

**WILLIAM (BILL) AINSLIE**  
1934 - 1989







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In September 1989 at Ainslie's funeral, a long-time friend *Mike Gardiner* spoke the following:

“

It must be acknowledged that Bill was a powerful person. He was too powerful to forget that beauty is truth and he was too powerful to be satisfied with the things as they are. Whereever he went and whatever he did he caused change to happen. Bill aroused a sense of danger, a desire to reach beyond the self, a need to offer more than habitual thought and so would stimulate new awareness and sharper insight.

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# Brief Biography:

William Stewart (Bill) Ainslie was born in Bradford in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. Bill Ainslie completed a Bachelor of Art degree 1952 - 1955 at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg and a BA Honours in Fine Art in 1956 - 1957 at the same university.

After completing his studies, Bill taught at Michael House School for boys in Natal, Cyrene Mission in Rhodesia, (now Zimbabwe) and King Edwards School in Johannesburg.

In 1965, after a successful one-man show, Ainslie was given a one year contract with the Adler Fielding Gallery in Johannesburg. He Started teaching privately from the family home.

In 1967 Bill won the Hajee Suliman Ebrahim Award on *Art- SA- Today*.

In 1968 the Ainslie family left South Africa to spend a year painting in Europe.

In 1969 they settled temporarily in St Ives, Cornwall, where Bill exhibited his work.

In 1970 he exhibited in Amsterdam before returning to South Africa in 1972.

On his return he taught privately from various homes/ studios.

In 1975 he won the Julius Robinson Award, again on *Art- SA- Today*.

From 1976 onwards he initiated various teaching studios and projects including, among others, Johannesburg Art Foundation, FUBA and Thupelo as part of the Triangle Arts trust network. The Bag Factory Studio, Thupelo and Greatmore Street Studios continue from these initiatives.

In 1976 Bill presented a paper at the UCT conference titled: “The State of Art in South Africa.”

Bill died in a car accident returning from the 1989 Pachipamwe workshop in Zimbabwe.

His work can be found in numerous private and public collections around the world.



12. c, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 76 x 255 cm

## From the horse's mouth:

“

I want to teach people to enjoy their art but at the same time to understand that it is a serious study... my main concern is with art. I am not here to teach people to make conventional paintings but to make them realize that there are disciplines, which affect our evaluation of what is happening in the art world. I want to teach people to concern themselves with the values that are inherent in art and in what I call painting. Everyone is encouraged to work on what they wish and I arrange special projects for those people who wish to have a better understanding of the explosion of possibilities provided by 'modern art.' What I am doing is creating a serious alternative to university and art school. A different learning environment, which is more flexible, more all embracing without all the stress of examinations and diplomas and degrees. My studio is a place where people can work simply for the pleasure of it. Artworks and art-objects are not made for capital investment. You might as well put your heart in the deep freeze. To learn properly, people must be fully engaged in what they are doing. And it is the teacher's duty to keep them engaged. Art is concerned with the whole man, the whole being is involved.

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31. "Amboseli 2," 1986, acrylic on canvas, 211 x 160 cm



26. c, 1989, acrylic on canvas, 91 x 110 cm

# On Painting:

Late in the afternoon of 1989, William Stewart Ainslie was driving back from the Pachipamwe International Workshop in Zimbabwe with two friends, Helen Sibidi and David Koloane, when his car crashed ñ killing him instantly. He was 55 years old. It was a tragic end to a life that had South Africa and carries a powerful influence through projects and artists that Bill worked with and taught. The influence carried a power or movement and was not a construct or prescription; this simple tribute documents a selection of images from his paintings and various quotes.

In September 1967, Ainslie wrote the following introduction for the opening of his first 'one-man' exhibition in Johannesburg, South Africa:

“

There's a story of the woman who approached

Louis Armstrong and asked: 'Mr. Armstrong, what is jazz?' His answer was: 'Ma'am, if you had to ask, you ain't got it.' If these paintings seem strange and objectionable, there is nothing I can say to make them acceptable. If they seem strange, but not objectionable, then perhaps there are a few things one can say about why they are like they are, that could help an interested stranger in his approach to them. I see art as a dialogue made tangible, between the artist and the life around him. Something comes from outside and something from inside. The artist selects and re-arranges, and the selection and arrangement is dictated by the nature of the things that move the artist so that he can better approach the essence. This seems to have been true of art since the beginning. Different periods and different cultures have approached the question of selection and arrangement in very different ways, and there are unique influences at work in our time which have

formed the unique nature of contemporary art's approach to this issue. Today, the artist is not required to subordinate his vision to any prevailing code, whether religious, nationalist, or otherwise—he is free to paint whatever moves him. Today the artist does not inherit his ideas from a single cultural stream as in the past. The modern world confronts him with the art of many cultures, and many different time periods, and artists today are making use of this new and rich inheritance. This means that though the artist can be as eclectic as he wishes (e.g. 'realistic' or 'abstract') there is no room for the sort of provincial tyranny that insists that only art of a certain sort is capable of moving us.

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4. c, 1980, mixed media on paper, 131 x 73 cm



4. c, 1980, mixed media on paper, 131 x 73 cm



18. c, 1980, oil on canvas, 101 x 183 cm



33. c, 1980, oil on canvas, 184 x 152.5 cm



100. c, 1985, mixed media on paper, 72 x 56 cm



37. c, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 58.5 x 154.5 cm



84. Pachipamwe series, 1989, acrylic on paper, 95 x 64 cm

# A Letter:

In an 'open letter' published in *The Classic*, Vol. 1, No.4 (1965). Written to two artists, Ephraim Ngalane and Lucas Sithole, in response to their successful exhibition Ainslie wrote:

“

Most white South Africans are not really interested in art, and this is because they have such limited interest in life... a choice all men have to make between gaining the world or gaining the soul, they have to take a majority decision for their world... for the artist in South Africa there are rather special difficulties resulting from the stultification of life here.

There is the isolation from one another, sometimes by choice but chiefly by circumstances, of which apartheid is the main one.

Your exhibition comes at the end of a terrible few years, the years from Sharpeville to the station bomb. I think that it was during this time that white South Africa finally broke its heart in two, chose the half that offered it the gain of its world and left the other half empty and suffering...

From this background I came to your paintings. Here I find no superficiality, patterned abstracts, no decorative still lifes. Your works are concerned with man. And yet there is something missing... too much of your work shows man only on the outside, not enough gets inside him. Do we all, black and white, fear to see him whole?

John Ruskin called this 'inside' the 'central fiery heat.' It was Ainslie's concern for human existence that motivated his promotion of art schools and workshops, which were so liberating for so many students.

”



98. Pachipamwe series, 1989, mixed media on paper, 71.5 x 68 cm



83. Pachipamwe series, 1989, mixed media on paper, 75 x 68 cm



2. Pachipamwe series, 1989, acrylic on paper, 64 x 48 cm



99. Pachipamwe series, 1989, acrylic on paper, 105 x 61 cm



35. c, 1985, acrylic on board, 61.5 x 121 cm

# On Teaching:

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He was a natural teacher, a master teacher, and his students knew how lucky they were to have him. He would let them find their own way, watching how they went, showing them only how others had solved similar problems. — Pat Williams

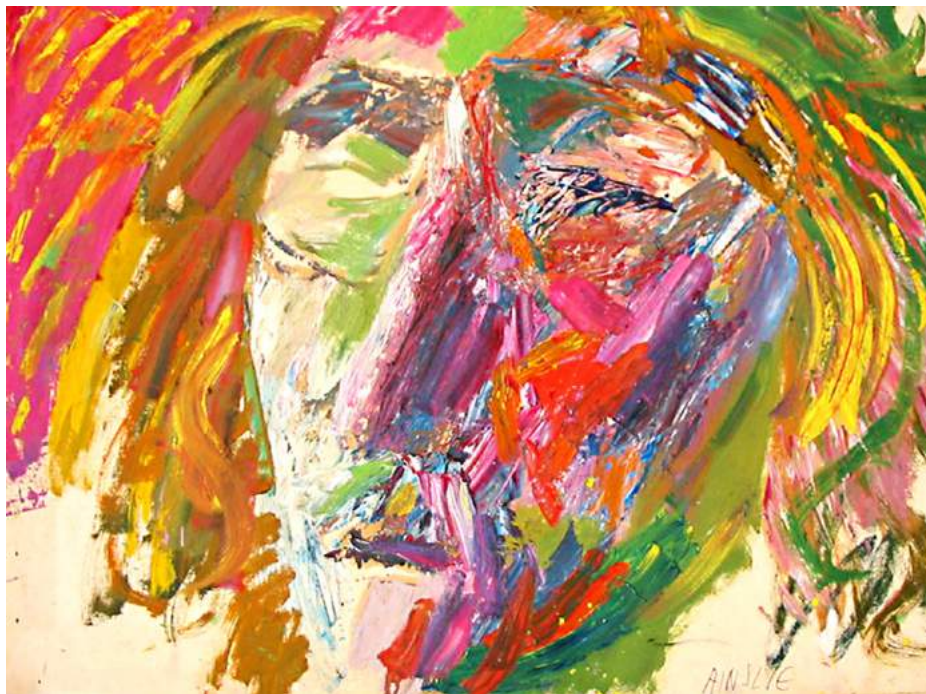
”

