

THE USE OF ABSTRACTION BY BILL AINSLIE AND

DAVID KOLOANE

BY

VANESSA ANDERSON

VOLUME II

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**DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL COMPLIANCE WITH THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE MASTER'S DEGREE IN TECHNOLOGY : FINE ART
(PAINTING) IN THE DEPARTMENT OF FINE ART, TECHNIKON NATAL**

The financial assistance of the Centre for Science Development (HSRC, South Africa) towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the Centre for Science Development.

I declare that this dissertation is my own work and has not been submitted for any degree or exam at any other institution.

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26. April 1999.

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INTERVIEW WITH FIEKE AINSLIE

18 MARCH 1996

VA: I know that his family farmed in the Karoo.

FA: Yes, but it was not just the Karoo, it was also Spring Grove. A very beautiful farm in the Eastern Cape. This is also all written in that little book [Last Paintings by Bill Ainslie 1934 - 1989].

VA: Does the book mention where he went to school?

FA: It is mentioned. He was supposed to go to Grahamstown because all the Ainslies went there; but then his father died in the last war so he went to King Edward in Johannesburg. He was head boy there.

VA: Did he take art at school ?

FA: Oh yes. He was always painting. The whole family paints. His grandfather is mentioned by Bains as having 'entertained us in the evenings with the bagpipes, and he was a competent painter with rather a great use of yellow ochre'. So they all painted.

VA: In other words he comes from a history of painters ?

FA: No, it was just that they were civilised people, you know. In those days people made music and people painted. They were more gentlemen farmers in those days.

VA: When he went to university, was there any specific reason why he chose Natal University?

FA: He had always been in Johannesburg so his mother felt it was a good idea for him to get out of Johannesburg and go to Natal. He found it was not a big university and had a very happy time there. He was president of the Student Representative Council and he was politically very involved.

VA: It is mentioned that his original intention was to study Agriculture.

FA: Yes, this is what he wanted to do because the whole family farmed. But he did an aptitude test and he got 100% for all the artistic things; you know, like literature and other subjects, and very low in the sciences. So he decided just there and then to study fine art and it was the best thing he could have done. He did philosophy and theology and at one stage wanted to go into the Church.

VA: It was mentioned that he was influenced by Selby Mvusi.

FA: Selby Mvusi was a great friend of his at university. He had great admiration for him in the way he worked.

VA: Was there any other person, say a lecturer, who may have influenced him?

FA: Yes, there were lots. Philosophy professor Eugrove. He was a big influence in his life and Calvin Cook who also married us. He is now in Grahamstown. He is the professor of Theology there. A very learned man. Bill went to him and said at one stage that he needed to go into the Church. He told Bill, "First finish your studies, and then we will see." And professor Heath. He absolutely adored the man. He thought he was a very funny and wonderful man.

VA: What was he painting at the time?

FA: He did figurative painting and he did a huge mural for Wentworth University dining hall.

VA: Would it still be there ?

FA: It is destroyed, that area, but somebody phoned me to ask what we were going to do with it and can they have the big painting. Bill was then still alive and he said yes, they could have it. But I don't know who it is. It's in Durban somewhere. It is a huge painting. He did monumental paintings of black people and women. "Sunflower Madonna" was one. An amazing painting. Irene and Clive Mennel - they live close by. They have a beautiful painting which they bought at his first exhibition: "The Herd Boy".

VA: Do you have photographs of work he produced at varsity ?

FA: I have only a few because the Association of Arts in Pretoria lost all his slides. In those days you didn't make a double slide. You couldn't do it in South Africa at the time and the whole lot was lost. But I have got a couple of photographs. Bongiwe Dhlomo bought two for the Gauteng collection instead of having his more recent paintings.

Bongiwe used to run the workshops here. She is now working for Gauteng doing their collection. She has been working for the Biennale. She does a lot of different things. The "Mother and Child" is in their collection. Cape Town bought an earlier almost Rembrandt-like, huge "Mother and Child". Beautiful brown-gold colours.

VA: Did his work during the 1960's play with different styles?

FA: No, he didn't play with different styles at all. He went slowly on like any human being grows. He grew in his paintings. He went slowly on to the abstract, and when he had his last exhibition at the Adler Fielding Gallery and he brought in four abstracts, they said they couldn't be on show. He said, "Then I won't have an exhibition." They then put them on and that's how he developed. He never played with different styles, never ever. A natural development. That's what artists should do. You see, that's why Bill always felt very strongly, when he started the proper Art Foundation, that the people who were coming to teach had to be practising artists, otherwise you can't teach. You had to have exhibitions. You go dead otherwise, if you only teach. They must be practising artists and they all should work, say three times a week, and that would look after the bread and butter. Bill wanted to have this school. At first we wanted to support the school ourselves because you couldn't get money from the Government. You couldn't take it because it was dirty money of course. We had to be able to buy paint for the black artists and they used to be hungry as well. Then white people came and asked if they couldn't come to the art classes.....we used to give them classes in the evenings and a couple of mornings to enable us to buy paint for the black artists. So the money went around. Bill was on

a retainer at the Adler Fielding Gallery, so we had money for the rent and food and things like that. The extra had to come from somewhere, that's what Bill always said.

VA: He had a years contract with Adler Fielding Gallery ?

FA: Yes, he broke it in the end because they wanted to dictate to him what he must paint. He always felt an artist must have an income from somewhere else, no matter what. So you don't have to sell your soul.

VA: His first exhibition, was it with the Adler Fielding Gallery ?

FA: Yes, it was a great success. People thought at first it was a black person who had painted those paintings because they were crude. He did it on purpose - the crude.

VA: Do you have a catalogue ?

FA: No, we never had money for that sort of thing. In those days people didn't make catalogues like they do now. We just had an invitation with a photograph on it.

VA: Do you have any photographs of the works he exhibited then ?

FA: Yes, as I told you most of them are slides . . . Photographs don't show a painting properly. A slide does, or a transparency . . .

VA: After Bill's studies he taught at Michaelhouse.

FA: Yes, and then we got married.

VA: So you met him in South Africa ?

FA: Yes, I was here through my work. Through the Dutch Cultural Addition. But you don't want to hear that whole story. It is not relevant for you, is it?

VA: More or less. I am sure you had an influence on Bill Ainslie.

FA: Yes I did.

FA: When I came out for my job for two years, I stayed with the Dutch ambassador who was an old friend of my mother. And this is where I met Jan and his wife. I was in Durban for my work and he phoned me. He asked me to come for the weekend to Pietermatizburg, as it was very nice there, and to meet a very exciting professor of Fine Art and his wife. So we had dinner with the professor and his wife in one of those marvellous old hotels . .

. and while we were sitting on the built-in terrace a group of students came in. The professor said, "There are a group of my students." They all had grey flannels on, black shoes and white shirts. I had never seen an artist like that, but there was one who had jeans on and sandals and very blonde hair and a beard and also a white shirt. He looked like an artist. So suddenly professor Heath shouted, "Hey Bill, come over here!" And so we met Bill that way. He invited us to come and look at his work. A lot of honours students were busy there. Jan was very impressed with his work. He had a very fine art collection. He said, "Now this man must paint your portrait. Your mother wants it and you have done nothing about it and you have been here already a year. So you must ask him to do it." He approached Bill. Bill phoned him only four months later because he was too busy. He was at Michaelhouse already. He also worked for the Liberal Party at the time. He then started painting my portrait and we were married four months later. I was never going to get married. It was an awful situation to get into, that which I saw of my friends. And Bill felt women were far too possessive. You couldn't do any work. But we married . . . later friends thought it would be good for Bill to get out of the country for a little while and he had already been offered a job at Cyrene Mission.

VA: So you were married here?

FA: We were married here in 1960 - the 5th of January . . . And that's how the whole thing happened. It was very exciting to be at Cyrene Mission. An immigrant English aristocrat and scholar and his wife wanted to start a new Eden in the middle of the bundu. It was not practical at all, but anyway, we were there when the first student uprising took place and we helped people sort it out. Bill was also offered an exhibition in Johannesburg.

VA: Did he paint during his stay at Cyrene Mission?

FA: Yes, he was always painting. Bill never wanted to go on holiday. He was always painting and teaching there. He enjoyed it very much. I got Cyrene Mission on the map and all the very wealthy oil magnets came and bought lots of art, everything that the students did. There were some of them that were very good artists, mature artists already. That is one . . . an ivory piece by Sam Songo - he is still alive. "Samson and Delilah"

VA: Apparently your plans changed at this stage. You left to see Douglas Portway.

FA: No, we first came back to Johannesburg. From the time we were married we went straight to Cyrene Mission, then we came back to Johannesburg. Bill had been offered an exhibition and he brought

in straight away four paintings . . . to Adler Fielding and they were sold immediately.

VA: Were these paintings painted at Cyrene Mission?

FA: Yes.

VA: How long did you stay in Johannesburg?

FA: Quite a long time. In 1968 or 69 we went out of the country again because Bill was a great admirer of Portway. Bill was again, well we were continually bothered by the special branch and its very hectic when they were standing outside. I used to bring them a cup of coffee at about 10:30 and a piece of cake. People said, "How can you do that? They are your enemy." I said, "Well, I want to know the faces of my enemy." I also did it to diffuse the whole thing and let them know that we knew that they were there. So we were going to Spain first, but Sophia [daughter] got very ill on the trip, so we decided not to go to Spain, but to go to St Ives. We were two years in St Ives; no, a year in St Ives and two years in the Netherlands. We stayed with my family in the Netherlands. They were very pleased.

VA: Did you have two children by this stage?

FA: Yes, they also felt we were crazy to go back. My family were very much anti-apartheid. We stayed with my sister. They had a magnificent studio in this huge, old house and Bill started painting Dutch middle class portraits for money. He also had an exhibition in the Netherlands with a fairly good review. It's very difficult in other countries to get a good review. In England he also got fantastic reviews . . .

VA: Did he exhibit during the time he spent in St Ives?

FA: Yes, he has always produced work and sold work.

VA: I was under the impression, from some write-ups, that he didn't paint that frequently.

FA: No, he painted from the early morning until late in the night.

VA: I thought that he was primarily a teacher.

FA: Where did you read that? They have never taken Bill seriously. They have never followed it up properly. It's a very simple thing. First it was the Cyrene Mission when we were married. We never lived in Johannesburg when we were just married. We went straight to Cyrene Mission and then from Cyrene Mission we

came back to Johannesburg. Spent some years in Johannesburg. Then he had an exhibition. That's when all the black artists came because they had no place to paint. So they came to our Jubilee Road home. . . . Dumile was one of our most famous. The Goya of the townships....Then we left for England, which was going to be Spain first, but we never stayed there. We went to St Ives. That's where Portway lived too.

VA: Did Douglas Portway influence Bill in any way?

FA: Bill in the beginning was influenced by him, but he very quickly moved away from that. When he was in St Ives it was very brief. There were only about eight paintings that were really influenced by him, but even they were not like him at all; they were different because even Portway said that himself. Then we went to Holland, but Bill painted and painted. He had a studio away from our apartment.

VA: Did you ever paint?

FA: I did. I was always painting; but when I met Bill I never painted because I had to organise. And I felt that he was the better one and there was no competition between us. I believed in his vision, what he wanted to do, very much. That's why I supported him so

wholeheartedly all the time. Here, when we started to teach . . .
did you want to know about that?

VA: Yes, you mentioned that you came back to South Africa after
Cyrene Mission.

FA: Yes, and then we went into Cecily Sash's house. That was where
he first started. Straight away when we came back, he went to
Cecily Sash.

VA: Was this after you came back from the mission, or after the
Netherlands?

FA: No, after England. To Cecily Sash's house in Randburg. It was a
big, lovely house. The biggest space we used for a studio, and
there he taught. Some white people didn't like the fact that there
were black people there, but then Bill said, "Well then you mustn't
come." Especially when there was a white model and a black man
or woman drawing that. It was absolutely scandalous. Bill used
to say to them, "Look, it's only another colour."

VA: Was this the beginning of the Bill Ainslie Studios?

FA: Yes, it was the Bill Ainslie Studios. And then we went to the old
Yugoslav embassy. That is where we lived for a couple of years.

Then they wanted to sell that property, so we moved to Oxford and Elfinwold, in a house there. Then they wanted to sell that house and Bill had seen this other house for a long time already standing empty. A lot of drug addicts were there. It belonged to the council, so Bill went to the City Council and asked if we could have this house for minimum rent. Some clerk said, "Mr Ainslie, this is not Paris, New York or fairy land, it's Johannesburg." Bill said, "Exactly, we need a community art centre here." The clerk said, "Why in this area." He said, "Well, there are a lot of cooks, gardeners that were already coming to Anerly Road and they all want to have a lesson. It is in a good access place and it is standing empty, totally dilapidated." There was a lot of talking and talking, till Bill finally went against all the wishes of the lawyers who got involved to help him, and he suddenly got it on minimum rent . . . So that is how the whole thing happened. And then it was the council, those people on the art council who said it should be an art foundation now that it was getting too big. And he handed it all over just like that. "We are having a council," he said. "I will be the director and you can be the administering director." For years I didn't get paid because there was not enough money, but Bill got paid and then together with his paintings we could manage. Bill also gave a vast amount of money away.

VA: They then decided to sell this place?

FA: Yes, finally but not for many years. The council said Bill must paint more and not have to concentrate on all the money. And also some of our friends were a bit worried because he was so generous with his own money and the result was that we had nothing left . . . Bill was planning in 1990 to have this exhibition in New York. He would be six months there. I wanted to stay behind, but he said, "No, you must be with me in America to prepare for the exhibition." The children said, "Daddy, are you now going to make money for the Ainslie family?" because they were quite worried. They were always involved with everything. He said yes, that is what he was going to do. His plan was to live six months in America and six months here.

VA: Working and exhibiting?

FA: Yes, and also working at the Arts Foundation, because he wanted it to survive. He said, "I will never give that up. I want to see to it that it stays the way I have set it up, for people who cannot afford much, and it is meant also for white people."

VA: Is it still running this way?

FA: Well, I had to fight like hell since Bill died. It has been very difficult for me, but now things are better.

VA: In what way?

FA: You had to fight for the principles.

VA: In other words, you still want to retain the original principles?

FA: Yes, very much so, because that was how it was set up. It can work. If other people could work it like that it can be done; the money can go around. The upkeep of the house too. It can go around, but you see, now salaries are so high and that is what eats up all the money.

VA: You have lecturers now?

FA: Well we always had...

VA: Back then did you charge anything for tuition?

FA: Yes, the white people mostly paid the fees. The money went around into salaries, upkeep etc.

VA: Were the salaries fairly minimal?

FA: Yes they were. But people could pay the rent out of it and put away some money. There were interesting lecturers. They all loved Bill because his seminars were so good. He really cared for the people. He nurtured them. The artists that were teaching here, he had great respect for them and they for him. They inspired him and vice versa.

VA: Can you tell me about the Triangle Workshop?

FA: Yes, Robert Loder and Anthony Caro started the Triangle Workshop in America. It is a very prestigious workshop.

VA: Does that still run?

FA: Yes, and when Anthony Caro came here to give a lecture at Wits, hardly any black people were there. He knew Bill and asked, "Why are there no black people?" Bill said, "Because they can't afford the fees." He asked Bill to lunch and Bill said he would like to start a Triangle Workshop or rather a workshop like the Triangle workshop in this country. And then Anthony, and especially Robert, gave money for it. He always had a little bit of money tucked away for Bill's projects . . . and David naturally helped. Bill was asked straight away to come to the workshop,

but he couldn't afford it at the time. We didn't have money for the trip because we had to live on a shoe string and for David, somehow, he could raise money, but not for himself . . . So then David went first.

VA: I know that David and Bill met up in 1974.

FA: I'm not sure. I think Bill and David may have met earlier.

VA: Just to recap, when he taught at Michaelhouse, did his teaching experiences affect him in any way? In other words, could it have influenced his decision to teach for himself and to no longer work for schools and organisations? Was it a negative or positive influence?

FA: He enjoyed Michaelhouse, but really loved teaching at Cyrene Mission because the people were hungry for knowledge. The rich, white kids were very different to teach, they were very difficult . . . He didn't just teach art; he was very versatile. He did eight years worth of degrees in six years. He was academically very good.

VA: Why then did he specifically start up his own school?

FA: Because he's an Ainslie I think. Ainslie's do not want to work for other people. They have a very free spirit . . . like his cousin who

told the police when they came onto his farm in the Eastern Cape, "If you come onto my farm, you ask . . ." He wanted to have nothing to do with the Apartheid system and to be told by anyone what to do or what to say.

VA: When he taught at King Edward . . . ?

FA: We just came back. He had to work. . . . That was organised very easily because he was an old boy there. He taught art and I think he did a couple of other subjects, and especially sport. He was a very good rugby player. He was captain of his rugby team at King Edward, captain of the cadets and cricket . . . But he felt that it had become too much. It was very boring at King Edward; and he tried to do exciting things for his students in order to stimulate them. . . . Then he decided he must get out of teaching altogether. But before he uttered it, he had been offered a contract at the Adler Fielding Gallery.

VA: Then did he start teaching in the 'houses' you mentioned earlier?

FA: Yes.

VA: Did he have a lot of people to begin with, or just a very few?

FA: First it was all the black people, as I told you. Then all the white people came and asked if they could come to life drawing.. . . .

VA: How did he come into contact with black people? Was it due to the work that he had done in the Liberal Party?

FA: No, not at all. It was because they liked his paintings. As artists they had a very fine eye but, because of the political system, the whole set-up, they were very poor. They would never have been poor if they were white people . . . or if they had already been in the situation we have now.

VA: After seeing his work exhibited, is that when they came?

FA: Yes, that's when they came and they also liked him very much. They asked him to their houses and Bill took up things with the police . . . He was always actively involved and so was I.

VA: The awards he won, the Art-SA-Today?

FA: Yes, the Cambridge Shirt Award, and also one in America that was never published . . . the charitable assistance fund in San Francisco . . . and again that money he didn't keep for himself.

VA: Do you have any slides of his award-winning works?

FA: I might have. We are busy going through a whole lot of stuff because of those exhibitions coming up. . . . most of his paintings went to Europe later on in his life. Several foundations in America bought his work. . . in several banks in America there are paintings of his.

INTERVIEW WITH FIEKE AINSLIE**9 AUGUST 1996**

VA: Why did Bill want to work at Michaelhouse after he completed university in 1959?

FA: He was offered a job there and he wanted to be at Michaelhouse, because at the time he was working for the Liberal Party and the farm and factory labourers. He was trying to get a better deal for farm labourers in the area.

VA: Was he politically active at the time?

FA: Yes, and at university as well. His whole life was spent working against Apartheid.

VA: Then his move to Michaelhouse was a matter of convenience?

FA: Yes. He worked for the Liberal Party and the farm labourers had come to him about their salaries or working conditions, I think. Bill was known there as he had made a lot of friends amongst the

black people. He had been working with them all the time while he was at varsity.

VA: What did he teach at Michaelhouse?

FA: He taught art and religion, I think.

VA: You mentioned you had a portrait done by him at that time.

FA: Yes, three to four months after I met him at university we made a date, and then he did my portrait. He was then at Michaelhouse.

VA: When did he leave Michaelhouse?

FA: I think it was at the end of 1959.

VA: Then you married at the end of 1960, shortly after which you went to Cyrene Mission. Why did you leave for Cyrene Mission?

FA: They [the police] were really after Bill. We had to get out of the country for a little while. All our post was suddenly opened, quite obviously, as we received empty envelopes. Bill was very outspoken, and so was I. At university he spoke to the people. It came from that. He also took a group of students from

Pietermaritzburg to see the Prime Minister - it was obvious he wanted the same rights for black students.

VA: In other words Bill's anti-Apartheid views were very public?

FA: Yes, Bill wanted to make an opposition, people speaking out.

VA: As you were saying, things were difficult for you and Bill?

FA: Yes, Bill had the Special Investigative Branch on his tail. We were being investigated by the Special Branch and it was best we left. He was interrogated and they also went through my room in a hotel leaving ,an enormous mess.

VA: Why did you choose Cyrene Mission?

FA: Anthony Channels, a friend of Bill's from varsity, was at Cyrene Mission at the time. He wanted someone to revive the Cyrene Mission art centre. He thought Bill suited this position.

VA: In other words, he provided an opportunity for you and Bill to leave?

FA: Yes, and others helped.

VA: You then left for Cyrene Mission?

FA: Yes, straight away after we were married in 1960.

VA: Why was Cyrene Mission established?

FA: It provided a very good education for black people in Zimbabwe. It was an English education.

VA: What did Bill teach there?

FA: Only art - painting, drawing and sculpture. I put the art centre on the tourist map so that tours which came to Zimbabwe would stop and have a look. I framed and mounted everything that was good of the students' work. It was a poor mission and we needed the money.

VA: Did you and Bill manage to revive the art centre?

FA: Yes.

VA: Were only black students taught there?

FA: Yes, very eminent people came out of that school. It also housed the first student uprising. They say the first student uprising in Africa was at Cyrene Mission.

VA: Was this during the time that Bill was there?

FA: Yes.

VA: What was the uprising about?

FA: Worms in the beans. When beans have been standing for a long time, they get worms. Let me explain. It was a great misunderstanding. Bill was called in in the early morning. The students were very angry and he was asked if he could calm them down, which he did. Bill suggested that the school did not call the police (they were going to call the police because students had thrown stones) as he believed he could calm the students down. After much talking, asking and answering of questions, the students calmed down. Then the police arrived. Bill was angry. He had managed to calm the students down and now the police were arresting them. He went with those that were arrested in order to get them out. Some of the students, who were very clever boys, were asked to leave the school. Luellen Namo was one. Luellen was a brilliant student, one of the best they ever had. Luellen's parents were scared. They had spent a lot of

money on him and if he was going to do things like that they weren't prepared to pay anymore. Bill met with his parents and asked if we could be allowed to pay for him. He also spoke to the school board to have him and the others reinstated. Which they did. Luellen was so incredibly clever . . . We sent him to study further.

VA: It was not a directly political uprising?

FA: No, it was not political; but it was not done in those days anywhere in Africa to protest like that. Those students had apparently been protesting to the cook about the worms in the food, but nobody had taken any notice. Warnings had already been given, because in the morning at the service the boys didn't want to pray.

VA: Did you leave Cyrene Mission after that?

FA: Yes, we were a year and a bit there and then Bill was offered a job at a school in Bulawayo, which he took because he felt he could not work with people like that at Cyrene Mission. If he pledges to the people that nothing should happen to them, then he didn't want to be undermined. He knew it was just a matter of time before it happened again. The Bulawayo job was a

government school - he took the position to finish off the year for an exhibition in South Africa.

VA: Was this his first exhibition?

FA: Yes.

VA: Was the Bulawayo school for black pupils?

FA: Yes, a black government school. No, I think there were black and white children there. He taught art and a couple of other subjects.

VA: Teaching black students at the Cyrene Mission, do you think that particularly inspired him?

FA: Oh yes, very much! He said it was the most rewarding teaching he had ever done. The people wanted to learn, they were hungry for knowledge, no matter what. He did art history with them and showed them slides of things - photographs and books. He never kept to the school hours. He enjoyed it thoroughly.

