THE BILL AINSLIE HANDBOOK

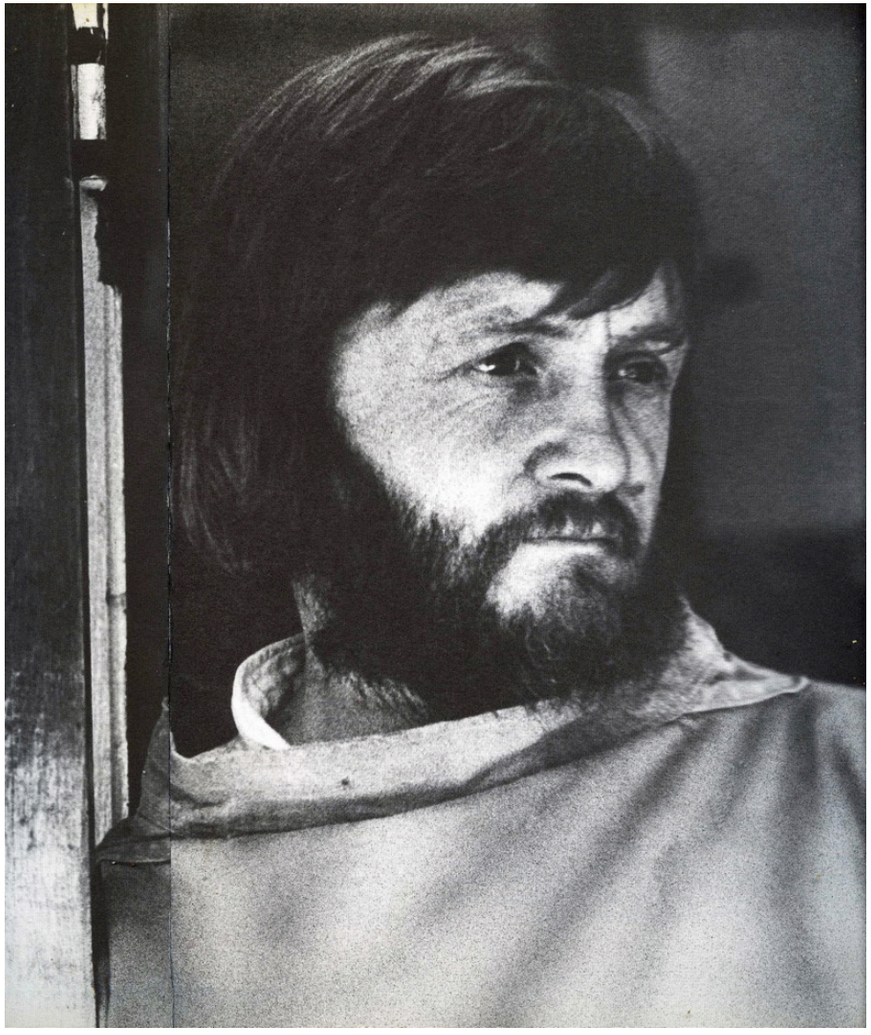
from Artist to Ancestor

MICHAEL GARDINER

THE BILL AINSLIE HANDBOOK

from Artist to Ancestor

MICHAEL GARDINER



When you ask people who knew Bill Ainslie what he was like, the answer is always, 'He was a good person.' And then they go on to say that he had a warmth about him, that he respected people, and that he was a decent man.

Well, that says much, especially since he lived at a time in South Africa when loyalty to certain groups and hostility to others were encouraged by law and custom.

But Bill Ainslie was much more than just a decent person, special as that was. He did things, he thought things, and he made things happen for himself and many kinds of people.

This handbook offers ways of discovering who he was, what he did and how he did it. It lays strong emphasis upon Ainslie as a teacher and, especially, on his life as a painter.

Bill Ainslie (1934–1989), although highly active during his life in the South African cultural landscape, dropped out of sight and general memory after his death in 1989. For three decades (1960–1990), Ainslie was a powerful influence in the lives of many people, especially artists, who longed to live and work freely with their art. He was also trusted and respected by figures in the liberation struggle. Regrettably, he did not live to see the country liberated.

Ainslie's influence was felt in three particular areas.

First, his paintings are regarded by many as his most important achievement. In his relatively short career, he held ten solo exhibitions, mostly in the city of his choice, Johannesburg, but also in Pretoria, Durban and Amsterdam. He participated in many group shows and art competitions, and his portraits, drawings and sketches together comprise a large body of work. His abstract paintings from the 1980s are regarded as major works in their field.

Second, there is Ainslie the teacher. After his graduation from the University of Natal with an Honours degree in Fine Art in 1958, he painted and taught continuously. He taught privately while he prepared work to show. During the early 1970s, he extended his individual teaching and workshops by working with larger numbers of artists,

students and part-timers until the fully fledged Johannesburg Art Foundation (JAF) emerged with Ainslie as director. This foundation developed into a multi-activity centre, which drew into its ambit writers, musicians, artists and educators who contributed to the centre's cultural importance.

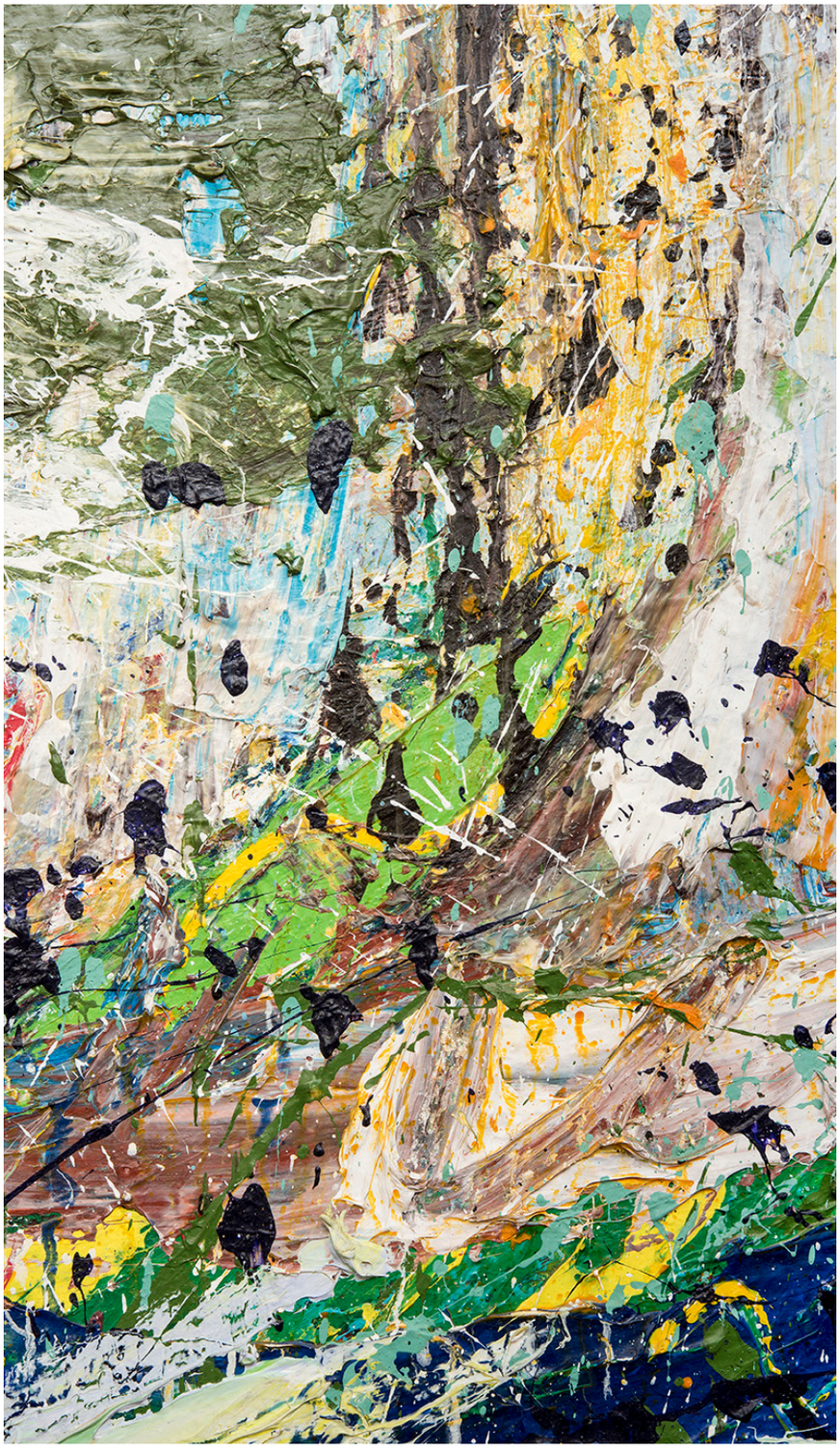
Third, a key feature of the JAF was its focus on helping individuals discover and express their creativity through painting. Because of the foundation's tone and ethos, artists who worked there felt that they were in 'another country', different from the one that they had to endure.

The JAF was more than an art centre or school. It developed into one of the many progressive initiatives by South Africans in the 1980s that explored and practised values that might characterise a future country. The JAF was regarded by activists as a model or example of what centres for urban and rural communities should be, a model that offered fresh creative possibilities in the arts and humanities. In that role, the JAF developed and supported other community centres. With the input of the South African artist and art critic David Koloane and Ainslie, it launched a series of artists' workshops in South Africa, which have now spread across the world under the management of the international Triangle Workshop programme.

During the more than 35 years since his death, Ainslie's influence has become evident in the work – exhibiting, teaching, workshopping – of artists who spent time with Ainslie in his Studio and later in the Johannesburg Art Foundation. Communities of practitioners and the teachers and students at arts centres in many places, even beyond South Africa, have felt his presence in their working lives. The Johannesburg Art Foundation itself, as developed and led by Ainslie has become a point of reference in thinking about the influence of cultural centres in society.

As his influence expands and continues, it has become possible now to regard Ainslie not only as a figure of esteem, but as an ancestor from whom artists can draw their values and practice. Hence the title of this handbook.

This handbook begins the process of discussing and discovering more about the life and career of Bill Ainslie than has been available before. It is also intended to create an opportunity for long and deep studies of Ainslie as an artist and teacher and the context in which he worked.



CONTENTS

1. AINSLIE'S PERSONAL ORIENTATION **13**
2. CHRONOLOGY OF BILL AINSLIE **21**
3. AINSLIE AND LIFE IN THE CITY **41**
4. AINSLIE SPEAKS ABOUT ART **55**
5. TEACHING THOSE WHO WANT TO PAINT **81**
6. AINSLIE'S PUBLIC ACTIVITIES **99**
7. OBSERVATIONS ABOUT AINSLIE AND THE ART FOUNDATION **109**
8. INSTANCES OF AINSLIE'S PAINTINGS **123**

1. AINSLIE'S PERSONAL ORIENTATION

This term, 'orientation', refers to Ainslie's actions, which were shaped by his attitude towards living and working as a painter and teacher in South Africa during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

These were the years when apartheid tightened its grip on the lives of all its inhabitants. Life for those who did not comply or who refused to submit meant living with varying forms of danger, especially from the state. What was Ainslie's orientation towards this situation?

When Bill and Fieke Ainslie arrived in Johannesburg in 1963 after two years in what was then Rhodesia (renamed Zimbabwe in 1980), they knew well what to expect. They set themselves up in a flat in Hillbrow, the part of the city least affected by racial laws. Then, after the birth of their son and when Ainslie had completed his second solo exhibition at the Adler–Fielding Gallery in the city centre, they moved into one half of a large, rented house in Parktown. There was room for living, for guests and for a studio enclosed by a broad, private garden.

From this base, the Ainslies developed extensive links with people, and their section of the house was constantly active with visitors, students and friends. For example, they could accommodate the artist Dumile Feni in the house for two years. He needed shelter, support and safety and these he received from Bill and Fieke Ainslie. During that

time, Feni produced work for highly successful exhibitions at Gallery 101, also in the city centre, and elsewhere in the late 1960s.

Seen together, the work of Ainslie and Feni was engaged, not in the strident forms of resistance or protest, but as art that emerged from their responses to the swirl of daily interaction with people and issues in actual circumstances.

One key to Ainslie's commitment to art-making was largely the need to unlearn, to discard, to reject what he had inherited. His early work, such as that in the 1960s, bristles with attempts at rejecting the stereotypes, assumptions and attitudes that characterised his personal legacy.[1]

Feni, by contrast, was a refugee in his own country, and initiated a new genre of drawing and sculpting. He walked away from what his fellow artists from similar backgrounds were doing. His voice was a fresh one, challenging everyone to reconsider how they were reflecting and depicting their worlds.

As a person who was actively interested in political issues, Ainslie had to experience some of his friends being sentenced to long terms in jail. He had to acknowledge the killing of people, especially young people, by the police. He had to feel the loss of colleagues who went into exile as well as the banning of over 40 local writers who lived abroad.

1 Describing his attempts to 'slough off a skin of inherited ways of doing things' in an interview shortly before 1979, Ainslie said, 'I know what so far I have rejected. I don't yet feel that I have got through fully at all to what is trying to come through … I have realised for the first time how very derivative a lot of my earlier work was, and that it wasn't meeting my main aims.' Avril Herber, *Conversations* (Johannesburg: Bateleur Press, 1979), p. 106.

What did he do? He first tried to participate in the work of the non-racial Liberal Party of South Africa, but it dissolved when it became illegal in 1968 to have a multiracial political party. He did not join the underground sabotage group, the African Resistance Movement, nor did he work in secret as a communist or 'fellow traveller'.

From the mid–1960s onwards, he was under constant surveillance by the security police. This consisted of monitoring all his visitors, interrogating detainees about Ainslie's activities, telephone tapping, interference with his mail and, later, in the 1980s at the JAF, sudden intrusion by police deep in the night to search the premises. Interestingly, he was never arrested, and he continued to do everything as he saw fit in plain sight.

In many ways, Ainslie's story is one of disturbance, disruption and disorientation. Within all this, he retained his focus, painting and teaching and becoming increasingly influential.

Ainslie's first crisis was his need to be an African painter in Africa. This he achieved over time through association and involvement with several people such as Dumile Feni (artist), Mongane Wally Serote (poet), Lionel Abrahams (writer) and Barney Simon (theatre director), active people who shared his passion for the arts and humanities in their determination to engage with their local world. Ainslie's major achievements were to move his art from figurative painting to abstraction, and to establish arts centres where all could meet and work. In doing so, he created what has been called 'another country' in its radical difference from the

orthodoxies of South African life.

It is important to add that, in demonstrating what 'another country' might be like, Ainslie shared strongly similar impulses with several South Africans in the 1980s. His search for how he should orient his life and that of others in an unjust society was shared in many parts of the country.

In his dealings with people who approached and worked with him, Ainslie was quietly attentive and confident in responding with both sympathy and critique. His analyses as well as his decisions about people and situations usually had a moral element. A close student friend said that his decisions, though moral, were not always practical. He was known in some instances to put morality before kindness.

His Protestant form of Christianity gave him the freedom to think independently and the ability to argue on an ethical basis about what could and should be done in response to the injustices of apartheid. For example, Ainslie was deeply interested in the role played by German Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Lutheran resistance in the 1930s to the state-controlled church of the Nazis. He was unafraid of ideas and explored many other forms of religious and spiritual consciousness. This included the *I Ching*, Sufism, shamanism, traditional healing and the thinking of people such as the English poet Robert Graves and the Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung. What links these areas of attention is the significance Ainslie gave to what he called 'religious consciousness'. Central to this aspect of Ainslie's abiding interest was his reaching for a wholeness, an inclusiveness that gave due importance to what he believed were the spiritual dimensions of human life.

Strong and decisive as his young character was, Ainslie was deeply influenced during his student days in the 1950s by his friends, especially Catherine Shallis (later Brubeck). Interviewed in 1999, she said:

> Bill was not what you might call your stereotypical painter – fragile, over sensitive, having feminine characteristics. Bill was a very regular guy. He played first team rugby for his school, he was a boxer, a brave person … a very masculine type [of] man. He fell into the male stereotype and yet not. This is why he was such a good leader … everybody could respect him because he had a touch of everything … He had a wide vision of life.[2]

He was educated and encouraged by his lecturers in art and philosophy, and by political figures outside the university such as ANC president Chief Albert Luthuli; Liberal Party president Alan Paton; Indian Congress leader Chota Motala; and the artist Selby Mvusi. In particular, he found the Reverend Calvin Cook an important thinker about religion and society. It was no accident that Cook conducted Ainslie's wedding and funeral.

In 1960, Ainslie married Sophia ('Fieke') Jacomina Elisabeth Jansen-Schottel, of Dutch descent, who would go on to devote her life to his success as an artist. They had a son, Sholto William (1963),

2 Catherine Brubeck, interviewed by Vanessa Anderson, 'The Use of Abstraction by Bill Ainslie and David Koloane', dissertation submitted in partial compliance with requirements for the Master's Degree in Technology (Fine Art: Painting), Technikon Natal, 1999, vol. II, p. 55.

and a daughter, Sophia (1966). Both children are based in the United States and work in the world of the arts. Sophia is an artist and teacher of art in Boston; Sholto is an artist who lives in New York; the housekeeper Ida Makoka's son, Henri (1970) becomes a full member of the Ainslie family.

In many respects, Fieke Ainslie complemented her husband well. In contrast to his warm and measured intensities, she was quick to spot opportunities and alternatives. Her speech, with an attractive accent from her childhood in the Netherlands, often combined multiple motives and lines of thought simultaneously – generating a form of what has been called 'functional ambiguity'.[3]

Their daughter, Sophia Ainslie, is quoted as saying, 'Together Bill and Fieke made a great force as Fieke was intuitive, physical and business–like, and Bill diplomatic and visionary'.[4]

Fieke Ainslie's energy was partly from a refusal to be tied down. She never had a permanent home, she refused to return to the Netherlands after Ainslie's death and she was stimulated by a strong sense of justice for others, especially for young Black artists.

As a key partner in Ainslie's career, she attended every business transaction, was known to remove a painting from his easel because he dithered over whether it was complete or not and, after his death, cropped unstretched canvases for sale and show.

3 Clare Bucknell, 'You can't prove I meant X', London Review of Books, vol. 42, no. 8, 16 April 2020, p. 25.
4 Natalie Nolte, 'Bill Ainslie', 2000 [online] available at: http://www.billainslie.co.za/natalie%20essay.htm (accessed 3 February 2011), p. 2.

Her commitment to enhancing Ainslie's career was unremitting and she supervised enrolments and fees, ensured the maintenance of the physical environment in the house and garden, and created an environment conducive to aesthetic creativity. She and Bill were the centre of the JAF's life. Beyond the creative citadel of the foundation, he moved among networks of arts–related and political activities. From her base in the JAF, Fieke cultivated donors and supporters, particularly among the diplomatic corps. Their dinner parties, receptions and evening events such as poetry readings and musical performances brought together richly disparate interests and preoccupations.

This account of Ainslie's personal orientation towards living and working in the second half of the twentieth century in South Africa has chosen to focus on some of his qualities and actions. In summary, these are:

· his adaptive responses to disruptions and disturbances

· his interest in people's creative capacities

· his openness to influence by people while sustaining his personal values and religious consciousness

· his search for wholeness in his life and art while shedding those factors that inhibit creativity

· his sharing a life with a person who was the negation and affirmation of his core values

· his assembling communities of students and practitioners in the visual arts.

