

## **Adams: Most relevant**

*Cape Times*  
*18 August 1980*

It's a tight-rope that the artist walks, says Albert Adams, as he tries to maintain a balance between the emotions which direct his creative urge and the objectivity needed to control the development of a work of art. In his exhibition of drawings at Gallery International, Adams successfully performs this feat with confidence and ability.

His subject matter falls broadly into two categories - men and animals. But since he chooses to stress certain general rather than specific characteristics, his subjects appear to represent far more than meets the eye.

### **Caged animals**

At Regent's Park Zoo near his home in London, he closely observed the behaviour of caged animals. Later, drawing in his studio, Adams discovered that exploratory lines were beginning to resemble aspects of zoo animals. He pursued this direction realizing that the dog image provided a most appropriate vehicle to carry the content of his work.

A strong sense of alienation comes across from these most disturbing studies - particularly with the dogs and hyenas. For these animals removed from their natural environment, escape seems as impossible as adaptation. Confined in narrow alleys or cornered in dark empty rooms, frustrated, alone and desperate, they turn inwards on themselves or aggressively outwards to the world. Twisting, leaping, running - there is no rest for these homeless creatures.

A more refined torture is implied in two other disquieting images depicting dogs that seem only distantly related to their snapping, snarling cousins. Sleek, well-fed and cared for, they appear alert and stable - but their heads are muffled in canvas or leather masks which not only inhibit their natural instincts, but also suggest a selective filtering of outside information to the animals senses.

### **Headless**

Figure studies represent another point of view. These are treated in a more abstract manner, some with flat vertically striped areas suggesting a suit front. The figures are headless - obliterated by some explosive force (from within?), replaced-by a puff of smoke, or cancelled out with violent gestural marks.

Adams uses a graphite stick to achieve a range of tones from deepest black to a luminous white, Whether rubbed into solid satiny masses, smudged to blur areas, or used sharp-edged to produce aggressive gestural lines, the graphite sensitively reflects the artist's ruling emotions, while control is evident in the distribution of tonal areas on the surface.

Like Francis Bacon with whom Adams has an affinity, tensions are set up between the implicitly violent images and the sensitivity of media handling.

In the context of art in our time and place, this is probably the most relevant show to have been mounted by a South African-born artist in recent years. Albert Adams has done his job well.

*Benita Munitz*  
*Cape Times*  
*18 August 1980*

## Anger revealed artworks by Albert Adams at the Irma Stern Museum to April 25

*Cape Times*

16 April 1994

The centenary of the birth of Irma Stern provides an excellent excuse to exhibit the work of former South African artist Albert Adams - an expressionist of a different kind.

Not since 1980 has Albert Adams exhibited in South Africa. But while based far from his homeland (he has lived and worked in London since 1960) and while working in a style you could loosely call "international", his art still reveals scars of formative years in this country.

Artworks on show include examples from 1960 as well as recent work. Surfaces have been stitched, zipped and stuck, painted and drawn on. Apart from their consistent two-dimensionality, what many relate is a sense of frustration and a vision of violence barely restrained.

Pictorial space becomes a metaphor for real space as shapes take on recognisable attributes of humans, animals and reptiles. Within this claustrophobic arena sinister forces operate to oppress the vulnerable - and to threaten viewers in Kafkaesque fashion.

In early works violence is implicit and contained within fairly static compositions. Over time aggression and the sense of power-play develops, promoted by the use of dynamic diagonals and strong contrasting colours. Restless surfaces often suggest rapid, violent or restrained movement as in figures assaulting, fleeing, disintegrating, waiting.

Over the years many influences have left residual marks on Adams' surfaces. Still identifiable are elements borrowed from artists such as Jim Dine, Allen Jones and Ron Kitaj -- hardly surprising when you consider that Adams entered London's artworld during the 1960s - an exciting and productive period for British and American art. Pop art was "in" and manifesting itself in a number of ways.

[Kokoschka](#) and Francis Bacon have also contributed to the success of Adams' eclectic approach - Kokoschka evident in viscous sparkling surfaces of some years back and Bacon in "rushes" of paint-blurred movement, the sense of claustrophobic confinement and the use of savage animals that express fury more openly than humans.

Eclectic, most certainly. But even through periods when a personal style has been overwhelmed by environmental influences, Adams has consistently maintained a central theme - the sense of undefined and barely restrained rage suffered by both aggressors and victims - as relevant a theme now as ever.