VA: After Bulawayo, at the end of that year, he went to King Edward in Johannesburg in 1963?

FA: Yes, his first exhibition was on 6 October, 1964 at Adler Fielding Gallery. He exhibited all the works he had done at Cyrene Mission and Bulawayo.

VA: Were these paintings figurative?

FA: Yes, figurative.

VA: He started at King Edward in 1963?

FA: Yes, he really painted his way out of that situation. He was coaching rugby . . . and taught painting. He did not find it a stimulating environment .

VA: Were their only white children?

FA: Yes, of course.

VA: So the reason he went to King Edward was because it was offered to him and it was convenient financially.

FA: Well, it was his old school and several places had offered him a position. He wanted to live in Johannesburg and not in Natal. It was too much of a backwater for an artist to live in Natal, although we loved Natal. We would have loved to have lived there. After

King Edward he decided he would never work for a government organisation again. He wanted to teach in the way he chose to, to whomever wanted to learn. He didn't want to be constricted in a superficial mould.

VA: Is that the reason he left King Edward?

FA: Well, he really didn't like teaching people who didn't want to learn. On the whole though, he felt it was too constricting for him. He decided that he wanted to start his own school and if he was going to teach, then it would be in his own school.

VA: Was he put off by the fact that he couldn't teach black students?

FA: Yes, he wanted to teach black and white, that was the absolute reason for it.

FA: The Arts Foundation was started because there was no art tuition. Black artists had no place to work, no money and also young aspiring artists had no place to go for training . . .

VA: What happened after King Edward?

FA: I think in 1965 he left King Edward. He also had a retainer from Adler Fielding Gallery. Bill brought in paintings and they were

selling them straight away. We were in a flat at the time, and then moved to a house, Jubilee Road house. A huge old house. That's where the whole teaching started, after he finished at King Edward . . . I met Dumile then. Bill was quite impressed with his work. He said that he could come and work there. He was very impressed with his drawings and Bill called him the Goya of the townships. He was one of those colourful people. He stayed with us. One morning he came, he had no pass. His hand was unbelievably damaged and Bill asked what had happened. He was in great pain and he said the police were after him and he tried to escape. Somebody closed the door on his hand and then the train left, so the police didn't get him. Bill said that he couldn't go on like that and that he must come and stay with us. We had a guest room with a bathroom downstairs. He could stay there and do his work. Then Bill got him a pass finally with the help of Judge Marais. He was one of those very verligte Afrikaners. They first endorsed him out of Johannesburg to the Transkei, where he had never been in his life, but then Judge Marais helped him with a pass. He got a pass and then wanted to leave the country. Marais helped him then again with a passport. We got him to England finally.

VA: He was one of many prominent black artists who came to Jubilee Road?

FA: Yes.

VA: Dumile came to Jubilee Road with other black artists, but were there white artists who attended as well?

FA: Yes, but first it was the black artists....It became quite expensive for us because he helped them with paint, as they had nothing. They would have lunch, we would drop them in the township, even though it was forbidden Then some white people said they would love to do some model drawing, and that's how it began. We had a huge hall. Classes in the evening and the morning. Women in those days in South Africa didn't work. There were a few who did, naturally, but those women didn't. They were very, very wealthy . . .

VA: Were you surveyed a lot by the government during that time?

FA: Yes, anything that happened in the country, we were investigated. They did the route, all the people on the list.

VA: Dumile came to know about Bill through Mrs. Hadden, and the others?

FA: Word of mouth, and Bill's exhibitions . . . they liked his work very much. This is how we met all the contacts. I can give you the names of the black artists, most of the old corps have come from Bill's school.

VA: At Jubilee Road Bill taught painting, drawing and sculpture?

FA: Yes, but not so much sculpture. There were very few people who wanted to do sculpture. Bill was very much about that people had to learn how to draw properly. You had to do the basics and then you're off because it opens up the eyes and it trains the eye to see. To get people's individuality out so that people don't copy, they listened to their inner voice. It was very interesting to teach those people, a marvelous atmosphere.

VA: You both then left South Africa in 1968. What were your reasons for leaving?

FA: We had saved some money to be able to go away for a year and we were actually going to Spain. Bill was a great admirer of Douglas Portway, but then Sophia [daughter] got very ill on our journey. Then we felt it was better for us to go to England, to St Ives, and he had an exhibition there.

VA: Why did he leave when his school seemed to be doing so well?

FA: Well, there were two things. Firstly, the government wanted to build an Afrikaans university and they really wanted to destroy the whole English heritage. There were old mining houses in Jubilee Road and the whole area was to be made flat . . . All the people had to leave. Secondly, it became a bit too hot with the government and Bill had to get away. We were advised to leave.

VA: So Bill admired Portway and went specifically to spend time with him in St. Ives. What influence did Portway have on Bill?

FA: Douglas had this incredible, well he never had a better exhibition I think than that first exhibition he got together in Spain, and it was shown in Pretoria in the art gallery. It was amazing. It was really like the heavens opening, magnificent, brilliant paintings. Bill, funnily enough, was doing something like that. After that he [Bill] wanted to paint at St. Ives. We got an apartment on the beach. We had one of those boat houses in town and that was his studio. He had a couple of exhibitions there... He was very well received by the English population.

VA: His paintings at this time, were they tending towards the more abstract?

FA: Yes, this was the beginning. That painting against the wall was done in St. Ives. He started painting abstractly in South Africa. As I mentioned, the Adler Fielding Gallery wanted to have an exhibition. He went with all his paintings . . . and Adler Fielding said to him, "We cannot have those paintings," as they were going towards the abstract. There were four paintings that were going that way, and Bill said, "These paintings have to go on exhibition or else I will have to break the contract, because I cannot be dictated to as to what to paint." Ironically, the first paintings sold were those four.

VA: What do you think turned him towards abstraction at this stage?

FA: Well, you grow as a human being. You can't do the same thing all the time. It was first figures in the landscape, and then it became figures, and secondly, he started seeing things in a more formal way.

VA: After he had spent time with Portway, was he encouraged or disillusioned?

FA: Every artist has ups and downs, and then you move into the next phase. Some artists turn out their whole lives the same things.

People were very upset when Bill went towards the abstract side
They wanted 'Ainslie paintings', which is very irritating.

VA: He had exhibitions overseas?

FA: Yes, he had several exhibitions at St. Ives. Dealers from London
came to the exhibitions at St. Ives. It was important because it
was an artist centre.

VA: Did you first go to Amsterdam after St. Ives?

FA: Yes, Bill had an exhibition in Amsterdam.

VA: Was there anything in particular that influenced him in
Amsterdam?

FA: No, not at all. We stayed with my family and they had hoped Bill
would stay. He painted portraits for Dutch millionaires. I have no
copies; they were lost by the South African Association of Arts.
The work he produced in Harlem and Bussen was exhibited in
Amsterdam in the Sphinx Gallery.

VA: Did it look similar to the St. Ives work?

FA: It was abstract and along the same lines. Going totally abstract.

VA: Was this his Namib period?

FA: Yes, it was at the same time. It always came back to him, the pictures of the desert and its open spaces.

VA: Then you returned to South Africa in 1971.

FA: Yes.

INTERVIEW WITH FIEKE AINSLIE

22 MARCH 1997

VA: As we discussed, Ainslie's paintings during the late 1950s and early 1960s were largely portraits and portrayals of monumental African figures. Why do you think he focused on African figures?

FA: Well, it's almost like a photographer. He wanted to document that time of suffering. It was the dark 60s. He wanted to document what was being ignored, like a lot of artists did.

VA: What made his portrayal of African people different to other white artists who were also depicting Africans at the time?

FA: Well that I can't tell you. They were paintings and not just photographs. They show a lot of suffering in the faces of the people, in the way they held their bodies and things like that. It went beyond the surface and into the people he saw. He used to make sketches continually at meetings and in the streets.

VA: Did he paint the same sort of thing at Cyrene Mission and Bulawayo? Did he also look at the people?

FA: Yes, all the time he was very much interested in people.

VA: And his portraits. Were they of African people working there?

FA: Yes, some of them like Wally Serote and Joe Mannana. There are some of Nelson Mandela out of his first marriage.

VA: Did he paint some of the students?

FA: Yes, he did. A lot of the students were very wealthy Northern Suburbs women and a lot of them would want their portraits done. He always said when he did a portrait, "You don't have to take it if you don't like it." He couldn't just do a pretty thing. He did what he saw in the character.

VA: Later, towards the time that you left for Europe in 1968, Bill's paintings showed less emphasis on the descriptive portrayal of the human figure and focused more on abstract, formal qualities like line, colour, tone etc. His paintings depicted vast plains of colour populated by shapes. He was now acknowledging the two-dimensionality of the canvas. Why did his painting style change?

FA: I think it is a natural thing. As a human being you grow. If you are a real painter you don't hold the growth back; you don't paint for a

market or make money spinners. If he did a money spinner where the people asked for a still life, he might do it reluctantly for the money, but he would do about ten before he was satisfied with one.

VA: Why did he discard the human figure that he had focused on for so long ?

FA: I think the human figure became abstract, like the landscape became colour.

VA: Did he find the representational stuff, the portraits, were getting a little bit too restricting?

FA: He actually loved to do portraits to get away from abstraction.

VA: So he carried on doing portraits right through?

FA: Yes, absolutely, all the time. He loved to do portraits of people.

VA: So if he needed a break from abstraction, he would turn to portraits?

FA: Yes. When he was very tired, he used to ask me to sit, or a friend. That's why there's one of Zinzi Mandela. There are two of her.

VA: At times you could say he almost fused the figure and landscape.

FA: Oh yes, you see it in his paintings.

VA: Did he have a particular love of African landscapes?

FA: Yes, he loved Africa. He always said he was an African and his friends used to laugh. They said, "But you are so white, the whitest whiteman." He said, "Yes, but my heart is black."

VA: What was he looking for in his paintings?

FA: Well, he was really exploring shapes and colour. He was obsessed with colour; he loved colour.

VA: In 1968 you went abroad. The paintings he did and exhibited abroad, were they mostly abstract and in the same vein as the one on your wall?

FA: Yes, abstract as in something emerging; not totally abstract, like landscapes.

VA: He also did portraits?

FA: Yes, portraits were always done - of the family and in the Netherlands.

VA: After seeing Portway, did he feel that he had learnt something. In what way had Portway influenced his painting?

FA: Yes, he did gain an enormous amount. He was a great admirer of Portway, but he didn't want to be like Portway. In St Ives already he started moving away from that type of painting, the minimum painting and that sort of thing. He might have been inspired by Portway, but he took it further. They called his paintings lyrical and intellectual.

VA: So he started moving away from these flat paintings to more textured works?

FA: Yes, he was always looking at medium, and when the acrylic and gel came out . . .

VA: Hadn't he used acrylic and gel?

FA: No, he couldn't use it; it didn't exist in those days. He came properly into contact with acrylic in America when he went to the Triangle Workshop. This was in the 1980's.

VA: So this is where his acrylic work came from?

FA: Well he had been trying already with this material [he had used acrylic earlier, but it was not very good quality]. He would always try materials out. He would put it in the bright sun, but then it started to crackle. It wasn't very good.

VA: His earlier works, were they all in oils?

FA: Yes, but in that one you can see he is already trying to build the paint up.

VA: You returned to South Africa in 1971 and Bill continued to paint in this manner, which is referred to by some as his Namib paintings. Is this true?

FA: He started working in a textured manner in acrylic. . . He was given golden paints. They were very good.

VA: So when he returned he had started in acrylic?

FA: Well , he had bought better acrylics in the Netherlands. You still couldn't use the gel properly there. It was still very runny stuff, a bit like wallpaper glue.

VA: Acrylics then advanced?

FA: Yes, it allowed a lot more freedom. Then he started to work on the floor flat and not on the easel anymore.

VA: When was this?

FA: 1984 or 1985.

VA: Then he started to work with better paints?

FA: Yes.

VA: For the most part of the 1970s and 80s Ainslie did not produce much work. Then came his last paintings at Pachipamwe. Would you regard this as being true?

FA: He did produce a lot of work, but he was also very busy with community work.

VA: So he didn't produce as much as he possibly could have?

FA: Yes, and that's when I started to take over, when we came back.

VA: Did he have a barren period between 1977 and 1986?

FA: No, Bill never had a barren period. He might go smaller in trying things out, but he was always working. He liked to do very big paintings; he loved that. He did monumental paintings already in the Netherlands.

VA: So he was still painting, but he didn't have as much time as he would have liked?

FA: Yes.

VA: The paintings he did at Pachipamwe, were they very different from what he had done before?

FA: The last paintings. When he left he actually didn't want to go, but he was asked by Robert Loder to go once more to show them what a workshop was like. Bill was always painting, and this time he never came out of his studio. He phoned me and said, "I'm opening up, I'm opening all my paintings up." Those [looking at paintings on the wall] are more condensed, so he opened up space.

VA: Is that where you can still see the ground, whereas those paintings are completely covered?

FA: Yes, David Koloane said he was just painting and painting. This time he didn't give a lot of lectures and show them other paintings. He was continually in his studio.

VA: What had he achieved in these works that he had not achieved before?

FA: When he left he said, "I really have a hell of a lot of painting to do and I hope people don't come to disturb me all the time." So I said, "Well, lock your door and if you don't have to go in for lunch, if you can get something, take it to your studio."

VA: His paintings were then opening up and he was sweeping clean in a sense?

FA: Yes. He was very happy because he was doing good stuff. That's what he said.

VA: What do you think Ainslie was looking for in his art? Do you think he achieved this before he died?

FA: That I don't know. That is very difficult. With painting you sit in front of an empty canvas and sometimes something suddenly comes. It's something like making magic. Sometimes you can visualise what you want to do, but often a painting can start from one little spot or line.

VA: Would you say his paintings were intuitive?

FA: Yes.

VA: What came from within spilled onto the canvas?

FA: Yes, and undisturbed. It's not like knitting a sock. People think that when you paint they can come and chat to you. It is not so. It needs intense concentration. It breaks the whole spell.

VA: Did he try to finish paintings in one long sitting?

FA: No, he never tried exactly to finish. Some of the paintings you see here took two to three years. Suddenly they were taken off the wall again and painted on. There was perhaps an area that wasn't satisfying. Sometimes a whole new painting came out. That painting I saved [on the wall]. Sometimes I would put them away. I was frightened he might do it again. He would say, "Where is the painting?" and I would say I just cleared up a bit and that I would

have to look later. Then he sometimes forgot about it. Then I would say after about two to three months, "Oh! I found it."

VA: Do you think he achieved what he wanted to before he died?

FA: Oh yes, very definitely. The paintings speak for themselves, and the two phone calls I got during that time, they were incredibly happy.

VA: If he had continued to live, what direction do you think his paintings would have taken?

FA: With Bill you could never be sure because Bill was never a repeater. I think as a human being you keep on growing and growing.

VA: So his way of working would have changed?

FA: Yes, I think he would have gone on in this particular way for a year or two, and then out of that some new thing would grow.

VA: While he was painting abstracts, he was still doing portraits?

FA: Yes, he painted two portraits at Cyrene Mission - of two people . .

VA: During the 80's, did he produce any portraits?

FA: Always, from the time I've known him.

VA: They developed with his abstract interest in that they showed more expressive mark making, but you could still see who the person was?

FA: Yes.

VA: When did Bill go to the Triangle Workshops?

FA: In 1984 or 1995 I think. He went three times.

VA: When and why did he get the idea for initiating the Thupelo Workshop?

FA: He always had that passion and he told Robert Loder and Sir Anthony Caro that he would like to have a workshop in Africa. He said you will see [already in the 60s] that one day the whole of the world would look at Africa for paintings and not only Paris and New York. And that is what is happening now. He thought it would be marvellous to set up workshops right through Africa. It was a dream of his for years, as long as I have known him. People

thought it was a very impractical thing to do, that people from all parts of the world could learn from one another, especially from Africa.... Then when the people here said what a ridiculous thing to do, they said, to make black artists paint abstractly. They were very patronising, those people. Bill got very angry and said one doesn't make any artist do what you want, but every artist must come into contact with all sorts of things, and besides, African art has always been abstracted. That's where it comes from.

VA: How many Thupelo Workshops did he attend?

FA: He helped to initiate them, and some of them were held here if there wasn't enough money, because people had to eat. Aida and I once did the cooking for thirty people for fourteen days.

VA: Thupelo dwindled for a couple of years. Why?

FA: That was only because somebody was running it in an extraordinary manner. They had three people working there on two computers. Those workshops in the rest of the world, a group of people came together. They do it voluntarily and they write out to all over the world to particular artists to invite them to apply, and its just for three months that these people are extraordinarily busy, and for the rest not. It's only in South Africa that it became such an expensive production. They should have closed down at

that particular time, when they realised they were running out of money; but that didn't happen in opposition to the rest of the board.

VA: Was Bill on the board?

FA: Initially yes. Bill liked to initiate things.

VA: Did he initiate any other workshops in Africa?

FA: He helped to set up with Robert Loder the Pachipamwe and the Thapong.

VA: Does Thupelo exist today?

FA: Yes. At first Sweden wouldn't give any more money for it. Finally I tried to persuade my niece, Jill Trappler, with a group of people in the Cape to try to start it again. I said, "You can do it on a shoe string and show them that you can do it with much less money." Sweden and Germany came to have a look. They were very impressed. Next year they got a little more and now it is off the ground. We have regional workshops. Sophia organises one here. People just come from all over. She and a group of people send slides to Cape Town of people they think are very talented. Then in Cape Town is the main one.

VA: Was one held at Cape Town last year?

FA: Yes, it is held every year. It has now gone from strength to strength and people from there have also gone to Triangle. Jill and a couple of other people run the Cape Town one.

INTERVIEW WITH CATHY BRUBECK

5 JULY 1996

VA: What subjects in particular did he study at university?

CB: Philosophy, then English. He did a year of Psychology. Philosophy was his other major. Fine Art subjects; but the best would be to get a transcript from the Pietermaritzburg campus. We both studied a subject that looked at different religions. Bill leaned towards the spiritual - religion and its related philosophy. In his mind, art had all those things in it. That would also be his main thrust as a teacher - that art is a holistic experience and very disciplined. He was very influenced by [I think this was something Picasso said] "art is a war on chaos". He very much believed that, expanded that and taught that. Art was a way to order your whole life, vision, society. A very civilising process in a very holistic way. I think that probably more than wanting to be a teacher in the sense of a school teacher, he taught more because he felt that painters and people who were interested in art needed to feel the importance of art rather than being strictly an art teacher. I think really, like most artists, he would have preferred to paint all the time. But as the years passed by, I do think he found fulfilment in teaching. He really liked being with people. He wasn't an artist

who would hide away in the attic and I think the education part of it fulfilled that as well.

VA: The varsity at that time [1950 - 60], did it expose its students to overseas movements? Was this part of the programme?

CB: Yes, very much so. Bill's main teachers at university were Jack and Jane Heath, and they were both English; so their knowledge and experience came from Europe. That and the Fine Art Department was very strong on what was going on in the rest of the world. You got a fairly traditional History of Art course. I would say perhaps the most modern figures in that time were Cezanne, Picasso, Baroque . . . Post Expressionism etc.

VA: Would you say that during that time one could find traces of Cezanne and Picasso in his work?

CB: Yes, Bill was a student leader; president of the SRC, a member of the Liberal Party. I influenced that to some degree. In those days he and I used to go down to the townships. He was most certainly influenced in the classical tradition and certainly conscious of his environment. I remember one time, for a white election we, were putting people on the voters' role, working for various Liberal Party people. If we were going out in the country somewhere he would be saying, "Oh well, that is so South African", as he was

picking up things around him. Also, he had the background of his family coming from the Eastern Cape, a farming background. He was very conscious of the beauty of South Africa. This would always be introduced into his painting with that kind of European style.

VA: His farming background, in what way did that come through, i.e. in that he painted landscapes?

CB: No, I don't think you can pinpoint it so specifically because it's part of the holistic thing, where a person must just be part of his environment, but also private at the same time. Where farming comes into it is that Bill was not what you might call your stereotypical painter - fragile, over sensitive, having feminine characteristics. Bill was a very regular guy. He played rugby for his school. This is what was very interesting about him. Again into this holistic thing - he played first team rugby, he was a boxer, a brave person . . . a very masculine type man. He fell into the male stereotype and yet not. This is why he was such a good leader. Agricultural students etc., everybody could respect him because he had a touch of everything. This is where I would say the farming gave him the strength and the survival to drive along the lonely path against Apartheid. He had a wide vision of life. He appealed to a lot of people and excelled as a teacher. He did not have a narrow outlook.

VA: What subject matter did he paint predominantly [1950 - 60]?

CB: A lot of African people. Everyday scenes. People on park benches, markets as you see in this one [looking at a picture] - people working. A lot of portraits.

VA: Were the portraits directed by people he knew who asked for them?

CB: I think there were a few things. He felt that that was a good way to really improve your drawing, to be as accurate as possible. It was a discipline and you really did look for a likeness, a honing of skills. He was interested in people and he wanted to see if the painting revealed something about them. Plus I think there was a certain amount of encouragement in the department to do that as well. It was an accessible subject to paint.

VA: Did he make social comments through his work? I've heard them being described as melancholic.

CB: I wouldn't say that that was the right word. I would rather say he was saying, "Look at this, we have a whole lot of people in this country who are having a hard time." I think it was a bit more missionary, kind of saying that the conditions around here aren't

so good. The sadness, of course, would come through the painting. His paintings drew the viewer to the plight of the people. To educate white South Africans. He was a very idealistic person and I think that an idealistic person often has that teaching - educating side to them.

VA: Do you know of any lecturer at the time who knew him or taught him who may be able to give me a more in-depth idea of the political and educational programme of the varsity?

CB: Lorain van de Riet, now Lorain Raab, a contemporary in the Fine Art Department, had the same lecturers as Bill. She was, I think, a year ahead. Lettie Gardner, younger than Bill. She went to Johannesburg subsequently and she taught at the Art Foundation. And Mike Gardner was a board member of the foundation. It's important to see him [Bill] as someone involved in politics - student politics and sport. His family came from the Eastern Cape, but he really grew up in Benoni. He went to King Edward. He was head boy there. He was very much a leader and natural teacher. He was editor of the student newspaper NUX. They have some of his cartoons. He used to like doing cartoons, again often with a political theme or slant.

VA: Selby Mvusi, it is mentioned by Pat Williams, was the first person to make Bill aware of the plight of black South Africans. To quote: 'While at University Bill met black artist Selby Mvusi. "It was my first contact with a black artist and my first liberal education as a white South African", Bill told me. "Selby alerted me to the needs of the country. He was the first person to teach me about the situation here, and through him I began to see the demand for the development of black art. The work I have done in my life was a consequence of the formative period I spent with him."....'

CB: That refers more to the position of the black artist, because long before he met Selby he was politically involved and aware of South Africa generally. I think that that quote means more that there were black artists and what their positions could be.

VA: I don't know how Selby fits into the whole picture.