2. CHRONOLOGY OF BILL AINSLIE

Bill Ainslie was descended from a Scots family, who came to the Cape in 1834 to join relatives who had arrived in 1820 with a party of British settlers to occupy land near the Eastern Cape frontier.[5] This land had been occupied from at least the sixteenth century by amaXhosa people, who by then had been driven further inland by colonial forces. In other words, the 1820 and the later settlers were there to strengthen a colonial frontier. They were thus drawn into the conflict over land that had persisted since the late eighteenth century between the Dutch and British colonists on the one hand, and the groups of amaXhosa people on the other.

1934 *Birth of Bill Ainslie*

William Stewart (Bill) Ainslie is born in the town of Bedford, Eastern Cape, on 10 April 1934. This is 100 years after his family arrived in Africa from Scotland. The lush and fertile farm, 'Spring Grove', remains to this day in the hands of the Ainslie family. His parents, Ross and Kathleen, have an older daughter, Jean, and later, another daughter, Pam.

1938 *Driven to the city*

Since he is not the eldest son, Ross Ainslie does not inherit the family farm. He becomes a merino

5 William Ainslie (1790–1855) married Jessie, sister to the poet Thomas Pringle (1789–1834), who had arrived as a Settler in 1820.

sheep farmer in the distant district of Carnarvon, Northern Cape, in the arid Karoo. But by 1938, the worldwide Depression and an extended local drought have driven the family off the land. Bill's father finds employment as a 'compound manager' on gold mines in the Witwatersrand. The family settles in industrial Germiston, near Johannesburg. By the age of four, Bill Ainslie has experienced the open landscapes of the semi-desert, the lush forests close to Bedford, and the clamour of the mines and their factories.

1942 *Death of his father*

Despite his age (37), Bill's father joins the South African Air Force as an air mechanic and flies with his bomber squadron to Madagascar. Like many of his fellows, he is infected by malaria, but, as a Christian Scientist, he refuses hospitalisation and dies of cerebral malaria. He is buried in Madagascar. Bill Ainslie is eight years old.

1942–1952 *Leadership at school*

Like his sisters, Bill Ainslie is sent to boarding school. In his case, it is to a Johannesburg school for White boys, King Edward VII Preparatory School (KEPS) and then King Edward VII Secondary School (KES), where, after ten years there, he matriculates in 1952. He captains the school rugby and cricket teams and is both cadet captain and head prefect. His leadership qualities are obvious. Pupils are prepared by this school to offer 'manly public service' to the British Empire and to play leading roles in a racially segregated society dominated by Whites.

1953–1958 *University and influential people*

After his indecision about a future in either agriculture, teaching or preaching, Ainslie enrols at university in Pietermaritzburg for a general arts degree, majoring eventually in fine art and philosophy. His professor, Jack Heath, urges him to focus on art and he graduates in 1958 with an Honours degree in Fine Art. His dissertation is on the work of Picasso.

While at university, Ainslie acts as president of the Students' Representative Council and is editor of the student newspaper, NUX. Under the influence of his lecturers, friends and girlfriend Cathy Shallis, Ainslie's views on economic, cultural and political matters shift from the conventional views and opinions of White society to an inclusive concern with non-racial justice for all.

Consequently, he becomes open to the wisdom of Chief Albert Luthuli; the concerns of writer Alan Paton; the religious perspective of the Reverend Calvin Cook; and the ideas of many other public figures active in that part of the country. Ainslie joins the small Liberal Party of South Africa, which advocates equal voting rights for all in a non-racial country. In 1956, Ainslie is introduced to the artist, teacher and thinker Selby Mvusi, which marks a major turning point in Ainslie's career.

As Ainslie later recalls:

> It was my first contact with a black artist and my first liberal education as a white South African. 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.[6]

1959–1961 *Michaelhouse, marriage and Cyrene Mission*

After graduating, Ainslie takes an art-teaching post for two years at Michaelhouse, a private boys' school in Balgowan, Natal. While there, he marries Fieke Jansen-Schottel, of Dutch descent, in 1960. They then go directly to live, paint and teach art at Cyrene Mission in the Matobo Hills outside Bulawayo in then Rhodesia. His students are young Black men, whom he encourages, with some success, to break from the mission stereotypes and paint more freely. Ainslie continues his own work there and, in 1961, contributes a column on the arts for the local newspaper, the *Bulawayo Chronicle*. The Ainslies form a close relationship with student Llewellyn Nhamo whom they support during his early education. He achieves academic and administrative distinction at the University of Zimbabwe. When Ainslie supports the students' token strike in sympathy with national workers, he is obliged to leave the mission. He and his pregnant wife return to South Africa and intense city life.

1962 *Temporary sojourn in Bulawayo*

Required to leave Cyrene Mission, Ainslie gets a temporary teaching job at a state school in Bulawayo, paints and has a work accepted by the Artists of Fame and Promise exhibition held in the Adler-Fielding Gallery in downtown Johannesburg.

6 Pat Williams, *Last Paintings by Bill Ainslie, 1934–1989* (Oxford: Wolfson College, 1990), posthumous exhibition catalogue, p. 5. Numbers of young White South Africans, brought up in rigorously racist environments, found that even a single experience of meeting a confident and articulate Black person for the first time meant that their inherited racial stereotypes were shattered irrevocably.

1963–1964 *Apartment in Hillbrow and first solo show*

The arrival of Bill and Fieke Ainslie in Johannesburg is deliberate and decisive. They rent a seventh-floor flat in Esselen Street, Hillbrow – the densely populated and most liberated living space in the city – and weave a network of past acquaintances together, including cultural activists, township intellectuals, school and university friends and members of the diplomatic corps. Their son, Sholto, is born in June 1963. Ainslie holds his first solo exhibition at the Adler-Fielding Gallery in 1964. It consists of paintings of large and powerful Black figures in conventional situations: childcare, domestic chores, people waiting, children playing ... suggesting emotions shared by all people. The show is a success, mainly because the quality of the painting and the focus on people as subjects.

1965 *Encounters with Feni and Portway*

Moving from Hillbrow to Parktown, the family rents one half of a large, ex-mining-magnate's mansion in Jubilee Road. They have space in which to live, have a studio and teaching room, and accommodation for visitors. For example, the artist Dumile Feni stays there for two years, bringing with him gusts of township energies and risks. The house is a hive of activity, filled with artists, friends and students – but is also carefully watched by the police. A combined tone and ethos are created, which characterise all the venues in which Ainslie lived, taught and worked. It is noteworthy that neither Bill nor Fieke Ainslie ever owned property.

Most momentous at this time for Ainslie's development as an artist is his response in 1965

to the paintings exhibited by the established South African artist Douglas Portway in Pretoria and Johannesburg. Ainslie opens up to the possibilities suggested by the Portway works because he is thinking and feeling beyond the limitations of his depiction of Black figures. Like Ainslie, Portway struggled with the difficult issue of being a politically aware White artist in a racially unjust society. Portway's answer was to leave South Africa. Ainslie, however, chooses to remain.

Ainslie publishes a letter to four Black artists, saying that, whereas White artists are 'against the visionary faculty', Black artists tend to show figures 'on the outside'. Neither seems willing to plunge into what the English poet Matthew Arnold called 'the central fiery heart of things'. Remarkably, this letter treats all artists as colleagues, regardless of external features. David Koloane described this act as 'fearless' for its time.

1966 *Second successful solo show in Johannesburg*

After the success of the 1964 show, the Adler–Fielding Gallery gives Ainslie a retainer, freeing him from a teaching job in a regular school. In return, he gives the gallery a full exhibition in 1966, one similar to his previous show. However, his doubts about his current approach to painting intensify.

Ainslie and his friends discover the novels of the Australian author Patrick White. His *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) provokes discussions and paintings, such as those by Caroline Seawright, then working at the Ainslie Studio. White's later novel, *The Vivisector* (1970), about a painter, is read with intense interest by Ainslie. Bill and Fieke's daughter, Sophia, is born.

1967 *Show in Durban: 'Vigil'*

Ainslie accepts an invitation by the Durban Art Gallery to exhibit there. In a rare speech about himself and his work, he makes clear his increasing conviction that South African artists need to free themselves from conventional restraints and expectations and strike out to paint with an African consciousness. This show's works have overt African references, and the dominant theme is a political one. The title, 'Vigil', suggests the country's expectant waiting for something momentous to happen.

1968 *Sheds figurative work, shows with Goodman Gallery*

By now, Ainslie is disentangling his work from the constraints of the figurative. At his next exhibition, at the Goodman Gallery in Hyde Park, he experiments with large, colour-field canvases. He says, 'I have become fascinated by the possibilities of combining multiple images derived from memory and working them together to create a mood.' They receive a tepid response. At the Art South Africa Today competition, Ainslie receives the Hajee Suliman Ebrahim Award. With the enforced closure of the Liberal Party, Ainslie has no political home. His political alignment thereafter is not organisation-specific but is in general support of the liberation movement.

1969–1970 *England, the Netherlands, Portway and Fieke's family*

These years are spent abroad. He meets his wife's family, after eight years of marriage. The couple and their two children then settle in St Ives, Cornwall, where many mature and successful British artists, as well as Douglas Portway, are based. From the Ainslie flat, one can see the roof of Portway's home. Ainslie's work is well received in St Ives and two of his paintings are included in the 1969 Penwith Society Spring Exhibition, along with works by Portway, Paul Fuller, Peter Lanyon, Patrick Heron and others. The works of a number these artists are today represented at the Tate Britain. Despite the positive regard for his work by these British artists, his current work is rejected by that year's Art South Africa Today and the Transvaal Academy of Arts shows. He next exhibits at the De Sfinx Gallery in Amsterdam (1970) and is very well received for the poetic quality of the work.

1971–1972 *Returns to South Africa, holds 'Wilderness' show*

Despite the possibility of extending their stay in Britain and especially the Netherlands, Bill and Fieke Ainslie decide to return to South Africa. They are accommodated first by Ton and Jana Hermans outside Pretoria, where Ainslie prepares further work for his two forthcoming exhibitions.

Cecily Sash, lecturer in Fine Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), rents them her home in York Road, Ferndale, and Ainslie assembles a small group of students. This arrangement lasts until 1973.

Ainslie's 1972 solo exhibition, 'Wilderness' at the Goodman Gallery, consists of large abstracts, portraits and a series of collages on paper titled *Homage to Bonnard's Dachshund*. This show represents Ainslie's finding a personal 'voice'.

1973–1974 *Inhabits Killarney mansion, joined by Koloane*

Ainslie discovers a large, deserted property at the top of Anerley Road in the Johannesburg suburb of Killarney. It had been the Yugoslav Embassy until the diplomats were expelled from South Africa for helping political prisoners escape from jail in 1964. He rents this 21–room building for R40 per month. It adjoins the properties of Harry Oppenheimer of Anglo–American, known as 'Little Brenthurst', and the home of Clive and Irene Menell of AngloVaal, 'Le Tholonet'. Across the street is the home of Dougie Hoffe, who chairs De Beers Consolidated Mines, and his wife Jackie. In other words, he is surrounded by gold and diamond magnates.

The ex–embassy building has been vandalised and the garden is a huge wilderness. The outbuildings are occupied by people of dubious interests. Children report ghosts. Friends and helpers make the place habitable and usable, and there Ainslie conceives the idea of having larger classes of students and a team of teachers, thus enabling him to engage the broader community with creative work in the plastic arts.

This year, he holds an exhibition at the South African Association of Arts' Northern Transvaal Gallery in Pretoria with the focus on large abstract paintings devoted to the theme, 'Namib'. A Christmas party, held by the Ainslies and their

friends Michael and Lettie Gardiner, takes place at the ex-embassy in Killarney. Two interesting guests are Dr Chabani Manganyi, the first Black South African psychologist and author of *Being-Black-in-the-World* (1973), and poet and artist Wopko Jensma, whose 1973 publication *Sing for Our Execution* causes a stir, partly because some readers and reviewers cannot decide whether his woodcut prints and his poetry are by a White or a Black person.

Of particular note is that, in 1974, David Koloane joins the group of students at the Killarney Studio. He arrives as a beginner painter on the advice of artist Louis Maqhubela and becomes a fully fledged, successful artist. He remains a central member of Ainslie's working life and memory until the dissolution of the JAF in 2001.

1975–1976 *Occupies Oxford Road premises, meets Greenberg*

After two years, Ainslie is compelled to move his entire project to new premises as the Killarney property has been sold. He rents a big house nearby at 61 Oxford Road and the living, working and teaching quarters are made as useful and attractive as possible, with the addition of space for showing films with a noisy projector.

This year, South Africa has a visit from US art critic Clement Greenberg. As adjudicator for Art South Africa Today, he awards Ainslie the Cambridge Shirt prize. Another visitor to the country is the

Paris-based Afrikaner poet Breyten Breytenbach, who is arrested and jailed for nine years for his plan to overthrow the government. This is also the period when the state, having recklessly imposed Afrikaans as an obligatory language of learning upon Black school children, provokes a massive and bloody uprising by the youth in June 1976, a national event that changes the country's political landscape irrevocably.

1977 *Discovers new premises in Saxonwold*

After a further two years of activity, the Ainslie entourage has to leave the premises, this time because neighbours object to multiracial goings-on. Walking with his son one Sunday morning, Ainslie comes upon an empty mansion on a double stand at 6 Eastwold Way in the Johannesburg suburb of Saxonwold. The property had been acquired by the city council and its contents, an Africana collection of a retired mining engineer, had been bought by Wits University. Plans were to establish an off-campus research centre there, with accommodation for the university librarian, but the deal has fallen through and the place has been abandoned. Ainslie manages to rent the property, which has stood empty for years. Despite problems such as rising damp, he moves his project into an ideal set of spaces, rooms, basements and studios for multiple activities in the visual arts.

1978–1979 *Campaign to acquire a permanent location, presents workshops paper in Cape Town*

When, two years later, the city council makes unreasonable demands for higher rent and repairs to the Saxonwold building by Ainslie, a group of well-wishers intervenes to acquire the property so that Ainslie and the centre have security of tenure. When the property is put to tender by the city council, a trust is constituted and a tender for purchase submitted. A campaign in support of the newly formed Johannesburg Art Foundation's (JAF) tender is launched across a wide spectrum of arts and city interests, with the aid of the English- and Afrikaans-language media. The council is persuaded to grant the JAF its tender of R150 000, payable over ten years.

During this period, there are two events of note. The first is the contribution that Ainslie and Koloane make in the formation of the Federated Union of Black Artists (FUBA) in Newtown. The other is the paper that Ainslie delivers in 1979 at the University of Cape Town on his use of workshops to teach art. Its title is 'An Artists' Workshop – Flash in the Pan or a Brick that the Builders Rejected?'

1980–1982 *The Johannesburg Art Foundation established*

In 1982, the property becomes owned by the JAF trustees, with Ainslie as director, Fieke as administrator and with teaching and other staff.

Despite continuous violence and disruption in the country, the 1980s are a period of intense focus on the primacy of creativity among those drawn to the plastic and other arts. The premises of the JAF are in full use.

Visitors include arts patron Robert Loder; sculptors Sir Anthony Caro and Isaac Witkin; critics and curators Terence Maloon and Gene Baro; jazz educators Darius and Catherine Brubeck; actor-director Dame Janet Suzman; writers Nadine Gordimer, Lionel Abrahams and Athol Fugard (with novelist Sheila Fugard); theatre director Barney Simon; and financier and philanthropist George Soros.

Then there are poetry readings, writers' meetings, children's classes, visiting lecturers and musical performances, as well as full- and part-time classes offered by an expanded teaching staff.

As director, Ainslie, along with his council (elected and augmented annually) must deal with financial management, fundraising, maintenance of the property and paying rates and taxes. There are also school-holiday workshops, evening seminars and lunch-time talks and performances.

1982 *Attends the Culture and Resistance Symposium in Gaborone*

The African National Congress (ANC) in exile spearheads the Culture and Resistance Symposium in Gaborone, Botswana. It is a joyful coming together of people involved in cultural activities outside (exiles) and inside (inziles) the country, who are able to meet, talk, dance and plan together after years of separation. Led by Koloane, the group of Ainslie, Dikobe Ben Martins, Colin Smuts and Paul Weinberg plus figures from Durban and Cape Town put together an exhibition of paintings and photographs.

The intention of the ANC to enlist 'cultural workers' in the liberation struggle is undercut by the absence of ANC policy or adequate preparation. (The ANC establishes a Department of Arts and Culture only in 1983). While the ANC goes back to the drawing board, those artists and teachers inside the country display a heightened sense of need for cultural organisations to connect with their circumambient communities. Ainslie and the JAF are far ahead on this score.

Ainslie and others try to act on the request from Mongane Wally Serote to establish a number of arts centres in South Africa, like the JAF. This leads Ainslie and other JAF figures to work with local residents to establish the Alexandra Arts Centre in 1986.

The ANC's follow-up is the Culture in Another South Africa (CASA) conference in Amsterdam in 1987, which produces a rigid framework for the control by ANC cadres of cultural activity.

1983 *Koloane attends the Triangle workshop in the US*

After meeting the British abstract sculptor Anthony Caro in Johannesburg in the early 1980s, Koloane is invited to attend the Triangle Artists' Workshop, held on a farm in Pine Plains, Dutchess County, about two hours north of New York City. This is an international residency programme founded by Caro and arts patron Robert Loder to bring together mid-career painters and sculptors from the UK, Canada and the US for intensive, collaborative work.

When Koloane meets up with Ainslie in New York they discuss the possibility of setting up a similar artists' workshop in South Africa.

They meet with Peter Bradley, an American artist of note and clear opinions, who agrees to be the guest artist at the first such workshop – to be named Thupelo, meaning 'let us learn together' – in 1985. The plan is given ANC support.

Ainslie prepares a set of abstract paintings to be exhibited at the Goodman Gallery the following year. It should be noted that Ainslie has not held a solo exhibition of his work since 1973.

1984 *Solo show at the Goodman*

Ainslie holds a solo show of abstract paintings and portraits at the Goodman Gallery. It receives mixed responses. A number of large abstracts are acquired by art museums and individuals but the generally cool response provokes questions about the readiness of local buyers to appreciate the value and quality of genuine abstract paintings.

1985 *First Thupelo workshop, led by Peter Bradley*

Using their experience of the Triangle Artists' Workshops in upstate New York in 1983 and 1984, Koloane and Ainslie organise a local workshop for artists, who work under difficult conditions. Fifteen artists come together for two weeks and are provided with board, lodging and unlimited materials. Funding comes from USSALEP (the United States–South Africa Leader Exchange Programme), a Quaker-based enterprise. The first Thupelo workshop takes place in August 1985. The visiting artist is the New York-based painter and sculptor, Peter Bradley.

These workshops continue at different venues annually, but provoke some academics, gallery owners and critics to attack both the workshops and the JAF – and, by extension, Ainslie himself. Supported by the English businessman and art collector Robert Loder, the Triangle–Thupelo model thereafter spreads throughout Africa. These workshops are now an international phenomenon.

1986 *Second solo show of abstracts at the Goodman; Alexandra Arts Centre established*

Ainslie holds his second solo show of abstract paintings at the Goodman Gallery. Though there is subdued interest in this work, it receives an effusive and lengthy review by Samantha James, published in *The Star* on 10 July 1986. She writes:

> Both the very physical fact of paint and the ambiguous illusion of seeing through it into worlds of 'otherness' are apparent in the best works. They are at once material yet seem to have been transformed so that they have the capacity to open the heart and restore the beholder to himself.