*Benita Munitz*

*Cape Times*

16 April 1994

## **Paintings By Albert Adams** **Irma Stem Museum, University of Cape Town**

Albert Adams left South Africa for London in the 1950s because he had no alternative - barred by apartheid structures from attending the same art school as his white counterparts. He ended up at the Slade. Later, he spent a year studying under Oskar Kokoschka in Salzburg.

As a brief retrospective, the exhibition at the Irma Stem Museum offers a fascinating insight into how Adams responded to forced upheavals, new situations and influences.

His earlier work, particularly *Cape Town Docks* (1959) and *Self-Portrait with Gold Fish* (1960), is strongly influenced by Kokoschka, though his vibrant colours are distinctly African. Far more bleak, yet equally impressive, *Resurrection* (1960) looks like a sinister and slippery fusion of Goya and Auerbach.

His work from the 1980s begins to point in a number of different directions. Pieces such as *Cyclist with Monkey* (1983), *Figure with White Dog* (1983) and *Untitled* (a canvas collage from 1984) display the influence of artists such as Bacon, Kitaj and Hockney respectively.

His more recent work, such as *The Monkey and the Signal Box* (1994), while playful and humorous, lacks the formal dexterity and perseverance which make earlier pieces so compelling. Even so, Adams has shown that he is an artist of considerable range and skill. He last exhibited in Cape Town in 1980. Let's hope it won't be another 14 years until we see more.

*James Gamer*  
*Weekly Mail*  
*8-14 April 1994*

# Adams's delicate balance

Staff Reporter 16 May 2009

A triptych of panels painted by the late expressionist Albert Adams in 1959 has been called one of the most important works by a black South African artist of the 20th century — and is one of the central pieces in the retrospective of his work at the Johannesburg Art Gallery.

The triptych, titled *South Africa 1959*, has been likened to Picasso's *Guernica* and was influenced by Sir Francis Bacon. Adams was a great admirer of both artists, though according to his civil partner, Edward Glennon, he didn't appreciate its nickname, "African Guernica".

"The work deals with devastation and death and horrors. It was his apocalyptic view of the future of South Africa under apartheid," Glennon says, as he shows me around the classical Georgian townhouse in London's Camden Town, which they shared for many years.

## Understanding Adams

Jeremy Kuper speaks to Edward Glennon, life partner of the later Albert Adams

[watch the video](#)

Adams's mother was a cook and housekeeper who met his Indian father in Johannesburg. In his

childhood his parent's relationship ended and Adams moved with his mother to live with his grandmother in Cape Town. Adams would later say that he never knew his father.

He would only see his mother on her days off, but sometimes she would sneak him into her room while the family she worked for was dining. His mother gave him pencils and paper to keep him quiet. And in the morning he would have to sneak out again before the family awoke.

At Livingstone High School in Claremont his teachers noticed his talent for art. When he finished school he tried to get a place in the Michaelis Art School at the University of Cape Town, but was rejected as non-whites and whites were not allowed to study together. "He was very hurt by it," Glennon says. The reason given was so white models would not have to pose in front of black or coloured students in nude drawing classes, but, in fact, most of the models were not white.

Like many talented non-white artists he tried to make it as a sign writer, painting signs in the department stores of Cape Town. Adams was considered to be too dark to get a job in the larger shops. Instead he found a position with a small trader who couldn't afford to give him a salary and paid only his train fare.

But it was while working as a sign painter that he was spotted by two German refugees who were art collectors. With their help Adams left South Africa in 1955 to take up a scholarship at the most prestigious art school in England, the Slade. There he won a prize to spend a further year in Munich and afterwards went on to Salzburg to study under Oskar Kokoschka.

"There's always an element of danger in his work," Glennon says, "a disturbing undercurrent. This was in part because of Kokoschka's influence. He told Adams: 'We can send men to the moon and we can do

all these wonderful scientific things, but we don't look around at the misery we create in the world.' And so his advice to Adams was always to keep the misery and the poor and the deprived in society in mind — and he did that all his life.”

Kokoschka sent a recorded speech to accompany the opening of Adams's first exhibition in Cape Town in 1959, shortly after his return. He missed his new friends in London and did not stay for long back in South Africa. The apartheid system also made it difficult for him to work and he was arrested several times coming back from his studio near the Waterfront at night. He went back to Europe in 1960, after Sharpeville, yet the short time he spent back in Cape Town was the most productive period in his life.