CB: He didn't spend that much time with Selby. We met Selby together because Selby was a great friend of another artist who used to teach at Tech, Harold Strachan.

VA: Was he a student at the varsity?

CB: No, we met Selby because we had come down to Durban to see Harold. Harold was politically involved. We didn't see Selby very much. What she perhaps is meaning to say is that Selby revealed to Bill what it is to be a black South African artist. Before Selby he was already in the Liberal Party. The Liberal Party then had very much the programme that the ANC has now.

VA: When did you first enter the Liberal Party? I know that he was there from 1952 and you only met up with him in 1955. Did he only start once he had met you?

CB: Yes, at about 1956. It was the year of the Treason Trial, after the Freedom Charter. He is two years older than me. He was in 3rd year in 1955. I think in 1953 was his 1st year. We started going out seriously in 1956.

VA: What political things did he get up to?

CB: We would go and try to get people to join the Liberal Party and to look at South Africa in a different way - spread Liberal Party ideals throughout black and white South Africa. We would go to factory meetings with factory workers. We were involved in protests over academic freedom.

VA: Was there a title for the political student group on campus?

CB: NUSAS's Student Relations. There were always debates on campus as to whether black students should have the vote. The Liberal Party was a forerunner of the Progressive Party and Democratic Party, I actually worked there most of the time and became a national secretary. We wrote letters to the paper. We were very radical for the time. Our friends were Africans and Indians. Members of the ANC were banned back then. It was very difficult to be politically active in those days. We were very criticised by whites for hanging around with black people and yet Bill was always somehow able to appeal to people. People who were really quite racist.

VA: Did he have an Afrikaans upbringing?

CB: No, the Ainslie name is English . . . Scottish, and his family are related to the Pringles.

VA: Does he have any relations?

CB: Yes, two sisters, one in the Midlands in Natal - Jean Bailey. His niece, Jill Bailey, was very influenced by Bill. His other sister is Pam.

VA: Did he make any direct political statements?

CB: Yes, because he wrote articles, very political statements.

VA: Where would I find these articles?

CB: In NUX. He was editor of the paper. For years he was involved in setting up FUBA. His paintings, I would say, are kind of political statements. Not in that they are obvious ones, but if you think of for years and years in South Africa many people who painted Africans did it in a very sentimental, you know, smoking-the-pipe manner. This very sort of romantic picture. Whereas Bill's paintings weren't like that at all, if that in itself is a statement. They were much more gritty. If somebody had a tattered coat, it would look as such; it wouldn't be romanticised. His attitude was that these people were like anyone else, whereas many white painters in South Africa had idealised the 'noble savage' as a tourist attraction.

VA: Was there anyone else he was influenced by?

CB: Well, painters weren't his only heroes. He would go through stages. He was interested in people who were great thinkers, great people, in the sense that they did something very special.

Leaders, perhaps, in a spiritual sense; not necessarily politically.

Though we both loved Chief Luthuli, Ghandi and Thomas Murtin.

There was a background of sufism to all this concern of how to live the good life, what it was to be a good person. His paintings included all these things.

INTERVIEW WITH RICKY BURNETT

22 MARCH 1996

VA: What was your impression or understanding of his teaching philosophy?

RB: I can give you some clues. Bill was a very thoughtful man, and to sort of toss off a few ideas, well what at the end of the day could sound like cliches, is not really going to do justice to it. But let me give you some idea. Some of the clues are to do with what he said and did, and some are to do with what he was reading, which he used as a kind of inspirational material. Broadly speaking, temperamentally he was a fairly spiritually alert man. He had an ongoing religious consciousness that he lived by . . . Very few people in my experience of the world actually engaged in serious conversation the way Bill did; he would put his whole heart and soul into conversation. He didn't toss things off easily. The people who came his way were therefore people that he took seriously, and he took seriously people who wanted to paint . . . We all have in our make-up certain fundamentals that you hang on to and you don't sort of question, and one of Bill's was to take people seriously, and the other was to take seriously the idea of painting. The idea of art, perhaps, was slightly less of an issue in that he

didn't find himself excluding people who weren't going to make art, but he did find himself embracing people who wanted to come close to painting. By this I mean he was concerned with the process of arriving at an image and of dealing with the experience of articulating your world. Certain ideas he would keep referring to were Kandinsky's notion of inner necessity, that you've got to find your own way. He was influenced by certain American painters in the 1950's and 60's, especially those who fell under the orbit of Clement Greenberg's writing . . . It was not just a question of, if you want, inner necessity must drive you and history has nothing to teach; it was a question of the ongoing dialogue between the two. He was called at one point by Joseph Boyes in conversation "a radical traditionalist", and I think he was strangely pleased with that view. He was not particularly dismissive of style, but I think he was, as I am and others who have certain affections for the difficulties of painting, kind of hard to convince when he wasn't looking at painting. I think that conceptual art was not what he was able to relate to as well as he was able to relate to painting. The difficulties of painting were the things that dogged him for a very long time. For most of the time that I knew him he really worked on the same batch of canvases over and over again, never being able to draw them to any conclusion, always thinking and working on the belief that to achieve certain things he must push it on . . . He would talk himself into a situation of being extremely hard to please, which

meant he never stopped working on the same paintings and they got thicker and thicker. There could well have been hundreds of paintings on the one canvas.

VA: So it's difficult to give a year to a work?

RB: No, you could say when he started it and ended it maybe. Also the teaching that he did and the painting that he did are locked in together. I don't think that it is possible to separate the two attitudes.

VA: This is where I have been confused in speaking to others. How are they locked in together?

RB: He [Bill] worked with people he was teaching in such a way that they were drawn into the process of exploring their sensations through the material, of questioning the processes they are in and learning to be delighted by things that are delightful, but at the same time not to accept too easily. Querying what about this, what about that, it is not finished, but always from the position of the person's inner necessity; trying to read the logic of what it was that was driving them. This puts a lot of weight on interiority of course. A hell of a lot of weight on the view that somewhere inside you is a kernel of eternal and everlasting truth and all you have to do is play it out and, I think that that is not necessarily, as

a pedagogical technique, all that reliable all the time. And certainly in his own painting it was what locked him into being unable to identify an unfinished painting for a long time...On a more social level Bill was a very committed anti-Apartheid person. The school that he developed, in so far as school is the right word, was always firmly developed on the idea that there were people who weren't accommodated by the orthodox or given institutions in society. Here they could find some kind of place. That also meant that, given the art education for blacks in this country, if it existed at all, black people who are significant now, Pat Mautloa, David Koloane, Lucky Sibiya, Dumile at different points had formed contact with him. He was a reference point for many black artists... The idea of humanising, if you like, making available a cultural activity, whether it be a doctor in search of some kind of recreational therapy, or whether it be a sort of sixteen year old school drop out high on dope, or an urgent black guy from Soweto, or a gardener from a house next door or whatever, they were all able to find some kind of reference under [him].

VA: His criteria then for accepting students was mostly that they wanted to paint?

RB: Yes.

VA: It was mentioned to me that he had three roles in his: life that of teacher, painter, political activist. But from what you have said, they are very much linked.

RB: Well, I don't believe they are separate. You can tease them out from one another and you can tease them out so far that they lost contact. Then you would have made a mistake. I think he was somebody . . . well I have separate lives: I have a son and I have a business, but they are part of the same life. I seriously believe that Bill's painting and his politics and his teaching are all locked in together. It's been assumed, well it's been asserted, in fact, more than assumed by some that his painting was not attached to his politics because it didn't form any part of a body called Protest Art. It was abstract, American, and therefore he was influenced by some sort of American imperialist agenda. To my mind those are banal accusations as to not merit any real critique in except to go so far as to say that the content of a work of art is not the story that it tells; it's the story that it tells about attitudes to life and Bill's attitude to life. In his paintings is his same attitude to life as in politics - about search, about dignity, about history, about acceptability. Bill was simply not a fascist, and because as a psycho-dynamic structure, if you like, was not anally retentive; he was exploratory, he was looking. He took sensations, vision, imagination and intelligence seriously, wherever they may arise.

That in a sense is a political assertion of some subtlety, if you ask me.

VA: How did you get involved with Bill Ainslie?

RB: I had spent many years trying different things at University and I sort of got it in my head that this [when looking at Cezanne] was something I needed to know more about, and a friend of mine had a cousin living in Cape Town at the time who had something he wanted to give to Bill. This person was asked to send it around and I went along for the drive, walked in and saw these people painting and I had a chat to Bill and he said, "Well come back and see me this evening", and I did. We had a long talk about all sorts of things and he said, "Well come tomorrow", and I did.

VA: Did you ask to paint there?

RB: Yes, within six to eight months I was actually helping to teach drawing. It was a very good time for me and for many other people. I think adventures like this have high points and one always judges these high points in terms of one's own attachment. There was a time when there were some really quite sharp and intelligent people around. It wasn't in structure a sort of suburban anomaly; it was more than that. It was a real sort of think-tank situation. And that, of course, had something to do with the quality

of the people involved, and the quality of the people involved had a lot to do with Bill's magnetism.

VA: How long were you there?

RB: About eight or nine years.

VA: Did Bill change in his outlook at all during the time that you were with him?

RB: I think that his convictions deepened. I think the original impulses acquired more rationale. We were both very interested in Jung, for example, and . . . at a certain point he became very interested in Sufism.

VA: What is Sufism?

RB: It is, I suppose, a sort of subtext of Islam. It's a kind of Middle Eastern mysticism. It's not particularly about religion; it's more about vision, ethics, insight and wisdom and that sort of thing . . . He liked to maintain, I think, a sense of the personal and there are certain things that are corner stones: one is the personal . . . In a way he always, I think, had this nagging suspicion that good art, especially good painting, was a kind of transcendent experience - that it was always greater than what you were able to say about it.

And it was what you could see, that what was left over after you said everything, that was actually what mattered. And there is a kind of, a sense of the mystic in that, a sense of the ineffable, a sense of the transcendent, a sense of the 'Oh Wow' that somehow transports one to a higher level of consciousness. I think his view was that you couldn't think yourself into that result. In a sense you had to work rather like a magician, and a Zen monk . . . You had to sort of take your chances. You required poise in order to pull it off. Zen was something he was interested in as well....There was a mystical element, and I'm using the word in a very general sense, to imply an attachment to the sort of importance of otherness rather than any kind of fey thing. We are talking about somebody who is working with hard stuff all the time. In a way, if you look at his paintings . . . they became crusty, heavy and thick and very material. In other words, the more he was looking to find the answer in a process without thinking himself into an answer, the more he was trying to find it in the paint, so to speak. The heavier the object became, the more material it became. I think quite a lot of the time and energy given to teaching did frustrate him. And he didn't paint as much as he should have.

VA: He appears to have given a lot in that he inspired people around him; but what did he get in turn from the people around him?

RB: I think Bill was a very sociable person. He was not a hermit by any stretch of the imagination, and he enjoyed and thrived off the dialogue and the contact and serious conversation. He needed it. There were times when you would walk into his studio and he was painting and he would engage you, actually make you talk to him. He would want to. This is not to say he didn't sometimes want privacy, but the fact is, I think, when you are engaged with challenging people, you discover what you think. He enjoyed the contact with all the people he was teaching because he took them seriously as persons. You could argue that perhaps from time to time it became almost psycho-analytic in quality, perhaps too much in that what does so and so need, is she feeling this, and why. But it was predicated on the sense of trying to deal with the personal factors seriously. He also, of course, made money out of it. It was a way in which he could find time to paint and give himself a sense of purpose and give himself this contact, and make a living and give himself somewhere to live. It was a very clever solution to a number of problems. It's not so much a thing of giving a lot to other people; he created a context in which it could work.

VA: He probably would have wanted to teach less.

RB: Certainly as time went by he wanted to teach less.

VA: Now to ask about David Koloane. In the last few years of Bill's life, was David still working quite closely with Bill?

RB: I'm not too sure what is implied by that. I think they had a friendship relationship. David came to the Foundation at a certain point . . . well it wasn't called the Foundation then. In fact, I was one of the teachers at the time when he came and David had come and gone. I don't know if he has ever worked there. I don't think they ever worked together in a kind of shared space or anything like that. One of the things you might think about looking at are the Thupelo Workshops or the Pachipamwe Workshop. They were not unrelated to what Bill was doing all the time and were the conjunction of what we were doing in Saxonwold and what these workshops then later did. I left round about the time the workshop thing started. I never got involved in the workshop thing. But the two together [David and Bill] I think have had quite a significant impact on, certainly, black painting.

VA: In what way?

RB: Have a look at that catalogue...

VA: The 'Persons and Pictures'?

RB: Yes. Read the section there on David by Ivor Powell; that kind of sums it up. It will give you a clue as to what it's all about.

INTERVIEW WITH RICKY BURNETT**24 MARCH 1997**

VA: During the late 1950s and early 1960s Ainslie's painting could be identified by his portraits and his characteristic portrayal of monumental African figures.

RB: Yes I suppose so.

VA: In what way, if any, are these paintings (particularly those portraying African figures) set apart from those produced by white artists who were also painting African figures at the time?

RB: I'm not sure. I think stylistically, if you know what his work looks like, I think you can spot it. There was a quality to his figures and portraits that I always felt was one of his weakest attributes. He had a way of over-sentimentalising the eyes: huge, staring, big innocent eyes that didn't do justice to the other kinds of levels of intelligence that he brought to bear on the work. It was a retrogressive sort of sentimentality and I think that something of the idea of the big noble peasant was underlying the motive behind these early figurative paintings. I don't know, or should I

say there is no-one coming to mind who I can think of who did that sort of thing actually.

VA: I think what I am really getting at is that when I spoke to Cathy Brubeck (she knew him from varsity) she told me, in answering a similar question, that other artists who were working at the time were portraying African people in a sort of 'sentimental, noble savage way'. Do you think he did so?

RB: Yes, I think that - well this is simply my view, I haven't seen a lot of his work from that period - but I think he might have liked to think that he wasn't. And loyal friends might like to think that he wasn't. But I actually think that he was. I think that if you go and look at the paintings, and certainly from this distance I don't think they managed to escape it at all.

VA: In your view, why do you think Ainslie focused on the African figure?

RB: Well, you know, I didn't know him at the time, so I can only guess. I think it was because he was a man of conscience and he felt drawn to trying to deal in some way and depict in some way the oppressed, I suppose.

VA: Would you agree that it was his way of putting into public view something that was being ignored?

RB: Yes, but you know, for that argument to hold water you would have to look at how many times he exhibited his paintings and just how declamatory and forceful the images were about oppression. I'm not sure if that is actually the case. Without wanting to be disloyal, I think one can too easily over-stress these factors. It's often maintained that not many white artists dealt with the experiences of blacks and I'm not even sure if that is true. If you scan South African art history from Thomas Bains onwards, the black exotic, or the black noble or the black oppressed etc. actually is more, I think - and this is off the top of my head here and perhaps is worth analysing - I think they are very well-represented up until the 1970s and 80s, when there is a slight shift and blacks start to articulate their own sense of things and white artists tend not to use blacks in their imagery to the same extent, whereas into the 60s it was possible for Skotnes, for example, to develop a style of cutting that is Afrocentric . . . You would have to sit down and try and quantify an opinion like that. It's only an opinion, but we often have a rather skewed opinion of our own history.

VA: In a 1965 Adler Fielding Gallery exhibition invitation Ainslie's paintings were described as "indigenous to this country". Would you consider this an apt description? If so, why?

RB: The word indigenous is a charged and imprecise one. Biologically, in terms of the way the flora and fauna of any particular region are discussed. Somehow the fact that something inhabits or colonises territory for a period of time becomes indigenous and typical to a space. But how do you actually, in a country where you have a high degree of immigrants in a short period of time . . . I mean the concept of indigenous is nonsense. Could those paintings have been painted anywhere else? Well, they weren't. It's a hard one to deal with - the idea of the indigenous I think.

VA: It's something you have to be careful with. In other words, one must be careful not to use the term too loosely.

RB: Yes, I think it is much easier to identify work which is not place specific. I mean, it's much easier to identify work which isn't indigenous than work which is. But it is slightly less hypothetical; one has a sense of what is easily exportable or what is international, or what has, in a sense, a kind of blandness that says it doesn't belong any place. Even now in a world of internets and international galleries and artists living in either New York or

Berlin and moving around the European Union, you can still tell a German from an American. So I don't know. But I think it's very difficult in this country, especially amongst white artists, to think of the indigenous. I may be contradicting myself when I say it's possible to identify a German from an American, in which case there is something indigenous about being German. Is that an indigenous quality? I don't . . . The thing is that it's hypothetical because in order to identify a particular artefact or cultural product as particularly indigenous, you have to be able to say that it simply, under no circumstances, could have been done anywhere else, and I don't know how you do that.

VA: Do you know if he continued to work in this manner at Cyrene Mission and Bulawayo?

RB: Yes, that's my impression.

VA: By the early 1970s Ainslie had discarded the figure to a large extent, producing a number of paintings that consisted of vast open plains of colour populated by various shapes. These paintings had very little descriptive reference to anything other than the vast open plains of the African landscape. Often referred to as his Namib paintings, they have a somewhat atmospheric quality.

RB: Yes, Interestingly enough, Bill's abstract paintings don't just arrive out of the blue or Namibia either. You know he spent a lot of time at St Ives - a year or two - which was sort of a home for a form of early British abstract painting.

VA: Yes, he went and saw Douglas Portway.

RB: There was a St Ives school of people, I think, Peter Lanyon and Patrick Herron. Sometime prior to that, if I remember correctly, I think Ben Nicholson was associated with St Ives. But there was a school of British abstract painting that he got to know and he also got to know, as you will see, Douglas Portway. Portway's work influenced him in particular, Portway's flat, modulated surfaces. And I think there was a kind of meditative quality to Portway's work. The idea of the enigmatic side, the mysterious still space, that appealed to Bill's spirituality.

VA: What I find confusing is: I had the impression that after he had been to Portway he started developing in this direction, but others have suggested that he was already working in that way before he went.

RB: Yes, I think that's true.

VA: Did he pick it up on his own, perhaps, from what he read? I have no grounding there. I have no idea how it came about.

RB: I don't know if anyone's life or anyone's biography is made up of easy before and afters. Certainly I saw a painting, I have forgotten who owns it now - Bill once told me it was the first abstract painting he had ever done. It was a small painting of lots of colour - subdued brownish sort of colour, very much like the colour he was using in his sort of peasant scapes, if you like, as distinct from landscapes. It looked much more to me that Paul Klee was an influence on that, but I think he was obviously interested in the challenges of abstraction such that, whatever influence Portway had on him, he was right for. One doesn't pick up influences unless you have done a bit of internal preparation anyway.

VA: Why was he turning towards abstractions and to your mind, what was he trying to explore?

RB: You know he enjoyed what he called the sort of open-ended nature of abstract painting. It was so open for him at a certain point that he found it hard to close any paintings off. But I think his interest in a sort of oriental metaphysics, which went on for many years, culminating in an interest in Sufism, for example, led him away from things that were too literal, too narrative and too

descriptive to things which were open-ended, suggestive, ambiguous and non-verbal, and I think abstract painting for him was a route whereby that quality of his temperament could find expression.

VA: So if one was to say what he was exploring in his paintings, it would be those qualities? And intuition? Would you say that?

RB: Yes, I think that's one element of it. It stays with the sort of attachment to the landscape in the early days. You know, in his Amsterdam period after St Ives he tries to work with calligraphic marks on the surface, rather like bushman paintings on a wall. He tries to create that wall surface and ritual marks. And then, of course, the next thing is the vast sort of full emptiness, if you like, of the desert - the sheets of colour; and it's later then that he leaves reference to nature behind.

VA: This is his later work, particularly what are called his 'last paintings'?

RB: Yes, although in the most successful of all of them there is still a sense of a burst of natural light. They seem to me to work at their best when there is an element of nature in them . . . but that's by the by.

VA: Did he continue to paint figurative work in the way of portraits?

RB: Yes, mostly drawing and yes, mostly portraits.

VA: Why?

RB: One of the things he did was that he liked sitting, talking to people in his studio. He would get people to sit down and talk to them. And he enjoyed his portraits. He did a few paintings during that time, one of Lynda Ballen and one of Fieke, which went on and on. But not with any great regularity or consistency,

VA: Fieke intimated he would do portraits to relax himself from abstraction. Would you agree?

RB: Yes, I think that's true.

VA: It would seem that Ainslie had always been concerned with the human condition. Would one be correct in saying that previously he had portrayed the physical, and to some extent, the spiritual; now he was discarding the physical and looking towards an inner spiritual essence of man? Would that be relevant?

RB: Yes, I suppose it would. But those are terrible generalisations. But in so far as they are generalisations they have some applicability. The question is when you invoke a phrase like 'the human condition' - what is the human condition, and what about it? What was his take on it?

VA: Is it true to say that in the latter part of the 1970s and the most part of the 1980s Ainslie did not produce a lot of work?

RB: Yes.

VA: For what reasons?

RB: I think there are two primary reasons for that. One is that he had an increasing number of people around him with the school and the Art Foundation forming, and the other was that he was finding it very difficult to close paintings off. He did a lot of, well there were eight or nine . . . canvases that he would keep taking back into his studio, doing things to. He was obviously looking for something that he wasn't getting and he just kept on year after year. The same batch of paintings would go in and out of the studio. He would try all sorts of things on them and he was obviously after something. I don't think he knew what it was. But he was unable to draw any of them to a close.

VA: So he was painting all the time, but he was just working on the same canvases. There wasn't a volume of work as such?

RB: Yes, that's right; and assuming that they were experiments, he might have been able to close them at any one time and start again, but he didn't.

VA: You have no idea why? Was it just something he felt he had to do?

RB: I think he had a big question in his head as to what a finished painting was.

VA: His 'last paintings' produced at Pachipamwe have been regarded as a significant development in his work. Would you agree with this?

RB: It probably wasn't Pachipamwe per se. It was probably happening before that. But he was certainly, obviously, on a bit of a high and a flurry at the Pachipamwe Workshop. But no, I think that there was a period before that where he was able to...[interruption].

VA: So you were saying that it happened before Pachipamwe.

RB: I think so, because there were a number of 'bigish' paintings that are in that spirit, that are more complete and that happened faster.

VA: So this was just before you say?

RB: Well, I didn't have much to do with him during that time; I was living in England...[interruption]...Well, I can only go by the evidence of what I see of the paintings. And yes, there were a lot of paintings done at Pachipamwe and yes, they were quick and yes, they were decisive and yes, there was a sense that the whirlwind was somehow in control. I think the idea of wind as a metaphor and image is one I imagine, in the long run, Bill might quite like actually, because there were times when he was tossed about by it, times when it was a gentle breeze and somehow, right at the end when he is doing this, you get the sense that there was some point and structure to the energies he was trying to deal with. I hesitate to say, 'Oh, it was Pachipamwe and only Pachipamwe'. I think it's really a result of years and years of work.

VA: So Pachipamwe is not the pinnacle as such?

RB: Well, it's the last moment so, how do we know?

VA: In your opinion, what is unique about this body of work?