Ainslie participates in group shows at the Gertrude Posel Gallery at Wits University and in the Thupelo travelling show.

Working with JAF staff, township community leaders and others, Ainslie sets about establishing the Alexandra Arts Centre with Bongi Dhlomo, artist and participant in the JAF, as director.

1987 *Contributes to group shows*

Ainslie contributes to group shows at the JAF, the Natal Society of Arts Gallery in Durban, the University of South Africa in Pretoria and the Vita Award show at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. He continues to paint portraits.

1988 *Attends Pachipamwe I, outside Harare*

Ainslie opens an exhibition of steel sculpture by Anthousa Sotiriades and describes his thinking about current factors in African art. He asserts that African Modernism and the New Abstractionists have achieved freedom from theory. Since art is now free from history and no longer censored by tradition, he argues, there is a 'fresh and independent' spirit in African art that could revitalise tired Western art.

Ainslie and Koloane are invited by Robert Loder to contribute to the first Pachipamwe artists' workshop, to be held outside Harare in Zimbabwe.

1989 *Attends Pachipamwe II, outside Bulawayo. Dies in motor accident*

Loder asks Ainslie and Koloane to attend and assist at a second Pachipamwe artists' workshop. This time it is held outside Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, on the site of the Cyrene Mission where the newly married Bill and Fieke Ainslie had lived and worked in 1960–1961. Ainslie takes unusual care to bid farewell to family and friends before leaving for two weeks. At the workshop, he uses the time for almost frenzied painting, day and night. He produces six acrylic paintings on canvas and ten works of acrylic on paper. They have astonishing intensity and lucidity in their painterly abstraction and exemplify a surge of sureness and delight.

Driving back to Johannesburg with their work inside the car, Ainslie has the company of Helen Sebidi

and David Koloane. On the highway in the Northern Transvaal (now Limpopo), the car collides head on with a truck. Ainslie is killed and the two passengers are hurt. The paintings survive.

1990 *Posthumous exhibition of Ainslie's last paintings*

Six acrylic on canvas and ten acrylic on paper paintings made by Ainslie at Pachipamwe are exhibited at Wolfson College, Oxford University.

Steven Sack, curator of the groundbreaking exhibition and catalogue for the Johannesburg Art Gallery, *The Neglected Tradition* (1988), is appointed Director of the Johannesburg Art Foundation.

1992 *Pachipamwe II paintings shown in Johannesburg*

These final works are shown at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, where the exhibition is officially opened by David Koloane.

2001 *Dissolution of the JAF*

Twelve years after Ainslie's death, the Johannesburg Art Foundation closes. Several directors have tried in the intervening years to continue its work in different forms, but it becomes unsustainable and shuts.

On 12 April 2003, Fieke Ainslie [as Sophia Jacomina Elisabeth Ainslie-Jansen] is awarded a knighthood by the Netherlands government. She becomes a 'Ridder in de Orde van Oranje-Nassau' (Knight of the Order of Orange-Nassau) for her services as a Dutch citizen to art in South Africa.[7]

7 In response to news of this award, Nadine Gordimer wrote, 'Your contribution to the nurturing and support of young artists, in the extraordinary partnership of devotion to the arts and human development you had with your man, Bill Ainslie, is unmatched by any couple I know.' Letter to Fieke Ainslie, 18 April 2003.

3. AINSLIE AND LIFE IN THE CITY

Ainslie spent time in three rural areas before moving permanently to the city: these were his first four years of life on his parents' farm in the Karoo; his two years teaching art at a school in the Natal Midlands; and more than a year in Zimbabwe's Matobo Hills, a place of particular spirituality amid dramatic natural forms. From 1963 he lived in the suburbs of Johannesburg and there he and his family engaged vigorously with city life.

Ainslie's more than 25 years in the city are divisible into three periods, which reflect his different concerns and activities.

1963–1968 *Engaged and challenged, Ainslie reconsiders*

Johannesburg was rigorously divided between the inner city, its Whites-only suburbs and the surrounding Black townships. The early 1960s were boom-time, with high-rise buildings going up at speed, increasing the city's role on the back of gold mining as the financial hub of the country. In those same years, the leadership of the ANC was sentenced to life imprisonment, and organisations involved in sabotage and other underground activities were smashed. Ainslie knew and respected people in a number of these groups. Censorship, banning and repression made cultural as well as political activity difficult. Nevertheless, Ainslie held four exhibitions (three in Johannesburg and one in Durban). He also had

the support and company of people active in other art forms such as a poet (Mongane Wally Serote), an artist (Dumile Feni), a writer (Lionel Abrahams) and a dramatist (Barney Simon), in addition to a range of friends and admirers.

Serote was initially reluctant to come out of his beloved Alexandra township to be introduced to Ainslie by Feni, but this was his [Serote's] response to entering the house in Parktown, which Bill and Fieke Ainslie rented:

> Many young men and women, black and white, gathered around this space and place, like bees around something sweet … There was this smell of acrylic and paint, and of good food, of perfume and of life lived … Bill and Dumile, who were the honey, gave the place a dreamy feel as if there was something big about to happen.[8]

Serote became a life-long supporter and friend of Ainslie and his family and has continued his commitment to Ainslie's status to this day.

Together, Feni and Serote established links between Ainslie and people based in the townships but who were active across South African society, such as Bishop Desmond Tutu (as he was then), the photographer Peter Magubane, Winnie Mandela and others of equal stature. The bonds established then endured throughout the turbulence in the country and the effects of exile. It was as if the city came to the Parktown house to meet people like Feni and Ainslie in an atmosphere that encouraged the full expression of oneself rather than what one was supposed by authorities of different kinds to be.

8 Elizabeth Castle, *Controversial Ways of Seeing*, catalogue for an exhibition curated at the Bag Factory, Newtown, towards a MAFA degree at the University of the Witwatersrand, June 2015, pp. 4–5.

It was from this location in Parktown that Feni and Ainslie sent their work for solo exhibitions. The first for Ainslie, consisting entirely of depictions of Black figures, was in 1964 at the Adler–Fielding Gallery in downtown Johannesburg. In contrast to the local tradition in which White painters depicted Black figures as objects, Ainslie imbued his figures with an emotional presence that challenged stock notions of pity and condescension. At their best, these works challenged viewers to engage with the complexities of the living and not the simplicities of stereotypes. His second solo show, in 1966 at the same gallery, was equally successful, confirming him among Black and White people as a serious and progressive presence in the art world.

When the Ainslies had moved to Parktown and Feni had joined them there in the late 1960s, artists would gather behind the house on a spacious lawn and have available barrels of unfired brick clay. One day, artist Lettie Gardiner was sculpting a nude female figure. When it was nearly done, Feni strolled over, looked at it and said to her, 'May I?' Gardiner nodded and Feni stretched down and moved one of the figure's legs a fraction, and the entire piece came alive.

Artists such as Ben Arnold, Esrom Legae, Feni and others were regulars at these informal workshops.

Ainslie next had a solo exhibition at the Durban Municipal Gallery in 1967, where he spoke about the need for local artists to shrug off their self-consciousness and free themselves of old and tired orthodoxies. His paintings on this occasion suggested a movement away from his figurative

focus to elements of abstraction.

It was in the latter 1960s that Ainslie began to doubt seriously whether he should or could continue with figurative painting. An event that made him decide to move beyond his recent exhibited work was his encounter with the paintings of Douglas Portway in 1965. Ainslie said in 1968:

> My last exhibition [in Durban] had a few paintings which indicated a new interest for me: something very different from the big figures. This is the first show of mine devoted to this new vein to be held in Johannesburg. Discovering Douglas Portway's work was an important experience for me.[9]

Of Portway's art he said:

> It led me into making a more careful assessment of what is called 'abstract expressionism'. I discovered painters like [Kumi] Sugai and [Zoran] Mušič, whom I had never heard of before, and I became fascinated by the possibilities of combining multiple images derived from memory, and working them together to create a mood. Paintings symbolic of a mood, but carrying landscape or natural references coming from this country – that is what this show is mainly about.[10]

No longer making work that could be easily assimilated by friendly liberal admirers, Ainslie shed increasing numbers of aesthetic orthodoxies and became a liminal cultural figure, except when he was regarded as a teacher and supporter of artists. Painting not long after the Abstract Expressionists of the US, Ainslie reached into his African environment for its spirituality,

9 In an interview in the 1970s, Ainslie said about Portway's painting, 'I felt I was seeing paintings the like of which I had never seen in this country, that I had never seen in reproduction and I came upon a revelation of possibilities that I did not believe existed.' Author unknown, *Bill Ainslie 1157,* undated, p. 10.

10 Editorial article entitled 'Bill Ainslie', *Artlook*, July 1968, p. 16.

acknowledged its treatment of abstraction as a normal mode of expression, and used the capacity of paint to incorporate and reflect the landscape he knew.

To achieve this, he went abroad to engage with Portway and to take his own art beyond that influence.

1971–1979 *Post–Portway, Ainslie relocates repeatedly*

The Ainslie family returned from abroad to excitement in the cultural realm about new poetry. In 1971, Ainslie's friend and influential literary presence Lionel Abrahams published a collection of verse by a Soweto resident, Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali, titled *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*. In its first year of publication, it sold 14 000 copies,[11] more than any local publication of its kind. This was followed in 1972 by Serote's first collection of poems, *Yakhal'inkomo,* which marked the start of his prolific literary career. These and other events shifted the centre of cultural gravity from middle-class White hegemony to a broader, more inclusive group of writers, and this, in turn, extended to the arts and humanities in general. This was followed immediately by adventurous publishers and the arts became increasingly inclusive of all practitioners in their fields. The poet Wopko Jensma, who brought together poems and woodcuts in his seminal 1973 collection *Sing for Our Execution,* eluded all local forms of conventional categorisation and was dubbed, 'the first South African'.

In returning to Johannesburg, Ainslie gave up

11 Mark Gevisser, *Lost and Found in Johannesburg* (Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2014), p. 135.

direct involvement with the international art scene and renewed his commitment to the South African political struggle as a painter and teacher. Yet he was not a political 'activist' in the sense of organising underground resistance to the state or engaging in insurrectionist actions. Instead, as Serote put it, he 'was a revolutionary person', enacting a radical alternative, in plain sight, to state policies. It is important to acknowledge that, by the 1980s, he was one example of a number of initiatives in the country at that time that asserted alternative ways of collective activity in the arts.

Almost immediately on his return to Johannesburg, Ainslie held two solo exhibitions, one at the Goodman Gallery in Hyde Park, entitled 'Wilderness', and the other at the South African Association of Arts' Northern Transvaal Gallery in Pretoria.

The 'Wilderness' exhibition consisted of a set of large abstracts, which were augmented by striking portraits of Goodman Gallery founder Linda Goodman and artist Lynda Ballen, for example, as well as a series of collages, which he called *Homage to Bonnard's Dachshund*, a painterly in-joke which produced some witty, affordable works.

The abstracts were his first post-St Ives, post-Portway paintings. Instead, for example, of Portway's cerebral and philosophical emphases in his finely tuned abstracts, Ainslie directed his efforts towards capturing the qualities of his remembered environment. For instance, his subconsciously recalled impressions of the Matobo Hills emerged as presences, along with scrubby features of the South African veld in paintings such as *Totem* and *Veld Forms*.

The landscape presences in these paintings are emotional, subconscious and intuitive gestures that flowed through the artist, who was open to their passage and form. This process refers to the disciplined engagement with paint by Abstract Expressionists such as the US-based artists Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning and Robert Rauschenberg, whom Ainslie acknowledged.

His second exhibition was in 1973 in Pretoria. Eight works on canvas were titled *Namib*, one was *Escarpment* and two *Kalahari*. Among the oil-on-paper works, 11 had the word 'baobab' in their titles, two were called *Namib* and three *Kalahari*.

With such a preponderance of specifically African references, Ainslie inserted his abstract paintings into the zone and tradition of local art dominated by White landscape painters. Instead of the pictorial control that such conventional landscapes attempted, Ainslie's paintings used abstract resources to suggest the unmistakeably African in earth, plant and colour. It was not the place or thing that his paintings sought to depict but their atmosphere and immanence. Insofar as the paintings as a whole are images, their content lies in what the paint invites the viewer to make possible. Here Ainslie has moved beyond Portway (whose later work became increasingly austere) and has found his own 'voice' by allowing paint to express the flow of the creative response passing through him.

Once Ainslie had mounted his two major exhibitions in the early 1970s, he began to assemble a growing group of students and employ teachers for the first time. But this developing enterprise and his opportunities to paint were disrupted every second year when the sites in Killarney (1973) and then in Forest Town (1975) were made unavailable by their owners.

When he moved into promising premises in Saxonwold (1977), he was soon required by the city council (the owners) to pay a higher rental and maintain the largely neglected property. It was then that his friends and supporters recognised his need for a permanent home, where he could both paint and teach in a stable environment. This led to the establishment of a trust, administered by a council, which formally employed Ainslie as its director.

Between 1977 and 1982, therefore, Ainslie was heavily engaged in a campaign to have the newly named Johannesburg Art Foundation's tender for the premises in Saxonwold accepted by the City Management Committee. This was successful. By this, the city was granted a fully fledged arts centre without financial burden for itself and the JAF occupied a permanent home.

As its name suggests, it was more than just a school for people who wanted to learn to paint. It was the place to go to engage seriously with the making of art; to learn more about the connections between the visual and other forms of art; and where creativity was nurtured. The foundation's working environment was clearly different from the burdens of apartheid outside it. For example, the JAF was South Africa's first non–racial art school.

By now, Ainslie had developed a coherent teaching programme based on openness, individuality, nurturing creativity outside of theory and preconceptions, and without coercive systems or structures. This he formulated in a paper for a conference – The State of Art in South Africa, held at the University of Cape Town in 1979 – on his approach to the intrinsic importance of artists' workshops.

In addressing this conference, Ainslie said artists should turn away from the past and confront the present realities of their context. He argued that it is 'the creative act which transfigures the past', that is, the creativity of the present. In so doing, teachers should use workshop methods for discovering the creativity of people in a process that meant encountering the exceptional, the unknown and the unexpected.

Ainslie was clear in stating that 'I do not know how to make an artwork, nor do I know how to teach people to do it.' He added, 'Teaching consists of leading and being led towards the threshold of the unconditional.'

More on his approach to and work with artists' workshops is in the section on **Teaching those who want to paint** in section 5.

1980–1989 *Secure location, full abstraction, creative workshops*

This era represents Ainslie as an artist fully committed to making abstract paintings as his most emphatic contribution to his community and to his world. His two solo exhibitions at the Goodman Gallery in 1984 and 1986 mark a summit in his achievement as a painter.

There is abundant evidence that the JAF was functioning then as a remarkable centre for the arts, with the emphasis on the visual art of painting.

Ainslie's abstract work was never wholly separate from references to and intimations of landscape. Painting as an African in Africa, he acknowledged the history of abstraction in North American and European art, as well as elements from the East such as the 'untrammelled' tradition in Japan and China. And, most importantly, his work stands alongside the ancient traditions of abstraction in Africa, including South Africa.

By his focus on the power of paint to suggest and embody the beautiful, and in his strong sense of the poetic, Ainslie infused his abstract works with spiritual presence.

When hot-heads in the liberation struggle took the view that art should be an overt 'weapon of struggle', Ainslie's abstract works of the 1980s constituted a problem for his friend and admirer, Mongane Wally Serote. They met in London in 1987 and spent two nights and a day in unresolvable disagreement.

Fifteen years later, when Serote used to sit in the JAF at dawn to compose his poetry, surrounded by the late Ainslie's major abstracts on the walls, he began to understand how such art, in response to changing light, addressed deep qualities in the human ability to reflect, change perspective and move beyond the ordinary limits of the self. Serote expressed his regret that he had not been able to tell Ainslie that.[12]

By 1984, the JAF had established itself broadly with the following individuals:

Patrons: Ian Haggie, Harry Oppenheimer, Bill Wilson, Irene Menell.

Initial Council: Ricky Burnett, Michael Gardiner (chair), John Hall, Irene Menell, David Morrison, Sipho Sepamla, Franka Severin. The council was augmented over time to reflect community and other interests.

A full history of the JAF would need to include the names of the staff and teachers, visiting artists, and the many participants in the life of the art foundation.

For example, the year 1984 at the JAF was marked by a proliferation of activities in addition to the regular full-time (three-year) and part-time courses. There were a number of public seminars on art movements; lunchtime lectures; workshops on poetry, dreams and creative writing; and seminars for staff and senior full-time students. There were also classes and school-holiday workshops for children, ranging in age from the

12 Mongane Serote, interviewed by Elizabeth Castle, October 2013 for her MAFA degree: see footnote 8 above.

very young to matric students. There was a gallery for the exhibition of artworks; a library of books and slides; and a bursary scheme. People seeking special skills could pursue watercolours, oils, sculpture, etching, drawing and egg tempera. The centre was never closed and functioned as a live, organic entity. At its heart were the workshops for artists. Ainslie described their importance thus:

> 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 and 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's all too self-conscious. What we need is to get on with the job of discovering ourselves, and let the labels be used by the ideologists. Beuys[13] 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 the promises that fail and ambitions that can be defeated are the raw stuff of the living stone.[14] I like Joseph Beuys for giving me the idea that the workshop is a social sculpture.[15]

The increasing depth and strength of the JAF's focus on people's creativity was shared in the 1980s by other initiatives. For example, in 1983, Darius and Catherine Brubeck, with vital assistance from Professor Chris Ballantine, persuaded the University of Natal in Durban to admit, at selected levels, gifted and creative musicians into the new jazz courses and activities in the Department of Music. Many of these were people whose musical

13 Joseph Beuys (1921–1986) was a German artist who included debate, discussion and teaching in his definition of art.

14 The stone overlooked by builders has particular value.

15 Bill Ainslie, 'An Artists' Workshop – Flash in the Pan or a Brick that the Builders Rejected?' *Proceedings of 'The State of Art in South Africa' Conference* (University of Cape Town, 1979), p. 87.

