







Albert Adams



Albert Adams

Prints and Drawings 1950-2006

A R T S P A C E G A L L E R Y

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Foreword

When the South African artist Albert Adams died in London in 2006 he left behind a body of masterly works, most of which had never been seen outside of a small circle of friends and colleagues. Born in 1929 of mixed race he had grown up in Cape Town and the pain and alienation must have stayed with him all his life. Joe Dolby, Curator of Prints and Drawings at the South African National Gallery has written that: *His was a vision and identity forged in the crucible of apartheid but whose range was universal and timeless and which found its full expression in his graphic art.*

Entry into art school had been denied but there were positive influences, amongst them the German émigré friends of the South African artist Irma Stern who opened the way to a scholarship at the Slade School of Fine Art in London (1953-56). With a Slade travel award he was able to attend the Munich Academy and study in Salzburg with Oskar Kokoschka who was to remain a lifelong friend. He returned briefly to South Africa but emigrated to England in 1959 earning a living teaching in London's East End schools and working in self-imposed isolation free of any apparent desire to engage with the commercial 'art world'.

It is in the drawings and as an intaglio printmaker that Albert Adams excels. There are self-portraits, a series of an ape on a man's back, an incarceration series – he had relatives imprisoned on Robben Island – and studies of animals, in the wild and caged, alienated in unnatural environments. They are images that owe a debt to Irma Stern and her refugee friends who introduced him to the works of Goya, Durer, Rembrandt and the German Expressionists in their collections. And to his tutors Adolf Thiermann and Anthony Gross who had revived the art of printmaking in the 60s. But above all it was his own belief in the value of art to transform "mans' inhumanity to man" into something deeper and more meaningful than its surface violence.

There has been belated recognition of the importance of Albert Adams in South Africa with a major retrospective at the South African National Gallery and work placed in their permanent collection amongst others. But this will be the first major exhibition of his graphic works in London and my thanks go to Edward Glennon, the artist's life-partner, who has made it possible. I'm also indebted to the printmaker and sculptor Michael Sandle RA whose essay shows a clear recognition of one major artist by another.

Michael Richardson
Art Space Gallery, 2017

Head of Christ, c.1950
charcoal on card, 64 × 48.5 cm



Albert Adams

by

Michael Sandle RA

Earlier this year Michael Richardson asked me what I thought of the drawings and prints of an artist I had never heard of called Albert Adams, who died in London in 2006 aged 77. In the first instance, he was only able to show me reproductions in a catalogue, but that was enough to grab my full attention and I immediately recognized I was looking at work by an artist who was, in vox populi, the “real deal”. Subsequently I was able to go with Michael to view the late artist’s original drawings and etchings in the studio situated on the top floor of the house in Camden he had shared with his life-partner and supporter Ted Glennon, who happily is still with us and who has given his blessing to this exhibition.

Anyway, I could sense immediately on viewing the work laid before me – and without knowing a great deal about the artist’s background at this stage – the extraordinary breadth of his enquiring mind coupled with his powerful emotional engagement. That was clear to see from the nervous energy encapsulated in the very black marks made with charcoal or printer’s ink on paper. Along with this there was compelling evidence that this artist had a profound knowledge of 20th Century European Art – particularly German Expressionism which also lay at the heart of these powerful images – but crucially it showed too that in spite of these influences he never lost his own identity. You just can’t do work like this without genuine passion, and the work of Albert Adams sprang off the page straight into my own psyche.

Self Portrait, 1956

woodcut on paper, 44.5 × 29 cm



Self Portrait, 1960
etching and aquatint on paper;
44.5 × 32 cm



Self Portrait, 1960
sugar lift etching on paper;
39.5 × 30 cm



Self Portrait, 1960
etching and aquatint on paper;
59 × 39.8 cm

This doesn't happen too often. When I look at a lot of contemporary art these days I lose the will to live because of its shallowness. Too often it seems to be a mere commodity aimed at a combination of the rather nauseating "Art Market" and "Cultural Stalinism", in which the rules are arbitrary but absolute, and determine who is "in" and who is "out"; and if you are "out" these days, by God are you out! Undoubtedly one of the reasons that I had never heard of Albert Adams, apart from him being South African, is that he wasn't interested in doing art for commercial gain. For him being an artist was a vocation, like it used to be for most artists of my generation, i.e. before "art" became the huge industry it has now become. I am grateful to Michael Richardson – who incidentally is not your typical dealer because he only shows the work of artists he believes in – for making me aware of someone I can believe in, and I have obviously made it my business to find out more about this remarkable artist.