RB: It appears to me that he obviously cleared away a lot of the obstructions. This may be the one occasion [Pachipamwe] where it is much more evident, much more focused and much more fruitful than it had been in the past. But I don't think Pachipamwe itself removed the obstructions; I think he removed the obstructions himself, very slowly over a long period of time.

VA: So Pachipamwe simply provided the time and space for him to do it in.

RB: Yes.

VA: Do you think he resolved what he was looking for before he died?

RB: I think he may well have been getting on the way there, yes.

VA: But not completely?

RB: No. I suspect he had just reached the moment when he was about to start making paintings that were really significantly his. I think they were all ways of dealing with other paintings or other kinds of

issues. I think he was starting to get rid of a lot of his complications. That is why everyone thinks of Pachipamwe as this breakthrough, because it was all so quick and because they had a freshness and a speed and a directness because of him getting rid of complications.

VA: Fieke mentioned that his paintings were opening up.

RB: I think, well that's one way, but I think they were closing down in the sense that he was not taking everything on board. He was taking on board only what he was able to. I mean, it's rhetoric really.

VA: So this would comply with the fact that he was now going to focus on his paintings and cut down on all the other things?

RB: Yes, he had been saying that for years, but never quite managed to do it.

VA: In your opinion, what impact has the Thupelo Workshop had on South African art and, more specifically, in what way have South Africa's black artists benefited from its development?

RB: I think for me the primary influence of Thupelo was on black artists who had little or no access to formal art education and it

certainly had, for most of the time, an agenda which was closely aligned to this sort of modernist painterly preoccupation that Bill had. It enabled a lot of black artists, who normally worked in small cramped conditions with very little material, to spread their wings a bit and use materials and stuff in a way that they had never had access to before. While a lot of the paintings that came out of the workshops per se were perhaps repetitive, there are some artists who end up, as a consequence of that experience, becoming very good artists. To mention a few: Pat Mautloa, Kay Hassan, David Koloane, Anthony Nkotsi and Sam Nhlengetwa. I think the workshop had good repercussions for black artists, completely and without parallel. Proving more so as time goes by and as these artists mature.

VA: There was a strong abstract expressionist influence in the 1985 workshop. In your opinion, why was this so and what were the consequences?

RB: I think it was so because that was the interest of the people who were running it and the artists who were coming out and visiting. The workshop environment lends itself to putting canvas on the floor and experimenting in an open-ended sort of way. It doesn't lend itself to finicky fine, eyeliner brush realism, but I think those sort of experiences, those cumulative experiences, really pushed and enabled people to develop a sense of courage.

VA: If there were any negative consequences, what would you say would have come out of that?

RB: Nothing worth even mentioning really.

VA: Thupelo dwindled over the years. Do you know the reason as to why this occurred?

RB: In Johannesburg it has.

VA: I didn't realise that it was all over. I thought it was just one thing that happened.

RB: Yes, but there is a group in Cape Town run by Jill Bailey, Bill's niece and they are doing some good work. I think one of the things that happened in Johannesburg was that it ran its course in some ways . . . but I think it had made its influence felt. I think the sort of abstract painterly ideology, if you like, the process was one that was hard to sustain because it was so generally discredited by the academic world, and I think that the people found it hard to maintain their alliances.

VA: Has it started up again, do you know?

RB: In Cape Town. It's not called that anymore now. I don't know what it is called now, but I know they were also thinking of setting up in Durban. You know, of course, of workshops in Zimbabwe etc.

VA: If you were to look at abstractions by both Koloane and Ainslie, there is a sense that they have embraced abstract expressionism for the freedom it affords them. Would you consider this true?

RB: Yes, I suppose so. The idea that one employs full stops because they give you freedom to construct sentences. I mean, if it is a strategy that makes sense and it's a strategy that helps you to get somewhere that feels right, then it's giving you the freedom to move. It's not freedom per se, it's having the strategy that enables you to work productively in what feels like the right direction. I'm just flexing it slightly differently.

INTERVIEW WITH THAMI JALI

28 AUGUST 1997

VA: When did you attend your first Thupelo Workshop and were you painting abstractions at the time?

TJ: In 1988 I attended my first, but I was not into abstraction at the time.

VA: Why then, did you turn to abstraction in the workshop?

TJ: It was never said or impressed that one must paint abstractly. It rather came about as a result of the environment. Abstraction was an organic process lending itself to the experimentation of foreign materials and paint application. In 1988 the workshop took place at the Africana Museum. The museum was being renovated, so there was lots of rubbish, steel, paper etc. lying around. The environment was rather ironic in that it became a place of liberating artistic expression. At the time I was a ceramic and sculpture teacher at Mofolo Centre. I did printmaking also.

VA: How did the Thupelo Workshop influence you initially?

TJ: I saw my work as functional. I was not certain about the purpose of art. I suppose my work had always bordered on craft. I started from a practical, functional point, such as a bowl, and developed my sculpture from there. Thupelo showed me another purpose of art. It had another function other than practical. It was expressive and emotive. I could simply create without being concerned as to what purpose it would have for the consumer. This liberated me and my work. I don't have to worry about the end product as such. It was free and this was its strength. I immersed myself in the process of making art devoid of any extraneous concerns. The work would simply be; it didn't have to fulfil any predetermined function. It simply was infused with my spirit. In this sense it liberated the viewer, in not having to concern himself with the message. There was none. It was what the viewer saw or felt.

VA: How many workshops did you attend ?

TJ: Five, the last one in 1992. When it [Thupelo] dwindled, many other workshops started. Most of the first Thupelo members ended up at the Bag Factory.

VA: Did most of the workshops have an abstract emphasis?

TJ: Yes, most of the workshops had an abstract emphasis. It worked out like that not because it was enforced, but because the environment encouraged such a form of expression. Many black artists had been working on small scale works because of no space in their living environment. Here there was a lot of space and to use it was liberating. So was the material. One simply just wanted to explore the material to its fullest. Abstraction allowed this. I remember at my first workshop, I had been mostly figurative before. Here I produced abstract works as I was putting together what I found. But I still made use of photographs lying around as I was still apprehensive and felt a sense of artificial security in the representational.

VA: What about the concern that it [abstraction] was an American import?

TJ: The abstraction was not American. The Thupelo focused mainly on black artists as its intention was to open up new ground for us. What one got in addition was a necessary network for survival and encouragement.

INTERVIEW WITH DAVID KOLOANE

21 MARCH 1996

VA: Can you tell me a bit about your background because that will determine to some extent the art you produce?

DK: I was born in a township north of Johannesburg called Alexandra Township. I did my primary school there and that's where I started drawing. I had friends in the school, particularly one friend who was good at drawing; he had a natural gift. We admired him very much and he encouraged us to doodle, although we didn't know really what we were doing. We did manage to do some figures. I had a problem when I started; I couldn't do a full length figure. For me he was like a magician, because he could just produce any figure in any position. So in a sense I worshiped him and he showed me how to draw a full length figure. When I managed to finally do it, I realised that one has to just keep on practising, so I used to copy everything, comic books etc. I also used to decorate books for my school mates. At the time, to me it was entertainment; it wasn't something that could be a profession. There were so many Apartheid restrictions at the time that I had never seen a newspaper article of a black artist or knew of any black artists where I grew up. I don't remember meeting an artist,

so for me it was something only whites were allowed to do as a profession; but then our teacher brought some forms for this friend of mine, who was very good at drawing, to enter a competition. It was a national schools' competition.

VA: What did this teacher teach?

DK: A bit of everything. He was our school teacher but he knew a bit about art and told us that our friend had talent and it was a pity that there weren't schools that encouraged him. So he brought these application forms; they were for a competition on road safety. It was a national road safety competition. This friend entered and the teacher filled in the forms for him and submitted the work on his behalf. He won second prize and we were all so excited. We went to high school together, the three of us and this friend. I think because he had financial problems he had to leave school to go to work and help support his family. He dropped out and forgot about painting completely. When I got to high school I met somebody who was a student at Polly Street at the time. He told me about Polly Street; I didn't know that there was such a school . . . He also told me that some of his work was in a gallery in town. There was a competition, Artists of Fame and Promise, that used to happen in the 60s. The exhibition was of all the entries; it was at the Adler Fielding Gallery in Johannesburg. So we went there . . . and it was a revelation for me to see all those

works done by black and white artists because there were quite a few black artists . . . That is when I realised that this was actually a possibility for blacks. For me it was a most exciting discovery, because I had been reading a lot of biographies on Van Gogh, Gauguin etc. I loved reading. After I had been to this gallery my curiosity grew. This friend of mine said, "You are actually good at drawing", but I didn't have the confidence in myself. He said, "As far as I know, you are actually better than most of the artists who I know are practising". I just couldn't believe it. I thought I was much more interested in writing at the time - I was writing poetry and reading a lot of stuff on writing. The fact that I read about art was because I felt that it was another world. It became a very fascinating world for me. Then he gave me proper materials which I started using and he showed me what paper to use, what pencils to buy, things I didn't know before. I started doing work at home on my own and later I started showing him.

VA: What is his name?

DK: Louis Maqhubela. He is in London now. He left South Africa in 1972. He won this competition, 'Artists of Fame and Promise' and as part of his prize he went on a trip overseas to visit major galleries and institutions for three months. When he was overseas he met a South African painter [Douglas Portway] who was living in London. I think this painter had a great influence on him. When

he came back he decided to leave South Africa because he felt there were not enough opportunities. I think this painter gave him several places where he could go and work and meet other artists. He went to an island in Spain where he stayed for, I think, about two years, then after that he went to London.

VA: Have you seen him since?

DK: Yes, we actually exhibited together. So he left and before he left he recommended Bill Ainslie to me.

VA: During the time he [Louis Maqhubela] was at the Polly Street Art Centre, did you study there?

DK: No, I didn't. At the time I had left school. I had to drop out of school when I was about to finish my matriculation because my father fell ill - he had a stroke. So I had to leave to support my family. But then that was when Louis started giving me proper paper and pencils to use. I started working as an interpreter at the Municipality offices in town. I was an interpreter of African languages, the different dialects. It is common when you are born in the urban areas to mix with a lot of different ethnic groups. You play with peers from these ethnic groups, you go to their homes and you pick up different languages. I am Tswana, my family is Tswana, but next door lived a Xhosa couple who did not have any

children. In a way I was also their child, as I used to run errands for them and spend my time in their home and I spoke Xhosa better than my home language. At school you met different people who spoke different dialects. When you are young I think it is easier because you want to show these people that you can speak their language and you want to communicate. Acceptance is easier if you can speak a number of languages because you can mix with different groups.

VA: During the time that you were working as an interpreter, did you paint or draw?

DK: I did small drawings at home after work because space was a problem. I used my bedroom whenever there was nobody around, to do my drawings. I just got a board and worked on it. Each time I finished about five or six drawings, I would go to this friend [Louis] and we would discuss them. He encouraged me and said that he thought I was coming on all right. He didn't want to interfere, he just wanted me to keep on working so I would get used to solving my own problems and not be dependant on him. I mostly worked on my own and would only go to him when I had a body of work. He then left and told me he had spoken to Bill Ainslie. At the time I was still working I moved from the Municipality to an engineering company. I was the stores clerk. Then this company, in 1974, decided to move out of the Johannesburg area. They moved

towards Pretoria and I felt I couldn't carry on working for them as it was so far away and I was living in Soweto. I felt the best thing was to look for a job nearby. I remembered then that Louis had said I should go and see Bill Ainslie. I made an appointment, met him and showed him the work I had been doing with Louis' help. He [Bill] said, "You seem to know what you are doing. Why do you want me to teach you?" I said, "I don't think this is enough. This is only the beginning. I think there is still so much I have to learn." He said, "Yes, I agree with you that you may need to do more colour exercises." He accepted me and at the time he was just teaching from his house in Parktown. There were a few students, among them were William Kentridge, Ricky Burnett and a few others. I was the only black student at the time. It was a problem because I was not supposed to be there because of the Group Areas Act, so when somebody suspicious came around I would pretend I was working in the garden. I stayed with Bill from 1974 and in 1975 some colleagues in the class bought some of my work. One actually felt my work was good enough for an exhibition. I didn't take her seriously, I thought she was joking when she said, "I want to arrange an exhibition." I said, "I'm not ready yet."

VA: Who was she?

DK: She was a part-time student who just came for recreational reasons. She just loved being in an art environment, but she was actually a business person who only came some days to classes. She started buying my work and arranged this press conference in her house. There were all these press people and two artists. The other artist was a sculptor from Natal called Michael Zondi. He was well known in South Africa at the time and had done a lot of commissions for churches in Natal. I was actually amazed and terrified at how they could pair me with somebody who was so well known and so professional. Were they trying to make a joke out of me? I was really nervous, so much so that I didn't go to the opening because I was terrified. The opening was on the Friday. I didn't go, but then I went on the Monday. When I got there Bill said, "What happened?" I said, "Oh, I had transport problems" . . . That was my first break and when I went to the gallery I was surprised that half the work was sold. I was just amazed, and at the end of the exhibition there were only one or two pieces of work left. Bill said to me, "What were you afraid of?". I said, "I thought perhaps they are trying to make a joke of me." He said, "No, we realised your work was of quality." It was only then that I started gaining confidence in myself. Then I became very close to Bill as the years went by. In 1982 I got a British Council scholarship to do a course in Museum Studies. At the time I was teaching at FUBA and FUBA had a basement which they intended turning into a gallery. A British sculptor came to South Africa for a visit. He had

come, I think, to give lectures at some of the universities.

VC : What was his name?

DK: Anthony Caro. Bill said to him that it seems he was only going to white institutions and that he didn't know what was happening with black artists in this country. Caro said that he would appreciate it if he would show him where he could meet them [black artists]. So Bill brought him to FUBA and he was appalled by the lack of facilities he found there. He also asked us to show him our work, and we did. He then left for London and when he got there he appealed to artists in Britain and the States. He told them about his journey to South Africa and what he had seen. These artists, many of whom were famous - to mention two, Henry Moore and David Hockney - contributed a painting. What Caro had in mind was that this collection of work would form the nucleus of the gallery in the basement of FUBA and could also be used as a teaching aid for students, as well as a fund-raising tool. When Caro returned in 1983 to present the work officially to FUBA, the event was held at the Market Theatre . . . The British Council gave me a study grant to do a course in Museum Studies so that I would have an idea of how to run a gallery and what was required, with the intention that when I came back I would be the curator of the FUBA Gallery.

VA: What was it like studying there?

DK: It was a most exciting period when I was doing this course with the University of London. Each time we used to be assigned to one major institution, like the British Museum or the National Gallery, for a term, and after that term you would do an assignment inside that institution, then the next term you would move to a different institution.

VA: So how many institutions did you work in?

DK: Well, I worked at the Tate National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery and the British Museum. It was interesting to see what was happening inside the institutions themselves, how the different sections operate. You were allowed to see all the different sections: the restoration, the exhibition section, the conservation section. All of the. And then you would just determine which area you were most interested in and work in that area in an assignment related to that. For me, in the British Museum for instance, they had a major printmaking exhibition of a German Expressionist which I had always been interested in because of the techniques, the devices where one did not have to use a press, where you would use alternative methods. That was my interest. I read a lot about the techniques they were using

and I also looked at the exhibition as to whether it had sufficient information for the public to be able to understand what the exhibition was all about. I looked at how the information was prepared by the education department, whether it was working. I chose to look at whether the information provided was sufficient. I found that they could have added something, especially for children, to make it easier. I felt they should have published a special brochure for schools . . . It was an exciting period to be working in these institutions, because I learnt so much. Speaking to people in each institution and working with the education department. They were a great deal of help with your assignments, helping you decide which area to tackle. The National Portrait Gallery was also interesting because when I did my assignment I interviewed people of different cultural backgrounds, what they thought of the portraits in the gallery, whether they identified with them or whether they felt that they were too British.

VA: Were they? Who were they of?

DK: Portraits of the Royal Family, high profile people in different disciplines: music, theatre etc. Portraits from the eighteenth up to the twentieth century. The later centuries most people preferred; the techniques were more immediate. This also included photography, which was more accessible to people. People

drifted towards this section more than any other. So it was interesting just to have been there for that. I felt it was a course that really helped me understand a lot of different things and when I came back I did work in the gallery [FUBA]. However, before I went to study I was fortunate that Anthony Caro had persuaded me to apply to participate in a workshop in the States that they had started [Triangle Workshop]. So before I went to London I went to Triangle for two weeks. I was late. I had problems getting my passport. I got there on the Wednesday and the workshop was ending on the Sunday, so I had to do some work. I managed to do four paintings, but then because of the lateness of my arrival, they invited me again for the following year for the full two week period and by that time it was easier because I was in London, so I went to the States for the two weeks in my holidays. I was fascinated by the fact that there were artists from all over Europe, Canada, the States, and for me it was interesting to see people who had never met one another before come to meet for the first time and be together for two weeks working. I felt that this idea would work well in South Africa because there was no infrastructure [in South Africa] and there were so many restrictions in terms of the Group Areas Act. We couldn't just work in Durban or Cape Town. We hardly knew each other as artists. We would occasionally hear of one another in the newspaper, but we had never met. So the idea of the workshop appealed to me. Fortunately Bill came to New York just after the workshop and I discussed this idea with him,

because it had so excited, me and when I got to Britain Bill said he would try and get funding whilst I would go and study. When I got to Britain I had to write a dissertation at the end of the course and I based my dissertation on establishing printmaking workshops in urban areas in Southern Africa, using alternative printing methods. I interviewed a lot of printmakers from different parts of the world about their techniques and what they would do in a situation where they didn't have proper equipment. I was fascinated by the response I got, the techniques and ideas people told me they used. I worked for a full year actually practicing some of the techniques. Before I could write about them I had to prove that they worked. When I came back, this idea of the workshop I felt would help to alleviate the lack of infrastructure we have in South Africa. I was fortunate also to find funding from an agency called the United States South African Leadership Exchange Programme. They were already helping to send teachers [they were helping in the education area] on training courses and they were also sending them overseas to see how institutions functioned there. So when Bill came with this idea of a workshop to the agency, they had never done anything for the visual arts; they immediately felt that this was up their street. They were excited to be able to fund such a project. Fortunately I had met an African-American painter at this workshop [Triangle] and we discussed this idea of the workshop together.

VA: What was his name?

DK: Peter Bradley. I asked if he would be willing to come to South Africa and at that time the cultural boycott was still on. He said he would be willing. He did come eventually and that actually pleased the funding agency because we had somebody from the United States who was coming here. It made things easier for them. They started funding us. We had our first workshop in 1985. I completed my studies in September and in November we had this first workshop. For me it was a fantastic ending, that I came back and participated in this workshop

VA: Is this the Thupelo Workshop?

DK: Yes. After that they funded us for quite a number of years, I think until 1989, and then they pulled out because their priorities changed.

VA: Where did the artists come from?

DK: Different parts of the country, and we used to include an overseas artist from the States because that, in a sense, was tied to the funding. They could only fund us if we included an overseas artist, as this emphasised the exchange aspect. If we didn't invite

someone from outside, there wouldn't have been any interaction because they were getting mileage out of the exchange aspect. Actually we got a lot of flack for that because the critics were saying we were importing American and English painters.

VA: Was it implied that you were simply copying them?

D K: Yes, but that was a petty argument because the person from overseas who was invited also worked. In a workshop situation you don't have somebody moving around saying do this or do that. We all do our own individual thing, but together. It is the intensity of working together.

VA: In other words, they only came out here as individual artists and not as teachers.

DK: Yes, as an individual to come and try out new things. If he was a sculptor or a painter, the light here is different from the light in Europe. They always enjoyed coming out here for those reasons and also to come and see what artists here were doing. So the whole thing was misconstrued. The fact that most of the work we produced at the time was non-figurative was actually what got everybody upset because they really felt we were lost.

VA: That you were mindlessly painting and didn't know what you were doing.

DK: Yes, but if one thinks, I mean its like music. You first have to know the notes before you can play a tune. It's the same, in a sense, as developing a vocabulary. Most of us had never worked on a large scale before, or on canvas and had never used acrylic because we could not afford to. So it was a great exploration trip for us to be doing large scale works and finding out what we could do with paint, how it falls, how it dries, how it cracks.

VA: In other words, you were expected to produce masterpieces but you did, in fact, have to start somewhere.

DK: Yes, they know that every art form is a process. You don't just go in there and immediately have an identity and be complacent in that everybody recognises that this is you. You have to search. It is a lifetime process. But they [critics] immediately dismissed it and our first exhibition brought such bad reviews; but we were not dissuaded by the criticism, we just continued. Then in 1988 Robert Loder, the person who actually bought this building [the Bag Factory] for the artists, asked Bill and I to go to Zimbabwe to set up a workshop there. We went and met a lot of artists from Zimbabwe, Angola and Mozambique. We sort of spearheaded the workshop there in Zimbabwe

VA: I am aware that during the time that you participated in the workshops funding was allocated for materials etc., but how did you survive financially? How did you live and eat?

DK: Well we did different things; some of us taught. At the time I was still working at the FUBA Gallery as curator and I was also painting. Other people were teaching and some were working and they would come to the workshop when they had a few days off to be at the workshop. Some of the artists were working for the SABC in the graphics department. They were doing graphics for a living. One of them actually works half day and in the afternoon he is in the studio.

VA: So it is a matter of balancing everything.

DK: Yes it is. The other criticism that we got was what was the point of people coming together for only two weeks for the workshops; what do they do then for the rest of the year? We felt that the workshops were not intended to change people, it was only there to help people develop, to nourish them and when they left, they could actually try and adapt their working situations to do whatever scale of work they wanted to do. But we also felt it was important to try and get studio space where people could work consistently. At the time it was difficult to find a suitable place

because of the Group Areas Act; until we looked at this area [Fordsburg] which at the time was known as a grey area as it was neither black nor white. We looked around this area for studio space until this place [the Bag Factory] was found. It is fortunate, because it is about five minutes away from the Market and it forms part of the Market Theatre complex. We moved in here in 1991 and it has become a landmark in a sense, in this country. Everybody by now knows the Bag Factory, even during the biennale, artists used to come here to see if we were hosting the biennale.

VA: So how many artists are there at the Bag Factory?

DK: There are about fourteen artists. We came at different times. It is divided into different studios.

VA: How does the Bag Factory stay alive?

DK: We rent the building. Rent is charged per month for the studios. But basically that is only for the lights and water and to maintain the place. All the artists contribute.

VA: After the Thupelo Workshop you went to Zimbabwe?

DK: Yes, the workshop in Zimbabwe, Harare.

VA: Did this also include artists from other countries?

DK: Yes, there were artists from Zimbabwe, Zambia and others from Botswana. What is surprising, I think, is that there is a common problem in most African countries in infrastructure. A lot of people believe that South Africa has the largest art market in Southern Africa, I mean with all the galleries, but the problems are still similar in terms of infrastructure, like in Zimbabwe where there are one or two galleries but no other facilities for artists, so that is why the workshops became popular in Zimbabwe. From Zimbabwe there was one in Botswana and from Botswana one in Namibia and then one in Zambia and I think this year they are starting one in Uganda.

VA: After each workshop, is there an exhibition?

DK: Yes, we have an exhibition of the work.