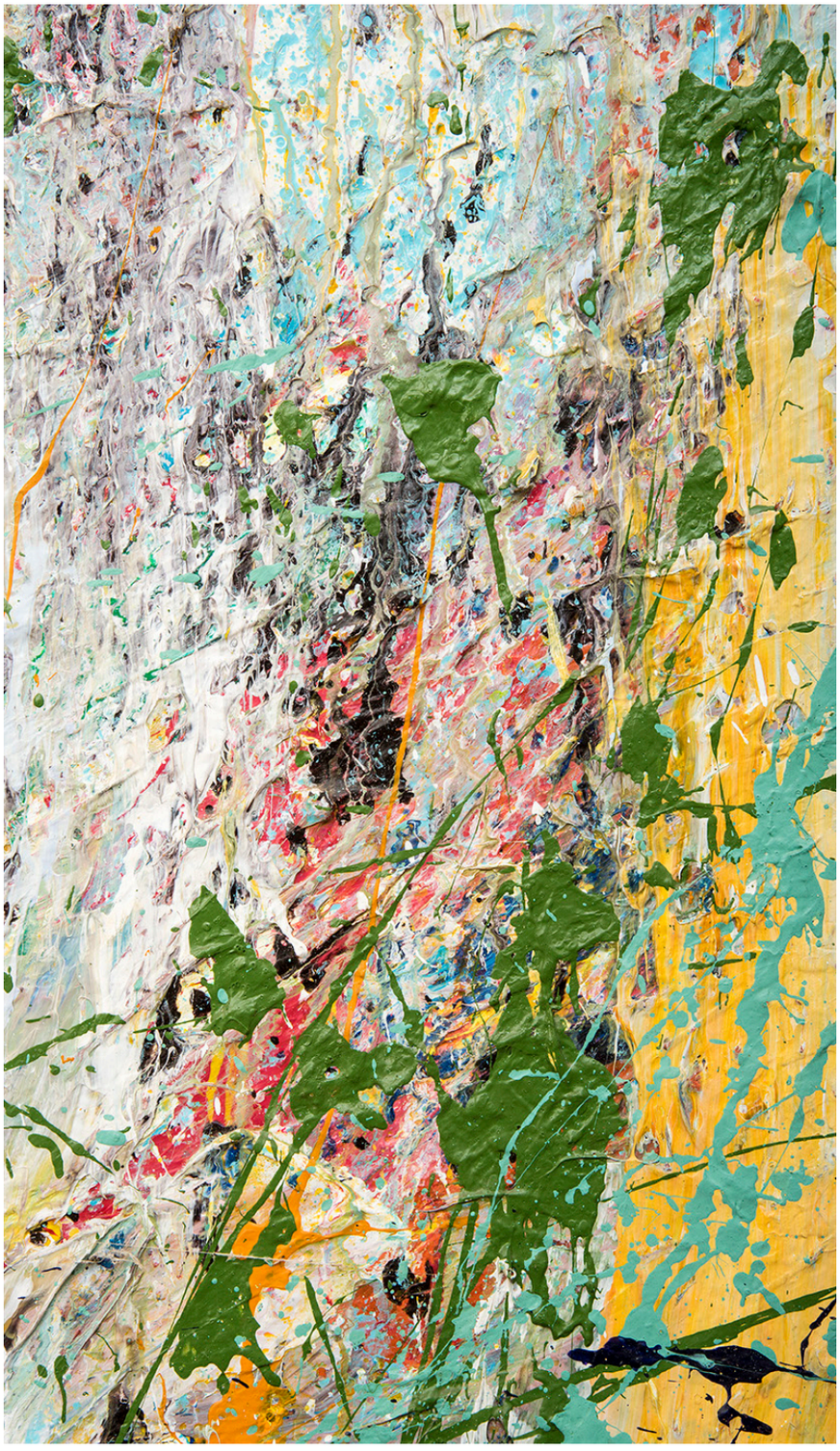
proficiency was unquestionable but who had little or no formal schooling, no money, and no place to stay.[16]

Today, the University of KwaZulu–Natal is home to a thriving Centre for Jazz and Popular Music (CJPM), which, as the first university course in jazz in Africa, stimulated the inclusion of jazz in almost all South African music teaching programmes.

This example demonstrates that the JAF, unique in many aspects, was but one of many initiatives by diverse groups of people to find new ways of forming environments in which people's creativity could find expression, free from the weight of officialdom and orthodoxy. In fact, if one draws a spider-like web of the various arts centres that were linked in the Transvaal (now Gauteng) alone, with the JAF as its centre, one can develop a complex pattern in which the many arts were interlinked and interacted with one another in the 1980s.

Further examples of creative activity at this time are the impact of Johannes Kerkorrel and the Gereformeerde Blues Band upon Afrikaner youth; the Market Theatre Laboratory's programme of workshopping community plays; large poetry readings taking place in spaces between suburb and township; and the output of at least three adventurous publishers such as Ravan Press, Ad. Donker and David Philip. It is a regrettable fact that much of this creative energy was dispersed after 1990.

16 Darius Brubeck and Catherine Brubeck, *Playing the Changes* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu–Natal Press, 2023). In 1983, they established the first school of Jazz in an African academic institution.



4. AINSLIE SPEAKS ABOUT ART

As an artist and teacher, Ainslie 'spoke' about art in a number of different ways. For example, he commented on his developing work to friends, interviewers and the interested public. In particular, he recorded in letters and notes the changes and difficulties as he sought continuously to achieve the finest possible expression of his skill and insight.

A further form of 'speech' about art is to be found in Ainslie's focus on developing spaces and environments which were conducive to art-making. The workshop, as he conceived it, was a major form of expression and required the most careful cultivation.

Most eloquent of all is his making in paint works that are beautiful, poetic and spiritual. Responses to this go beyond the verbal.

Public speaking

When he was an art teacher at Cyrene Mission in 1960, Ainslie challenged the tradition of painting taught there because it had become frustrating for artists to work on minute scale, using flat and unshaded colours and having to observe other external requirements.[17]

In 1961, Ainslie contributed a series of articles on art and society to *The Bulawayo Chronicle*. Having to use black-and-white illustrations, he discussed

17 Fiona Lloyd, quoting Anthony Chennells in 'Tribute to Bill Ainslie', *Africa South*, November/December 1989, p. 41.

ideas of modernity, twentieth-century art, and art's ways of reflecting human concerns and issues of contrasting cultures.[18] In so doing, Ainslie offered the readership of the newspaper ideas not easily accommodated by supporters of racial colonialism.

Once in Johannesburg, in 1965, Ainslie published a letter to four well known, Johannesburg-based artists who were exhibiting together at the Adler-Fielding Gallery in a show titled 'Four African Artists'. They were Ephraim Ngatane, Andrew Motjuoadi, Louis Maqhubela and Lucas Sithole.

Ainslie's letter did an extraordinary thing: it addressed the four painters as colleagues, as one might elsewhere in the world but not in South Africa then. The implicit assumption was that concern with art transcended apartheid's values of separation, supposedly incompatible differences and racial division.

In this letter, Ainslie declares, 'Most white South Africans are not really interested in art, and this is because they have such a limited interest in life.' Then, commenting directly on the work on show, Ainslie writes:

> Here I find there are no unpeopled landscapes, no superficially 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?[19]

In addition to his stance, which Koloane later

18 Copies of the articles are held in the Ainslie papers, Johannesburg Art Foundation collection.

19 Bill Ainslie, 'The Living Eye', *The Classic*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1965, p. 46.

described as 'fearless', Ainslie revealed a passion in response to the frequent and common failure of the work by both Black and White artists to address the issues that were important in people's lives. He went on to establish respectful working relationships with these artists, especially Maqhubela. A joint exhibition of work by Ainslie and Maqhubela would be of great interest to those who value local abstract art.

Speaking during an interview with a reporter from a news magazine in 1977, Ainslie said the following about the state of art in South Africa:

> I am interested personally in the problem of inertia and demoralisation … Both black and white art reflect frustration and defeat. There is no great difference between them. But what factors might set the sap moving again? That's what interests me. Can you structure a reply to alienation?[20]

Once again, Ainslie viewed the issues as affecting everyone, displaying consistent 'whole-ism' that underpinned his personal quest for completeness in a divided and fractured society.

A further example of Ainslie's interest in the role of art in society is contained in the following statement:

> Without art, politics is corrupted by a false notion of power and becomes brutalised; science and technology are corrupted by false notions of insight and reason becomes sterile, reductive and polluting; industry, technology and commerce become materialistic, self-seeking and exploitative. Religion is corrupted by false notions of the spirit and becomes superstitious, self-righteous and sectional.[21]

20 Peter Anderson, 'Portrait of a Studio', *To The Point,* 11 March 1977, p. 35.

21 *Bill Ainslie 1157,* undated, p. 6. Neither Sophia Ainslie nor I can identify the author of this photocopied document, nor is there any evidence in the Johannesburg Art Foundation papers.

What Ainslie had in mind when making this blunt-seeming statement is contained in his next response to the interviewer about art's usefulness:

> … in a materialistic culture, art will seem useless because it involves the question of meaning. It actually challenges people on the level of what they are alive for. Whether they exist for the sole purpose of perpetuating the existing social, political or economic structures or whether they are alive for the quest for personal meaning within that context and a striving to preserve personal integrity.[22]

When Ainslie was located in a permanent place, he was able to assemble around him a flexible community of people with whom he shared the concerns and satisfactions of art-making. Like many people in 1980s South Africa, he sought to form an island of sanity and creativity.

Speaking about his own work

This is what he said in 1979:

> I started off in painting with certain preoccupations. These preoccupations changed. But one thing that has remained continuous for quite a while has been the attempt to almost slough off a skin of inherited ways of doing things. That which is called derivative … And I think it takes a long time to do good work, and to actually discover where the true sources of one's expression lie. I know what I have so far rejected. I don't yet feel that I have got through fully at all to what is really trying to come through.[23]

Speaking in the 1980s, Ainslie repeated his view that South African art was 'essentially derivative' and that it conformed to staid and conventional practices when not copying British and American developments in art. Instead, he believed:

22 *Bill Ainslie 1157*, p. 7. Note that this is a paraphrase by the interviewer.
23 Avril Herber, *Conversations*, 1979, p. 106.

> Art is very much a challenge to the taste. It is a challenge to one's accepted notions of life. It is an opening up of new possibilities, of a new sense of meaning.[24]

Ainslie struggled to shake off his historical, cultural and familial legacies as well as the powerful influence of Douglas Portway in the process of finding his own voice. This quest became acute once he abandoned figurative painting.

Having completed two successful solo shows in Johannesburg, and before going abroad, Ainslie accepted an invitation to exhibit at the Durban Municipal Art Gallery, which did not usually offer opportunities to individual artists.

On that occasion (the only one of which I am aware), Ainslie typed up his address for the opening of the show, an address which contains a number of interesting statements.[25]

To begin with, the audience in Durban was told of Louis Armstrong's response to the question, 'What is rhythm?' He said, 'Ma'am, if you has to ask, you ain't got it.' Ainslie then said:

> 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.

His assertiveness here, as an opening gambit, speaks of a fragile confidence in his art. But there is a deep sense in what he said about necessary freedom from inhibitions:

24 *Bill Ainslie 1157*, p. 15.
25 Copy held in the Ainslie papers, Johannesburg Art Foundation collection.

> 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.

This assertion is a critique of the provincialism of the South African kind, with its legacy of colonial and cultural (and hence racial) bigotry. Art, Ainslie asserts, is bigger than and not subordinate to the national, the local or the contingent.

Turning to his own work on show, Ainslie pointed to the African origins of the imagery – such as 'dust, dung, rock, lichen, mud, stains, spoors, bones, carvings, masks' – and the Eastern (as opposed to post–Renaissance European) sense of space in his paintings. And then he concluded:

> This imagery, this manipulation of space, this technique, I have attempted to use to evoke a painting which, for want of better words, is symbolic of a certain mood or state of mind. A mood of waiting, of inactivity, of expectancy, sometimes hopeful and sometimes fearful. This is why most are called *Vigil*.

When showing new work in Johannesburg in 1968, he said:

> My last exhibition [in Durban] had a few paintings which indicated a new interest for me: something very different from the big figures. This is the first show of mine devoted to this new vein to be held in Johannesburg. Discovering Douglas Portway's work was an important experience for me.[26] It led me into making a more careful assessment of what is called 'abstract expressionism'. I discovered painters like Sugai and Mušič, whom I had never heard of before, and I became fascinated by the possibilities of combining multiple images derived from memory, and working them together to create a mood. Paintings symbolic of a mood, but carrying landscape or natural references coming from this country – that is what this show is mainly about.[27]

Having abandoned the figurative mode by this stage, Ainslie's work displayed qualities of colour–field paintings.[28] They reflected obscure depths, enigmatic semi–suggestions with inevitable indeterminacy. They were thus reflective of private dreams and 'moods'. For some sympathetic observers, the big canvases were successful reflections of 'mood' but, for others, they were without sufficient conviction, seeming to reflect uncertainty in Ainslie himself.

However, a reviewer of the 1968 show at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg wrote, 'By painting this way, Ainslie is free to allow his whole being, not just his conscious processes, to be expressed on canvas.'[29] Speaking to this reporter, Ainslie said, 'I find myself drawn to the New York school of painting. Men such as Rothko, De

---

26 In an interview in the 1970s, Ainslie said about Portway's painting, 'I felt I was seeing paintings the like of which I had never seen in this country, that I had never seen in reproduction and I came upon a revelation of possibilities that I did not believe existed.' *Bill Ainslie 1157,* p. 10.

27 'Bill Ainslie', *Artlook, p. 16.*

28 See perhaps Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change* (London: BBC, 1980), p. 156. He wrote, 'The paintings [Helen] Frankenthaler, [Kenneth] Noland, [Morris] Louis and Jules Olitski did in the 1960s were, as a whole, the most openly decorative, anxiety–free, socially indifferent canvases in the history of American art.' The Frankenthaler painting in the Johannesburg Art Gallery is an example of a successful colour–field painting.

29 Staff reporter, *Northern Reporter*, 2 August 1968.

Kooning and Rauschenberg have influenced me – the American abstract expressionists generally'. Therefore his colour–field focus was transitional.

The business of Ainslie and 'abstract expressionism' is not addressed here because it was only one part of Ainslie's expanding repertoire of techniques and, more importantly, was one element of his full move into abstraction. In his Durban and Goodman shows at the end of the 1960s, Ainslie explored the different languages of paint in which its formal properties, such as imagery, perspective, calligraphy and so on, were derived from different sources and eras.

Ainslie's major concern at that time was that he wanted to make his own kinds of paintings, which were not *about* Africa but which *were* African.[30] It is my contention that he did so by expressing in paint, his perceptions as an African, through the poetic and the beautiful. Such matters can be discussed by attending to the work he produced in the 1980s, including the astonishing set of paintings which he made at the Pachipamwe workshop days before his death.

Letter from St Ives and his ongoing battle with the influence of Portway

Writing to Lettie and Michael Gardiner from the Netherlands in February 1969, Ainslie summed up his need to shift beyond the strong influence of Portway's work in the following way:

> There is one thing that irks a bit though – and that is that if people don't like my new work, and I grant that it is not all good, then they say I am too influenced by Portway. This is the bogy I must knock. I am influenced by Portway, as Portway was influenced by a whole host of others. Now I am pretty sure that we both want our paintings to be fresh, to be radiant or beautiful, to be subtle and sensitive – and there are other things we may want too, we have the same attitude towards it. I sensed this in South Africa and it has been confirmed in St Ives. And, of course, I have learned a lot. And I grant that Douglas [Portway], as a mature painter, has done things that I have found so irresistible that I have felt pressed to try them too. But that is the end of the matter. I know in my bones that I am a different person – that the world has impinged on me in a different way – and I know that the distinction between us will become clearer.[31]

It is evident from his two solo exhibitions in the 1980s and the Pachipamwe set of works that he had, in fact, made the distinctions between himself and other artists very clear.

Notes and thoughts

Though there are no examples currently available of Ainslie speaking about his painting in the 1980s, there are examples of other thoughts in the notes that he made when clarifying his own thinking about matters.

To clear his mind, Ainslie used to write his thoughts and ideas in his large, legible handwriting. It is most likely that he never used a computer.

In response to a showing of works by Sue Williamson in the late 1980s, Ainslie handwrote five pages titled 'Draft notes on Protest art'. Here are two extracts:

> The greatest quality required by a Protest artist

30 This distinction was made in general terms by Robert Hodgins in *News Check*, 20 December 1968, p. 17.

31 Ainslie to the Gardiners, 22 February 1969. See '1965' in the **Chronology of Bill Ainslie** for more on Portway.

> is courage, [plus] concern and the ability to strike on a way of painting this in a clear manner. The greatest quality required by the artist is the determination to adhere to the constraints and illuminations of the inner eye – frequently against the pressures to conform to a more popular and public view of things.

He said that Feni was the first artist he worked with who registered the disturbances that plagued the country. He then remarked that artists such as Mandla Nkosi and Helen Sebidi had begun to do the same. He went on to say:

> … but I do not understand this to be Protest art in the strict sense. It is art in the broader sense in that it articulates a personal response to public events, and achieves this through a struggle against the conditional forms of conventional and academic stereotypes.

Ainslie concludes his rumination with 'All art is propaganda; not all propaganda is art.'[32]

The final instances of Ainslie's voice are those statements he made about the nature and significance of the workshops for students and artists.

Ainslie gave concrete examples of the ways in which he encouraged and participated in the processes through which students went as a result:

> 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 and 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's all too self–conscious. What we need is to get on with the job of discovering ourselves, and let the labels be used by the ideologists.[33]

When reflecting on Ainslie's priorities in his teaching, one should add his inclusion of spiritual qualities in his thinking, such as when he says, 'We in this country, in spite of being in Africa, have copied the forms but tended to withdraw from the spirit.'[34] In developing this thought, he became explicitly political by saying:

> I believe that we should be exploring the implications of the work we are doing for the people as a whole in this country. One of the really important developments of our time has been the creation of the proletariat ... and one of the challenges we face is whether our forms of expression are theirs as well; and whether the avant–garde needs, in this context, to fight the same sort of battles that are being fought in Europe; and whether there are new creative initiatives here which we are cut off from.[35]

By the time Ainslie discovered him and his writings in the mid–1970s, the American Clement Greenberg was well established as an art critic. His seminal work, *Art and Culture*[36] had appeared in 1961, but when Ainslie discovered the opinions of Greenberg – probably in the early 1970s or through his earlier interactions with Portway – he found a kindred spirit, which excited him deeply. Greenberg's visit to South Africa in 1975 was a major event for Ainslie.

An obvious aspect of Ainslie's interest was Greenberg's involvement in contemporary

32 Bill Ainslie, 'Draft notes on Protest art', handwritten, unpublished, Johannesburg Art Foundation papers.

33 Ainslie, 'An Artists' Workshop', 1979 UCT Conference, p. 87.
34 Sue Soppitt (ed.), *Gdunk! Arts Magazine*, vol. 1, no. 2, Durban April/May 1979, p. 10.
35 *Gdunk! Arts Magazine*, p. 10.
36 Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).

American painting and sculpture from the 1930s to the present. Here was a lively link for Ainslie to international debates about art, of which he wanted to be part. Greenberg had paid particular attention to American abstract painters, from abstract expressionism to its later forms.

Greenberg's writings, especially his essays, articulate definite and strongly argued positions over, for example, what constitutes art criticism and what does not; the 'autonomies of art'; and the intrinsic links between value judgements and aesthetics. Uncannily, or coincidentally, or serendipitously or merely logically, Greenberg's views about art accord closely with the views of British critic FR Leavis on literature, which Ainslie had read as a student. For example, Greenberg said:

> That great literary critic FR Leavis, while insisting on the primacy of value judgment, avoided the word for – as it seems to me – fear of these connotations. Instead, he resorted to 'sensibility' of circumlocutions like 'feeling for value' or 'sense of value'. … I want to try to rehabilitate the word. Taste is the handiest term for what's meant, and somehow the bluntest – in part precisely because of disrepute into which it has fallen. The word drives home the fact that art is first of all, and most of all, a question of liking and not liking – just so. Liking and not liking have to do with value, and nothing else.[37]

To Ainslie, such sentiments would inevitably have echoed the resonant 1928 declaration by DH Lawrence, in a text used extensively in English literature courses at the University of Natal in

37 Clement Greenberg, 'Art Criticism', *Partisan Review*, vol. XLVII, no. 1, 1981 [online] available at (link no longer active). Accessed 8 September 2008.

Pietermaritzburg when Ainslie was a student there:

> Literary criticism can be no more than a reasoned account of the feeling produced upon the critic by the book he is criticising. Criticism can never be a science: it is, in the first place, much too personal, and in the second, it is concerned with values that science ignores. The touchstone is emotion, not reason. We judge a work of art by its effect on our sincere and vital emotion, and nothing else.[38]

Issues such as these were bread and butter to Ainslie, who was exhilarated rather than daunted by the powerful demands that engagement with art in these terms made upon one's personal resources.