Identity and South Africa were central themes for Adams, who said: “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.” Glennon recalls how Adams used to tell him: “I'm not South African. I never was South African. I was never allowed to be South African.”

Adams acquired British citizenship, but although he lived in London for almost 50 years he never really regarded himself as British either. In London he also encountered a lot of racism and it was only after visiting India that he felt he discovered himself.

Another great theme in his work is the idea of a man on a tightrope. “It's how we all go through life — we're balanced on a tightrope and we can go to disaster, on one side,” Glennon says. The man on a wire is about the will to live and survive, “and also man's humanity for his fellow man. It reflects the triumph of the human spirit to overcome all difficulties in life.”

In his later life Adams worked among the bergies in Cape Town and then started to document the devastation caused by the United States and Britain in Iraq, says Glennon. He shows me the old newspapers in the studio at the top of the house, with their images of war, famine and torture.

“From the point of view of his artistic endeavours, he was the most modest of people. He didn't regard himself as a great artist or anything like this. He was just struggling to do what he wanted to do in paint and drawings. He tried to find himself in his work,” says Glennon. Most of all he didn't want to try to become famous. Adams told Glennon that if he ever started to think of himself as a great artist his work would suffer.

“I have an axe to grind in promoting Albert's message,” Glennon says. Then he adds that he feels Adams was never given the recognition he deserved in Britain. He was an artist who never sought fame and refused to undertake commissions for the money. He didn't like to sell himself, but Glennon is certain “his day will come when he really will be classed as a world-class artist”.

*The Albert Adams retrospective, Journey on a Tightrope, runs at the Johannesburg Art Gallery until July 3*

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# Overlooked late artist Albert Adams remembered

Mary Corrigan 9 May 2016



*Albert Adams is one of the names on Marilyn Martin's list of overlooked artists she wants to put on the art map.*

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“I am fascinated by those who have been left behind or forgotten,” says Marilyn Martin, the co-curator of *Bonds of Memory*, a retrospective of Albert Adams’s paintings at the Smac Gallery in Cape Town.

The curator, who carved out her place in (art) history as the director of the Iziko South African National Gallery in Cape Town, has compiled a list of overlooked artists she wants to put on the art map. Some of those names, such as Louis Maqhubela, who is known for his modernist abstraction, have already been ticked off that list.

Martin thought she had ticked Albert Adams off the list after a 2007 retrospective of his work at the national gallery, which she curated with colleague Joe Dolby. It coincided with the publication of a book of essays on Adams penned by, among others, Peter Clarke, the Cape Town artist who had grown up with Adams. But it seems Adams didn’t become a household name, showing that a book isn’t always enough.

“People forget so quickly,” says Martin.

She and Dolby hope this new retrospective of mostly paintings Adams created between the 1950s and 2000s — drawn from a collection held previously by the University of Newcastle in the United Kingdom — will reignite interest in the artist, and sustain it. Another iteration in Stellenbosch before a countrywide tour of the exhibition next year is intended to help achieve the goal of solidifying Adams’s place in history, and in our collective memory.

This is usually the type of work a public art institution undertakes, rather than a commercial one, but this is not the barrier to Martin and Dolby’s objective. There are a number of other obstacles. These include the fact that it is not clear where in the big art history scheme of things Adams “belongs”, given he was somewhat of a chameleon artist who adopted a variety of different styles influenced by British

and German artists. It doesn't help matters that he died before giving the curators enough insight into what motivated his art; so much of what we know is based on their suppositions.

It is likely, given his reticence towards commercial galleries, that he may have been reluctant to show his art, or perhaps he was sceptical about how it would be framed by someone else. He and **his partner, Edward Glennon**, curated a show of Adams's work at the Irma Stern gallery in Cape Town.

*Untitled (Four Figures with Pitchforks) c1950. Chalk on paper.*

Another complication is his life story, which does not conform to the "struggling political artist in exile" narrative. He wasn't interested in politics, claim Martin and Dolby, and appears to have flourished in his self-imposed exile from the country of his birth. In a way, it is almost as if Adams quietly resisted being canonised. This puzzle makes his art all the more poetic and attractive, and is fitting given that he was a "complicated man", says Martin.

Adams taught art history, so one can assume he knew well enough the machinations around unearthing overlooked art or artists. In South Africa, such activities are politically and racially fraught. The sensitivities about which and how supposedly overlooked artists are brought to light cannot be underestimated. Martin and Dolby do not appear to suffer from an overt "white saviour" complex — Martin's list of overlooked artists includes white men.