The following is necessarily very condensed: Albert Adams was born in Johannesburg, the son of a Hindu father and a mother categorized as Cape Coloured by the Apartheid Regime. He was rejected by the Michaelis School of Fine Art in Cape Town because of his colour, but his talent was recognised by some luminaries from the South African cultural scene including two German émigrés who had fled the Nazis. Rudolf von Freiling and Siegbert Eick advised him to apply to study overseas, which he did. With a scholarship he went to the Slade School of Art from 1953 to 1956, where amongst other disciplines he was taught etching (as I was too) by the excellent Anthony Gross. Albert Adams was subsequently awarded a scholarship to Munich where he met and became very good friends with Oskar Kokoschka. As previously mentioned, Apartheid had impacted on Albert Adams's life because of the colour of his skin, and it is worth noting that several of his cousins had been imprisoned for being political activists. One ended



South Africa 1948: Triumphant Ape with Flag, 2006
etching and aquatint on paper, 43.5 × 33 cm



South Africa 1948: Ape on Figure in the Sky, 2006
etching and aquatint on paper, 44 × 33 cm

up in Robben Island with Nelson Mandela, and after the 1960 Sharpsville Massacre Albert Adams chose to live more or less permanently in London with Ted Glennon. Adams, who was homosexual, and judging from photos had been a strikingly good-looking young man, would have felt some alienation at the outset of his life in Britain because homosexuality was still a criminal activity until 1967. And I am guessing that he would undoubtedly have encountered some racism as well to compound this feeling. At any rate there is a lot of pain in his work which is what makes it so compelling, and he never forgot his South African roots or the degradation and misery caused by Apartheid.

In spite of not being interested in the art market – he was able to live from being a lecturer – Albert Adams did gain some recognition in his homeland. His triptych “South Africa”, painted in 1959 and now in the Johannesburg Art Gallery, has been compared – maybe exaggeratedly but still mentioned in the same breath – with Picasso's “Guernica”. And before his death Marilyn Martin, the former Director of the South African National Gallery, made an impassioned attempt in the catalogue printed for his retrospective exhibition in the Iziko National Gallery in Cape Town, to place Albert Adams at the forefront of South African Contemporary Art History. In that publication she is supported by several colleagues from South Africa and by our own Colin Cina. Amongst others, she mentions as one of Albert Adams' heirs the important South African artist William Kentridge. There is the same welcome humanity in both of these South African artists' work, although as he was “White” Kentridge would not have had to endure the slights burned into his psyche that Adams did. Maybe that explains the edge Adams has, in my opinion, over Kentridge in terms of expressing sheer “passion”. Adams' tortured drawing of Christ is the nearest I have ever seen to the incredibly expressive – almost monstrously so – painting of Christ by Matthias Grünewald, which hangs in the Kunsthalle in Karlsruhe.



South Africa 1948: Ape on Crouching Man, 2001
etching and aquatint on paper, 41 × 29.3 cm



South Africa 1948: Ape on Man on all Fours, 2001
etching and aquatint on paper, 41 × 29.3 cm

In her encomium for Albert Adams, Marilyn Martin gives a long list of cruelties and atrocities documented in newspaper cuttings which he had collected and used as source material. These covered, for example, events in Angola, Iraq, Dafur, Palestine, up to Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. A painting of his about the latter has inspired a poem by the American poet Carol Dine which appears at the end of this piece. Albert Adams' concern for the awfulness that humans are capable of immediately makes him my kind of artist. Why are there so few artists like Goya or Georg Grosz bearing witness to our terrible times, I keep asking myself? There are some, of course. Tim Shaw is one and I even try to be one myself. However, to his everlasting credit, Albert Adams did just that – he bore witness. He deserves to be more widely known outside South Africa, and I very much hope that this exhibition will go a long way to redress the balance between meretricious “populism” – no names no pack drill – and art like his that has something immensely important to say.

London, 2017

Michael Sandle RA is a British sculptor widely recognised as one of the finest sculptors in the world. He was professor of sculpture at Pforzheim, Germany in 1973, and at Karlsruhe, Germany in 1980 and has public sculptures in the UK and abroad relating to themes of war, death or destruction. His work has been critical of the “heroic decadence” of capitalism and its involvement in global conflict. He was elected Fellow of the Royal Society of British Sculptors in 1994 and has exhibited in numerous exhibitions in Britain and internationally including the 5th Paris Biennale, 4th and 6th Documenta and Sao Paulo Biennale.

Carol Dine is a poet, essayist, and college lecturer who lives in Brookline, Massachusetts. She is the author of *Orange Night*, a book of poems accompanied by the images of acclaimed artist and Holocaust survivor, Samuel Bak, published in 2014 (Pucker Art Publications) and three books of poetry, *Trying to Understand the Lunar Eclipse* (Erie Street, 1992), *Naming the Sky* (Golden Quill, 1988) and *Van Gogh in Poems* (Bitter Oleander Press, 2009). Her highly-regarded memoir in poetry and prose, *Places in the Bone* (Rutgers University Press, 2005) explores the redemptive power of art.



