

Michael Morris

Retrospect



NOW AND then, when the family she worked for was having supper, Emma Caroline would sneak her young son into her room and give him pencils and paper to keep him quiet.

First thing in the morning, the boy, Albert, would slip out again before the family awoke, say goodbye to his mother and return to the care of his granny.

If the creative materials and routine of his occasional more or less subversive visits to his mother in suburban Cape Town of the 1930s were formative in Albert Adams's life-long vocation, the oppressive atmosphere of his early life was also a vitalising element in the ethos of this remarkable and remarkably under-acknowledged, artist.

The detail of his occasional childhood visits to the home of his mother's employers (he otherwise only saw her on her days off) emerges from a 2009 interview with Adams's life partner, Edward Glennon, in which we are left with a striking sense of the artist's lasting alienation from, yet perpetual fascination with, a South Africa he experienced "as a vast and terrifying prison".

It was a sensation, he told Glennon before he died at the end of 2006, which "still haunts me".

It was also the fount of his oeuvre – most of it executed as an exile in Britain and Europe.

Works never before exhibited in South Africa form part of the comprehensive *Albert Adams, Bonds of Memory* exhibition at Woodstock's SMAC Gallery in Sir Lowry Road, until May 21. The exhibition, curators Marilyn Martin and Joë Dolby write, "reveals Adams's instinctive expressionism that was charged by a deep social commitment".

"Adams, more often than not, worked in series," the curators explain, "exploring and developing his chosen themes and all of these series are represented on this exhibition: self-portraits that he produced throughout his career; the *Apes* series, begun in 1969 but to which he returned with greater concentration in 2001; *Prisoners*,



MIXED MESSAGE: Albert Adams's *Celebration Head* is part of the *Celebration* series on the Cape minstrels. *Blue Head*, executed in 1999.



PICTURES: SMAC GALLERY

Neglect of a local talent

A posthumous exhibition confirms the status of exiled Cape expressionist, Albert Adams

which he began as early as 1959 but renewed with urgency in 2000; the *Celebration* series from 1999; *Homeless* from 2001; and, finally, the *Circus* series which occupied his final year in 2006."

The exhibition includes oils, watercolours, drawings and prints. Arthur Albert Hugh Adams was born in Joburg in June 1929 to an Indian father and a South African mother. His parents parted when he was four and his mother took him and his sister to Cape Town.

After matriculating at Livingstone High School, his application to study at the Michaelis

School of Art was denied on the grounds of race.

He became a window dresser to raise enough money to study teaching at Hewat College. A fellow art student at the time was Peter Clarke.

Grants from the Cape Tercentenary Foundation – and help from two German friends and supporters, Baron Rudolf von Freiling and Siegfried Eick – enabled him to study at London's Slade School of Art from 1953 to 1956.

A Slade scholarship took him to the Munich Academy of Arts from late 1956 to mid-1957. Later that

year he attended master classes at Oskar Kokoschka's School of Vision in Salzburg.

Adams returned to Cape Town in late 1957, exhibited locally to acclaim – his first exhibition in Cape Town was in 1959 – but in 1960, after Sharpeville, he left South Africa and settled in London.

He taught at various elementary schools in the East End and from 1979 lectured for 18 years in art history at the City University, London.

He died on December 31, 2006 aged 77.

Adams is represented in the Iziko

South African National Gallery's permanent collection, the Johannesburg Art Gallery, the SABC collection and many private collections locally and abroad.

His last major painting, *Abu Ghraib* (2006), is in the Imperial War Museum in London and the University of Salford in Manchester has a small but significant collection of drawings, prints, books and materials from Adams's studio. A retrospective of his work at the Salford Museum and Art Gallery was followed by a show in partnership with the Salford Working Class Movement Library

in 2012.

Spanish curator Pep Subirós selected the major painting, *South Africa 1959*, from the Johannesburg Art Gallery collection, for the exhibition *Apartheid: The South African Mirror* at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona in 2007.

In South Africa, exhibitions at the Irma Stern Museum in 1994 and at the National Gallery in 2003 were followed by a major retrospective, *Journey on a Tightrope* at the Iziko in 2008, curated by Martin and Dolby.

Martin said this week that while Adams had exhibited widely early in

his career, "his long absence from his land of birth has resulted in the neglect of a great talent".

"What sets him apart from many contemporaries," she added, "was that Adams was moved by and responded to, the horrors of his own time and experiences and captured them in his work – genocide, natural disasters and atrocities perpetrated across the globe, from the Holocaust to Abu Graib prison in Iraq and genocide in Darfur.

"But he always returned to South Africa for inspiration, depicting or alluding to, among others, homeless individuals in Cape Town, the darker side of the Cape Minstrel parades and the 'baggage' or legacy of apartheid."

After 1994 he explored "the challenges, dangers and threats that came with political change, compelling the viewer to see and share the disillusionment of the downtrodden and marginalised. He was unforgiving of the wrongs done to people, while, at the same time, searching for the spiritual and metaphysical in and through his art".

Martin said she wanted to "raise awareness of his contribution to our art history" and see more of Adams's work in collections here. Martin and Dolby point to Adams's treatment of the minstrels in his *Celebration* series as an indicator of his singular vision.

"The parades have been depicted by many artists since the late 19th century... but no one has approached the subject in quite the same way as Albert Adams."

There were "no depictions of either the riotous colours of the troupes, the excitement of the parades, or of individual minstrels in an attempt to highlight the 'exotic' quality of their painted faces.

"Instead, there is unremitting concentration on the dark side of celebration... an ironic and bitter twist to the usual idea of 'celebration'."

Irony and bitter twists, too, no doubt, were part and parcel of a life experience which brought him no small measure of anguish, yet which also broadened his reach.

Glennon recalled in his 2009 interview "how Adams used to tell him: 'I'm not South African. I never was South African. I was never allowed to be South African.'"

Martin and Dolby write of Adams that "his was a vision and identity forged in the crucible of apartheid but whose range was universal and timeless and which speaks to all of humanity".