Claremont. As I recall, before this I accepted apartheid as the status quo - assuming as a child believes, that his arm will burn if placed on a hot plate of a stove.*

*Livingstone's Art Master was Mr Esterhuizen. He was brilliant but quite mad, At first I was advised to pursue Natural Sciences because it would ensure a better course, but during lunchtime breaks and after school hours Peter Clarke and I attended Art Classes. The head of the school Mr Roberts called me one day and asked whether I had heard something. "Have you heard the call? Do I imagine or has the Art Class called you? Listen to what the Art Class wants from you."*

*This is how I learnt to paint what one sees about one. I am from the old school and do not therefore question the nature of art.*

*I wanted to study at the Michaelis Art School, but at that time non-white and white students were not allowed to be in the same class. More especially when life drawing was taking place. The joke was that most nude models were not white. I therefore, as almost all black art students of the time, became a ticket-writer. These were the people who wrote price-tickets. Many found work in the upper storey at the OK Bazaars - where the Golden Acre now stands. You had to be light of colour so that the customers at ground level who could see you, imagined you were white. I was too dark.*

*I then went in search of work at Dicky Trout's one man business in Palm Street. He was always drunk. He could not compensate me for the work, but paid for my train ticket. When my grandmother heard of this, she threw me out of the house. One of Trout's customers, a German. saw my work and asked me to work for him, offering a salary and my train fares. Through this arrangement I was able to save enough me to attend Hewat College.*

*When I completed my course at Hewat he encouraged me to apply for a bursary which would enable me to attend a European Art School for further study. In 1952 the Tercentenary of Jan van Riebeeck's arrival at the Cape was being celebrated and I won a bursary for a year to the Slade Art School in London"*

*At the Slade Adams won a Grant and a Bursary with which to attend the Munich Art School for further study. He also attended master classes given by Oscar Kokoschka. He returned to South*

Africa for two exhibitions, one a solo-showing. Since then he has shown work in Yugoslavia, Belgium, Germany, Brazil, America and Britain.

### **Self Portrait II Britain**

*After my first successful exhibition in the Cape in 1960 I returned to London on a permanent basis. As almost all young people I had dreams of leaving the nest There was the fact that in the preceding seven years I had made many friends in the art world. I wanted to return because I missed my friends. It was not originally a political decision.*

For 18 years Adams was a lecturer in European History of Art at the City University in London and retired in 1997.

### **Self Portrait III India**

*When I visited India for the first time, I discovered that I had an enormous relationship - mainly visual with the land. I looked at the people and thought how closely I resembled them, although I was from England and felt at home in England.*

*I think the most difficult question to be answered by anyone is, 'Who am I?' I have never regarded myself as an exile, although South African born and raised, I was a second-class citizen who never felt South African. I don't regard myself as British either in spite of having for the first time experienced freedom in Europe, for there is antagonism against foreigners. I have never called myself South African or mentioned that I am from South Africa.*

*Above all I have discovered myself in India, believing that age and education can help one to understand things. I am 72 but I still do not understand. I am still investigating with my brush.*

Once again a handshake, soft and without baggage.

"Go" he says, showing his rusty Afrikaans "But it comes back, especially when I read"

*Weg - Gone - Street - Fight?*

*Veg? V-E-G?"*

That's it, yes. Struggling with yourself