

# Important art landmark

**CAPETIMES (ICAPETIMES)** / 18 May 2016 at 22:18pm

By: **Danny Shorkend**

THE BONDS OF MEMORY. By Albert Adams. At the SMAC Gallery. Curated by Marilyn Martin and Joe Dolby, until Saturday. DANNY SHORKEND reviews

THIS OVERVIEW of Albert Adams' (from 1929 to 2006) work is an important landmark in the artistic landscape of South African art. Strong, deeply emotive and possibly alluding to the monumental and perennial struggle within the psyche amidst social breakdown, Adams' is able to capture both the triumph of the spirit, as well as an empathetic, even angry observation of the human condition.

This is accomplished in the various series of works that are displayed, culled from a rich, diverse and prolific output spanning a half a century or so.

Indeed, it is the "bonds of memory" that keeps this selection of works as one cohesive and highly impressive exhibition.

His style is overtly expressionistic, even drawing inspiration from early 20th century German Expressionism. His mark making, albeit loose and impulsive, does not eschew descriptive detail.

His major focus and the locus around which he expresses ideas is the human head and to a lesser extent, the figure.

The artist gives just enough information to describe features, and yet it is not always a particular person as such, but rather, in my estimation, the image stands for – that is, symbolizes – a universal, human substrate.

In his "celebration" series, the face becomes a vehicle through which content is expressed, situated as it is within the boundaries of the canvas – but only just.

In this respect, there is a sense of pushing against the boundaries, as if space and object are out of kilter, as if time and space mar the human attempt to fly, run and jump. And this interpretation is reiterated if one considers his bold mark-making and intense, one might say impulsive series of lines that fill space and delineate space, and that sometimes cannot be contained and simply enter the nebulous world of the abstract. However, Adams' is not a modernist in terms of the agenda of abstraction: he draws from the world of real, human problems, the political history of South Africa specifically, and the general concern for the difficulties of living, whether that be material and/or spiritual in origin.

His use of colour reflects this dynamic struggle and it is worth noting that he learned from Oskar Kokoschka at his School of vision in Salzburg in around 1957. Earlier he had studied at the Slade School of Art in London as well as the Munich Academy of Arts. Nevertheless, he continued to depict images drawn from his country of birth.

It is perhaps not inaccurate that the art critic Neville Dubow (a few decades ago) compared Adams' work in quality and range to that of Goya y Lucientes, both in terms of subject matter and style (in fact, the artist carried Goya's Disaster's series with him).

Indeed, one notices that it is not only his paintings that appeal, but also his fine drawing technique with charcoal and his numerous lithographs and etchings.

While the works are unmistakably pleasing, there is an undercurrent of forlornness, resignation and philosophical questioning as to whether the soul of man is corrupt.

This one gathers in respect of the following: The "celebration" series is clearly not that celebratory as the images scream, the space is contorted, the colours staid and cajoling.

His *Ape* series question the very heart and soul of humankind: on a simple and perhaps brute level, the image asks the question whether man is simply a more sophisticated ape, or even more incredulous, whether that sophistication is a veneer, that beneath the clothing, as it were, are mere primitive wants and needs.

This reading is buffered if one considers his "circus" imagery where the tightrope walker clearly straddles a fine line and one might argue that humankind is on a kind precipice between primitive violence, darkness and the potential to rise above it, and seek more spiritual goals.

Whether the latter can be realized is unclear, for amidst his more colourful work (and it is particularly pleasing to see examples from the burgeoning of the artist's talent as a youth in his early work on display) are deep recesses of various tonalities of black and his constant use and expressive intent with charcoal.

Sometimes his monumental faces become vaporised; one is left wondering whether there is a solution to the problems of social upheaval or rather that there is a solution, but perhaps our primitive nature, for want of a better word militates against it, where selfishness reigns.

But, I would caution against the "selfish-gene" postulate, against rigid determinism and argue instead that there is a kernel of light and a broadness of vision.

Adams', one might see, senses this, for in feeling the pain and torment and misery of others, is an essentially selfless act and it rises beyond mere resignation reflected in a lifetime of artistic production.

He may have suffered for it, but he gives to the viewer in the process.

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