VA: Does the work sell well?

DK: Yes, surprisingly. I mean, if you show the work in Zimbabwe, occasionally they might sell one or two, but in places like Botswana, where there is a strong expatriate community, they sell

very well because the exhibition becomes a main event. People actually look forward to seeing works from the workshop. But in Zimbabwe, for instance, it is not the case. The exhibition opens and it is very quiet, one or two works may sell, but there isn't the interest you find in Botswana.

VA: How come?

DK: I think because of the soap stone carving. People tend to regard Zimbabwean artists as often being soap stone carvers. In a sense, soap stone carving has overtaken any other art form in Zimbabwe.

VA: As far as education is concerned, during my research I was under the impression that you were a teacher. Are you ?

DK: Not really. What happened was that when I left Bill Ainslie and started working on my own, I was invited to teach at FUBA. I didn't have any teaching experience, but I felt that I could teach from my limited experience and I also read books on teaching in order to develop my teaching abilities. I taught in a school in Soweto as part of an outreach programme FUBA was trying to do. I used to go to this school once a week on Mondays and then Saturday mornings. I would teach a class of children. Later on I became a full time teacher at FUBA. In 1983, before I left to study in Britain,

I was made head of the department, but it was just for a short while because then I got the study grant and went to Britain for two years.

VA: Did you enjoy teaching?

DK: Yes I did, but I think I enjoy workshops more than teaching because with teaching you have to prepare and it divides your time. You have to plan what projects you are going to teach in the next two weeks or so. It is unlike a workshop, where you are moving and working spontaneously.

VA: I suppose if there is an element of teaching in a workshop, it is more that of advice.

DK: Yes, so I prefer that type of "teaching" as opposed to the formal kind.

VA: It is mentioned that you go overseas regularly. Do you give conferences there?

DK: Yes, the problem is that I wear many hats, you see. I write and also curate exhibitions. I have been involved in a major event that was held in London last year that was called "Africa '95".

VA: I am confused. Whitechapel and Africa '95, are they one and the same thing?

DK: Yes, the Whitechapel housed the contemporary exhibition called Seven Stories. There were seven exhibitions from seven African countries and I was curator of the South African section. The Africa '95 embraced all the activities happening in London at the time: music, theatre and dance. Whatever was happening at the time was organised under the Africa '95 umbrella. They had sculptural workshops in Yorkshire and in Birmingham. There was also a show curated by Colin Britches of South African art work.

VA: So you created the exhibition for South Africa in Whitechapel?

DK: Yes.

VA: And Africa '95? You mentioned you wrote something?

DK: Yes, I wrote something for the Seven Stories catalogue about the South African section. So Africa '95 is actually the whole project. It involved music, theatre, literature, poetry, sculpture, painting. There were a lot of exhibitions all over. There was also a textile exhibition. So Africa '95 is the umbrella and Seven Stories is the painting side of it.

VA: Did you enjoy creating that exhibition?

DK: Yes, it was the first time I had been involved in such a challenge.

I had to move around the country to look at different collections in order to identify the work I wanted to use and I think for me it was a very challenging project in that I had to tell a story about South Africa. It was not easy.

VA: You had a lot to choose from?

DK: Yes, but I also knew that I would get flack from both white and black artists. But I felt the best way was to let history tell the story. I chose Steve Biko as the central event and looked at work done around that particular event by different artists. This eliminated the problem of choosing artists on the basis of colour and made things easier in terms of selection. For me it was an enriching experience to meet curators from other African countries and to read their different reviews. It shows how differently people think or perceive what is happening in Africa today. You know, some dismissed it outright and then some got a good idea and some were surprised, and I think that it was very interesting to find all this diverse perception, and also to talk to people personally who came to me and said, "Did you create the South African section? We think it's the best section or the most moving" etc. So those

kinds of responses, you know, made me realise how differently people look at things . . .

VA: I noticed you chose a few works, but they exercised the whole idea. . . ?

DK: I just felt that I couldn't do another survey of South African art. Just tell a story and keep to it as much as I could.

VA: It must have been quite a challenge.

DK: Yes, it was a challenge. It showed that much could be done with local work. I mean, even with so many ideas I'm thinking of future exhibitions of trying to look back and look at what had been done in a certain period. How it looks today. I would like to look at work done in the 60s. The change and difference. So if I'm trying to write a proposal about curating that kind of exhibition, it's also a way of reminding people of how things used to be. I'm sure I can get funding for that, but I have to sit down and find the time to write a proposal, check the dates and also to be able to get the type of work I need for this exhibition. It's almost like going through this whole process again. I went through it with Africa' 95, but I think because I have established some contacts with other institutions things will be easier.

VA: Are people helpful?

DK: Yes, unbelievably helpful. They used to call me and say, "When are you coming to collect the work?" Yes, everyone wanted to be involved in such a major event.

VA: I want to ask you about your exhibition that was on [1996 Exhibition at the Newtown Gallery]. What can you tell me of your work, particularly of that exhibition?

DK: I think in that exhibition I was looking at the social aspect one finds in the local communities, but that seems in a sense to be ignored. These independent church groups [looking at paintings] . . . were, for me, resisting main stream churches. Before colonisation missionaries came to this country and converted people to Christianity and dissuaded people from whatever their beliefs were prior to that. This has brought about a crisis in terms of belief within the black communities. Some people are feeling confused, what is right and what is wrong. So for me these groups are like people saying 'lets take a break and look at ourselves and see what is good for us'. They [the church groups] convene their services anywhere. It could be under a bridge, under trees. They don't need any formal structures and for me these are like spiritual co-operatives, you know, where people come together to express

themselves and nourish their spiritual strengths. These are very brave people who say we have to find a way. You see, in mainstream churches you can't just say, "I want to see the Bishop because I have got a personal problem" because the Bishop might be in Rome. But with these small churches, if somebody's ill in the church, the women will come to their home and clean the house and see that everything is in order. It's accessible.

VA: So they get help right there and then.

DK: Yes, and if somebody's out of a job, he will announce to the congregation that I have a problem, that I have lost my job. Somebody will say, "Come, and I will try where I am employed to see if I can't help you."

VA: So it's an accessible 'God' around you.

DK: Yes, it's like a family, an extended family. People can find comfort in these small churches rather than in the mainstream churches where they become nothing, where they feel that they are meaningless.

VA: One of many.

DK: Yes, there is no direct line of contact to the superiors of the church. But with these local churches, one can go and knock at the door of the elder or the leader. You can go and talk your heart out to him about your problems and he will do his best to help. So for me [this is] fascinating, and also the fact that they have a dance where they go around and around, almost devilish, until they are in a state of trance. That's interesting.

VA: Is this the Zionist faith?

DK: Yes.

VA: Is the Zionist one faith?

DK: No, there are a whole lot of sects. They operate according to the dictates of that congregation.

VA: They have different colours?

DK: Yes, it is a form of identity. That is what I find fascinating, in that they are in a sense like the workshops, but they are spiritual workshops . . . I'm fascinated, because they don't have a hierarchical system and they don't have bureaucracy. It's also a plausible idea that if one comes from a different area where they

don't exist, one can always just go and begin a branch there. They are able to adapt. You can adapt them to any situation.

VA: And the "Dog" paintings?

DK: For me, if you go to any township, you will always find stray dogs. They are a characteristic of the township in that they are a community unto themselves and that they have a territorial monopoly over certain areas, and also the fact that they don't belong to anybody and their lives are just that. I mean they stand to be abused by the next person who walks by, who can just kick them for no reason at all or run them over with a car the next minute on the street.

VA: Yes, I met a man the other day who would go into the locations and shoot these dogs for fun.

DK: Yes, it's because they don't belong to anyone. When I grew up in Alexandra we always used to have stray dogs just wondering about and maybe because you gave it some food that evening, it will come back again the following evening. So we knew that we could adopt them maybe for a couple of months, then they would disappear.

VA: They would move on?

DK: Yes, and some would get sick and people would say, "Can you help us? We don't want to have it any longer as it might infect everything else." So we would take it, and you know how boys can be cruel, one would start pelting it with stones and then we would all throw stones at the animal.

VA: Till death?

DK: Yes, I think those things are part and parcel of youth and also, I suppose, the life in those conditions, crowded social conditions where people sometimes can't even afford even to share their food with a pet, a dog, a stray dog that is just passing by. But for me they are like street children because they are street dogs. You know, they don't know where they are going to eat or sleep next. They don't have comfortable kennels and they don't have anybody caring about them. They don't know what a bed is. If they are hurt they must heal themselves. We used to move around the township drinking. I used to drink a lot and at night we would meet a pack of these dogs and you would just see these glowing eyes. That would sober you up a bit because you never knew if they were friendly or if they would attack. I have always been fascinated by them and even now, my mother lives with my

nephews in Soweto and each time I go there they have a new dog.

VA: So it's almost as if they are dependent as well as independent.

DK: Yes, because if there was a wedding or a funeral they would come around. They know that there is plenty to eat there and they would fight off the local dogs for the food.

VA: They depend on people to supply food.

DK: Yes, that's right.

VA: But they don't want to be ruled by people.

DK: Yes, so there is this renegade spirit in them. What I am trying to do is contrast them with dogs that are kept, that have kennels and collars. That are taken for grooming and are groomed. Whereas these are like street kids. You know, every minute of their life is full of excitement, danger. You know, chances. That is the fascination that I have for them.

VA: How often do you paint? All the time?

DK: I paint all the time. When I'm travelling I try to paint as much as I can. I mean for that exhibition, I painted throughout the first season, because fortunately my wife is a health worker - she is a nurse - so most of the time she works at night and I have all the time to paint without needing to go home early. I regard myself as a painter more than anything else. I have to play these other roles like writer and curator, but if I had to make a choice, I would like to paint and do nothing else. The others are obligations, and also the fact that we still don't have many people who are aware that art is also a career, as one can have become a writer or historian. We still have to have career guidance for students. I don't think enough has been done in that area in order to show students the possibilities available.

VA: Yes, even in schools there appears to be a danger that art tuition will be a thing of the past.

DK: Yes. Precisely because it is seen as a cinderella discipline where the funding has never actually been enough and will never be enough because people don't get the results they anticipate as in other disciplines.

VA: Possibly because it's a commercial world and people prize money.

DK: Yes, that is why people are impatient with the visual arts, because no company can get immediate mileage out of it as they do with sport. Yes, so I suppose that is why one has to play these different roles.

VA: In what way did Bill Ainslie influence or affect you?

DK: For me Bill was actually somebody who really brought me out of my shell because I am personally very shy and I met somebody who encouraged me, my ideas and to do things in a way I had never been encouraged to do before. He would leave you to do things on your own, that was the thing that was most important for me, rather than using him as a crutch. He always used that expression, that students shouldn't use teachers as a crutch. They should move on and become artists themselves and actually challenge the teacher. So I think he has given me the courage to do things. I mean with my writing - he encouraged my writing and said, "You write so well. Who taught you to write such things?" He encouraged me in those different areas, and curatorship. He just made me realise the potential and possibilities I had which I had never realised before, and he made them possible.

VA: If you produced a work and showed him, how would he evaluate it?

DK: As a teacher he would actually put his point across as if he had done that work by saying if he had done that work this would be that and that would be that, never taking you out of your context. Not saying this should have been that or you should have done this.

VA: In other words, not saying that you are wrong?

DK: Yes, but saying if I were doing this, I would actually try this direction or try that direction. He would actually leave it open, it was for you to choose.

VA: So he would give you a number of options and you selected what you wanted to do.

DK: Yes, and if you didn't see it, hard luck. That is why I say he actually encouraged students because he dealt with them within their working context and not outside it like 'no that's totally wrong, that's never done'. He encouraged students to try and see in a different light [and] he also taught me a lot about the spirituality of the human being.

VA: Do you think you had an impact on him in any way?

DK: Because we got so close we felt alike in many instances. When I first told him about the workshop [Thupelo], he said for him it was such a breakthrough, he had been thinking about it as well, but he didn't know how exactly to express it . . .

INTERVIEW WITH DAVID KOLOANE**10 AUGUST 1996**

VA: You were born in Alexandra Township and went to St Michael's Primary School. Was that a mission school?

DK: In a sense, yes. There were different missionary schools. The government over the years had neglected the responsibility of education within the black community, so different mission societies took up the challenge of education. It was also to their advantage because they could now convert the communities into their different religions. When I grew up most of the schools were missionary schools, with a few exceptions. The government subsidised them, but they took on a whole lot of responsibility themselves.

VA: Because of this, did the mission schools have a lot more freedom in education?

DK: Yes, they had a lot more freedom in education. I think the education system, if you ask anybody, was one of the best at the time because there were fewer restrictions. That was why there was a problem when Bantu education was introduced. In the

1950s, when they changed the education system, most of the mission schools decided to close rather than hand themselves over to the government.

VA: This was when the government refused funding.

DK: Yes, they gave them restrictions, though some became affiliated with the government. I think Anglicans and Roman Catholics resisted.

VA: St Michael's, what religion was it?

DK: Anglican.

VA: How many years did you stay there?

DK: From my early school years up to primary school level.

VA: You have mentioned this was more or less when you started drawing.

DK: Yes, I started drawing because I had a friend who could draw very well. We were very close. He gave me inspiration. I suddenly realised that this was something I had always been good at

[drawing], but I never knew how to go about it. He gave me early guidance.

VA: Did the mission school promote expressive activities like art?

DK: Although we were not taught art particularly at primary school, our teacher was very liberal and used to tell us about different things. He knew a great deal and told us about a lot of different careers. He actually brought us information about a schools' art competition and encouraged this friend of mine to enter.

VA: What was his name, the student?

DK: Jacob Maholie.

VA: So he started you off because you could see how art could be practised.

DK: Yes. I just did decorations until I met him. Then I started getting interested in the figure, because of his drawings.

VA: After St Michaels, you went to St Peter's.

DK: Yes, which was also an Anglican mission school. That is why it was easier for me to get into this school, because I had attended an Anglican school before.

VA: So it was a progressive development?

DK: Yes.

VA: Rossettenville, where is that?

DK: It is in the Southern Suburbs. In fact that school still exists today; it's called St Martins.

VA: Were you still staying at Alexandra Township?

DK: Yes, I travelled. I got a bus into town and then to the school.

VA: Did they have art classes at the school?

DK: Yes, that is where I had my first art lesson. An art teacher came in once a week and taught us mostly decorative colour work.

VA: Did that have any impact on you?

DK: Not really, except for the colour, the fact that one could use colour. Before then I had never used colour. I remember particularly because this was one of the schools that closed because Bantu education was introduced. The school authorities decided to close rather than hand it over.

VA: This is the reason why you left there and moved on to Orlando?

DK: Yes. Bantu Education was introduced in 1955 and the school [St. Peter's] closed down in 1956.

VA: Otherwise you would have stayed there right through?

DK: Yes, I would have stayed there.

VA: What standard were you in when it closed down?

DK: Standard 8.

VA: Then you moved to Orlando High School and Soweto.

DK: My family moved to Soweto.

VA: Why did you move to Soweto?

DK: Because at the time Alexandra Township was in turmoil. There were a lot of gang lords. There was a gang that was actually terrorising the township, almost something similar to what is happening now in Cape Town. There was a gang we knew as being the sort of Mafia in the township when we grew up. The gang, I think, was taking a protection fee from the business people in the township. So the business people decided to hire a vigilante gang to protect them against these extortionists. That started a whole lot of things because the vigilante groups were taking the law into their own hands, terrorising everybody indiscriminately, and because some of my friends had somehow been involved with the former gang, they were also terrorised. So my parents wanted to leave, because they knew we would also be involved, and I think they felt it was an unhealthy situation for us as children, because it would disrupt our education. I had just started going to high school and they felt I would maybe be coerced into becoming a member of one of either of the gangs. They used to coerce young children into their gangs and would threaten their families if they resisted.

VA: There was also a bus boycott in 1957.

DK: Yes, there was a bus boycott in 1957.

VA: In 1957 you had just moved.

DK: We just missed it, but it affected us because at the time I was still in a sense staying at Alexandra. My mother moved, but I had to remain because my father had some business and he was winding up that business.

VA: In what way would you say, if any, did it affect you?

DK: At the time, in the last year at St Peter's, because I was a boarder at the school I didn't have to travel daily. But I remember seeing people, the inconvenience, the antagonism. People actually saw that others didn't get to town at all. So there was intimidation that affected everyone in that environment.

VA: Orlando was a state school?

DK: Yes.

VA: How different was its education?

DK: The difference was that in St Peter's we had mixed teachers. In English we were taught by white teachers and in Art and Science. When we got to Orlando we were only taught by black teachers.

Though some of them were very good, we felt the difference in standard and quality of education. Also lack of funds and facilities - in St Peter's we had libraries and laboratories.

VA: Here, were you given art classes?

DK: No.

VA: What did they teach you?

DK: They just taught us formal subjects like English, etc. Very basic.

VA: You met up with Louis Maqhubela at Orlando?

DK: Yes.

VA: He was born a year younger than you, but you were in the same class?

DK: Yes.

VA: At this time he was going to the Polly Street Art Centre.

DK: Yes.

VA: What was he doing there, at Orlando? Was he was getting an education, and at Polly Street an art education?

DK: Yes, Polly Street operated on a part time basis. He used to go to Polly Street on Wednesday afternoons. From school he would go and get a train into town and work there from five to seven in the evening.

VA: This is where your connection with him started?

DK: Yes, but I was more interested in writing at the time I met Louis because I was reading a lot and thinking I would like to be a writer. I was still doing a lot of drawing; that was when Louis discovered my drawings. I was at this time mostly doing portraits of famous people: politicians, musicians.

VA: Things for yourself?

DK: Yes, I would do them from photographs, newspapers or magazines.

VA: For how long were you with him in school?

DK: We met in 1957 and I left school at the beginning of 1959, when I was supposed to do my final year.

VA: What was your relationship with him and art? When you said you showed him things, in what way did the relationship work?

DK: I would draw things. We lived near each other and we would visit each other. We lived in the same township - from my house to Louis' home was about twenty minutes walk. I had been told by a friend of mine who had seen my drawings that I should meet Louis because he did what I was doing. When I first went to his place I found him painting a water-colour of the township nearby and that's when I realised we had something in common.

VA: So you had a common interest?

DK: Yes. Later when we started talking we found we had even more things in common, like music and reading. He wanted me to show him my drawings. I had seen his painting and told him I had only started, I had hardly even painted. He still wanted to see my drawings, so I showed him and he encouraged me to carry on. As young people we were close; we had so many interests, like going to the movies, reading and football matches. It was only later when I left school that Louis started giving me materials, showing me what materials to use, which paper and pencils to buy.

VA: In 1959 you left school because your father was ill.

DK: Yes. In fact I thought because I was going to work I might finish my matric through correspondence. But I didn't realise that it would be very difficult.

VA: What was your first job when you left?

DK: I worked as an interpreter. They had these offices, Bantu Administration Offices, where documents were processed.

VA: Were you sort of a clerical interpreter?

DK: Yes.

VA: You started this job immediately in 1959?

DK: Yes, because they were looking for young people from school who could act as clerks and interpret for people from the rural areas who couldn't speak English or Afrikaans. So our job was to interpret and explain what was required of them.

VA: Then from '59 to '68, besides the work you did on your own, your only real artistic influence was from Louis?

DK: During that period, yes.

VA: You have said that you did a lot of reading during this time. Were you still very interested in writing?

DK: Yes, I was writing pieces of poetry all the time.

VA: Though this was a relatively quiet period painting-wise, it was nevertheless instrumental in forming your interests, the people you were reading about etc.

DK: Yes, at this stage I also became a member of the ANC League. The ANC played a major role in the lives of many communities, I think. In Alexandra I was already going to meetings even though I didn't understand. I just felt it was important to belong to a movement in the community that was interested in us, that was geared to uplifting the lives of people generally. When I grew up in Alexandra I realised it was nicknamed Dark City because the only street lights were along the main route to where the buses and taxis used to travel. Otherwise the entire township was in utter darkness. So there was a lot of crime because of this. Muggings. You would hear people cry for help and be chased at night. It was a common thing. I felt at this stage that this was not the way that people should be treated and live. Why can't we live

like whites? Whenever my father had to tailor in a white suburb for some reason, like Orange Grove . . . At that stage the Group Areas Act was not enforced . . . he was a tailor and he used to mend clothing of black and white people in that area, I used to look at the difference. White children coming from school in their colourful uniforms and their bags and all that, and I used to go to school barefoot without a jersey when it was cold or without a cap when the sun was hot. The white students had caps, blazers, shoes and ties - the works. At the time I thought, why is life so cruel? I remember always when I looked at their houses and their yards, the freedom the children had in running around the yards. In a sense my heart bled. Why am I going to grow up like this and forever living under these conditions? I think also now when I started reading I really got to know the political situation, that is why I went to these meetings.

VA: So you were reading about what was going on at the time.

DK: Yes, about the leaders, and I was politically aware. I mean I could recognise the leaders in the township, black leaders. I remember at the time there was a newspaper they called the Bantu World and it had a club for young people. I was a member of the Junior Bantu World Club. We used to submit articles or stories to the newspaper and we were given a badge to show that were a member. That made me proud. Once a year we would have a

party at the offices of the newspaper and we would meet other young people from different townships and different schools. We would have general discussions about how the situation was in their areas and schools.

VA: The newspaper that ran it was it white-dominated?

DK: No, it was black. In fact the Sowetan came from that newspaper.

VA: The articles, were they politically orientated?

DK: No, we were writing about . . . well I remember the first one I wrote was a fable about the fox and the grape, I think.

VA: At the time the ANC was promoting black nationalism and it had not been done to this extent before.

DK: Yes. In Alexandra they used to use a football field, that's where they had their meetings. At the time I think the PAC had also just broken away from the ANC. You would have these two groups having meetings on the football field. I think the majority of people belonged to the ANC. I remember when they had their annual elections, they would release the names in the newspaper who would be allocated to what portfolios. I remember one thing they used to look at was a list of the white cabinet at the time, then

publish a list of the ANC who were nominated. We got to know them and we could recognise them in the street.

VA: In the 1960's black protest was still fairly passive. How did this affect you?

DK: Yes. You see in the 1960s there was a strong influence of the Ghandi philosophy - passive resistance. That was happening because they had a problem . . . of which areas to target. Let's say a group would think that to target res students [boarders at university] would work. They would just sit in the reses and be removed forcibly. But the influence at the time was passive resistance. India had just gained its independence, hence the influence. This is also why there was a break with the people who started the PAC . . . after the Treason Trial it was more radical.

VA: Were you ever involved in any of the rallies?

DK: Yes . . . well we used to have cells in each area. During the time that I was in Orlando West they had a youth league cell and I used to go to their meetings, and my mother was also a member of the Women's League.

VA: Did you stay in Soweto right through the 60s?

DK: Yes.

VA: And you had a number of different jobs?

DK: Yes. I worked for a year as an interpreter and then the following year I worked at the traffic department as a messenger, taking letters to different departments in the city. After that I went to work for an engineering company. In fact I realised working for an official department, the government or the city council, one would have to work many years before you get any increment, and also that one would have to improve one's education if you wanted to have a better salary. So I started applying to small companies outside the government. I applied to engineering companies whenever they needed a clerk. At the time most companies still used people who could write because computers were not in.