One method Leavis liked to use to develop exchanges of thought and opinion – in his case about literature – was to offer a point of view and then appeal for corroboration. He would ask questions such as 'Do you remember …? Did you notice …? Don't you think it was …? What do *you* think?'[39] The ideal response is, 'Yes, but …'. This manner of engagement in the arts is an essential feature of Ainslie's workshops.

Towards the end of the 1980s, Ainslie articulated a view that incorporated the continent of Africa and its cultures.

In opening the exhibition of steel sculpture by Anthousa Sotiriades in late 1988, Ainslie argued that her sculptures, made while teaching at the JAF and the Alexandra Arts Centre, were instances of

38 DH Lawrence, 'John Galsworthy', in Edward D McDonald (ed.), *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of DH Lawrence* (London: William Heinemann, 1936), p. 539.

39 Elizabeth Cook, *The Ordinary and the Fabulous* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, rev. ed. 1978), p. xi.

'African Modernism' as well as examples of the pursuit of freedom in art by New Abstractionists. In making these continental and international references, he combined his desire to focus on contemporary African art (in contrast with faded European modernism) with the 'fresh and independent spirit' that was infused in the sculptures on show. He saw that, in addition to their African elements, these works included mark making that was suggestive of Eastern and Middle Eastern calligraphy. A further quality he noted was the way in which the work was 'defiant' in its demand to be shown in a specific environment and in its deliberate use of incongruities, thus challenging conventional taste and terms.[40]

These qualities suggested to Ainslie that an African creative spirit could, through its art, once again revivify and change Western art and culture in particular. One hundred years previously, African, Eastern, Middle Eastern and North American art had had an influence on Europe which he described as 'a change in the attitudes towards *seeing* itself'.

Citing the 'Blackness' of the sculptures and the fact that Sotiriades came across to some people as a Black person, Ainslie quoted Clement Greenberg's assertion that art was now freed from history so that artists were able 'to tell everything without fear of censorship by tradition'. This allowed Ainslie to argue that African Modernism and New Abstractionism offered freedom from theory and permitted the use of radical-seeming techniques such as those in ancient Chinese and Japanese 'untrammelled' art.

40 Published in 'The Art Foundation Newsletter' (Johannesburg Art Foundation), 2nd Quarter, 1989.

Ainslie himself, his work and his society

Speaking in 1979, Ainslie said:

> I started off in painting with certain preoccupations. These preoccupations changed. But one thing that has remained continuous for quite a while has been the attempt to almost slough off a skin of inherited ways of doing things. That which is called derivative … And I think it takes a long time to do good work, and to actually discover where the true sources of one's expression lie. I know what I have so far rejected. I don't yet feel that I have got through fully at all to what is really trying to come through.[41]

Ainslie's determination to 'slough off' whatever was obstructing him as a painter is central to understanding his struggle for artistic freedom. As a thoughtful artist himself, Ricky Burnett's response to the excited general reception of Ainslie's last, Pachipamwe paintings, is instructive:

> It appears to me that [what is unique about the paintings] is that he obviously cleared away a lot of the obstructions. This may be the one occasion 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.[42]

Ainslie's personal need to shed tradition and fixed categories of art was to become increasingly open and receptive to other energies and impulses, which DH Lawrence called the 'fine wind' of intuition and inspiration 'blowing the new direction of Time'.[43]

Given the suddenness of Ainslie's death

41 Avril Herber, *Conversations*, 1979, p. 110.
42 Ricky Burnett, interviewed by Vanessa Anderson, 'The Use of Abstraction', Technikon Natal, 1999, vol. II, p. 90.
43 DH Lawrence, 'The Song of a Man Who Has Come Through', in Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts (eds), *The Complete Poems of DH Lawrence* (London: Heinemann, 1964), p. 250.

immediately after the Pachipamwe workshop, there is no guessing where the new direction would have taken him, his art or us.

In the interview with Avril Herber, Ainslie describes what the artist's job is:

> To me, an artist in South Africa is necessarily a sort of liminal man. A person on the threshold of society or the outskirts of society. A person who is on the frontiers of society. A person who cannot simply accept what the society lays down as norms. His or her job is to question them, so that the people within the society itself can have their eyes opened to other possibilities and other realities which man in his 'busyness' so easily overlooks. It's the artist's job to remind people of that transcendent side which underlies or overlays the activities of man. The artist's job is to look for meaning, to provide the meanings by which man orders his life. And in that way he is a liminal person, and in any healthy society, this role of the artist will be acknowledged and encouraged. In a society which is fearful the artist tends to be censored.[44]

Ainslie makes an essentially moral statement here. It is about matters such as quality, choice, priority and value. Every human situation involves questions and decisions for which art can provide 'meanings'. However, the focus in this statement is on the relationship between artists and their society. For artists to do what they have to do, Ainslie believes that they have to be not only in but also on the threshold or outskirts of society.

There are numbers of 'liminal' figures in society. Cartoonists (Zapiro); satirists (Pieter–Dirk Uys); the often–whipped 'fool' in Shakespeare's tragedies; and others who speak truth to power are all in their own way 'liminal'. They are a necessary element of their society, with roles to play in ensuring the

44 Avril Herber, *Conversations*, 1979, p. 110.

health of society and community. In Ainslie's case, the position of the artist is both a peripheral and an engaged one. This constitutes an aspect of the 'wholeness' that Ainslie sought.

Communities of 'liminal' figures, in Ainslie's case, can be a 'blessing', even though there is a wisp of sadness in his voice:

> I love working in this situation and I consider it a 'blessing'. The free, vitalising and thorough interchange that can take place between people who have freely chosen to discover for themselves what they most need in their work is a blessing … Everybody freely chooses to discover for themselves what they really most need in their lives, and in this they encourage others to do the same.[45]

In his interview with Herber, Ainslie noted how the 'colloquial terminology' of contemporary psychology diminishes people's capacity to experience themselves and other people comprehensively by excluding the dimension of 'soul'. He amplified this by saying:

> You know, progressive enlightened modernist humanism excludes a very important part of man's experience which I would call the religious consciousness, and thereby reduces man's dignity and depth. It's the religious consciousness … [that] has always formed, in my opinion, throughout history, the main source of his creative expression.[46]

Consistent with and in addition to his seriousness about 'religious consciousness' was Ainslie's deep interest in the thinking of Carl Jung and Sufism, the latter described by Burnett as 'a sort of subset of Islam … not particularly about religion [but] more about vision, ethics, insight and wisdom …'.

45 Ainslie, 'An Artists' Workshop', 1979 UCT Conference, p. 83.
46 Avril Herber, *Conversations,* 1979, p. 105.

Burnett goes on to say:

> … he always 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 … 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 ... We are talking about somebody who is working with hard stuff all the time.[47]

The presence of Peter Bradley

By the mid–1980s, having established the JAF and having been to the US more than once, Ainslie became attracted to a more robust approach to the myriad issues affecting the arts in South Africa. An example of this is provided by the attraction Ainslie felt to Peter Bradley's explicit attitude to art and art–making.

The story of how Koloane and Ainslie met the New York artist is part of the genesis of the Thupelo series of workshops for South African artists they originated. That is told in more detail in the section on **Ainslie's public activities** in section 6.

From his handwritten notes on Bradley, it is clear that Ainslie found Bradley's directness and forthrightness attractive and he wrote in some detail about Bradley's approach to art.

On meeting Bradley, Koloane and Ainslie sensed that his involvement with New York's Black Arts

47 Ricky Burnett, interviewed by Vanessa Anderson, 'The Use of Abstraction', Technikon Natal, 1999, vol. II, pp. 69–70.

Movement gave him insight into being an artist in a repressive society. Furthermore, his outspokenness would 'stir things up'. Before arriving in South Africa in 1975, Bradley declared:

· Abstract art was the only area in which original work of quality was being made;

· The art of old Africa made a more significant contribution to modern art than the art of old Europe;

· Black artists must get out of their ghetto by refusing to make pathetic derivative pictures of broken–down environments and people, and by refusing to exhibit in second–rate galleries, and by setting out to get the most out of themselves;

· Artists must be on guard against the knowingness of the right hand – in other words, art is a matter of instinct not intellect.

Bradley also declared that he was determined to 'beat' Anthony Caro, whom he claimed was the best sculptor in the world.

When he landed in South Africa, therefore, Bradley decided that, in addition to being the 'visiting artist' at the first Thupelo workshop, he would use the opportunity to make large steel sculptures – though he had never sculpted before. He ordered 14 tonnes of scrap metal from a Boksburg foundry and had it delivered to the (shocked) Fine Arts Department at Wits.

Ainslie recorded that Bradley, in his own approach, disdained careful workmanship. He joined large and awkwardly shaped chunks of scrap steel to

others because of their dissimilarity. He sought pieces that provided major resistance to his design and provided dissonance. In his notes, Ainslie remarked that:

> The sculptural challenge for Bradley is to find a means to counteract the givenness of the originating piece. The uniqueness of the originating piece requires the exercise of the imagination that must adapt itself to very different demands in each case … The quest for an extraordinary counterpoint, a ridiculous, a bizarre connection was invariably the main stimulus. It was a deliberate defiance of a 'formal' logic associated with Greenberg and [New York art dealer André] Emmerich.

Regarding what Bradley had assembled, Ainslie said the following:

> The work is discomforting in two ways. In one way it is an abrasive discomfort, exhilarating and threatening – the best sort of discomfort. Another way it is discomforting because certain decisions seem wilful and unrelated to the sculpture's best interest. And sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between the two, because a refusal to tie up a loose end may be dictated by an insight that is more in line with the work's best interest than a formal resolution meeting the requirements of established taste may demand. Peter risks the latter in his determination to achieve the former so one must acknowledge that he is aware and responsible for the total look of the work.

Ainslie concluded that, 'The central challenge of Peter Bradley's visit was the assertion, coming through his work and his presence, that art was a matter of particulars.'

The Pachipamwe paintings

Ainslie's last statement about art consists of the paintings he made at the 1989 Pachipamwe artists' workshop – examples of his ideas expressed in paint rather than in words. It happened in this way.

When shifting the Triangle/Thupelo concept of artists' workshops out of South Africa into Africa, thus breaking the international cultural boycott, Robert Loder brought Ainslie and Koloane as key presences to two artists' workshops in Zimbabwe, one outside Harare and the next one, in 1989, outside Bulawayo, at the Cyrene Mission in the Matobo Hills. The latter workshop was the last one that Ainslie lived to attend.

Over two weeks at Cyrene, he painted night and day and produced six acrylic paintings on canvas and ten acrylic paintings on paper. All this work, but especially the canvases, excited wonderment among friends and onlookers at the degree to which the finer elements in Ainslie's previous work has been given a heightened and intensified quality. These paintings were in the car, with those of his passengers, Helen Sebidi and David Koloane, when Ainslie was killed in a collision with a truck on their way back to Johannesburg.

The paintings were shown at Wolfson College, Oxford, in 1990 and at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1992. In the catalogue for these exhibitions, Pat Williams wrote:

> His Pachipamwe paintings are, to me, astonishing. Not because of the power and style and focus of his expression (because his voice was familiar), but because of the intensification of all these things – and because of what he expressed. Once again,

he'd outwitted the guardians.[48] The paintings are more luminous, more spacious, more awesome than any that went before. The radiance and energy were always there. So was the pure and blazing colour, and the inventive compound of texture, as well as the timelessness, the truthfulness. Yet the work, *Pachipamwe One* in particular, seems no longer to inhabit this world entirely, but to be calling from the borders of the next. 'Here,' he seems to say, 'I have drawn closer to the sources of beauty and truth. I have gone deep within myself and found the entrance to another world. When you find it too, do not be afraid. See how beautiful it is.'[49]

On learning of Ainslie's death, the sad, close friend of the family, Dumile Feni, sent a handwritten letter to Fieke Ainslie:

I cannot begin to form the words to express the tremendous tragedy. Bill had a great part toward building the new South Africa that is peeping on the horizon – getting ready to usher in a new dawn, existing beyond expectation. I don't really have the knowledge of what happened on that border road, but what I do know is that people from many parts of the world with a conscience gave great respect for the work that Bill was trying to do, his concerns with equality, freedom, justice, universal love and appreciation for the world we live in. I wish you great courage in this hour of need. I remember Bill particularly because of the fact that I was hiding in his house before eventually being forced out of my country. I treasure my friendship and association with Bill, you, and the family. Thank you for the wonderful memories. May God Allah grant us all strength, guidance, wisdom, and spiritual knowledge.

48 The 'guardians' are the inhibiting forces of artists' creativity.

49 Pat Williams, *Last Paintings by Bill Ainslie, 1934–1989* (Oxford: Wolfson College, 1990), posthumous exhibition catalogue, p. 2.

PACHIPAMWE No.1 acrylic on canvas 126 x 161 cm 1989

PACHIPAMWE No.7 acrylic on paper 61 x 65 cm 1989

PACHIPAMWE No.3 acrylic on canvas 141 x 181 cm 1989

PACHIPAMWE No.2 acrylic on canvas 81.5 x 168.5 cm 1989

5. TEACHING THOSE WHO WANT TO PAINT

This section of the handbook expands on the earlier statement that Ainslie 'spoke' about painting by assembling artists and students and shaping the environment in which they worked.

From the early 1970s, Bill and Fieke Ainslie established a special tone and atmosphere wherever they lived and worked. They and their family lived in every one of the places that they occupied.

For example, the JAF itself was never closed or empty. People lived and worked there continuously. Ainslie moved perpetually from one area or zone to the other, as director, artist and inhabitant, and he attended drawing classes as a participant. Whatever he drew at that session was subject to commentary by teachers and students in the same ways as the drawings of everyone else in the group. He also invited individual students and teachers from time to time into his private studio for conversation or for responses to his current work.[50] Hungry students could slip into the kitchen for a meal, and residential artists were accommodated in guest rooms. Artists would attend family meals as well as the dinners arranged for them to meet people of interest.

As an example of the access and openness which

50 It was one of Ainslie's tenets that learners needed to learn and develop in the same places where established, working artists were busy.

characterised the art foundation, this is what **Sam Nhlengethwa**, who worked both at home and at the art foundation, said:

> [Bill Ainslie] was like a father figure … because [you] would just get a call: 'What are you doing this Friday evening? Would you like to join us for dinner?' you know, and then you'd go there and you'd find Bill was having this kind of night gathering of warm people, artists, actors, writers and so on and it's like Bill's house was like our homes were because we were welcome at any given time.[51]

A key figure who kept the challenging and disparate activities in manageable shape was the Ainslies' housekeeper for forty years, **Ida Makoka**. Those who visited the domestic areas never saw her sitting down. She catered cocktail parties for funders and diplomats, dinners for the Ainslies' guests and lunches for speakers and their audiences; she met the needs of the Ainslie children and provided coffees and teas for all and sundry. She kept the reception area, entrance hall and living quarters in spotless condition. She also did the flower arrangements for the sitting and dining rooms.

This dedicated commitment to domestic tasks occurred within a particular context. Fieke Ainslie, the supervisor of enrolment, fees, venues and other organisational matters, made every building or house the Ainslies occupied appealing. The floors, walls, stairs and furnishings all emanated beauty and good taste. She managed this using

51 Sam Nhlengethwa, interviewed by Simon Trappler, Johannesburg Art Foundation papers, unpublished, 2007.

minimal resources.[52]

Commenting in the 1980s on the combination of what Bill and Fieke Ainslie achieved in the house, artist **Pat Mautloa** said:

> I don't know if you have been very much to Bill's house …when you enter there, there was this glow, this colour from the work and that tells you something about the person and you'd be able to sit there quietly and you'd be inside the atmosphere of colour which was very magical to me.[53]

Similarly, **Darius Brubeck** once commented on the quiet and enhancing atmosphere he felt about the formality and elegance of the Saxonwold house's entrance hall. He also commented on the degree to which Ainslie faced 'trials' by questioning ideas of the self, the essence of things, the nature of ancient knowledge and the processes of initiation.[54]

In addition to the entrance hall, the house in Saxonwold contained upstairs reception rooms, bedrooms and living rooms, bathrooms and a kitchen, as well as a studio for Ainslie. Spacious rooms downstairs were used for groups of part–time and full–time students to work in and gather for seminars, the 'crit sessions'[55] as well as for events such as musical performances and poetry readings. There was also a separate cottage for the housekeeper, Ida Makoka.

52 There is the view that this level of décor and entertainment could not have been achieved without substantial funds. Certainly, the Ainslies devoted all their resources to their initiatives, but there is no certitude about what funds they had access to or were obliged to spend to maintain such levels of quality. It is my opinion that they made much from little.

53 Interviewed by Simon Trappler, 2007.

54 Personal observation to Michael Gardiner, 1 November 2012.

55 After each painting and drawing session, participants and the teaching staff discussed the work that had been done.

Outbuildings and a basement made etching and printing possible and there were spaces available for a writers' group to meet and where new art works could be exhibited. There was also a double garage, which Ainslie used for painting his larger works against the walls, on the floor and, riskily, lying flat on the tarred driveway.

The garden offered opportunity for outdoor work, there was parking on the disused tennis court and there was a small swimming pool on the lawn. Sections of the grounds were used for sculpture and *al fresco* painting sessions.

In addition to Ainslie's own work and teaching, multiple activities involved children, weekly painters, professional artists, teachers, visitors, academics and weavers. A range of practitioners such as sangomas as well as church groups were permitted to use the premises at specific times. Lunchtime seminars, debates and performances drew people from outside the foundation and took place on the spacious lawn. Business people and professionals came after hours for individual opportunity to work with and speak to Ainslie.

The working areas were cluttered and crowded, difficult to heat, and hard work to keep clean. In other words, the whole space made possible a rich variety of activities but there was a spartan plainness in the working areas.

That tone and atmosphere made it possible for **Dumi Mabaso**, an artist who worked at various times at the art foundation, to describe that being there was 'like another country, that whole building it was a country away from South Africa. We were in a different country'.[56]

Ainslie did not use the workshops only to enable individual artists to 'become themselves' and to push their work even further than they believed they could. He also used a process of mutual and interactive commentary on work done, at which he invited students and others present to comment on his work as well:

> He would also ask you individually or as a group, 'What do you think of this?' and explain his problems with a particular painting. It was actually such a great thing that you could be on the same par with a master, or someone you look up to and he brought himself to your level and he said: 'Listen, I'm just an artist like you and help me along as well.' So there was that kind of feeding each other, a give-and-take situation, which I really enjoyed with Bill.[57]

This is what it could be like to live in another country.

In the early 1960s, **Mongane Wally Serote** wrote of 'the sweet smell of creativity' that emanated from the house and studio in which Ainslie then lived in Parktown. Speaking after more than twenty years of exile, about what the JAF and other arts centres had been able to offer students, Serote remembered the sensation on entering an arts centre such as the JAF:

> We saw … a space where we would be exposed

56 Dumisani Mabaso, interviewed together with Cyril Manganye by Elizabeth Castle, Soweto, 12 February 2012, p. 13. Interview conducted towards a MAFA degree at the University of the Witwatersrand.
57 Dumisani Mabaso, interviewed by Elizabeth Castle, Soweto, 12 February 2012.