As always in this country, one can't put race aside. This exhibition is subtly haunted by Adams's racial identity as a coloured person, although it is not something to which he drew attention or wanted to be highlighted, according to Martin.

"His work needs to be assessed on its own terms," she says.

But his dark rendering of the recurring motif of a minstrel from the Kaapse Klopse festival led Smac Gallery owner Baylon Sandri to conclude that Adams's significance is tied to his racial identity or aspects of it with which the artist wrestled. Minstrels are associated with stereotypical ideas about the coloured population in the Western Cape and Adams had a compulsion to paint self-portraits, leading Sandri to this conclusion.

*The Captive 1982. Acrylic on canvas.*

Adams would not have been able to overlook his race, because it prevented him from enrolling at the University of Cape Town's Michaelis School of Fine Art. Being homosexual apparently made it difficult for him to feel a sense of belonging in his community, too.

Presumably these circumstances encouraged him to study abroad, at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, before enrolling for other classes in Italy and Germany, where he apparently absorbed the German Expressionist mode.

European artists, including Picasso, influenced Adams heavily. This can be seen in his triptych dubbed *South Africa 1959*, which is informally known as the *African Guernica* in reference to Picasso's famous work relaying the violence and chaos of the Spanish Civil War. He settled in London until his death in 2006 and his art reflects British sources of inspiration, mostly from the School of London painters, who were pursuing forms of figurative painting amid the trend for abstraction in the 1970s.

*The Captive*, a semi-figurative work reflecting three spliced male figures, brings to mind the bright collage-type paintings of RB Kitaj, who came up with the term School of London. *Cyclist with Monkey*



and other works featuring this animal make one think of Francis Bacon's work. In this way, Adams seems to have slipped under the skin of many different modes of expression.

"This made him an individual. He wasn't part of any movement," says Dolby. "I think that is his strength," adds Martin.

*Celebration Head 2002. Oil on canvas.*

In today's art world, a lack of distinctiveness might not have won him applause. Artists are under pressure to develop a characteristic language that is recognisable, particularly to buyers. Selling his art does not seem to have been a driving motivation for Adams.

Adams may have moved in the same circles as Irma Stern when he was based in Cape Town and then visited the city later on, but he does not appear to have forged strong alliances with the art community in London. This may have had something to do with British class snobbery, says Dolby.

Adams may have created work in isolation, but he was not a recluse. He loved teaching and, much to most people's surprise, thrived on it, despite working at tough schools in London's East End. He appears to have settled happily into life in England with Glennon. Martin and Dolby describe him as a charming, sophisticated, knowledgeable raconteur, although their interactions with him appear to have been limited, most often to discussions around funding for his 2007 retrospective, which he did not live to see.

He may have been reticent about showing his art or discerning about the contexts in which he did, but he appears to have craved praise. Martin claims he was deeply disappointed that she did not rave about some of the works he had shown her.

Martin and Dolby favour his drawings over his paintings. "We both feel the more graphic and gestural and restrained use of colour works better," says Dolby.

But his paintings, as always, are of more value to buyers and it is the sale of them at a commercial space such as Smac that may ultimately put Adams on that elusive art map.

*Bonds of Memory is on show at the **Smac Gallery** in Cape Town until May 21.*

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# Invincible yet still mercurial

Kwanele Sosibo 3 May 2019



Looking back: 'Albert Adams — An Invincible Spirit' exhibits the artist's seminal works such as *The Captive* (1952)

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Although Albert Adams has had a number of posthumous retrospectives, the current one, entitled *Albert Adams — An Invincible Spirit*, may just be his most important, especially if timing — straddling Freedom Day, South Africa's elections and the publishing of his biography — is factored in.

The exhibition, at the Wits Art Museum (WAM) until May 25, is curated by Marilyn Martin and celebrates 90 years of the exiled artist's birth. It once again encapsulates an oeuvre spanning more than 50 years.

Comprising paintings, drawings and prints, including several key works such as *South Africa 1959*, from the Johannesburg Art Gallery's collection, the works highlight the "universal" scope of Adams's political outlook while speaking to the particular effect of apartheid on South African society.