South Africa 1948: Ape on a Skeleton, 2004
etching and aquatint on paper, 43 × 33 cm

ABU GHRAIB

after Albert Adams by Carol Dine

Yellow, the color of madness,
covers the walls of the cell,
as if the sun could enter
the cordoned off bars.

Piled up on the floor;
a blur of white
decomposing bones,
bloodied newspaper;
ashes.

Beside them a torso,
thigh bones,
arm & wrist bones,
a leg with a horse's hoof,
a hideous jaw
exposing its black teeth.

Masklike,
bearded,
partially eaten away,
the head of Christ.
He lies among the starved,
the tortured,
the guilty, the not guilty,
the pious
in another language.
The unconfessed.



Iraq: Abu Ghraib, 2006

etching and aquatint on paper, 45 x 35 cm



Robben Island Prison Cell, 2002
etching and aquatint on paper; 42 × 57 cm



above

Hyena, 1979, charcoal on paper; 101 x 76 cm

right

Leaping Monkey, 1978, charcoal on paper; 101 x 76 cm





Wild Dogs, 1979

charcoal on paper, 101 x 76 cm



Hyena II, 1979

charcoal and graphite on paper, 101 x 76 cm



Howling Ape, 2006

etching and aquatint on paper, 58.5 x 41 cm



Baboon, 2006
etching and aquatint on paper, 58 × 40 cm

Brief Biography

Born in Johannesburg, South Africa, 1929.

Moved to Cape Town aged four.

Attended Livingstone High School and Hewat College Cape Town.

Unable to study at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, Cape Town, because of the policy of 'separate development' he began work as a window-dresser and was befriended by Seigert Eick and Rudolph Von Freiling, refugees from Nazi Germany, and the artist Irma Stern who were hugely supportive and with their help he left for Europe to study at the Slade School of Art in London (1953 to 1956).

Following a brief stay in Cape Town he returned to England and taught in secondary schools in the East End of London. In 1960 he went into voluntary exile in London and set up a studio in Camden in a house he shared with his life-partner Edward Glennon. In 1979, he was appointed to the staff of the City University, London as a lecturer in art history where he stayed for 18 years. Towards the end of 2006 he was diagnosed with lung cancer and died on 31 December 2006.

Awards

1957 Studied under Oskar Kokoschka at his School of Vision in Salzburg. Kokoschka remained a lifelong friend.

1956 Awarded Bavarian State Scholarship and studied at Munich Academy of Arts.

1955 Winner of the Slade Summer Composition Award.

Exhibitions

2017 *Albert Adams, Drawings and Prints*, Art Space Gallery, London. Solo exhibition.
Rupert Museum, Stellenbosch, South Africa.

2016 S.M.A.C. Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.

2012 Imperial War Museum, London.
Imperial War Museum North, Manchester, UK.

2008/16 Northumbria University Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK. Solo exhibition.

2008 *Journey on a Tightrope*, Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town. Solo exhibition.

2007 *Scratches on the Face: Antiquity and Contemporaneity in South African Art*, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi & Mumbai, India.

Apartheid, the South African Mirror, Centre de Cultura Contemporania, Barcelona, Spain.

2005 *Paintings, Drawings and Graphics* University of Antwerp, Belgium.

2002 *Paintings, Drawings and Graphics* Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town.

2001 Frans Maasereel Centre, Antwerp, Belgium.
Tyron Centre for Visual Arts, Charlotte, USA.

2000 *Paintings and Drawings*, Institute of Physics Gallery, London. Solo exhibition.
City Art Gallery, Atlanta, USA.

1994 *A Tribute to Albert Adams*, retrospective exhibition, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town.

1980 *Albert Adams, Drawings*, Gallery International, Cape Town. Solo exhibition.

1974/80 Africa Centre, London, UK.

1961 *South African Graphic Art*, Munich, Germany.
South African Paintings, Sao Paulo Biennale, Brazil.

1960 Modern House Gallery, Cape Town. (Opening speech by Oskar Kokoschka read at the opening). Solo exhibition.

1959 Under 40s Exhibition, SA Association of Arts, Cape Town.

Albert Adams in his studio, 1960



cover

South Africa 1948: Ape on a Skeleton, 2004
etching and aquatint on paper, 43 × 33 cm

inside front cover

Robben Island Prison, 2002
etching and aquatint on paper, 41.5 × 57 cm

frontispiece

South Africa 1948: Ape on Standing Man, 2001
etching and aquatint on paper, 41 × 29.3 cm

inside back cover

Saint John's Locust, 1979
etching and aquatint on paper, 41 × 58.3 cm

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