> to all kinds of knowledge … [and] … I'm conscious that we were breaking the law very deliberately in insisting on creating space for our thoughts, our spirit, for our being. The arts centre being that, [when] you entered the gate of the art centre it was like entering the most free space.[58]

Ainslie's workshops

At a conference in July 1979, Ainslie presented a paper on the importance of workshops for artists.[59] The title of his paper was 'An Artists' Workshop – Flash in the Pan or a Brick that the Builders Rejected?' Its focus was on the priorities of the workshops he assembled for the teaching component of his studio. He had been using workshops since the early 1970s and from the many forms which they could take, they had become an integral part of his teaching and learning.

Rather than focus on the practical details of his workshops, Ainslie argued at the conference that artists should turn away from the past, confront present realities and recognise that it is 'the creative act which transfigures the past'. He argued that teachers should use workshop methods for discovering people's creativity in the process of their encountering the exceptional, the unknown and the unexpected.

In stating that 'I do not know how to make an artwork, and nor do I know how to teach people to do it,' Ainslie added that for him, the 'difficulty has to do with getting used to getting lost and working in the dark'. Furthermore, 'teaching consists of

58 Mongane Serote, interviewed by Elizabeth Castle, Johannesburg 2013.
59 The State of Art in South Africa conference was held at the University of Cape Town, 16–20 July 1979. Theme Three of the conference was 'The Problem of Art Education: the Role of Art Schools – Education for Whom and for What?'

leading, and being led, towards the threshold of the unconditional.'[60]

Ainslie gave concrete examples of the ways in which he encouraged and participated in the processes through which students went:

> 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 and 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's all too self-conscious. What we need is to get on with the job of discovering ourselves, and let the labels be used by the ideologists. 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 the promises that fail and ambitions that can be defeated are the raw stuff of the living stone.[61] I like Joseph Beuys[62] for giving me the idea that the workshop is a social sculpture.[63]

Teaching at the Johannesburg Art Foundation

One way to understand the nature and zeitgeist of the JAF is to focus on the kind of teaching that occurred there and the tone that this established. Though busy, the centre itself was what Ainslie believed it should be, a secure, peaceful zone where it was possible to give extended attention to what mattered:

> My studio is a place where people can work simply for the pleasure of it. Artworks and objects are not made for capital investment – you might as well put your head in a deep freeze. To learn properly, people must be fully engaged in what they are

60 Ainslie, 'An Artists' Workshop', 1979 UCT Conference, p. 84.
61 That stone overlooked by builders has a special value.
62 Joseph Beuys (1921–1986) was a German artist who included debate, discussion and teaching in his definition of art.
63 Ainslie, 'An Artists' Workshop', 1979 UCT Conference, p. 87.

> doing. And it is the teacher's duty to keep them engaged … To learn, the students must see the point of an undertaking and what they stand to gain from it. We do not only have classes, but in order to back up the knowledge gained here, we also have discussions, symposiums, literature and films. People must be taught to appraise their own feeling and in order to do this must have a wider knowledge of what is going on around them.[64]
>
> My methods of teaching are based on the ideas and techniques of the French painter André Lhote[65] and the American Hans Hofmann[66] [both of whom also taught art]… and consequently the projects set are based on these methods. I have taken what I find useful from them and used those ideas in conjunction with my own methods that I have evolved.[67]

When asked about what he got from the environment of Ainslie's studios, **David Koloane** replied:

> 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 [such as] 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.[68]

Koloane's account points to the pivotal nature of

64 Bill Ainslie in Rosemary Smythe and Frances Rowsell, *In the Interests of Art*, post–1982; source not established.

65 French Cubist painter André Lhote (1885–1962) developed notions of 'screens' and 'passages', which describe the structuring and interconnection of pictorial planes.

66 German–American Hans Hofmann (1880–1966) articulated the theory of 'push and pull', describing the dynamic tensions of colour, form and spatial depth that animate a painting's surface.

67 Rosemary Smythe and Frances Rowsell, *In the Interests of Art*.

68 David Koloane, interviewed by Vanessa Anderson, 'The Use of Abstraction', Technikon Natal, 1999, vol. II, p. 157.

the workshops, which permitted a high degree of individual as well as collective focus. According to Ainslie's handwritten notes (undated but likely from the 1980s), he argued that the status of teachers and students in the workshop should depend on the quality and value[69] of what was said, and that the authority of what was said should arise from insight rather than from the personality of the teacher. What he wanted to achieve was an enabling process of initiation for would-be artists as they experienced their transformation rather than as talented people who merely acquired skills, techniques and know-how.

By rejecting White, middle-class, racial and institutionalised orthodoxies, Ainslie sought to make possible the joy of open and free communal creative work where 'true relations between the unconditioned and the conditioned in art and in life' could emerge.[70]

In response to the view that Ainslie discouraged the inclination of younger artists to make 'township art', **Sam Nhlengethwa** declared, 'It was like a massive experiment with freedom. None of the artists lost their own style. It taught us something new.'[71]

David Koloane answered the question, 'What was

69 The estimation of 'quality and value' of what teachers offered belonged to the students.

70 In the introduction to his book, *The Way of the Sufi* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), Idries Shah begins with the following epigraph from Nuri Mojudi: 'The Sufi is one who does what others do – when it is necessary. He is also one who does what others cannot do – when it is indicated.' The achievement of 'true relations' crucial in Sufist practice had a deep influence on Ainslie.

71 J. Brooks Spector, 'South Africans Get Ready for the Venice Biennale 2013', *Daily Maverick*, 27 May 2013, p.5.

Bill like as a teacher?' in this way:

> I think he was committed as a teacher and very unique in that he had time for everybody. You know, he had the patience, he had the time, he never gave up on a student or gave up on anybody. He would actually make you realise that what you [thought] were mistakes were actually your strong points so that in that way he changed the perception that there was something wrong [with what you had done]. He would say this is the right way to do it, why don't you carry on doing this and out of that would come something that would make you … actually surprise you and say that is that. What you thought was a weakness was actually a strong point, a strong character of yourself in you.[72]

Commenting on the influence on students and artists of the JAF, former Council member **Cyril Manganye** said:

> If you look at the works of the late Mandla Nkosi and Sam Nhlengethwa, those are the students that he encouraged to become themselves – he encouraged them to get their own research. He used to encourage them to develop on that line … It was not just stereotype teaching. He said find your line, find your artist, find your mentor and see if you can understudy them and find something out of them.[73]

As mentioned earlier, seminars, lectures, debates and discussions were a vital part of the experience for both students and artists. It was this breadth and variety to the foundation's nature that Serote understood was so necessary for South Africans to experience if they were to be active members and creators of a post-apartheid society. This moved Serote in 1982 to urge Ainslie and others

72 David Koloane, interviewed by Simon Trappler, 2011, p. 3.

73 Cyril Manganye, interviewed together with Dumisani Mabaso by Elizabeth Castle, 12 February 2012.

to establish arts centres throughout the country, which would expose township and rural people to a rich diversity of creative possibilities.

Workshops: some examples

The first example is from 1973, when Ainslie was teaching in the former Yugoslav Embassy house in Killarney.

Classes were held in three downstairs rooms. Ainslie taught six classes a week, each lasting about two hours. He usually had six to eight students in a class. They paid him R20 a month for one lesson a week and, when basic equipment was added, that ran to about R23. According to **Geoffrey Lawrence**:

> His classes are a mixed bag. A couple of teenagers, an art student from Wits taking extra lessons, a businessman or two, and maybe a housewife. He's taught successful professionals like Harold Voight, Lucky Sibiya and Sydney Kumalo. He's also taught a member of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council, a former SA judo champion, a psychotherapist, an engineer, two headmasters and a number of surgeons and company directors.[74]

Writing in 1977, **Peter Anderson** described what was called a 'crit session' of a student painting, held in the teaching studio at 61 Oxford Road, Saxonwold:

> On the day I attended, the painting in question was abstract – broad areas of colour done in enamel paint, hard and glossy. Green spread across the lower half; a sharp-edged grey square dominated it higher up. A wedge of flesh pink, tipped with red, caught my eye: also some patches of dark blue. 'Let me formulate my responses,' said Ainslie, inclining his head. 'When I first saw this

74 Geoffrey Lawrence, 'Bill Ainslie: Teaching Society to Paint', *Signature*, 1973, p. 26.

> painting I responded to the green area as a field, a landscape. But this – this pink area – is pinched – like hurt flesh. At the moment, however, I am not certain of the blues…'.
>
> One of the students shook his head. 'I like the ambiguity of the blues. They seem very much placed on top of the other colours, yet they retreat in terms of the picture plane.'
>
> At this level, and at progressively rigorous levels, the discussion was pursued, while Jill, the student whose painting it was, sat quietly and intently listening. Various approaches to the painting were considered: the historical, the analytical, the naïve. Ainslie challenged his students to 'see the painting for what it is'.
>
> 'I think what we are doing here as an initiation, rather than an education,' Ainslie remarked. 'Nobody can make a work of art out of deliberate intent. All he can do is make himself deserving of it.'[75]

The people drawn to this centre were freely admitted, without consideration of institutional or apartheid-based criteria. Therefore, Ainslie could orchestrate the following combinations of experience for artists and students:

> In keeping with the modern movement, the teaching is not academic in the sense of stressing technical skill and reproducing conventional art models. Instead the Art Foundation promotes the workshop concept, emphasising the importance of the example of the master, the immersion in 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 is an essential part of the process.[76]

The following are comments by artists who attended classes and workshops under Ainslie's guidance.

75 Peter Anderson, 'Portrait of a Studio', *To the Point*, 11 March 1977, p. 35.

76 Bill Ainslie, quoted by Sophia Ainslie, 'The Voice of the Nation', in Gary van Wyk (ed.), *Decade of Democracy: Witnessing South Africa* (Boston: Sondela, 2004).

Ainslie's daughter, **Sophia**, has become a notable artist who works and teaches in Boston, US. She described her experience of being taught as follows:

> I have been in and out of Bill's classes and the art foundation [workshops] all my life … Over and over I went through carefully structured still life and drawing classes … They were thoughtfully designed exercises developed to open our eyes to the act of seeing – to acutely observe the unique moment in front of you … At age 12, I remember focusing on a still life of onions for six weeks.
>
> One frustration I had with Bill's teaching in my late teens and early twenties was he very rarely, if ever, gave me answers to my questions … A characteristic that I admired was his ability to be completely honest with his critique without the need to fluff it up or sugar coat it. He very seldom praised work. In fact, I don't think I remember a time that he did. There was always more to be done. More questions, more thinking, more work. I feel this taught me to trust myself and my decision making.[77]

William Kentridge has become an internationally recognised artist in many fields. He has said, 'in some ways Bill was a terrible teacher … providing no practical, basic guidance or instruction'.

Kentridge did say that good teaching of drawing of a formal, conservative and academic kind occurred there. Though it was not a good school through which to learn a skill or a craft, it was a good place to generate an enquiring mind and spirit. He added, 'I get caught in the dichotomy between it

77 Sophia Ainslie, an essay for Elizabeth Castle's MAFA research, 21 June 2014. See too *Sophia Ainslie: Drawing Breath 10 Years*. (Gallery NAGA, Boston, MA, 2021).

being a really great school and a really bad school and I think it was both.'[78]

Anthousa Sotiriades was a medical student who was taught art by Ainslie, and, in turn, taught at the JAF and the Alexandra Arts Centre in the 1980s. She acted as director of the JAF and has subsequently led the art department at the National School of the Arts in Johannesburg. In her multiple interviews about the foundation, she mentioned how Ainslie allowed everyone to express a view. For her, the emphasis was more upon perception than conceptual thinking, and there was continuous encouragement to search for new ways to express things and to make one's voice heard. In her view, all who studied at the JAF received a good understanding of the building blocks of art-making.[79]

Sam Nhlengethwa has become an artist recognised for his work in a number of countries. He is prolific and industrious, and found his artistic feet by associating with Ainslie and the JAF. He admired the consistent support he received – even to the extent of being rescued at times from the police – and the openness with which artists were made part of the Ainslie establishment. Nhlengethwa has a particular love for jazz:

> Well in one of the things I discovered about somebody who loved jazz is that there is a period when people break away and do some free form of jazz. That's exactly how I can describe Bill because Bill had this thing of taking a canvas and playing with the colours … So exactly he taught us many things, how to use this medium – gel and acrylic mix them together and getting certain textures, playing with them. Don't try to be formal and stiff on the canvas, just play it, just create, just let the inspiration pour out of you.[80]

78 William Kentridge, interviewed by Simon Trappler and Elizabeth Castle in 2013 and 2014 respectively.

79 Anthousa Sotiriades, interviewed in 2011, 2013 and 2016 by Simon Trappler, Elizabeth Castle and Michael Gardiner respectively.

Interviewed about his thoughts on Ainslie the artist and the centre he had established, **William Kentridge** made two interesting observations. The first was about the wretched disputes in the South African political and art worlds over abstract and figurative painting:

> So you had this interesting phenomenon of someone who on the one hand was a very clearly politically engaged figure and wasn't taking to abstraction as a way of avoiding politics and was making a very strong argument for the possibility of both things to exist. To be a politically engaged person didn't mean you had to be involved in figurative painting and if you were involved in figurative painting it wasn't enough to say 'Oh, because I had a political connection.' It had to be able to function at the same level formally as the most advanced abstract painting.[81]

Making abstraction the benchmark against which the quality of figurative painting is measured is a real turnaround.

Kentridge's second observation highlights the less didactic but vital dimension of the activities of the art foundation:

> And I think that the vital things that [Ainslie] did socially was having meetings at his house, gatherings at his house, the evenings that Fieke was largely responsible for where there would be meetings of different people who wouldn't otherwise meet in Johannesburg society at all. I

80 Sam Nhlengethwa, interviewed by Simon Trappler, 2007.

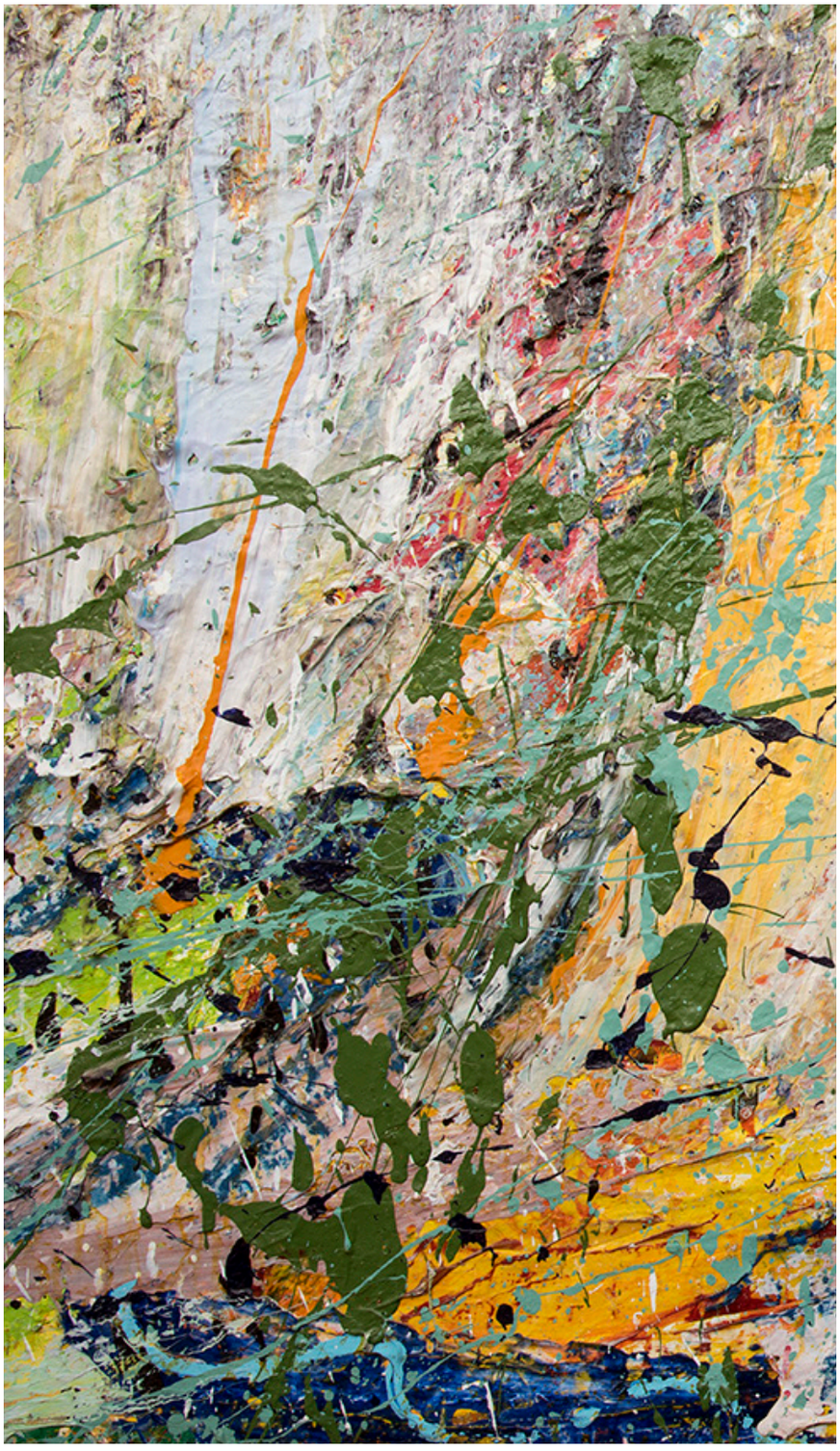
81 William Kentridge, interviewed by Simon Trappler, 2007.

> mean that there was an extraordinary sense of style that she gave to his house and to those evenings and lunches.[82]

Mining magnates, diplomats, township– and city–based artists, theatre people, writers and teachers, critics and journalists, musicians and businesspeople such as the politically active owner of a butchery in Alexandra township as well as political figures of all progressive shades mixed and mingled on these occasions in a warm ambiance of rooms with large Ainslie canvases on the walls.

At gatherings at the foundation, one could meet a range of people who were seriously engaged in what they did and did well. It was Fieke who brought that community together. Bill Ainslie went beyond the foundation into gatherings with communities and organisations, usually in tandem with David Koloane, to implement their combined ways of meeting the needs of artists.

82 Kentridge, interviewed by Trappler, 2007.



6. AINSLIE'S PUBLIC ACTIVITIES

As a political and social being, Ainslie was perpetually engaged in activities in the public realm. His articles in *The Bulawayo Chronicle* are quoted in the section 4 **Ainslie speaks about art** and his famous letter to four colleagues in 1965 is referenced in more than one place in this handbook.

Ainslie never regarded what he did at his studio or, later, at the art foundation as exclusively private. One view of him is that he was constantly acting and thinking within a network of instances and possibilities. Another way to see the nature and extent of his public activities would be to draw a spider map with the JAF at the centre, with links radiating out in all directions and at multiple levels with arts centres in Soweto, Katlehong, Alexandra township and the city centre, as well as in towns and places elsewhere.

It is remarkable how figures like Ainslie, who were in Johannesburg and concerned with the arts, sustained their activities by establishing extensive networks. Notably, there was Barney Simon, theatre director and co-founder of Johannesburg's Market Theatre, which, through its Laboratory, brought in drama groups for performance and training from villages and towns across the country. Then there was Lionel Abrahams with his literary magazines and writers' groups. There were publishers such

as Ravan Press, with key contributions from editors Mike Kirkwood and Mothobi Mutloatse, who not only produced publications that revisioned history but also put out a radically different magazine, *Staffrider*, and held massive poetry readings on the edge of the city on Saturdays. Public activity of this kind was normal in the 1960s and '70s and beyond.