VA: Did you do any other jobs after that?

DK: No, that was the last job. The company moved from the Jo'burg area in 1974, I think. I felt I couldn't move with it, so I became a full-time student at Bill Ainslie's studio.

VA: During the time you were working in these jobs, you worked with Louis Maqhubela part-time on your paintings and drawings?

DK: At the time I was just drawing. I would also go to the library to read art books, through which I got a better understanding of art. I think during this period the Separate Amenities Act was still in place and I couldn't go to the library or the art museum, but there was a social centre for blacks in town called the Bantu Men's Social Centre, where blacks could do ballroom dancing, boxing, table tennis. There was a restaurant and next to it was a cultural centre where they trained musicians, social workers. They had a small library attached to this place and I went there.

VA: The books, were they of international artists?

DK: Yes. I would read about international artists, about the Impressionists: Michaelangelo, van Gogh - a lot of biographies.

VA: Would you say any of them influenced your style?

DK: I would not say that the books particularly influenced my style as I was still learning and getting a large input from Louis. He told me to look at my surroundings, hence my interest in portraits of my family and drawings of the surrounding area.

VA: During this time, while you were doing research and working with Louis, did you produce any political writings?

DK: No, I didn't do any writing at this time; I was just reading. I got a broader idea of the situation from reading art. I wasn't influenced directly, but rather had a broader understanding of art and the dilemmas that artists were faced with.

VA: Now did Louis skip the township style?

DK: No, he did actually go through the township idiom. What happened was he won a prize for the 'Artist of Fame and Promise'.

VA: When you worked together, were you both doing township drawings?

DK: Yes, but he got this prize and part of the prize was that he travelled to Europe for three months. During this time he met Douglas Portway in Cornwall. I think he stayed with Portway for some time and was influenced by Portway's work.

VA: Did this bring about a change in his work?

DK: Yes. When he came back there was the change; but his work was still figurative; it was not completely abstract.

VA: But he was moving towards more formal concerns?

DK: Yes. He broke the format because he was working on a flat surface instead of trying to project the three dimensional. He was moving on to a non-figurative format, but still with symbolism that one could recognise.

VA: In what way was he a significant influence?

DK: We used to go to galleries together - commercial galleries like the Adler Fielding Gallery. They used to organise the 'Artists of Fame and Promise'. It was an annual thing, open to all race groups. So we would go to the exhibitions and look at the work and discuss the work thoroughly. We discussed what we thought was lacking and what we felt the strong points were. I think that helped me a lot because I found it easier to relate to the work.

VA: Was he more interested in formal qualities before Portway's influence?

DK: Yes.

VA: Were you occupied by prospects of abstraction?

DK: No, I think at the time I was concentrating on and grappling with more or less the basics.

VA: What I'm trying to establish is the extent of Bill Ainslie's influence. Did Louis provide an abstract grounding with you to which Bill Ainslie added? Both Louis and you moved towards abstraction in your later works.

DK: No, what happened with Bill Ainslie was a completely different thing. When Louis left I first met Bill in 1974 and I showed him the work that I had been doing with Louis. He said, "There is nothing for me to show you, what do you want me to show you." I replied, "I still think I need to know more about colour." He agreed, "I can give you more colour exercises and I agree with you, you still need to develop your colour." At the time I was interested in the trials and tribulations of the worker, like I am doing now. Bill didn't try to influence me. I just carried on and he also went on with his own work and teaching. We just became closer when we started to discuss issues, in the same way that Louis and I became closer. Then there was the invitation to go to the Triangle Workshop in New York.

VA: At this time you hadn't produced any fully abstract works?

DK: No. In fact, even the work that I had sent to the Triangle Workshop as part of the application to be admitted was figurative, although at the time I was breaking down figurative work through the collage format.

VA: So it was still fairly representational, but not totally?

DK: Yes, not totally.

VA: When did you do your first true abstract works?

DK: It happened at the Triangle Workshop because it was the first time for me to work on a large scale. I realised I had been doing small scale abstractions at the time on a piece of paper more for myself than anything else, playing around with colour, water-colour and gouache, but when I got to Triangle I realised this was an opportunity to break out of the mould one was working in and try something new. This was up my street at the time because I felt I had to try other approaches.

VA: You were given an opportunity to experiment with other materials at this workshop. Up till now you had largely worked in . . . ?

DK: Water-colours.

VA: Oil?

DK: No, I had problems with oil. Every time I used it my nose ran; it affected me. I simply stuck to water-based materials. At the time I went to the Triangle Workshop I had been doing a lot of collages at home on a small scale, of all kinds of things. I was also doing a lot of monotypes and collage in newsprint, but the work was still figurative. So when I got to Triangle the first batch of work I did was also collage work . . . The first year I got there very late; I had problems getting a passport in order here. They ended up giving me a travel document which was even more problematic. It was the time when they wanted everybody to belong to some homeland, irrespective of whether you were born or lived there or not. So when I went to apply for a passport because I'm Tswana, they simply said I must go to Botswana. They had these homeland states. They said I must apply for my passport at Botswana. I refused, as I had never been there. They then said, "We will give you a travel document to allow you to go to this event and come back." This was a document saying 'designated nationality undetermined'. When I went to the States they said, "What's this? Are you a criminal?" I had to explain to them what the Apartheid system means. It was embarrassing. I hated that document. I had to get a visa for everything. Normally if you go to London from

here you don't need a visa, but with that I needed a visa. I travelled with it to the States and from there I also received a study grant to study in London to do a diploma in Museum Studies. So from the workshop I went straight to London for two years. Now because I was late at the workshop, I arrived on a Wednesday and the workshop was ending on Sunday. I had to rush to present some work at the exhibition on Sunday. The works were fairly abstract. So the following year when I went again, that's when the works became fully abstract.

VA: You finished working for the engineering company in 1974.

DK: Yes.

VA: You were still working there when Louis left and he recommended you to the Jubilee Centre?

DK: No, to Bill Ainslie, because Louis left after 1972. Before he left for three months in the late 60s early 70s he recommended Bill, and that's when he left me materials. We were meeting every weekend. We became almost like brothers.

VA: Somehow in 1968 I've got information that you went to the Jubilee Centre.

DK: No, I went on my own.

VA: No-one advised you to go there?

DK: No.

VA: What is the Jubilee Centre and how did it come about?

DK: Polly Street started in 1945. In about 1953 or '54 it was demolished. The Jubilee Centre became the cultural department of the Jo'burg City Council and the non-European Affairs Department at the time. They had a music department and an art department and a library. The Jubilee Centre took over where Polly Street left off. This time it was under the administration of the City Council, whereas Polly Street was independent.

VA: How long did you stay at Jubilee?

DK: Only two lessons. Possibly because the lessons started late, about four to five in the afternoon.

VA: Did you get anything out of it?

DK: No, nothing really. In fact the thing which made me not go back was that we were told to do a drawing of your hands, the outline. I did that and then started filling it in and some of the students started laughing at me who had been there for some time, because they realised what was required was the outline and not the detail inside. The instructor said, "We don't need that, we only want the outline." I also felt that the two hours were not sufficient. I felt I could do better on my own. I went because I thought maybe there was something I was missing. That's when Louis told me he no longer went for lessons, but to get materials. He was no longer getting anything from the tuition. I felt more or less the same way. I felt I could do better on my own.

VA: When you met up with Bill Ainslie, you then got what you were looking for?

DK: It was different. I was on a different level when I met him. When we sat down to discuss my work he was surprised that I had been reading so much. I think it was a pleasant surprise for him to have somebody with a broad understanding.

VA: What did you read about? Artists? Politics?

DK: Well, politics and general literature: Russian writers, American and English writers, Ernest Hemmingway, a bit of Shakespeare and others.

VA: Louis left in 1972 and then there was a two year break before you went to Bill. Did you work on your own then?

DK: Yes. I would use water-colour and gouache and I was doing scenes around the township. I was still working with the engineering company at the time, that's why I delayed going to Bill. I used to go to work and paint when I came back from work in the evening. Then the following morning I would be late because I had slept late. So when the company moved I had more time on my hands and the idea came that this was the right time for me to go and see Bill because I had some work to show him and we could start from that basis.

VA: During this time, the 1960s, were you aware that there was a township idiom?

DK: At the time I used to read whatever news there was about artists and I was aware of the current black art at the time.

VA: I was initially confused between Jubilee Centre and Jubilee Road.

DK: Yes. Jubilee Road is where Bill Ainslie had his lessons.

VA: When Fieke says that this was where he taught his first black students, were you one of them?

DK: No, I think Fieke means Dumile and Ben Arnold - they were more friends than students. They were colleagues and they used to congregate at Bill's to talk and drink etc. At the time I didn't know Bill; it was before me.

VA: So the school just carried on and you joined up with Bill after he came back from overseas?

DK: Yes, the school just carried on from one address to another. In a sense, when he started I was one of the first students with people like William Kentridge. I started when the school was in Oxford Road.

INTERVIEW WITH DAVID KOLOANE**22 MARCH 1997**

VA: Just to recap, you left school in 1959, then you started working. Louis Maqhubela provided you with artistic guidance. You produced drawings and paintings in your spare time. In 1974 you met up with Bill Ainslie. How would you describe your artistic development during this period and the art that you produced?

DK: I was exploring mostly the figure and I made pen and ink drawings with only a few colours relevant to the Zionist sect movement. I was depicting the community element, people working together, being able to rely on each other. These small churches provided a service and an aid to people in the township community. You could go to the Roman Catholic churches, but you couldn't just announce your problems to the whole congregation. At these small churches you could. They were like extended families. They would aid you in whatever way they could. I was also trying to explore the movement of these people dancing, trying to evoke a sense of motion in my work. The works were mainly drawings. Later I did the occasional water-colour, also using ink, pen and pencil.

VA: In what way did Louis aid the development of your artistic creativity?

DK: Louis aided my development by providing technical advice. I explored techniques he showed me, such as wetting the paper before applying water-colour and mixing sugar with water to create a granular effect. I wanted to know how one portrayed the detail of a tree like the leaves. Louis showed me how this could be achieved by painting different shades of green. That was really fascinating for me. I had never looked at it that way before. I was now more interested in composition, how things worked together.

VA: When you started working at the Bill Ainslie Studios, were you still working within the township idiom?

DK: Yes, I was working within the township idiom. I started doing landscape scenes of the streets and houses nearby, the people living in it etc.

VA: What media were you using at this stage?

DK: I was still working in water-colour and gouache.

VA: Were you painting on canvas yet?

DK: I hadn't painted on canvas. The first time I painted on canvas was at the 1983 Triangle Workshop.

VA: You worked at the Bill Ainslie Studios for three years until 1977. What development took place in your work there?

DK: In 1977 I started collage. Bill had shown me the work of Romare Bearden, not to influence me in that I should imitate his style, but rather with the intention that I should be exposed to new possibilities and the idea that one could assimilate things around you. Collage exposed me to form, the fact that representational things were made up of form and colour. Also there was more freedom and experimentation in that I could, for example, cut out white lips and stick them on a black face. Collage started breaking boundaries for me of what was accepted and what wasn't. I also started working in water-colours and collages on a slightly larger scale, experimenting with colours.

VA: What did Bill and the environment of his studios do for you that you would not have got from any other place?

DK: The environment nurtured my confidence. I didn't get a sense that anything was wrong. If I did something, we took it from there and explored that avenue. Bill provided me with technical advice as well as encouragement which stimulated my need to experiment. I had never come from a direction where I was taught at school etc. that this was right or that was wrong. I had been working on my own, so I found this new direction challenging and not intimidating. The real development was that my work grew in strength and conviction. I was also exposed to a lot through the library that Bill had there and the number of excellent talented local and international artists who would visit Bill. Bill did not teach a particular approach; he simply provided you with positive interaction and a nurturing environment.

VA: As you have mentioned, by 1977 changes had taken place within your work. You now displayed an interest in collage. How would you describe your collage work?

DK: My collage work consisted of mixed media, torn pieces of paper, plastic packets, paint etc., gouache and water colour.

VA: Why did you turn towards collage? What did it provide you with that was lacking in your previous work?

DK: It freed me from the restrictions of using line only to create form. I was beginning to understand that form, shapes and colour underpinned the representational image as well as abstraction. I also started looking at the environment around me and started to incorporate pieces of it into my collages. I didn't have to buy materials all the time. I was using things I found.

VA: Was your collage work still figurative and descriptive?

DK: I was still looking at the township and its activities, people etc.

VA: At this stage, what were your concerns and what were you trying to evoke?

DK: I just thoroughly enjoyed experimenting with collage.

VA: You continued to produce collages into the 1980s and your application to the 1983 Triangle Workshop contained a portfolio of collage work. What media did your collages consist of during this time?

DK: My collages were done on paper. I used mixed media. Pieces of paper, paint, mostly gouache and water-colour paints. I also did drawings on the paper and used pieces of plastic, newspaper and magazine cuttings.

VA: What development, if any, had taken place in the six years that you had been working in this manner?

DK: I grew more confident in my ability as an artist and the collages grew far more sophisticated. I was also less concerned with the image. I also opened up boundaries into a new area of work, one where the representational image became less relevant and where one had more freedom with experimenting with forms, shapes and colours.

VA: In 1983 you attended the Triangle Workshop. The works that you produced at that workshop were very much in the same vein as the collages that you produced before. Could you describe the work that you did there?

DK: When I arrived at the workshop I had never used canvas before, nor had I used brushes or acrylic paint. I had asked for acrylic paint beforehand and was quite glad that I had done so because all I had to do was mix water with it, similar to what I had done with water-colour or gouache, except that I would mix less water. Initially I was a bit nervous when I was given canvas because I had never worked with canvas before and all the other artists seemed to be working very well with canvas and the medium they were using. They were working quite prolifically. Eventually I

found some paper lying about and started drawing figurative images and putting pieces of paper on the canvas with acrylic paint. They were collages in a sense and not unlike that which I had produced before, but the difference lay in doing them on canvas, making use of acrylic medium and the brushes. My works were different to the other artists in the sense that I had made use of figurative images, whereas the others tended to be far more abstract. Except there were a couple of Dutch painters who painted landscapes. I was also quite different in my colours in that they were quite subdued and earthy; township and city colours.

VA: What kind of experience did you gain?

DK: I gained experience in the use of acrylic and I found the medium versatile. I gained experience and confidence in that even though I arrived late, I managed to produce four works, one small and three large ones, and that at the end of the workshop they were all purchased. I had managed to hold my own.

VA: You did not alter your style at the first workshop in 1983, but something must have struck a chord because once you left, you started doing small abstractions on paper. In 1984 you attended your second Triangle Workshop. Here you produced your first full abstractions. What brought about this change?

DK: After being introduced to the acrylic medium I wanted to experiment with this medium fully, and with canvas, and follow an intuitive response to abstraction. I took it to its fullest possibilities and revelled in non-representational art. Once I completed the first Triangle Workshop I started dabbling with acrylic paint and at the second Triangle Workshop I was given the opportunity to really experiment with a large format - canvas, acrylic, whatever medium I wished to use.

VA: What did the abstractions provide you with that the collage method had not?

DK: A greater sense of freedom, in the sense that the acrylic medium provided me with new dimensions. I had moved away from the figurative, no longer restrained by retaining a certain degree of representation. I started playing with my intuitive responses and in a sense the fluidity of the acrylic medium, which collage and paper did not have. Collage had opened up this direction towards abstraction and the acrylic abstractions were simply another development.

VA: What media did your abstractions consist of, i.e. paintings, drawings, canvas, paper?

DK: They really at this stage consisted mostly of acrylic paint and the canvas support. I was no longer producing collage works. In other words, mixed media.

VA: After the 1984 Triangle Workshop you continued producing pure abstract paintings. How did the experience of the Triangle Workshop affect your painting?

DK: The Triangle Workshop provided me with the opportunity to open up my experience and to, in a sense, break away from earlier conventions. It supplied me with the opportunity, materials and the dynamic environment of the other artists present that showed me possible avenues to follow. In this sense it brought about a change or development in my work far sooner than would have occurred if I had not attended the Triangle Workshops.

VA: In your abstractions, what were you trying to express and evoke?

DK: I was delving within myself and exploring my inner spirituality and my intuitive response to the artistic mediums, to my environment and to my experiences. Each mark initiated the next and so forth. There was no image as such that was directing me.

VA: In 1985 you returned to South Africa and initiated the Thupelo Workshop. The works you produced at this workshop were also abstract and within the abstract expressionist style. In what way did your venture into abstract expressionism serve your purposes at this stage?

DK: Abstract expressionism simply opened up my possibilities and avenues and I was really experimenting at this moment in time and enjoying the freedom of the style.

VA: For the remainder of the 1980s you produced abstractions. Did you also produce figurative work?

DK: On occasion I did produce figurative work, when I did my museum studies. I had printmaking classes or workshops while I was studying and there I produced figurative work.

VA: Why did you not remove yourself from figurative work entirely?

DK: I never really wanted to remove myself from the human form, the figure. I was always interested in the human condition and I never felt or saw the need to remove one or the other completely. I believe in a balance between the two and that an artist needs or should be entitled to produce both, for they inform each other.

VA: In 1989 you attended Pachipamwe II. Did you also produce pure abstraction there?

DK: Yes.

VA: Was this interspersed with figurative works?

DK: No, not really. Most of it was abstract, but I did produce one figurative work . . . but I was still concentrating for the most part on abstractions.

VA: At this stage, what concepts were you dealing with?

DK: I was still exploring my spirituality and intuition. I was fascinated that other black artists from other regions were also producing abstractions. I didn't see why South Africans were so upset about the predominantly abstract expressionist style at Thupelo because abstraction is very much within African art, African sculpture, busts etc. I didn't see why they would condemn it as appropriations from America.

VA: During the 1990s evidence of pure abstraction subsided in your paintings. Your work contained more figurative imagery, yet it retained the energetic, erratic mark making of the abstract

expressionist style. Why do you no longer produce pure abstractions?

DK: I felt a need to return to the human form. I never really got rid of the figurative element in my work. Abstraction had given me a new way of looking at painting, the South African city and township scapes. I felt I had achieved what I wanted from abstraction. This is not to say that I would never return to abstraction, it's just to say for the time being the combination of the expressionistic mark with the representational image suits my needs at the moment.

VA: In your view, what is it that you have attained from abstract expression?

DK: It was a freedom and the knowledge and experience to speak with my own true voice. It released me and showed me another necessary dimension.

VA: In your opinion, how do you think the development of the workshop [Thupelo] has affected South African art, and how do you think it has benefited black artists in particular?

DK: It benefited black artists in particular in that it provided them with the ability to interact with white artists and they got a lot more exposure to materials and to other artists. The period in which

these influences were experienced was consolidated into a short patch - two weeks. This benefited them tremendously. It's like cooking food in a microwave and cooking on a fire. You have to chop wood and it takes forever and a day whereas in a microwave it's quick and at the end of the day the food is cooked. But the point is that the one method takes forever and the other doesn't. It's basically a way of speeding up development that takes abnormally long in our country, because of the lack of benefit and facilities that the blacks have had in the past. This way black artists benefited in particular, and white artists benefited from their interaction with black artists. They weren't so insular. I wasn't surprised about the dissatisfaction and criticism I had got from the abstractions I produced at the Thupelo Workshop because I had a sense of it before I left for overseas. White abstractionists had never been that popular because it has always been seen by the critics as copying America and I didn't see any reason as to why one couldn't assimilate, couldn't gain some kind of experience from America. It falls under the idea that what right do these people have to determine what is South African and what isn't South African and what one is allowed to do and what one isn't allowed to do. I think that the Thupelo Workshop affected South African art in that it generated so many other workshops and allowed for an increased interaction in the whole of Africa and brought so much international interest. The general aim of Thupelo was to improve the lot of black artists. The benefit can be

seen in the leap in development of the work of artists who attended the workshops. They really improved a great deal. It was an intense experience because all problems and obstacles were in one place and one learnt a great deal. One also worked with no outside distractions and interruptions. There was no right or wrong within these workshops and the whole idea of experimenting, trying new directions, was encouraged intensely and the environment was positive.

INTERVIEW WITH DAVID KOLOANE**31 MAY 1997**

VA: As mentioned, you had a couple of major influences pertaining to your art, namely Louis Maqhubela and Bill Ainslie. Is there anybody else of significance, perhaps a poet or a writer, that may have influenced you?

DK: In terms of writing, I have been influenced. You know black writers, like the artists, deal with the narrative. We narrate social conditions and so, too, do writers. I remember the first book of short stories I read by Nadine Gordimer. I had never read the work of a white writer who actually dealt with the South African situation like Nadine did, except perhaps one or two white writers like Alan Paton . . . The short story I read was about a lady who was working for a family and was in a sense at the service of that family. She was the maid, but she was also being called to do things outside of that. I also read some other stories where she wrote about characters in the township. I had always wanted to know how she got to know or have an intimate understanding of these characters, because they were far from any stereotypical representations. It was something that was felt, human . . . I was

fortunate because she won the Nobel Prize and she asked me to illustrate some of her short stories.

VA: She was a strong influence in your writing?

DK: Yes, and amongst the black writers the one who has influenced me the most is Wally Serote. I find him one of the most influential writers in South Africa.

VA: What you have written, do you concentrate on art-related topics, or have you written fictional stories as well?

DK: I mostly write on art related-topics, although I have tried writing poetry and short stories. But I still feel I need time to develop that. I mostly try to explain the position of arts and how Apartheid has actually affected art history in this country. I am always considering what it would have been like if this country hadn't been affected by Apartheid, wondering what artists would be doing . . . Another aspect that I have always been closely involved in is music and musicians. Music is something that has influenced me.

VA: Does that relate to the sense of motion in your work?

DK: Yes, because in a sense music has also been something that had sustained black communities. . . . When I grew up the first thing you had to know was how to sing.

VA: You have mentioned that Ainslie taught you about the spirituality of the human being. What did you understand about human spirituality after you had been with Bill Ainslie that you had not known before?

DK: I had read a lot of books on my own trying to unravel a lot of things about religion, secular things and spiritual matters. Reading books on Buddhism and different religious systems. There is a book I read by Oscar Wilde called "The Picture of Dorian Gray" which narrates the story of somebody who had perfect physical features, but was not a very good person. He didn't have a good character; he abused people, especially women, and each time he did something he would look into a mirror and it was as if that was etched on his face. In the end he became disfigured. That was one of the first things that told me there was something inside ourselves that affected what we do outside, because had this person been well-intentioned towards fellow human beings he would have been a whole person. And given his perfect features he would have been an exemplary person, somebody people would have liked to model their lives on When I met Bill he told me of the Sufi sect - what it meant -

and in a sense it fell into what I had been reading about Buddhism and other non-western religions and beliefs. I found that a great help also in the creative sphere, that one shouldn't always be working from a self-conscious point of view, that you should let go and let things happen without you interfering.

VA: Would you say then that a lot of your abstractions were exploring that?

DK: Yes, absolutely. Usually when I started I didn't have any prior knowledge of what I was actually going to do, how and what colours I was going to use.