A particularly pointed image in this regard, which viewers confront quite early on in the exhibition, has to be the charcoal and pastel on paper work, *Red Figure* (1999). Standing 1 640cm x 1 500cm in dimension, an upended, heavily lined, greyish head spews out a rainbow-like flame (or flame-like rainbow) within range of an almost skeletal figure rendered in red on a backdrop suggesting Table Mountain. The work forms part of the artist's cherished Incarceration series which, given the timing of the exhibition, is pregnant with symbols of South Africa's social maladies and the country's thwarted potential.

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Red Figure (1999), charcoal and pastel on paper work. (Albert Adams)

For Martin, a curator of several of Adams's shows since meeting the artist during his visits to the country, this particular show (which coincides with the publishing of his biography by Elza Miles) is of particular visual significance.

This is because the spacing of the WAM allows the viewers to appreciate Adams's knack for serialising his work, the three tiers of the building lending themselves to capturing a sweep of the artist's areas of focus.

Of course, with a large portion of his work in varying hands, viewers are witnessing broad strokes and just a sample of his prowess.

Significantly, says Martin, the exhibition features few of the artist's prodigious self-portraits and his etches.

"With other retrospectives, such as at the Rupert Museum in 2017 [which was cocurated with Robyn-Leigh Cedras], we have many of the same key works, but this has a more developed schematic outline of different phases. With the Rupert Museum, everything had to go to one big room."



The show begins with a series of portraits on the lower floor, including those of the artist and a striking, colourful rendering of his studio in London's Delancey Street.



Introspective: The show begins with a series of portraits, such as *Portrait 2 (1950)*, however many of Adams's prodigious self-portraits and etches are not available for exhibition. (Albert Adams)

The main tier covers early works, drawings in expressionistic styles, very pointed political works such as *Untitled (Four Figures with Pitchforks)* (1950), key works such as the previously mentioned, Picasso-recalling triptych *South Africa 1959* and *South Africa 1958 to 1959 (Deposition)* as well as other seminal works such as *Sleeping Man at Rondebosch Fountain* — a large-scale oil on canvas depicting a headless, slouching figure with smudged legs passed out on a step.

Here, mood, palette, technical and thematic range and variations in scale may hit the viewer like a fusillade, with familiar works and Adams's variety of influences developing full power from the manner in which the works converse with each other.

The upper level of the exhibition encompasses works from the *Celebration* series (Adams's lyrical and inventive look at the Kaapse Klopse) and works that feature apes, a theme the artist returned to, albeit decades later.

Born to an Indian father and a coloured mother in Johannesburg in 1929, Adams moved with his mother and sister to Cape Town at the age of four. After high school, Adams was unable to study fine art at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, being refused entry on the basis of his race.

He was later awarded a scholarship to study at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, which he did from 1953 to 1956. He then studied under the Austrian poet, artist and playwright Oskar Kokoschka, who is often credited with bestowing on Adams a particular artistic sensibility and passion for justice.

For the few years Adams was back in Cape Town before returning to London for good in 1960 (the year of the Sharpeville massacre), he worked and exhibited often, with Kokoschka sending a written message for one of his exhibitions.

Adams later taught in secondary schools in London's East End and taught art history at the City University for 18 years from 1979.

In an article looking at a Smac Gallery retrospective on Adams, an exhibition cocurated by Martin in 2016, Mary Corrigan makes the point that "it doesn't help that he died before giving curators enough insight into what motivated his art; so much of what we know is based on their suppositions".

In the book *Journey on a Tightrope*, an exhibition catalogue that accompanied a retrospective at the Iziko South African National Gallery in 2008, little seems to be directly attributable to Adams by way of quotes or even his own writings. A concise journal featuring sparse but often visceral entries between August 1956 and July 1960 — put together by his partner Edward Glennon and Art Space Gallery in London — shows Adams to be a highly sensitive individual, navigating shame, rejection, encounters with art and a deep awareness of injustice, but resolving to do something about it.

Martin, having befriended the artist in his latter years, said during a phone interview: "He never regarded himself as a political exile. He was quite clear about that." On the other hand, she recognises the religious themes to his works as "vectors of social and political commentary".

Her words seem at odds with what the works quite emotively point to.

Also, Martin says, the artist was reticent about promoting his own work, noting that not much of his etchings are available, and that he was a very good printmaker.

The above is not to suggest any duplicity on Martin's behalf but merely to highlight that Adams's life, works and political ideas still present opportunities for further study and reframing.

The biography, which launches on the last day of the retrospective at WAM, may provide an opportunity to encounter the iceberg beneath the water's surface.

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