David Koloane's appointment as the first Black artist to run an art gallery coincided with a wider surge in Black-led cultural initiatives, including the magazine *New Classic* and the Federated Union of Black Artists (FUBA), both under the leadership of Sipho Sepamla. Ainslie and Koloane were instrumental in supporting their formation.

The Culture and Resistance Symposium

The ANC's initiative in 1982 to bring South Africans inside and outside the country together in Gaborone to celebrate and discuss possibilities for the incorporation of cultural initiatives into the 'struggle' for liberation from apartheid generated excitement and expectation among exiles and 'insiders'. However, the ANC's lack of a cultural vision or policy, plus the lack of acknowledgement of what was already happening inside the country, meant that the conference leadership had little to offer other than slogans such as 'culture is a weapon of struggle' and that everyone was a 'cultural worker'. These postures did not sit well with most participants, who themselves were divided on whether the realities of apartheid should focus on questions of 'race' or 'class'.

Because the Gaborone festival achieved so little, the ANC moved to establish a Department of Arts and Culture in 1983. Then, in 1987, it held a Culture in Another South Africa conference in Amsterdam, which passed a series of rigid policy resolutions by a selected range of delegates.[83]

Ainslie and Koloane played a number of roles for the symposium in Botswana, most notably in putting together with Dikobe wa Mogale Ben Martins, Emile Maurice, Colin Smuts, Paul Weinberg and Gordon Metz an 'Art Towards Social Development' exhibition of 169 works by 58 artists.

At the end of the 1980s, once it became clear that the ANC's hard line on culture was counterproductive, ANC intellectual and future Constitutional Court judge Albie Sachs questioned the ANC's stance on cultural matters. Clingman writes that Sachs 'called for the intrinsic dispositions of art to be set free' and that he proposed a moratorium of five years on ANC members 'saying that culture is a weapon of struggle' and he also quotes Sachs as saying that a 'purely instrumental and non-dialectic view of culture was damaging not only to art, but also to the struggle itself.'[84]

During the symposium at the Festival, Mongane Wally Serote met with Nadine Gordimer, David Koloane, Bill Ainslie, David Goldblatt and Bongi Dhlomo to discuss possibilities for the establishment of a network of arts centres (note the plural) in South Africa, using the JAF as a conceptual starting point. The intention was that township and rural people could experience the range and variety of activities that the arts

83 Willem Campschreur and Joost Divendal (eds), *Culture in Another South Africa* (London: Zed Books, 1989).

84 Stephen Clingman, 'Writing the interregnum: literature and the demise of apartheid', in David Attwell and Derek Attridge (eds), *The Cambridge History of South African Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 645.

make possible, thereby giving the arts a role in the preparation of people for participation in a democratic society.

Both Ainslie and Koloane had already contributed to the work and existence of FUBA, the Katlehong Arts Centre, Funda Community College in Soweto and other community-based initiatives.

Important as his suggestion was, Serote at that time was living in exile, working for the ANC's Department of Arts and Culture in London. He asked for something that only an outsider to the country could ask. Though a number of long-established township cultural centres were able to continue their activities during what was essentially a civil war at that time, attempts by people, who were not well known and trusted, to 'parachute' into communities to do good were met with hostility and suspicion.

Nevertheless, on his return to South Africa from Botswana, Ainslie set about establishing the kind of centre that had been discussed. The first of these enterprises was to develop, with the co-operation of Joe Manana, a friend of Serote and township butcher, into the **Alexandra Arts Centre (AAC)** in 1986 with a local director, Bongi Dhlomo, and a range of teachers and instructors from the JAF, the Alexandra community and elsewhere. Unfortunately, the AAC became a battleground between rival township factions, a situation complicated by questionable interventions by police, with the consequence that Dhlomo had to withdraw after being accused of various unproven improprieties, thus facing risk to herself and her family. When he went into Alexandra to inform students of the change, Ainslie had to deflect the threat of his being killed by unruly individuals. The next director, James Mathoba, was hijacked and shot while driving the centre kombi, and the staff found it increasingly difficult to teach. The centre closed in 1992.[85] David Koloane played no part in this enterprise.

Thupelo Artists' Workshops

When Sir Anthony Caro spoke about art at a public lecture in Johannesburg in 1981, Ainslie pointed out to him that his audience was predominantly White. Ainslie and Koloane gave Caro an opportunity to see what the situation of Black artists was, and in response he opened attendance at the Triangle Artists' Workshops in upstate New York to South Africans. He also used his stature in the Western art world to assemble a collection of over 100 artworks from notable artists such as Henry Moore for FUBA to use for fundraising and art education. Soon both Koloane and Ainslie attended the Triangle annual events and, with their knowledge of the situation at home, and their experience of Triangle workshops in upstate New York, Koloane and Ainslie developed the idea of workshops in which local artists, especially those with limited means, could meet, reflect and try out different ways of making art. The first such workshop took place in August 1985. Quantities of materials such as paint and canvas with a range of implements were freely available. There was no teaching but

85 For a description of the atmosphere inside Alexandra township from February 1986 onwards, see William Dicey, *1986* (Cape Town: Umuzi/ Penguin Random House, 2021), pp. 40–43.

there were opportunities for work, thought and discussion. Many of the artists experimented for the first time with making non–representative, abstract works and everyone enlarged their scale immensely since there were space, time and materials in abundance.

Thupelo workshops were experienced in this way by an American academic:

> For two weeks they worked non–stop, making large–scale paintings and mixed–media work, and experimenting with sculptural forms constructed from found materials. They paused only for meals and for critique sessions led by Bill Ainslie from the Johannesburg Art Foundation and Peter Bradley, a visiting artist from the United States … The intention of the project … was to create a temporary respite for black artists who lived in isolation from other artists, had limited access to the kinds of art facilities available to white artists, and worked in a representational mode on a limited scale … Most had conservative schooling in art and were accustomed to struggling in cramped township rooms on small drawings, linocut prints, or watercolors … The … workshop was an eye–opening adventure, one that altered the direction of black artists' work in subsequent years.[86]

In contrast, there was the hostility towards the Thupelo project from academics, critics and gallery owners, based upon what they saw as an emphasis on Ainslie's using his interest in abstraction to influence Black artists. There was also hostility from within post–school art–teaching institutions about the nature of the art foundation. Critics, for example, glibly assumed that abstraction meant eliding political issues; the gallerists showed their commercial and sometimes racial motives

86 John Peffer, *Art at the End of Apartheid* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 131.

by demanding that Black painters use particular styles. At bottom, there was a real desire to attack Bill Ainslie, and this can be read as an unwillingness by the 'establishment' to acknowledge that an essential dimension of being an artist is to be free from the compulsions of commerce and formal courses and assessments. Their response to how Ainslie and the JAF made possible the emergence of coherent creativity was clearly a fear of freedom.

Though he did not enter the controversy over Thupelo at the time, Ainslie wrote this:

> In the end [no method or 'school of thought' was offered]. This constituted the major challenge of the work, a challenge which stimulated workshop participants but caused serious problems for some artists who attended the subsequent exhibition. It is likely to constitute a watershed between those artists who seek a justification for their work from some external orthodoxy, whether it be figuration or political comment or some derivation from African traditional iconography to provide the credentials for 'African identity', and those who welcome the opportunities for opening new possibilities made available by modernism through the elimination of redundant and inhibitory concepts. The recurring spectre of modernism – the issue of order or chaos – and the apprehensive casting around for some objective correlate haunted observers more than the participants for whom the issue was dealt with practically with [the] work situation and not theoretically.[87]

Once much of the dust of the dispute had settled, Kathryn Smith said this:

> The Thupelo workshops of the mid– to late–1980s, which promoted an abstract expressionist language as a counterpoint to the didacticism

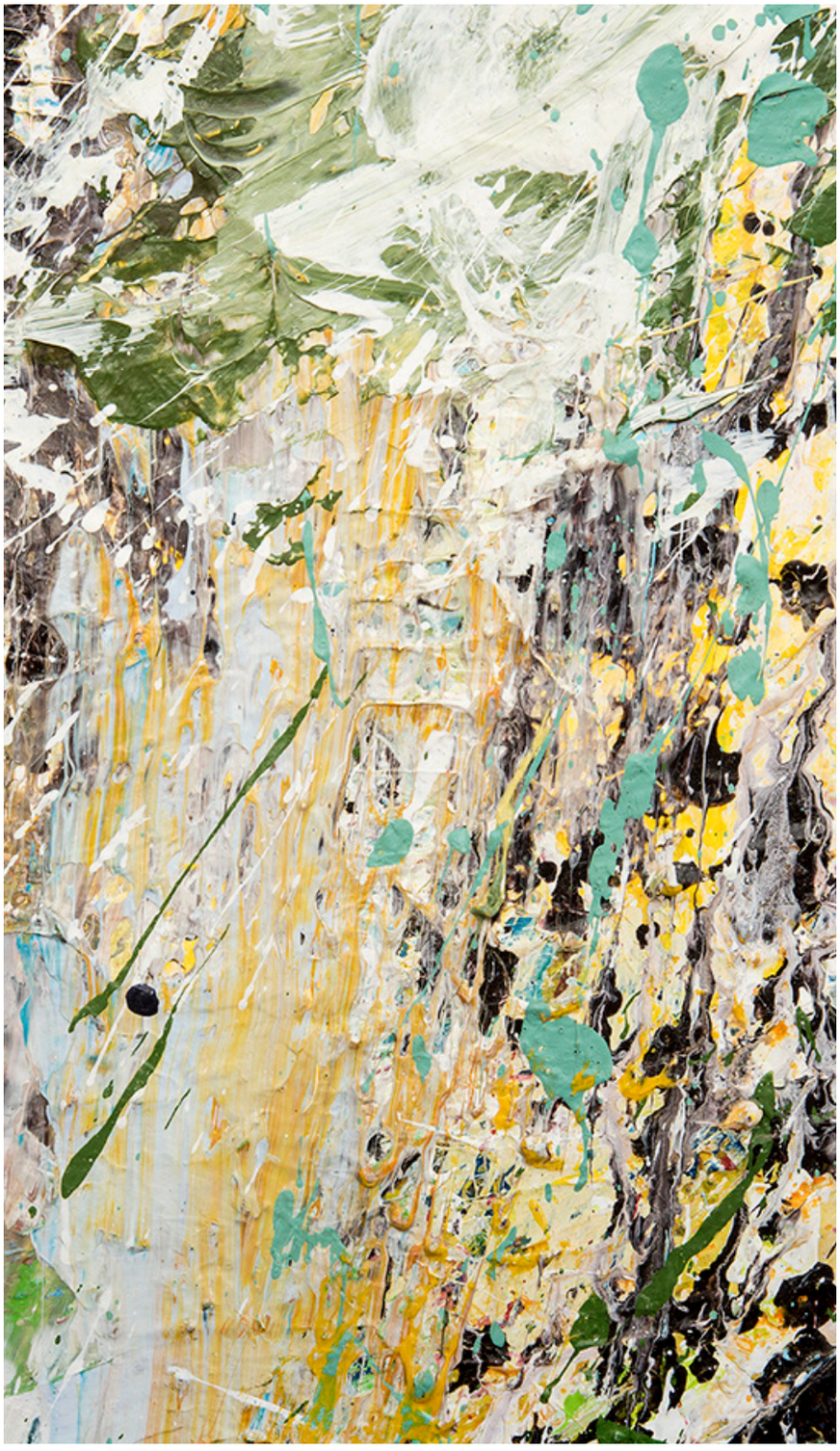
87 Draft introduction to the first Thupelo workshop exhibition, titled 'Bill Ainslee' (sic). Typed, with handwritten emendations, undated, Johannesburg Art Foundation papers.

> of resistance art (which has been the subject of vigorous critical debate), can be considered as another space of experimentation, at least insofar as they gave (black) artists the luxury to experiment in focused workshop situations and interact with their contemporaries from elsewhere in the world. During a period of intense cultural isolation, the importance of this cannot be overlooked, as it extended the professional and creative potential of predominantly black artists beyond FUBA and Funda. As part of the international Triangle Project, Thupelo gave rise to spaces like the Bag Factory in Johannesburg and, later, Greatmore Studios in Cape Town.[88]

In fact, the Triangle/Thupelo artists' workshop idea implemented in Africa meant that, by 2005, 1 400 African artists had attended such workshops. Since then, under the co-ordination of Gasworks,[89] there have been artists' workshops in the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean, South Asia, New York, the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere.

88 Kathryn Smith, 'The Experimental Turn in the Visual Arts', in Thembinkosi Goniwe *et al.* (eds), *Visual Century,* vol. 4 (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011), p. 131.

89 Gasworks, a centre for international artists' residencies in London, founded in 1994 by Robert Loder, has become the main hub of the Triangle network. Alessio Antoniolli and Anna Kindersley, 'Triangle Network History', 2017, Gasworks [online], available at https://www.gasworks.org.uk



7. OBSERVATIONS ABOUT AINSLIE AND THE ART FOUNDATION

Many people have offered their views and opinions about Ainslie and his work as a painter and as a teacher. Those that were recorded are available as transcripts, unpublished essays, a thesis and a video. They are among the JAF papers and other documents being located in the University of the Witwatersrand archives.

Speaking as a Jungian psychologist, **David Trappler** said:

> Anyone fortunate to find themselves connected with [the JAF], especially during the 1970s and '80s, knew consciously or subliminally that they were at a 'gathering place' of a unique nature – and at a unique period in time. Something was happening there, that transcended (merely) the formal issues concerned with making art … Bill knew intuitively that making art was serious business, not only to please the eye, but as a vehicle for change.

He also quotes Ainslie as saying, 'It's the artist's job to remind people of that transcendent side which underlies or overlays human activity.'[90]

Catherine Brubeck, who has maintained a close interest in Ainslie's work from the mid–1950s until the present, drew attention in an interview to the inclusion of the 'spiritual' in Ainslie's thinking. His early paintings, she said, are 'kind of political statements' – not propaganda or social

90 Alex Dodd, review of the exhibition of Ainslie paintings and drawings at Afronova Gallery, *Art South Africa*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Spring 2006), p. 74.

commentary but 'representational reflections of his concerns and observations'. She compared his early paintings of people with those 'who painted Africans [and] did so in a very sentimental … smoking-the-pipe manner. 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.[91]

The South African writer and editor **Lionel Abrahams** described one of Ainslie's typical early figurative works this way:

> The first [work] was a huge canvas by Bill Ainslie, one of his mother-and-child compositions, the figures (as in all his work) African but otherwise uncharacterised, suprapersonal embodiments, marvellously corporeal, of their functions and feelings – mother a giantised spirit of protectiveness, the child a miniscule emblem of dependence and instinctual trust, the whole an affectingly *forceful* illustration *of tenderness*.[92]

Given that Koloane and Ainslie worked in such close proximity, an observation in 1995 by art critic **Ivor Powell** of the differences and similarities between their paintings is apposite. Writing about the politics of modernism in South Africa, Powell referred to the relationship between the work of Ainslie and that of Koloane:

> There are very obvious similarities between the paintings of the teacher and the student, very obvious tokens of influence – in the strongly gestural use of paint, the sense of the canvas as an arena, the autonomy of the surface, and so on.
>
> What is less obvious is that, while the means are shared and the techniques similar, the actual content of the work, the nature if you like of the confrontation with the material, is noticeably different. Where there is an overriding lyricism in Ainslie's paintings, and a strongly romantic sensibility, Koloane is always harder edged. His references are urban, his light is degraded, his consciousness tends towards the realist assertion.[93]

91 Catherine Brubeck, interviewed by Vanessa Anderson, 'The Use of Abstraction', Technikon Natal, 1999, vol. II, pp. 12–13, 61.
92 Patrick Cullinan (ed.), *Lionel Abrahams: A Reader* (Johannesburg: Donker, 1988), p. 160.

During the time that he and his family were in the Netherlands in 1970, Ainslie held a solo exhibition at the **De Sfinx Gallery** in Amsterdam. This is a review of that show, where, reportedly, all the works were sold:[94]

> One reads in the invitation that the work is poetic and that it certainly is. Ainslie works abstractly, but it is not the form of the colour areas which determine the character of the work. It is rather in the colour alone. The colour movement is of the greatest subtlety and harmony. This colour is enlivened with an unobtrusive play of lines and bands, a play that never dominates the attention, but rather focuses it on the quiet colour poems that painting is for Ainslie.
>
> His work makes one think of dreamy, tender love songs. The great peace that emerges from the work is almost concealed. After having looked at the paintings, I find myself recollecting a particular canvas again and again and being buoyed up by it. I think that this work, if hung in a house will, over time, negate a great deal of the other work.

93 Ivor Powell, '"… us blacks …" Self–construction and the politics of modernism', in Ricky Burnett (curator and editor), *Persons and Pictures: The Modernist Eye in Africa* (Johannesburg: Newtown Galleries, 1995), p. 22. It is worth noting that, in the late 1980s, Koloane's paintings began to include more and more 'representational content'; see Powell, p. 23.
94 Natalie Nolte, 'Bill Ainslie', 2000. Available at: http://www.billainslie.co.za/natalie%20essay.htm (accessed 3 February 2011).

> Why the canvases have names is not clear to me. The symbolic value of the titles is so weak and so open to multi–interpretations that numbers would have been preferable. But that is naturally no criticism of the work, which I again eagerly describe as poetic, tender and strong therein. An extremely enjoyable exhibition.[95]

Having been a student of Ainslie and a key figure in the JAF in the 1970s and 1980s, and thereafter with a successful career as an artist, curator and teacher,[96] **Ricky Burnett** said that Ainslie's teaching at its best was instinctive or intuitive. Speaking as a leader of his own art studio/centre, he said:

> … Bill's teaching was at its best because it was instinctive or intuitive. It was a humanism rather than a theory. When people have asked me previously about his teaching method, I kind of thought it was a method, because it never seemed to be structured or transcribed or formulated in any concrete sort of way. It was different elements of attitude that would find things to cling to, but essentially it was an attitude to persons. It's a kind of liberal humanist position that says, yes, we're all different, yes, we all deserve a conversation which is particular to us at any one time. That learning happens best, as Bill liked to say, when you're engaged. And an engagement means when some important bit of you is being addressed that isn't otherwise addressed.[97]

When opening the Bill Ainslie Memorial Gallery at the Johannesburg Art Foundation in August 1999, ten years after Ainslie's death, the Nobel Prize winning novelist **Nadine Gordimer** said:

> Bill Ainslie was a renaissance man in the full *artistic and human o*riginal sense. The arts – creative expression in paint, stone, wood, old iron, any medium, as well as the written or spoken word – were inextricably linked and interdependent, for him. He read widely and he understood … the South African writers' mission to find adequate expression for the states of being and experience in our country, and also the mission of visual artists … Bill's vision was all–encompassing: he took it all on, with remarkable insight, intellectual courage, great warmth. What this meant in times that were discouraging, to say the least, and filled with horrifying events, at worst, was tremendously important to keep the obstinate life–assertion of our people's creativity alive.[98]

Reviewing Ainslie's 1972 exhibition, known as the 'Wilderness' show, *The Star's* reviewer **John Dewar** asserted that, for him:

> Ainslie's canvases achieved what more artists should do – sloughing off of the last remains of conventional artistic hang–ups … to leave a clearer thinking for the analysis of simplification. His simplified [read abstract] paintings, have, he says, realistic roots. He calls them Namib paintings and they do evoke visions of wind, dust and rock of desert regions. Despite being extensions of his personal painting intellectualism, their colours, and what form there is, have an attraction, a subtlety and a kind of mysticism.[99]

The **interlocutor** in the monograph *Bill Ainslie 1157* said this about the 'Wilderness' paintings:

> Two paintings … were hanging on the wall in his lounge. They hung side by side forming a diptych, the left one being predominantly yellow

95 J. van Doorne, 'Painted poetry', review in *Trouw* newspaper (Amsterdam), 20 May 1970; translated from the Dutch. Though there are some slender leads, it has not been possible to track down examples of work from this exhibition.