VA: Now having explored an intuitive response to painting and having expanded your subconscious response as opposed to your conscious through abstraction, when you returned to more figurative work, how would you say this aided your figurative work?

DK: I think it aided my figurative work in that before I did abstraction I had problems with my figuration in that it tended to be wooden and very stiff. When I came back to figuration after abstraction I found that it was fluid and people commented on that. The drawings I worked on no longer had the problems I had before. My drawings were much more fluid and had a lot of movement

which they never had before. So I think this, in a sense, comes from all that inner energy that I was exploring.

VA: Now what I understand of Sufism, which is very little at this stage, is that it's a sect of Islam and it's metaphysical.

DK: It's metaphysical . . . In fact, it's the one spiritual exercise that anybody can do regardless of their religion. These are exercises that actually assist one's personal outlook on life, improve one's personal outlook and your relationship with other people . . .

VA: Why I ask is that when I was researching Bill Ainslie, Sufism was mentioned as one of his influences. I had read that there were two types of Sufism. The original Sufism came from Islam, but the one you have described has been adapted to all religions.

DK: Yes, it was adapted by the west.

VA: Yes, Western Sufism. When Ainslie was talking about Sufism, he was talking about this.

DK: Yes. The one that was adapted.

VA: So it's about improving your personal relationships and spiritual nourishment?

DK: Yes.

VA: I have not read much on Western Sufism, but what I have gathered is the idea that one could be at one with God. That one was not separate from God and that if one entered a mystical state, you could be one with God. Now is this along the same lines?

DK: Yes, because when you are one with God, you are one with the universe. You see things in a holistic fashion. You don't differentiate between cultures, races. That is why, in fact, the person who introduced Sufism to the west - who died recently - he was from Afghanistan. He went lecturing to western universities. He brought awareness and adapted it from the original because he felt it was not something that should be confined to Islam. He was responsible for spreading it in the west.

VA: So it was the principles he valued?

DK: Yes. . .

VA: Given this, abstraction lent itself to those beliefs?

DK: Yes.

VA: Now you have returned to figurative work and it has been said that you are re-addressing township art. Is that true?

DK: Yes. I also think the fact that we did not have formal education, my going into abstraction was in a sense also an exploration of techniques and methods. It was a way of expanding my vocabulary and now coming back to figuration I don't see the distinction so much between my figurative and abstract work. It's only with figurative work that I tend to describe things more, specific things like physical form. Besides doing that, I don't see any difference in my method of working and my intuitive way of doing things.

VA: What is it that particularly interests you about city scapes?

DK: I think being urban-born and never having lived anywhere else. The urban scape is something I love, even when I travel. I love going to the rural areas, but I am still attracted to the city life. City lights at night, irrespective of the dangers and so on. I think it was something I grew up with.

VA: How exactly did the Thupelo Workshop come about? Some say you influenced it, others say Bill did. I need to clarify this.

DK: To put it in proper perspective . . . When I left South Africa, first it was the Triangle Workshop, then studies in London . . . When I was in London, after attending the International Triangle Workshop, . . . I started reading about and talking to people who had been to workshops. I was interested in the difference between formal tuition and the workshop experience. My motivation was how to help South Africa given the problems we have. I realised that in a workshop situation artists tend to understand things much better through practice rather than theory. Rather than sitting and listening to a lecturer tell you about how to resolve a problem which might have taken two years. In a workshop you could possibly resolve it in a day and be surprised that you could actually have managed to resolve that problem.

VA: So it's a much easier learning method?

DK: Yes, it is a much easier method of learning and developing as it doesn't require any particular language or vocabulary. It is a practical thing. In a workshop situation in South Africa you can have a professor or somebody from the rural areas who has never spoken a word of English and they will get along very well on a practical level.

VA: Now the Thupelo Workshop was not a printmaking workshop, it was a painting workshop.

DK: The reason I was doing it was because I had to stick to my course and a specific area. But with the Thupelo Workshop it was different, because painting was my area. It made more sense also with the experience I had at the Triangle Workshop.

VA: You mentioned this idea to Bill, that you were considering a workshop in South Africa, initially wanting one with printmaking; but then it changed when you realised painting would be more appropriate.

DK: The other thing that discouraged me from the printmaking was the equipment, the materials and the inks. It's specialised equipment. It wasn't practical and one would have to limit quite severely the number of participants. You could only cope with maybe four or five people.

VA: I have interpreted it that you spoke to Bill and Bill had also been thinking along similar lines and Bill supplied the contact, Robert Loder.

DK: No, I knew Robert through Anthony Caro. But when Bill came to visit me in New York, we discussed this idea and there was an

American artist who we discussed this with - Peter Bradley. He said he was willing to come as a guest artist. So we, in a sense, wrapped up everything in New York. Bill said, "I am going to find the funding for this workshop when I get back to South Africa", because I was going to London. So when Bill got to South Africa he started working and fortunately he came across this organisation who was very excited about the idea. They were called USSALEP.

VA: That is why one sees it sometimes as the USSALEP Workshop and not Thupelo.

DK: Yes.

VA: Thupelo was meant for the greater good, to aid South African art and particularly black South African artists.

DK: Yes, particularly black artists because of the lack of tuition. It was a leveller. It encouraged artists to explore regardless of their level of education.

VA: So it helped black artists in an art market that was stagnant, suppressive, white dominated and dictated.

DK: Yes.

VA: Do you know who was on the first USSALEP Workshop?

DK: Yes. There was a core group that went to a number of workshops that acted as part of the committee, as well as being people who encouraged other artists to come and participate.... You will find in the first three or so workshops this core group consistently participated. Each time there would be five or six new members from different parts of the country.

VA: There was a heated debate over the first workshop. What was this about? I have the impression that there were many pros and cons.

DK: The gallery inside the university campus was used to hold the workshop's work. Obviously all the lecturers and academics went to look at the exhibition and this really flared them up, that there were black artists doing huge abstract expressionist paintings. So we got flack that we had been influenced by American imperialist influences and that we are being removed from our roots and all similar accusations; that we were doing the work that was done in the 50s; it had a dated look, and what was the point of doing things that were not part of our culture etc. Yet when they [academics] do those things, nobody says that. I mean, conceptual art today is something that was also done in the 60s,

but nobody is saying that and that they do not want it to be seen. It's also recycled work that's being done throughout Europe, the United States and all the ideas of each and every conceptual work you look at has been done before. One should also consider the distance and the fact that the past South African government was not supportive of the arts, and that South Africa was a cultural backwater. We got everything twenty years after....I mean you can't have an avant-garde movement in a country that is so backward. So the whole gripe was the fact that we were being influenced by Americans. But the point is, nobody else came up with any initiative to help artists in this country and when we started this initiative we got all this flack. But now the amazing thing is that from those workshops we were aware that it was important to have a studio space where we could work consistently and we found this building [The Bag Factory] and opened it up to artists of all races. We wanted something to come out of it that is truly South African, not something that pretends. I think that can only be done by artists interrogating what they are doing . . . So when we started they didn't realise what we were doing and some jumped to conclusions that we were being intentionally misled, forced; that we were being paid to do that work by American agents. But now they can see what we were doing, now everybody wants to identify with us.

VA: From the Thupelo Workshop the Bag Factory has emerged?

DK: Yes.

VA: In other places, like Zimbabwe, other workshops have emerged?

DK: Yes.

VA: In the South African context, the Bag Factory is sort of a subdivision of the Thupelo Workshop? Although it's not a workshop in the workshop context, it's derived from the same principles?

DK: Yes, we have been here since 1991. We also avoid only having artists who work in a particular way. We have potters, ceramic artists here, working in different mediums and styles, painters, printmakers and sculptors.

VA: Is there no Thupelo this year?

DK: Yes, lack of funding. Unless you have a sponsor like a bank who says yes, we will adopt this project, it's not going to be possible.

VA: Basically you can see the positive effects of Thupelo Workshop by the artists who have come through it like yourself?

DK: Yes, and Sam Nhlengetwa, Pat and Kay.

VA: And they have all been very successful?

DK: Yes, and the most important thing for me is that the artists have been interrogating and exploring their work, and now they are actually finding their voice.

INTERVIEW WITH LYNDIA MORROSS-BALLEN**19 MARCH 1996**

LMB: You must speak to Rickey Burnett.

VA: Did he know Bill well?

LMB: Yes, he knew Bill very well. In fact he is the person I would really recommend. He's got a really good sense of what Bill was trying to do and he is very articulate . . . he would love to talk about Bill. David as well, but he would know more about what Bill was doing . . . For me though, Bill was three people. For one he was an artist, the other a teacher and [thirdly] he was also working in the political arena. This was very intrinsic to what he was doing because he believed that art was a political act and teaching was a political act. So what he did, the whole movement of the Art Foundation as it came to be [it was originally the Bill Ainslie Studios], was set up as a multicultural art school in the centre of white suburbia which was strictly between the lines. What was important about this was that you would go into a class where there were wealthy, middle class housewives drawing, and next to them would be a labourer, gardener, bricklayer, builder who was also drawing . . . the art process became a leveller. For the first

time you actually looked at a black woman or black man in a completely different light because they were doing what you were and better than you were doing. It was . . . very much about art being a levelling process [and] that was a great conscious thing he was doing by setting up the art school, because it was the only place where ordinary people would have those kind of experiences.

VA: You did a lot of work with children there?

LMB: I actually started the children's school there... You see, what happened was, Bill did his degree. You know that Bill didn't do a Fine Art course as such. He didn't have an art history background but a philosophy background. He knew very little about [the] history of art. I don't know exactly what he studied, but I do know there was very little of that involved. Then what happened was, he came to Johannesburg and he set up Jubilee Road, which was after he went to Cyrene Mission. Jubilee Road was a house that they rented. What is important is that there were a lot of artists who actually congregated in this house.

VA: Black and white?

LMB: Yes, black and white. They actually had Dumile Feni who was a black artist who lived with the Ainslies. Bill at the time was doing

these big figurative paintings. There was an enormous amount of interaction going on at Jubilee Road and it was a place where there was a lot of discussion about the arts, theatre etc. . . . There was a lot of that kind of interaction and they had all these black artists. Then the next place that Bill went to was a house here . . . It was actually Cecily Sash's house. He had a studio there . . . [and] started teaching suburban middle class people. Bill was very refined and people really liked him as a person. He established his middle class teaching operation and that, I think, probably got too big and he moved to the Yugoslav Embassy in Anerly street. What happened there is he had enough students in the school to warrant bringing in a whole lot of new teachers. Ricky Burnett from the Newtown Galleries was a medical student at the time. He decided he was going to give up medicine and go and work with Bill and become a student. So what Bill did was, he took on a number of apprentices. This was a period of apprenticeship. What he did was, he had these young artists who wanted to paint; [they] would actually come and work in this big old house. They would take up rooms [he was grappling with his own work at the time, he was doing big figurative paintings - mostly black people]. He also took a lot of extra students and what the artists did was help him teach. He had a lot of students. It was a teaching school that was teaching apprentices and these students . . . I think William Kentridge started in that house. So what happened is, he had these young artists painting in these studios; they would have

crits together. It was really an artists' collaborative. He had this vision of generating enough students for these people to teach . . . that is when I joined Bill. I said, "I'm teaching a whole lot of kids' classes and I'm feeling very lonely. Can I join you?" There was this wonderful sense of an artists' community. The issues at the time were really around trying to find a South African way of painting. What was South African and what was African. Bill had this whole thing that painting started with Matisse - that is where his head started from. He was very interested in colour. A lot of teaching . . . was colour, mark and gesture, all those abstract things. I never heard Bill talk about subject matter . . . Ricky Burnett was a student here and why I remember this is that there was a lot of discussion about content in painting. Then he was doing drawing about social commentary. He was definitely doing stuff, things that had political content...There was a lot of discussion about that. Bill was very much into colour, mark.

VA: In other words, his paintings did not necessarily reflect his teachings.

LMB: It is very complex. For me, what happened in Bill's teaching life was, in the beginning, around about these periods, the period of apprenticeship and certainly in the teaching of his inter-racial Bill Ainslie Studios, is that he was very much about individual exploration. He encouraged people to explore and that was

wonderful . . . That you must follow yourself. You must find yourself by exploring your own mark, your own handwriting, your own medium . . . and then he changed very dramatically. He had this thing about the American school of painting. Do you know about what happened there?

VA: No.

LMB: What happened was, he actually attended a workshop in 1985.

He attended a workshop in the States which was kind of an exchange programme which David went on a year before.

VA: The Triangle Workshop? Is that it?

LMB: Yes. What actually brought that about was that Bill had met

Anthony Caro . . . What he did was, during the heart of Apartheid he got his colleagues and friends in the States and England to put together an exhibition of paintings to be brought out to South Africa as a kind of counter-boycott thing. He wanted paintings to be seen by black artists. They believed, and Anthony believed, that black artists were being deprived of this very special experience of the work of international artists. So this exhibition was held at the FUBA Gallery. As a result of that, there was a kind of collaboration between American artists and South African, and that was the link that was set up between the Triangle Workshop

and South Africa. A lot of artists who exhibited, who sent paintings to this counter-boycott thing were American artists . . . It was quite an impressive collection. They weren't big paintings, but they were big names. They wanted to support black artists in this country, so they invited David to the Triangle Workshop. Caro came out and met Bill and Bill formed this kind of support for black artists. He was in the political front. Bill belonged to the ANC, although he never made it vocal. He was friendly with Wally Serote. Wally Serote is now a member of parliament. He was the person in London who upheld the cultural boycott. If you ever wanted to do anything with the arts in this country, you had to consult with Wally. Well any American or British artist who wanted anything to do with South Africa had to first appeal to Wally. Bill was very friendly with Wally; he used to visit him in London all the time.

VA: So this is why his ties overseas were so strong?

LMB: Yes, this is what I'm saying. Bill went to the Triangle Workshop and he became obsessed with American painting, to the extent that he believed that every one should . . ., well one of the things that happened, I believe, is that Bill was stuck in his own painting. He always said that he spent ten years developing his school and his attitude towards paintings [and he] had never really developed his own thing. So what happened was, he went to Triangle and

they were doing this kind of post-colour field painting. Those concepts like cropping a canvas, squeegees . . . were all very new to him and kind of liberating. He said he was completely liberated. For the first time in years he produced lots of work. He believed to unblock people, you needed to work in this way, which a lot of people found very narrow and because . . . he had found his way through this he imposed a lot on his students. Where before the kind of liberating factor was that you taught people colour and you taught them about movement and they did what they liked. But now he had this very set idea. I mean . . . he would say 'Come out into the garden. Here's a piece of canvas and some paint. Splash around', and they [students] would be completely lost. For [some of] them it wasn't a getaway to paradise because they hadn't learnt anything. So it was just very inhibiting. He got completely set on this . . . skill of abstraction . . . For contemporary South African artists at the time - I'm talking 1985 - there was a lot of protest art. That was the thing to be making: protest art, and also to be making statements. Certainly not to be importing American artists and imposing. You see, what Bill would do . . . he would have workshops at the Art Foundation or some retreat. He would take a whole lot of black artists with him and they would all land up doing these kinds of paintings . . . These [the artists] were kind of naive black crafts people who were doing much more traditional black township art, which Bill hated. He felt that it was very derogatory. But what he was doing was imposing

this kind of American style . . . Oh I forgot, he actually went to do you know who Douglas Portway is?

VA: Yes I do. Apparently Bill was inspired by him.

LMB: That was the Jubilee period. Around about this period Bill absolutely loved Douglas Portway's paintings. They were very minimal, very beautiful paintings. He went through the figurative period and then he went through the Namib period - exquisite paintings. These are basically the three periods. [The last period was after the Triangle Workshop].

VA: What were they like?

LMB: When he was influenced by Portway? He actually went to Cornwall [and] basically what Portway did was, he did these oil paintings using a roller. Bill [also] rolled them out very fine. Thin layers of paint. They were about the Namib. These very minimal, empty spaces - deserts. He did this technique. He would have newsprint - he would paint on the back of it and let it dry for a while. Then he would put it back on the canvas and then draw on the back side so that the back of the paper would act as a piece of carbon (then only where you have drawn will come through). Lucky Sibiyá also used this technique. Very much like the colour field paintings. So when he met Olitski and all the colour field

painters he was ecstatic. It was almost as if [he was] meeting a kindred spirit. Almost like plugging into something you really understood. Anyway, so that was his next period. Then what happened was, when he went to America and he met these artists, they were all painting in this acrylic gel. Now Bill had never painted in acrylic - never - and he was introduced to this stuff, which is a very heavy, gel-like substance.

VA: Does it look almost as if wax has been put onto the surface?

LMB: Yes, it dries very quickly and you can plaster with it. It's very flexible. It's like a very heavy varnish which you can paint into and also stick things on. That's why those paintings are full of sand and sawdust. Now he could never have done that before, because his early work was flat and about veils. This was very textured. So it gave him a way to work very quickly and very organically and spontaneously and direct. All these [things] Bill talked about: immediacy, openness. All these things this medium invited him to do. So he got very taken in by this medium and he did some very amazing paintings . . . I can tell you a lot about his teaching. He was very much about teaching visually, teaching people to see. It was about opening your eyes to colour. Perception on a very deep, philosophical level. When you read articles on him he always says, "My school doesn't teach technique or skill; it teaches people to see". And basically what he was saying was, "I

am teaching people to be aware of processes and the way nature works, the light works, the way colour works and the way human beings work and the differences between individuals". All those things on a very deep philosophical level. He would do a lot of crits and say, "This person sees things this way, and this person sees things that way, but they are all right". On a very deep level that was about culture and values. They are about very real cultural issues. That this person and that person are looking at the same visual phenomenon, but they are interpreting it differently, and that's about a very basic human condition. They are coming from different angles, or they are seeing with different eyes. It was very poetic, what he was saying, but it [also] wasn't. It was a subtle and profound way of teaching about values. I don't think I ever saw Bill teach about a colour wheel. It was a very impractical kind of teaching, when I went to the Art Foundation to teach. He would say, "There's a wall. Can you see purple in it? Can you see the shadows are purple and the light areas are yellow?". And people would look at it and be intrigued by that. I'd say to him, "But Bill, shouldn't you give them a colour wheel and show them the complementary colours?". He was very much about finding your way through seeing. He had a very profound understanding . . . I appreciate that. He had an extremely intelligent and profound teaching about life.

VA: The crits that he gave?

LMB: They were wonderful. As a student, especially when I was at Wits, we were doing a kind of hard-edge painting and there was absolute criticism: this works, this doesn't work. [But] Bill had this incredible ability to work through a painting and point out very important things about consistency. When I say to you he was concerned about individuals, he would bring someone into the class and say, "Draw this still life". He would teach them about proportion, scale and light, the basic drawing things. He also had an ability to zone in on their special thing. His criticism wouldn't be, "Your mark is too hard". He would say, "You are not being consistent with what you are doing. This is not you". He had an ability to look at someone's handwriting and pick up when they were not being true to themselves. He had this incredible ability to say, "You have copied somebody because your mark is not consistent". It was an incredible thing about seeing it for what it was, not seeing it for what it wasn't, or what it should be. Bill had such an impact on people's lives, we still sit down and talk about him. Because he was at the forefront of the cultural boycott, Fieke and Bill had all sorts of banned people staying with them. They were underground a lot of the time, although they had this sort of up-front art school. It was this very thin line . . . They were heavily involved in politics. You know Fieke was a child of the war. Did you know that?

VA: No, I didn't.

LMB: Well, she is. She actually comes from a partly Jewish background.

Her family hid Jews during the war. So she came to this country, thrown into politics and Apartheid. She still had the mind-set of harbouring political outcasts. They were always involved in that sort of thing. It's largely to do with the cultural boycott. They went between the lines. The first time I ever ate dinner with Fieke, the first time I ever met Bill, I must have been nineteen. Often I used to stay after teaching for dinner and they had all these black friends over and I was completely amazed, because that was something that never happened in Johannesburg. It was completely banned. It was an amazing institution. I don't know what the Art Foundation is like now. I don't know what Fieke has said about it.

VA: She said it had changed since his death.

LMB: Yes, it certainly isn't the same as when he was there. The other thing that you should know is that he set up all these community art centres. One of his educational objectives was to have outreach programmes. I spent a lot of time talking to Bill. What happened was I joined him, then I actually went overseas to do my masters in the States. Then I came back and he had just set

up a school here in Saxonwold. We spent a lot of time defining objectives and writing out programmes. At the time he [Ainslie] was forming outreach programmes which were set in community art centres. Alexandra Art Centre, FUBA, FUNDA and the Katlehong Art Centre were all little outreach centres that were important because they had a far-reaching effect on the development of art in this country. At the Art Foundation we taught artists to teach children, black artists in particular, who can go back and teach in their communities. He was very instrumental in those kind of things . . . When he was at Anerly Road, Rick Burnett, Gale Bohman, William Kentridge and others were working with him. They have carried a lot of his influence with them. I wasn't painting with him in those days. I was painting on my own and teaching. But Ricky was painting with him, so he knew his issues: Bill's painting issues. I knew his teaching philosophies . . . A lot of black artists were either students of Bill or lived with him. Politics is about power and so is teaching. You have the ability and if you are very serious about teaching, the power is to enlighten people about universal concepts and not just about painting. Bill had that enormous responsibility, because it's a power you are invested with. It can be like a political power. You can use it and abuse it, or you can use it to enlighten people. So the thing about politics and teaching is a very current issue. They were very tied together for Bill. He enlightened people about very profound issues like basic colour and culture. That is what artist

culture is all about, and culture is about people. The whole circle came round again to making art. It was never a conscious thing; it was very subtle and sensitive, just by having black and white people in one house together. You became very aware of differences, similarities, tensions. For me it was fascinating when he had only ever taught in schools that had children of a similar socio-economic group, then to have a class so mixed. It was unheard of in this country.

VA: Did theory form a major part of his teaching?

LMB: No. You see, the Art Foundation was never a school like the Tech is. It was very haphazard. There were no degrees. It was very much like an apprenticeship. You see, Bill believed in workshops. You just do things together and learn from each others skills. I'm a Fine Art graduate and I believed there needed to be some sort of structure to hang this stuff on. Bill's theoretical input would be that he would show a Matisse, a Cezanne and a Picasso. He would say, "Look, these people have done this to this still life". It would be a range of artists and the way they expressed their feelings and ideas. It wouldn't be a chronological study of Matisse's life.

INTERVIEW WITH LINDA MORROSS-BALLEN**24 MARCH 1997**

VA: Ainslie's paintings during the late 50s and early 60s portrayed mostly monumental African figures. In what way, if any, are these paintings set apart from those produced by other white artists who were also depicting African figures at that time?

LMB: Well for me, what is different about those paintings is the fact that they are really about form and structure. There is very little about them that I would say talks about anything other than the formal qualities of those figures. There is a kind of understanding that what Bill was grappling with was a kind of 'Cezannesque' form and structure and that the figure happened to be a vehicle for doing that. But the fact that they are monumental, enormous and certainly kind of volumetric, larger than life forms . . . is not so much a comment on a people; it's more a comment on the nature of form and structure. I think when Bill started doing a series of paintings later during the 1976 uprising he started working on the figure again, and then I would say he was saying more about the nature of the people instead of the nature of the figure. [But] it's almost as if his early paintings are about some kind of striving for a kind of spiritual vehicle for encapsulating form. To me they

were not 'really' about African people; it was just about the fact that they happened to be African. But they certainly didn't make a political statement.