One of the most difficult lessons I have had to learn as an artist and teacher,” he said, “is that I do not know how to make an artwork, not how to teach other people to do it. The difficulty has to do with getting used to being lost, and of working in the dark. The teaching consists of being a guide, it is more of an initiation than an education, and consists of leading, and being lead, towards the threshold of the unconditional.”

The Johannesburg Art Foundation was finally registered in 1982 as a non-profit, multi-racial, independently funded teaching school.

It provided a developmental teaching programme to meet the needs of students of all ages and backgrounds and for those who did not fit into the academic or commercial art spheres.

No prior academic accreditation or portfolio was required, just the desire to learn. Students could stay as long as they wanted, provided they were still learning. The art foundation promoted the ‘workshop’ concept, emphasizing the importance of the tradition, the significance of the individual vision, and the challenge of the new. Exposure to the best artists and the greatest examples of art work was an essential part of the process. (Ainslie 1986)



43. "Ricky Burnett, c. 1976, oil on paper, 86 x 61 cm



20 c, 1968, oil on board, 61.5 x 121 cm



24. c, 1985, acrylic on paper, 100 x 100.5 cm



82. c, 1985, mixed media on paper, 76 x 57 cm



15. c, 1979, acrylic on paper, 101.5 x 133 cm

Many of the leading South African artists of today passed through the doors of The Johannesburg Art Foundation or were somehow affected by Ainslie's work.

During this turbulent time, Ainslie and David Koloane (the first Africans) were invited in 1983 to participate in a workshop called The Triangle Artists' Workshops in New York. This workshop was founded by sculptor Anthony Caro and Robert Loader, a British collector and art supporter. Both had spent time in South Africa.

All the artists spent two weeks living together and working in different mediums, assisting one another and discussing artistic problems which otherwise could have taken months to solve.

Upon returning to South Africa, a similar workshop idea was initiated called The Thupelo Workshop, a Sotho word meaning 'to teach by example.'

Ainslie sums up his workshop philosophy by saying "the workshop exists for the correction of the artist and to protect him/ her from the pressures of 'professionalism' and 'commercialism' so that we can get on with what we need to..."



28. c, 1968, oil on prepared paper, 76 x 94 cm

We don't make art in an attempt to change people, we make it to change ourselves, and if it works it will change others through the appeal it makes. We are not making art for the museums, we are making it for the life. Having museums is a good idea but trying to make art for them is crazy."

One makes art for oneself and you share it with others who share your needs. If there are a lot of people who want to see it, then the museum is a nice, quiet place. But at the moment it seems to me that people are so far from feeling right about what they need, the priority is sorting out the issue of first starting in a very modest way, with modest exercises.

In the workshop we have people of all sorts—rich and poor, new and old, black and white—and it works. We watch people's lives changing, thereby changing

ours; everybody contributes. We don't need 'political art' or 'relevant art' or 'folk art' or 'African art' or 'suburban art' or 'township art'—it is all very self-conscious.

“

What we need is to get on with the job of discovering ourselves and let the label be used by the ideologists. Joseph Beuys is right, all men are artists, they can all create their lives out of the raw material of their failed promises and defeated ambitions, because promises that fail and ambitions that can be defeated are the raw stuff of the stone. I like Beuys for giving me the idea that the workshop is a social sculpture. The major stress of everything done in the workshop depends on the realization that in learning to see, we must look particularly at what our consciousness seeks to conceal from us.