96 These include his curation of *Tributaries* (1985), called 'the most exciting collection of South African art ever seen'; a ground–breaking exhibition of Jackson Hlungwane's work; and, after his return from abroad in 2007, he both curated a series of shows and held major exhibitions of his own work. He continues as an artist and private teacher of art. 'About Ricky Burnett' [online] available at: https://rickyburnett.com/about–ricky (accessed 21 November 2022).

97 Ricky Burnett, interviewed by Elizabeth Castle, May 2014.

98 Nadine Gordimer, 'Living On: The Work and Life of Bill Ainslie', 29 August 1999.

99 *The Star*, 28 July 1972.

> and the other greenish–yellow. Both paintings are divided into three vertical panels of colour surrounded by a band of the dominant colour of the respective paintings. The vertical panels of both paintings are practically mirror images as far as colour gradation is concerned. In the outside panels the colours are varied from the basic ground colour and the impression created in both is of turmoil which gradually changes to skeins of colour through the middle panels and into light and tranquil use of colour in the central panels. He calls them 'Wilderness paintings' because they were a rejection of all explicit object material such as landscape, still–life and figure … He realised that he was searching for an emptiness, a wilderness, and named them after the oldest wilderness in the world, the Namib.[100]

In her obituary of Ainslie, the artist, critic and scholar **Elza Miles (née Botha)** wrote:

> Bill Ainslie did not turn his back on Africa when, in the 1970s, his painting became connected with American abstract expressionism. On the contrary, his involvement in South African life never diminished for one moment. With the same conviction that he expanded the vista of his paintings, shifting its focus, he bypassed the restrictions of statutory apartheid. Bill and Fieke's house was open to the homeless and in Bill's studio and, later, at the Johannesburg Art Foundation, all students received equal attention…

David Roussouw, a former student at the art foundation, remembers that during workshops Ainslie read to them from Sufi wisdom. In view of the controversy surrounding Ainslie's espousal of abstract expressionism, one looks for an answer to his critics in Idries Shah's *Thinkers of the East*. There one reads about Rumi, who was accused of straying from the True Way by encouraging and permitting acting, song, music and other unconventional

100 *Bill Ainslie 1157*, p. 12.

activities. Some say that he ignored the charges, others claim that he defended himself thus: 'Let us see whether in time to come it is our work that is remembered, or the names of our critics.'[101]

Writing about Ainslie at the time of his death, **Sipho Sepamla**, poet, editor and director of the Federated Union of Black Artists (FUBA), said:

> I shall never forget Bill. He was one of a handful of whites I got to know as human beings. Many times we spoke as equals and friends; we fought as human beings and reconciled as lovers. I am sure that I learned a great deal from him. Certainly he taught me to persevere and be patient in running a project like FUBA. Often he recited to me Confucius' advice on how small beginnings were better than spectacular ones.[102]

Anthea Bristowe, writing for *Business Day* about the exhibition of Ainslie's Pachipamwe paintings at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, added to her comments on the paintings by saying:

> By their nature visionaries are controversial and Ainslie was no exception. A disciple of abstract expressionism himself, he stands accused of being 'part of a conspiracy to brainwash black artists with a deadly dose of American imperialism'…
>
> Ainslie's legacy is complex. It is fashionable to be dismissive of modernism. The essence of what he taught his students was to know and understand their materials and to work with them, acquiring the necessary skills and tenets of their craft, and leaving the concepts for later. Their individual voices, he believed, would develop in time.[103]

Art critic **Hazel Friedman**, considering Ainslie's

101 Elza Miles, 'Making images for a rebellious continent', *Die Vrye Weekblad*, 8 September 1989. Translated from the Afrikaans by Marcelle Manley, with emendations by Michael Gardiner.
102 Sipho Sepamla, 'The Dream Lives On …', *New Nation*, 8–14 September 1989, p. 11.
103 Anthea Bristowe, 'The soul of Ainslie in art and teaching', *Business Day*, 16 September 1992.

Pachipamwe paintings, said 'it seems that Ainslie was truly about to come into his own as a formidable abstract painter' when he died. She concluded her review with:

> Although the painter himself was very much a man of this world, with its conflict, pain and promise, his last works seem almost otherworldly, dematerialised. And, using the words of the international artist, the late Paul Klee, Ainslie's final paintings come perilously close 'not to rendering the visible, but rendering the invisible'.
>
> It was one of those cruel ironies that Bill Ainslie's quest was curtailed, just at the point when his aesthetic influence had really begun.[104]

Ricky Burnett was able to follow Ainslie's interests in poetry, philosophy and theoretical explorations, such as readings and discussions of Robert Graves' *The White Goddess*.

An essay by **Ricky Burnett**

It was the best of times for some and the worst of times for others. It was Johannesburg 1973. Whiffs of new freedoms, in music, art, education, and lifestyle, drifted in from Europe and America. In the public sphere, however, the callous fascism of apartheid hardened. Despite this, for some of us, the aura of the sixties still glowed. I was privileged to go to university in 1967, leaving behind a small West Rand town with its English vs Afrikaans school rugby rivalry and its Paardekraal monument. While I lived there with my parents and young brother the town and everything it stood for was not a natural home for me. In Krugersdorp I was shy, barely articulate and alien. But not at the University

104 Hazel Friedman, 'Bill Ainslie's talent was in fine flower', *The Star*, 23 September 1992.

of the Witwatersrand, its broad collective mind a welcome antidote to the small and the petty. It was the student mind more than the academic mind that drew me. The sixties were not just about music, free love and dope. There was the politics; French students questioning the education system, American students urging for the end of the war in Vietnam, English students bred in the English socialist tradition arguing against the hegemony of monopoly capital and imperialism. German students showed a tendency to want to blow things up. There were, then, thrilling cultural and intellectual tides drifting across our lives and, happily, subverting the constrictions imposed by the government – heady times. We read Herbert Marcuse, Ronald Lang and Jean Paul Sartre, had a Sunday night group reading *Les Miserables*. We had sit–ins, mass meetings and protest marches and we were mightily pissed off when a black academic was prohibited by the government from taking up a position at the University of Cape Town. Students then built schools in what was called Swaziland and we initiated and managed welfare services and clinics. It was learning and activism conjoined. The best of becoming a young adult for me was that it was entirely extra– curricular – and a full–time occupation.

"You don't have to be good," wrote Mary Oliver. And a few lines later she says, "You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves." For 'Body" I read *self*. The soft animal of my *self* (i.e. body and mind) loved intoxicants both physical and otherwise. I dropped out of university, turned on and tuned in, as a trope of the time went. I tuned

in, not to cosmic metaphysics, but to the jumbled and intoxicating world of a kind of literary all sorts, musical all sorts, all sorts of poetry and painting. How to live that life?

Along came Bill.

Bill had a compelling curiosity and a genuine concern for those around him, especially those that cared about painting. Bill was serious. When I first met him he had a little school catering to part-time, mostly once a week, aspirant painters. I arrived on his doorstep carrying that question, "How to live that life?" and so too, fortuitously, did several other similarly driven young twenty-somethings.

We became his first full-time students. We had a home, a caring tutor and a "soul" open to engagement. I could talk seriously with Bill as I could talk to no one else. His most significant and enduring impact on my thinking came not just from his guidance and challenging critiques but also from the example of his practice as a painter. Bill had a strong sense that there were both moral and ethical values held in the vocation of "proper painting." This has little or nothing to do with "correct technique", nor with aesthetic conformity, and nor has it to do with argument, declamation, statement or narrative. The foundational question of "proper painting" derives from a question posed by Meno in the Platonic dialogue of the same name, and it is this, "How will we recognise the nature of that thing which is unknown to us?" There was good behaviour that led to authenticity and there was bad behaviour that led to lies.

At the time the American Abstract Expressionists and their painterly progeny, were to our eyes the champions of Meno's question and, I believe, they reached into a places where no light had shone before. From what strange well did Mark Rothko, say, or Clyfford Still, draw their very new and very particular images – images that became *a Rothko* or *a Still*? Each painter had a look that became *them*. The boldness of their move was to relinquish the hold of all things pictorial so as to explore the explicitly painterly, painting without the naming of things, without people, places, and events. "Proper painting" is difficult and so it should be. It's the tussle that brings the reward. It is shaped by a clutch of core values, here are a few:

The authentic yield of studio work is the result of discovery and not of production. (Imitation is not at all a bad way to learn but it is poor place to stop.)

The primary means of transmission from artist to audience (what some might call communication) is the material, the paint.

The paint is animated by touch. "Touch" is the artist's presence.

His or her choices (touch; hard/soft, colour; dull/brash, texture; slight/crusty, and so on) are evidence of their consciousness.

Rothko said, "A painting is not a picture of an experience, it is an experience".

For a painter like Bill Ainslie these operating principles constituted, not a wish list, but an ethical framework.

During my close association with Bill (most of the 1970s) I don't believe I ever saw him start a new painting. Drawings yes, (mostly portraits) and, also, a large mixed media black and white work of, three or four, floor to ceiling panels. But no new paintings, though, he did of course paint. Time and time again he revisited the same squad of rectangles. (I re-stretched a few of these works as the stretchers had cracked, broken and warped under the weight of accumulated paint. It took some effort to lift them.)

His studio was a battleground and the battle was private. He was not at this time painting to produce. He was painting to uncover.

Hernandez de la Fuente has written that Marcus Aurelius wrote the *Meditations,* "not for us to read, but rather as the vehicle that this cultured man found to question himself." "It was a book," wrote Ryan Holiday, "for the author, not for the reader."

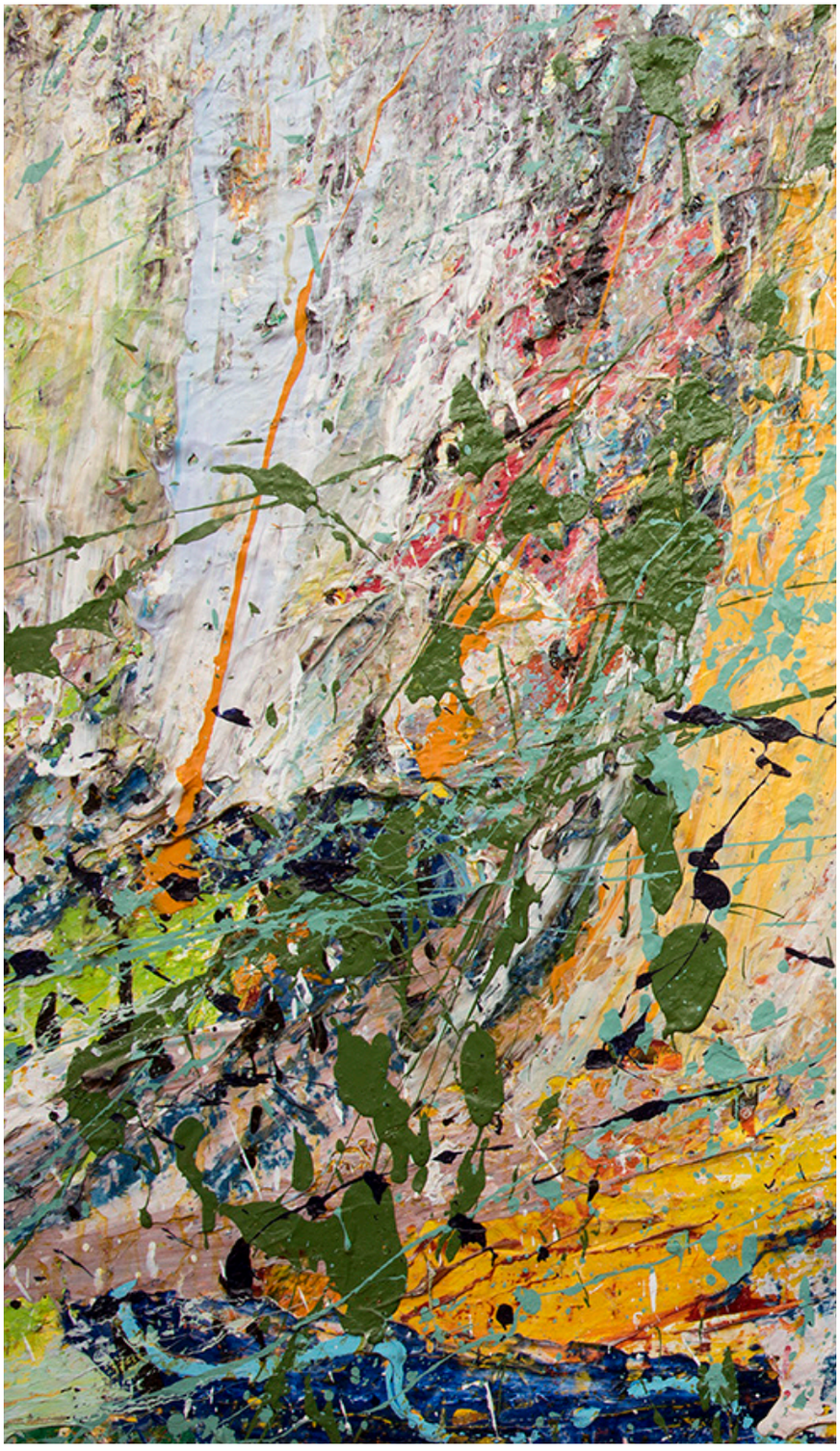
Bill Ainslie's decade of privacy was both true and exemplary. It was the time of discovery, a search for he knew not what through the rugged terrain of self and matter.

His search took place on two fronts. Firstly, the urge to physicality. The weight of accumulated paint was not gratuitous, it was acquired through the pursuit of the image as mass. Secondly, he felt too, the urge to be expansive. His big tussle was with small tubes. Small tubes of oil paint simply didn't give him enough load mark by mark. Small loads led to segmented areas, too many boundaries and edges. Liberation came to him in the form buckets

of gel, a thixotropic medium, that infused with pigment, allowed him to behave with unrestrained generosity, to sweep his arm from left to right unchecked, to play with wind speeds. The scars of wrestle and tussle, the additions, demolitions and alterations are a history and hence they speak of the painting's personality. The big stuff of Bill's paint is the painting willing itself out of the frame and into the world. Real for him did not reside in the vaporous. It lay rather, in a confrontational physicality, a kind of head-butt-bulk.

The marks made by brush, palette knife and other implements are the actors in both a drama and a game. Characters comport as stroke, slash, hack and stab, and interact as thrust and parry. In a field of play the characters move fast. One may make a long looping kick down field, and another jinx left then right, another might make a quick pass out of the back of the hand, and several others might crash and fold into a compressed coagulation. Speed is a significant element in Ainslie's later work. It belies the sheer bulk of stuff. Speed of action coupled with speed of thought, and both rooted, firmly, in time and matter.

The ten years of tussle was not about finding a way to look "good." He was testing and rehearsing ways of "behaving-well-with-paint," ways of behaving like nature, our paradigm, conscious or otherwise, of creativity. What Spinoza called Natura Naturans.



8. INSTANCES OF AINSLIE'S PAINTINGS

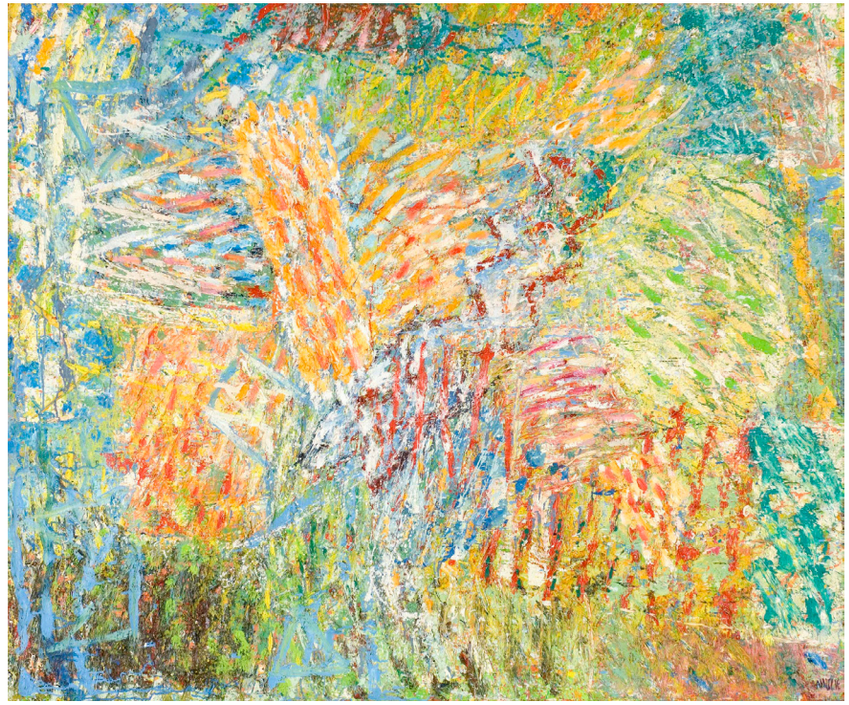
No account of Ainslie can be complete without thoughtful attention to his painting. This handbook is unable to do that at present. But when opportunity occurs to write up the insights and perceptions from such attention, it is intended here that the focus is aimed directly at the paintings and their making, without circumstantial factors dominating or impeding direct encounters between the careful onlooker and the works of art.

Sophia Ainslie's recent book about her father and the Johannesburg Art Foundation,[105] together with this handbook, establish a fertile ground for the study of Ainslie's paintings.

Only once that occurs can his full stature in our cultural world be apparent.

105 Sophia Ainslie. 2025. *Bill Ainslie: South African Artist and Catalyst*. Imprint: Dorchester MA: HallSpace

UNTITLED acrylic on canvas 123 x 153.5 cm c.1975



UNTITLED oil on canvas 152.5 x 184 cm c.1980

CAROUSEL acrylic on canvas 180 x 241 cm 1984

GATOOMA acrylic on canvas 168 x 190 cm c.1985

MATOPOS acrylic on canvas 140 x 320 cm 1986

Author's note

I wish to acknowledge support for the compilation of the Handbook from the following people:

Sholto Ainslie

Sophia Ainslie

Lunetta Bartz

Catherine Brubeck

Ricky Burnett

Bob Cnoops

Katherine Gardiner

Lettie Gardiner

Jack Ginsberg

William Kentridge

Elizabeth Sleith

Jill Trappler

all chapter details of the cover painting
TSITSIKAMMA acrylic on canvas 300 x 210 cm c.1985
photographed by Bob Cnoops

Author: Michael Bruce Gardiner

Textual consultants: Lettie Gardiner and Katherine Gardiner

Editor: Elizabeth Sleith

Proofreader: Lynda Stephenson

Book concept and design: Lunetta Bartz

Photography: Bob Cnoops for *Tsitsikamma* and *Gatooma*

Scanning: MAKER, Johannesburg

Web manager: James Gardiner

For all handbook and domain related enquiries
kindly email contact@billainslie.com