VA: So it wasn't protest art?

LMB: Not at all.

VA: In your view, why do you think Ainslie focused on African figures?

LMB: You see, I have seen portraits that he did of white people at the same time and there is this same quality of this sort of sculptured, chiselled outcome.

VA: You don't think then it's particular to his African. . .

LMB: Well, I think it is. I think Bill was definitely grappling with his kind of Anglo-Saxon African kind of heritage. Definitely, if you have located him in a social context by now, Bill was very much a private school, refined kind of traditional English schoolboy. His whole presence had a kind of Natal schoolboy feel about it. So he carried that heritage and grappled with what it meant to be that person in Africa. For me, that is what it was about. It always felt to me, in the whole context of his home and in his studio or wherever I was with Bill, that his presence had this kind of colonial in Africa

feel . . . The whole thing about Bill's work was that in his life and in his work he was involved in two completely different things. His life's mission was to work between the lines to establish a system that was outside of Apartheid. So wherever he could, he worked against the system. Then one would imagine his work would be political and that it would tap into this social focus. But it was very different. His art was somehow outside of that.

VA: In what way?

LMB: For instance, if you look at his whole grappling with abstraction.

His grappling with abstraction was at a time when all the most fertile and the most rich and the most powerful protest art was happening. Bill was such a politicised person and he was doing abstraction because of the nature of what he considered art to be. I have to see his work in the context of what I know his philosophy was - that art wasn't about making statements; it was about grappling with forms and the visual.

VA: So he made a statement rather in his private life?

LMB: Yes. His private life was about carving out a place for people to be individuals. It was a statement. . . . let me read you a statement I wrote out: "Throughout the Apartheid era while whites had access to art education at schools, universities and colleges,

black people were deprived of this opportunity of art education at formal institutions and they were not encouraged to explore and express their personal cultural values because of the oppressive nature of the system imposed on them. Apartheid, moreover, because of its policy of separateness, discouraged the sharing of cultural values". Because multiracial art education was not available in schools and universities, he set up the Art Foundation so that blacks would have access to the same kind of qualitative education as whites. The second thing was that he set it up so that there would be a sharing of value systems. In the same class, let's say, there would be Mrs Oppenheimer's gardener and Mrs Blogg, for example, from next door. So it was a leveller. He worked in terms of this kind of thing in education. It was definitely about creating an opportunity for people to express who they were in this world . . . You know, his whole mission for me was to make space for people to express themselves in any way that they felt was possible. And that's what he was doing; grappling with trying to express who he was, and it certainly wasn't through the vehicle of talking about politics, because his paintings were more about colour and light. His paintings had nothing to do with the political situation. They had to do with who Bill was as a spiritual being in the world. And he was very much plugged into a whole lot of philosophers and people who had absolutely nothing to do with the particularity of being in South Africa.

VA: Do you know which philosophers in particular he was interested in?

LMB: Ask Fieke. I can't recall off hand now . . . You must remember that we are talking about days before even the concept of personal rights ever existed. The South Africa that you know now is very different. For Bill that was kind of at the heart of his whole being - that every individual must be given the freedom to express in the most open and unrestricted manner. His philosophy encompassed that they could have been doing any kind of art. What was at the heart of it was qualitative. That good quality was what was important. Quality has nothing to do with content.

VA: How did he gauge quality?

LMB: Well, he had a very interesting concept. He would say if you give somebody who is a connoisseur five African masks. A connoisseur was a person who had taste - taste implied that a person had looked at enough things to have developed a connoisseurship and they would be able to tell which one of those was the best and the quality would be determined by the arrangement of the formal elements. The interaction of those formal element determines quality. It's got nothing to do with the

content; it's about the presence of that work. I would say the orchestration of the elements.

VA: In other words, if you understand the elements and start dealing with the elements, your ability to determine quality increases.

LMB: Absolutely. It's about experience. He used to talk very specifically about the fact that there is a direct relationship between somebody who is a good wine taster and somebody who is a connoisseur looking at paintings. They develop a taste. He always gave that example and lots of people used to argue with him and say it is not the same, because one is in the senses and one is in the mind. But there's definitely the thing about the fact that in painting your senses converge and what happens is, if it makes up a whole that is dynamic and has equilibrium, then it's a qualitative work of art. So he talked in those kinds of terms. It had nothing to do with what the paintings signified in the world. Not about content at all.

VA: So it was about an aesthetic experience?

LMB: Yes. Absolutely. That is what it was. It was definitely about aesthetics.

VA: Do you know if he was still painting predominantly African figures at Cyrene Mission?

LMB: I don't know for sure. You will have to ask Fieke. But I think so. I met Bill in 1975 and at that stage he was already doing his abstract work, similar to that of Douglas Portway.

VA: By the early 1970s he had discarded the figure to a large extent, producing a number of paintings that consisted of vast open plains of colour, populated by various shapes.

LMB: Do you know why that happened?

VA: Just that he discarded the figure to a large extent, producing a number of paintings that...

LMB: Do you know about Douglas Portway?...Well, Douglas was a very important person in Bill's life. Do you know about him?

VA: This is where I am slightly confused. I got the impression that Bill found Portway's work inspiring. He liked his manner of work, his style, and was working in a similar way.

LMB: Do you know what Douglas Portway's work looks like. Because his early works looked quite a lot like Bill's. What happened was

that I think there was a kind of resonance and converging of interests. Portway went to work in St Ives and Bill [also] went to work there.

VA: Fieke intimated that he started working in this direction before he even knew about Portway.

LMB: Maybe. The person who might be able to help you is Linda Givon.....In fact, I can tell you a little. I have very strong recollections of statements that Bill made because I remember him always saying that until he started painting in acrylic [1985], he used to say that he had to exorcise Portway from his soul. 'I had to exorcise him because he was so present in my soul'.

VA: In other words, he was largely influenced by Portway until he started working in acrylics.

LMB: He had to get over him, get rid of him. He used to say he couldn't come into his own. He felt he had been so influenced by Portway.

VA: You referred to them as his Namib paintings. Does this apply to the work, the general look of those atmospheric vast planes, or is it referring to a specific series of paintings?

LMB: I think there was one exhibition that Linda Givon held. Ask her, to be sure.

VA: In your view, why did his painting style change and what do you think he was exploring in these paintings? Form?

LMB: I think what was happening was...Yes, it was about form, but it was more about light and atmosphere as a kind of vehicle for a kind of spiritual space. Bill was a deeply spiritual person and I think it was part of him accepting himself and kind of transcending the political arena. Again it comes back to that thing about politics. But Bill was not involved with politics for the sake of politics. What he was involved in was the nature of the human psyche and that in fact, what one needed to do was to express one's particular presence in the world....he was trying to make way for people to be or to have the ability to be what they were in the world...Bill had this thing about this quiet, calm, empty space. When he talked, he often put his hand on his head because he could think more clearly when his eyes were closed. He was a very powerful, very slow-speaking, very deliberate man. Bill would never say something without thinking very carefully. Whatever he said had meaning.

VA: Would one be correct in saying that previously he had portrayed the physical and, to some extent, the spiritual? Now he was

discarding the physical and looking towards an inner, spiritual essence of man?

LMB: It sounds appropriate; but when I walked into Fieke's dining room a few months ago, I saw this painting with a flash. It looked very fresh and one of the things that Bill tried to do was keep his paintings alive and there is a feeling of the gesture just having dawned. So Bill immediately is constantly there. And when you talk about the physical. It's no longer physical in the descriptive form; it's physical in the gesture of making. It is a very difficult thing, the physical presence of the work and the tangible material presence. But also there is this thing about the physical presence of the artist that you don't ever disguise the gesture and the energy. It's definitely about the fact that he tried to make the mark that would express his physical movement in the world. So his physical presence was very much there - the physical movement of the artist. And even in his teaching, it was a major thing that nothing became mechanical. The mark must carry vitality and energy, immediacy and freshness.

VA: He was working then with the idea that there was no given. Ricky mentioned that at times he had trouble finishing a painting.

LMB: It was a big question. What comes into play when you talk about the finish of a work of art. He started cropping things...did Ricky

talk about that? If your basic premise is what makes a work of art is the juxtaposition of the art elements, there are many ways of doing that. You can take a format and work on it until it feels as if the whole thing works. You look at a painting and you acknowledge that the art elements come together as a whole, or else you cut the format on which they are until it works. That is what he [Ainslie] would do on occasion; he would crop the painting until what he was left with worked. He was solving paintings and trying to come to a whole, and a whole is about the decisions you make along the way and the gestures that you make. So one way of making a painting is that you have a piece of paper that's not going to change shape and you work on it until it works. And working means that you arrive at a whole that has a dynamic equilibrium, that has energy and balance. If that's not the way you want to do it, then your variable is the format. So what Bill would do was, he would work on massive, big canvases and then he would just choose a piece and say, "That piece for me contains all the elements I would like and I will just cut that out". All those paintings seen in the house were done like that.

VA: Is that why they are made up of pieces?

LMB: Yes; but he also used to use, you know that roll you get in a cash register till? Do you know how he used that? It's like a piece of masking tape, except it doesn't stick, and what he would do was

hold it up against the paintings and it would frame the image and then he would cut out what was behind it. So all those edges could be manipulated and moved, so there was no absolute to the given. That was what he used to do. It's like making a piece of sculpture in a way; it is not bound by a given parameter. The format doesn't dictate it.

VA: Those works that have canvas sticking out of them?

LMB: They were really just an extension of paper collage. It's part of the same process. You don't feel that you are defined or limited by the fact that you are using a two dimensional surface . . . nothing was given . . . you were free as the artist to make changes right along the way. You didn't have a concept, you see. It was the absolute opposite to what a conceptual artist would do. What happened was that you didn't have an idea first and then illustrate the idea. That is the way Bill would talk. He would say, "This is an illustration" [in a crit]. He would say you had an idea, and then you carried it through, and this illustrates the idea that was in your head. For him, making a work of art was the sum total of the decisions you made in your creativity.

VA: Nothing predetermined.

LMB: Nothing predetermined. Everything spontaneous. Everything direct. Those were the words he used: immediate, fresh, no limitations, no such thing as making a sketch and just carrying it through. At every point there was a decision to make . . . He would say that sometimes you could paint a whole painting in the last hour because you can rip it up and stick it back. You might spend weeks doing something, and then the last ten minutes just tear the whole thing up and stick it back in another way and that's the final painting....As a teacher his emphasis was very much on finding what was okay for the individual. He wasn't dogmatic. It was definitely his way of working. He talked about the fact that it unblocked him.

VA: By the 1980's Ainslie was producing full abstractions. Why did he totally discard the figure in his work and turn to full abstraction?

LMB: There were lots of debates about the figure. For him the figure was just an obstruction. It was like the figure wasn't necessary because all along he was dealing with form and colour and the elements. The figure was just a vehicle for expressing them. He decided that it wasn't a necessary vehicle for him . . . For him painting was, well the best paintings for him were the ones that came about in the most natural way, and the most natural way would be truth to materials etc. Very formalistic stuff. Greenberg. The best paintings express the nature of the materials that they

are made up of. So if you were using canvas, show the edge of the canvas, rip its fibres. If you are using sand, show it. The best paintings are those that express the nature of the materials in the most natural way. Let the process show . . .

VA: Once a painting was completed, he would then look at it and name it according to whatever he felt?

LMB: Yes; what to him it conveyed. So when I think how Bill got into those paintings that were torn and had canvas stuck into them . . . If you had a piece of canvas you had the most natural thing . . . what do you do with the fabric, you tear it. Canvas is very different from working on board. One could not work as one would on board. Be true to the nature of canvas; explore canvas for the sake of canvas, acrylic for its runny, thick quality.

VA: Is it true to say that for the latter part of the 1970s and the most part of the 1980s Ainslie did not produce a lot of work?

LMB: Bill went overseas in 1985. I know that because that was when I had my Goodman Gallery show and he had just started using acrylics. For the ten years before that, from 1975 to 1985, he didn't do very much work as he was setting up the Art Foundation. I remember him even saying that he didn't work for ten years. Then he discovered a way of working. I think we talked about this

before. When he went to America he discovered a new way of working. All these things that had blocked him, like the oil paint that he was rolling on in his Namib paintings, all of that didn't give him the freedom that he wanted. So he discovered acrylic, tearing canvas, cropping and all these new techniques when he went to the Triangle Workshop.

VA: Did he go to the 1984 Triangle Workshop?

LMB: No, I don't think he went in 1984. David went in 1984. Did Bill? He might have . . .

VA: So after Triangle his work took on a new lease...

LMB: Yes, and he became extremely prolific.

VA: Up to this point he was producing pure abstractions in oils, but he wasn't getting what he wanted from that medium?

LMB: Yes, he was very frustrated and couldn't resolve things. You see, when Ricky knew Bill, he was grappling with this fixed format and the coagulating effects of the oil. He just couldn't move and felt incredibly claustrophobic and I remember him being extremely liberated by the new devices he picked up in the States.

VA: His "last paintings", produced at Pachipamwe, have been regarded by some as a significant development in his work. Would you agree with this?

LMB: I think they were just the culmination of him coming to terms with the new medium and I think they are fine examples of him understanding what he was doing. In other words, he had enough experience by then.

VA: Ricky intimated that work he had done prior to Pachipamwe was as good, if not better. Do you agree?

LMB: Yes, I agree, [and] because he ran the Art Foundation it was extremely time consuming. He had to snatch time to paint.

VA: In your opinion, what is unique about this body of work?

LMB: I think that some of the paintings are really good in what Bill determined to be quality; that they came together as a whole in a really dynamic and significant way.

VA: If you look at the development of his paintings as a whole from the 1950's till the time he died, what would you say was his motivation and quest?

LMB: Definitely he would have talked about inner necessity. The

Kandinsky statement: I have an inner necessity to express myself through the medium of visual art. A drive to make something. A spiritual object in the world that carries with it a sense of who I am and what it is to be alive in this world. The thing about manipulating physical materials to make a spiritual object. I understood that through Bill. I don't think I ever heard him say that, but it is, for me, to give spirit to matter. You take this substance from the world and infuse it with spirit. That would be the kind of thing Bill would like to hear he was doing. It wasn't about telling a story in its most essential format.

VA: No great symbolism?

LMB: No, no great symbolism. Very modest statement... Bill didn't really talk about God very much, but I would imagine what he was trying to do was do something that was pure and honest and real that wasn't contrived, that was very important, that expressed what it was - canvas and paint. And that the manner in which he put those materials together would express his spirit and what it was to be alive. Very much about honesty. Bill had this incredible ability to distinguish between what was real and what was contrived, and that meant a very fine discrimination between what was truthful, truly that person expressing themselves, or was that

person trying to be somebody else. It was what was wonderful about him as a teacher. He would look at a mark and say that the mark doesn't have the consistency of the others; it doesn't have the gesture that is consistent with your handwriting. It looks like you did it in a moment of otherness. I spent a lot of time teaching with Bill and it wasn't about the fact that your drawing looked like the model, but rather about the fact that the mark you made to describe an anatomical structure was truly the mark that came out of your hand. It takes very fine judgement to know that. The most important thing to Bill as a teacher was to access the person's individuality; who you are in the world, for whatever that was. Flow and energy, that's the way he would talk, and it was wonderful. It was like talking about a dancer. You can see when they are not being true to their form.

VA: He had a positive, reinforcing manner?

LMB: A very cherishing, embracing and nourishing teacher. And that extended into his political life. And he appalled racism because it didn't do that. Bill is actually a very spiritual person. He didn't talk about God, but there was a sense that he was definitely tuned into an inner life force. Definitely about energy.

VA: Ainslie and Koloane, in conjunction with Robert Loder, initiated the first Thupelo Workshop in 1985. In your opinion, what impact

has the Thupelo Workshop had on South African art and the development of black South African artists?

LMB: The Thupelo Workshop was controversial. It certainly tapped into Bill Ainslie's whole philosophy of allowing people the freedom to express who they were; but it was considered by many basically a western import. That they [Thupelo] had brought an American 'thing' here that didn't allow the artist to bring along his or her own personal mythology.

VA: In other words, the artists that attended Thupelo?

LMB: Yes, the artists that came to Thupelo. Well, when I think about the workshop that I am conducting in their own community, we encourage [black artists] to work in the materials that are available to them. But what these people did is that [black artists] were given gel and acrylic . . . and it was very alien to anything of their culture. And those materials actually don't give much. I mean, they are very limiting for somebody who has never worked with them, and if you look at what Bill was doing, they opened and liberated for him, but for another artist they might be very limiting. It certainly doesn't embrace the kind of techniques that they would be familiar with. Actually very limiting in a way . . . They [black artists] didn't bring anything from their context to the workshop . . . It was whites imposing something on blacks, and that was the

criticism . . . If you read other crits it was definitely this thing about, if you took black artists who were doing pretty little water colours of the township scenes and portraits etc . . . , stuff they would have imbibed from their context . . . [remembering] the reason they got in to Thupelo is because they were established artists, but, they would get there and they would be handed these massive canvases and gel and squeegees and stuff and that was what they would work in. So they produced these paintings that had very little bearing on what they had done before. Yes, it might have been a liberating experience, but for some of them it was just a reality that didn't have any bearing on their past.

VA: So they might not have benefited from it as much as some people might have hoped?

LMB: I think that maybe some have, for example David, but he went back to imagery and he used some of the techniques that he learned from it, the spontaneity etc., although David did beautiful works before he did that - the most exquisite water colours. This was before he went to Thupelo. I met David in 1975 at Bill's studio. But the point is that David took it further because he had the intelligence to do that. He was very critical and he could understand the issues. You see, what didn't happen in those workshops and what was always my criticism... I as an art educator opposed Bill because there was never any discussion generated

by what happened. I mean, they didn't discuss what they were doing; where it was taking them.

VA: There was some contention surrounding this?

LMB: It was a very heated debate. There were nights when I didn't even sleep.

VA: From David I get the impression that he was fairly surprised by the criticism; that it was rather antagonistic?

LMB: There was a lot of criticism. I'll give you an example: Colin Richardson, Penny Siopis's husband, attended a presentation given by a guy called, I think, Peacock. He was one of the people who came out to run the Thupelo Art Project. He gave a slide presentation one night that was attended by people from Wits [University of the Witwatersrand]. Now Wits in those days was very politicised and it was also very conceptual and very critical. This guy held up a slide of Barnett Newman or one of the abstract expressionists who did those stripe paintings - Kenneth Noland, perhaps, and he compared it to a Xhosa blanket. He said that what Noland was trying to do was the same as what the Ndebele was doing, which was that he was working with colours in a dynamic way to make an orchestration of colours in the same way as Noland was doing. So he was taking it from a completely

formal perspective. Richardson nearly went mad. He said, "You can't do that. The purposes are completely different". One is making a ritualistic object . . . there were arguments from both sides and I felt very divided about what was going on because in fact the Ndebele woman is choosing colour for its aesthetic appeal; it's not only ritual. She's choosing it because the colours work together. Linda Givon [Goodman] said, "How can you diminish the relevance of these religious objects? They have anthropological aspects". The American artists were coming in with this very glib, superficial....they were coming here without an understanding or encompassing of what it meant to be in South Africa.

VA: If there was any negative aspect to Thupelo then it was this idea?

LMB: They were not celebrating or acknowledging the idea of what it means to be here in South Africa.

INTERVIEW WITH SAM NHLENGETWA**25 MARCH 1997**

VA: When did you first meet David Koloane?

SN: In 1976 at the Johannesburg Art Foundation. Thereafter I went to Rorke's Drift in 1977.

VA: Have you interacted with Koloane ever since?

SN: After Rorke's Drift I was associated with FUBA. I interacted with him quite a bit there. Then in the early 1990s I started at the Bag Factory and as you know, we both work there.

VA: At the Johannesburg Art Foundation, when you met Koloane, in what manner was he working? In other words, was his style figurative?

SN: Yes, I would say that his work was figurative.

VA: Have you seen the development of his work from figurative imagery to full abstraction?

SN: To some extent, yes. He has worked within the two different styles and at times alternated them.

VA: In your opinion, why do you think David discarded the figurative in his work and turned to full abstraction?

SN: I cannot say for certain, except that he was exploring the abstract expressionist style in its totality and for the time being it provided him with answers.

VA: How do you think this encounter with full abstraction has benefited his work today?

SN: I cannot say. You would have to ask him for that answer. But one can see a development in his work in the difference in his mark making and texture.

VA: What do you think Koloane is trying to explore in his paintings today?

SN: David's paintings deal with socio-political things. He explores his environment and the people that surround him.

VA: Of your time at the Johannesburg Art Foundation, what did you gain in terms of your artistic development and in what way was Bill a unique teacher?

SN: My art developed on the whole, but mostly in drawing. Bill was different in that he encouraged freedom of expression. He didn't just simply mould you. He would wait and try to see what was particular to you as an individual person and then try to get the best of that out of you.

VA: David and Bill initiated the first Thupelo Workshop in 1985. Did you attend this workshop?

SN: Yes.

VA: What can you tell me of your experience there?

SN: It was the first workshop in South Africa and I was honoured to be invited as I was unknown at the time and it was like 'knowns' working with the 'unknowns'. It felt quite prestigious. It was also highly unusual in that white and black cultures were brought together working as equals.

VA: There was much controversy pertaining to the 1985 Thupelo Workshop because of the strong abstract expressionist influence.

Some considered this a positive aspect and others viewed it as being negative. What is your view?

SN: I saw it [abstract expressionism] as a positive thing. It was sad that people accused Bill Ainslie of 'teaching' black people Abstract Expressionism. They implied he was indoctrinating us with a Western import. I found this rather a racist and insulting view. The purpose of the workshop was to expose us to new techniques, methods and styles; to create a dynamic working environment. We were introduced to abstract expressionism and in many ways it was liberating, adding to our artistic vocabulary. I found it insulting that people thought we were too naive to cope with abstract expressionism, that we couldn't do better, that we should rather stay where we were, producing what they considered to be African art.

VA: How did the Thupelo Workshop affect you and your work?

SN: I worked with people I hadn't been able to work with before. For me it was a step forward. At the workshop there would be general communal crits where suggestions would be made for improvements. I was exposed to various techniques, experienced local and international artists from Swaziland, Lesotho, Zimbabwe and overseas. One felt on a fairly equal footing with everyone else

who attended and I learnt from others' advice and established international contacts.

VA: In your opinion, how do you think the development of the workshops has affected South African art and how do you think it has benefited black artists in particular?

SN: It was one of the few developments at the time that attempted to provide black artists with an equal footing. One can see the benefit of the workshop in the development of black artists who have attended. Many artists have improved tremendously after attending. Also the international exposure and links provided artists with additional funding and support.

VA: Who else attended the 1985 workshop with you?

SN: David, Dumisani Mabaso, Durant Sihlali