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14. c, 1975, acrylic on canvas, 123 x 153.5 cm



17. c, 1980, acrylic on canvas, 101 x 150 cm



Bill Ainslie, 16. c, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 81 x 315 cm



9. c. 1987, acrylic on paper, 60 x 90.5 cm



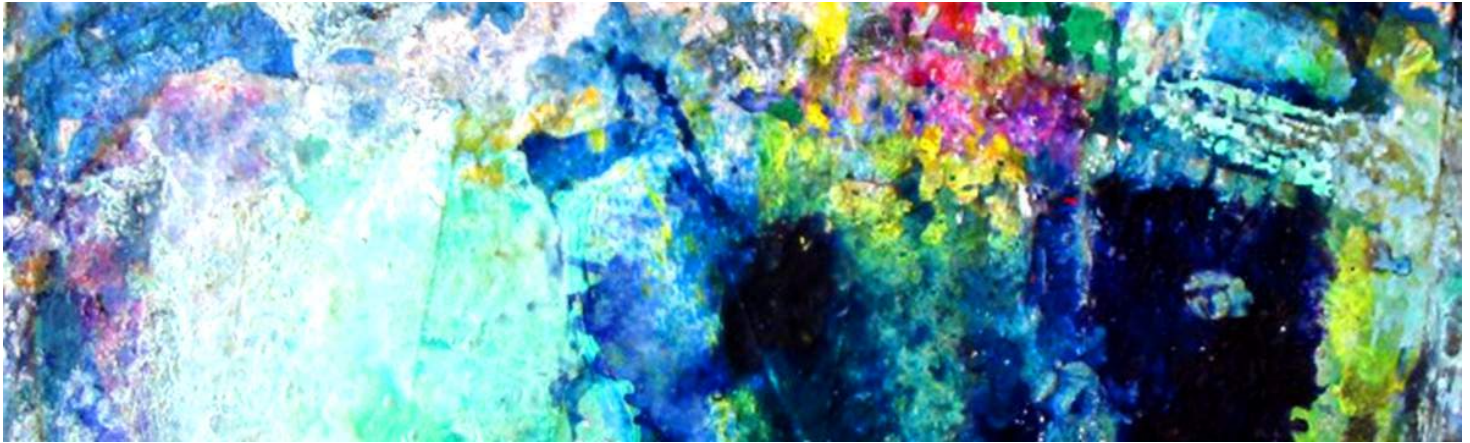
13. c, oil on canvas, 109 x 186 cm



23. c, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 77.5 x 170 cm



19. c, 1980, oil on canvas, 90 x 150 cm



27. c, 1989, acrylic on canvas, 50 x 150 cm



10. c, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 139 x 122 cm



11. c, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 268 x 122 cm



21. c, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 37 x 46 cm

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Bill's work moved from figuration to abstraction between 1960 and 1970. By 1968 his monumental figures of black domestic workers had merged with his landscapes, creating non-figurative shapes. By 1970, the image was virtually dissolved into colour field painting. Bill's artist statement from 1968 reveals his take on abstraction: 'I have become conscious of an imagery emerging which seems to derive chiefly from Africa, although in evoking it I have deliberately used methods derived both from the East and from the West. The sense of space is from Eastern influences, as opposed to the receding size perspective that dominated Europe from the Renaissance up to the turn of the century.'

”

– Seippel Gallery



70. Portrait, c, 1980, graphite pencil on paper, 32 x 46 cm

## His Practice:

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In most of these paintings, I have been conscious of an imagery emerging which seems to be derived from the East as well as the West. The sense of space is an Eastern thing and is modified by contemporary American Abstract Expressionism. The floating image, as opposed to the image fixed by gravity, also derives from America but works further back to Cubism and Surrealism. But the imagery is African, because of the dust, dung, rock, lichen, mud, stains, spoors, bones, carvings, masks...

It is frequently and deliberately ambiguousÑa brush stroke may evoke lichen, or a rock for focus and a head for a different focus, similarly crusts of mud emerge as the suggestion of human forms. In keeping with the intermingling of the multiple imagery, I have felt obliged to use a varied approach in the application of the paint, sometimes meticulous and sometimes broad sweeps of line, of wash and scratching, rubbing and glazing, all in an attempt to find an equivalent in paint for the image I wish to evoke. This imagery, this manipulation of space, this technique I have attempted to use to evoke a painting, is, for want of better words, symbolic of a certain mood or state of mind. A mood of waiting, of inactivity, of expectancy, sometimes hopeful and sometimes fearful.

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47. "Fieke and Sophia," c, 1972, mixed media on paper, 68 x 46 cm



46. "Fieke," c, 1975, oil sticks on paper, 46 x 64 cm



73. Portrait of model c, 1985, mixed media on paper, 100 x 70 cm

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She was not seeking to paint herself, not flaunting an Id or ego, a fear, or even her own way of being present to things.

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— a quote by art critic Yves Michand about painter Joan Mitchell.

This is also a description of the South African painter/teacher Bill Ainslie, unknown to many people, hugely important in the art of South Africa in the 21st century.



85. "Reclining Nude" c, 1985, mixed media on paper, 73.3 x 102.5 cm

“

I know: a generation after me will perhaps be witness to a moment when art from my country will be free from being ‘black art,’ or ‘township art,’ or ‘tribal” art,’ or ‘craft.’ But this can only happen when Africans themselves free it and themselves... It is when this art contributes to liberation, to a rebellion, to a reawakening of the Africa, and when the African claims and freely creates an art that expresses this freedom, that art will be liberated. — Mongane Wally Serote.

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*Liberated Voices.* Eds. Frank Harreman and Mark DAmoto. New York, Museum of African Art, 1999.



78. Model, c, 1972, charcoal on paper,101.5 x 70.5 cm

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Bill's vision was to create an environment where all South Africans could work together as equals. Through Bill's determination, his dream became manifest. What he created in the field of the visual arts was a microcosm for the macrocosm he sensed South Africa could achieve but which he did not live long enough to witness. His pre-democratic dream and exploration became prophecy; it paved the road for other to imitate. — Sophia Ainslie

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Essay title 'The Voice of the Nation,' 2004, pg 35, published in *A Decade of Democracy-Witnessing South Africa*, edited by Gary van Wyk, Sondela, Boston.



75.. Portrait of model, c, 1982, charcoal on paper, 45.5 x 64 cm



80. "Sarah", c, 1987, charcoal on paper, 45.5 x 64 cm each



92. Reclining Nude, c, 1985, charcoal on paper, 64 x 91.5 cm



86. Reclining Nude, c, 1985, charcoal on paper, 102.5 x 76cm



87. Sitting Nude, c, 1985, charcoal on paper, 64 x 91.5 cm



96. Reclining nude, c 1985, mixed media on paper, 64 x 64 cm



65. Fieke / Sophia, date dependent on model, pencil on paper, 35 x 50.5 cm



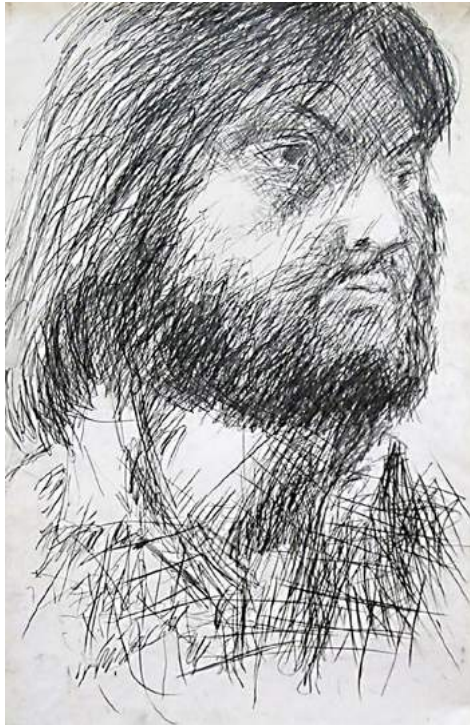
40. Mandela's son, c, 1987, charcoal on paper, 35 x 50.5 cm



54. "Ella", c. 1978, graphite pencil on paper on paper, 92 x 62 cm



63. Walley Serote, c, 1972, graphite pencil on paper on paper, 57.5 x 90 cm



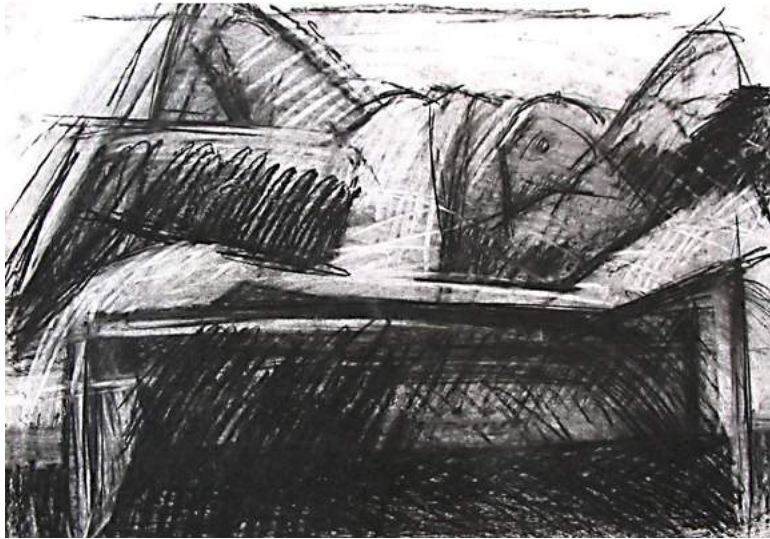
Left to Right: 58. "Claude," c, 1981, graphite pencil on paper, 46 x 64 cm; 79. Mandela's son, c, 1987, charcoal on paper, 70.5 x 101.5 cm



91. Zinzi Mandela, c, 1985, graphite pencil on paper, 64 x 91.5 cm



53. "Roland," c. 1978, pencil on paper, 63.5 x 96.5 cm



42. Reclining Nude, c, 1986, charcoal on paper, 86 x 61 cm



56. Portrait of model, c, 1982, Graphite pencil on paper,  
91.1 x 64 cm



57. Portrait of model, c, 1981, graphite pencil on paper, 46 x 62 cm



68. Portrait of model, c, 1984, mixed media on paper, 70 x 99.7 cm



74. Henry, c, 1979, mixed media on paper,  
63 x 71.5 cm



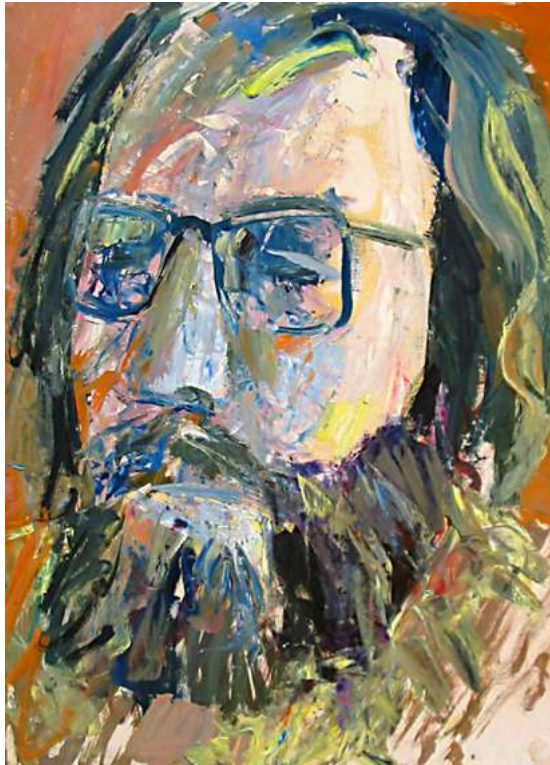
71. Portrait, c, 1980, graphite pencil on paper, 92 x 62 cm



64. Sipho Sipamela, c, 1984, mixed media on paper, 67 x 101 cm



44. "Cathy Brubeck," c, 1979, pastel on paper, 51 x 77 cm



48. Portrait, c, 1972, oil on paper, 56 x 76.5 cm



50. "Shelly," c, 1975, mixed media on paper, 63.5 x 102 cm



77. "David Bennet," c, 1976, graphit pencil on paper, 54 x 74 cm



95. Sleeping Nude, c, 1985, mixed media on paper, 64 x 91 cm



7. "Jo Manana," c, 1987, charcoal on paper,  
66 x 97 cm



Special thanks go to:

**Bill Ainslie**  
**David & Jill Trappler**  
**Judy Conway**





Publishing this catalogue is the beginning to understanding the missing link in contemporary South African art and with it the hope that Bill Ainslie's place in it's history will be rightly established. Ainslie was a leader in developing and stimulating young South African artists both black and white and was one of the first serious abstract painters of his generation in South Africa.