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DEALMAKERS

Cover: Artwork: Anne Sassoon (1943–), *Ishmael and Isaac*: 1–4, 2001, ink and glue on draft paper, 1393 x 900 mm (x4). Constitutional Court Art Collection (CCAC). Donated by Albie Sachs and Gill Polonsky in 2001. Cover image courtesy of the artist and the Constitutional Court Trust. For more information, visit ccac.concourtrust.org.za or follow @concourt_art on Instagram and Twitter.

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Constitutional Court Art Collection / cover

The politics of Otherness, acknowledging duality and coming together

THE CONSTITUTIONAL COURT TRUST

Artist Anne Sassoon was born in Llandudno, North Wales, but lived in Johannesburg from the age of five.

After she completed school, she painted sets at the Alexander Theatre in Braamfontein. She then went to art school in London where, according to the artist, “everything was about abstraction, but I have always been committed to figurative art. When I came back to the rawness of apartheid South Africa, there was no way I was going to make aesthetic abstract art. Whites had to be my subject, the awkwardness of Whites in an unfair situation that favoured them/us: women in bikinis gaping into the glare, pink flesh burnt by the sun; people under umbrellas or dancing at parties, being served by Black waiters who they ignored.” The artist’s first exhibited painting, *Political Party*, was of a young Alsatian dog standing on a table surrounded by grinning women. Sassoon was especially exposed to politics through her husband, Benjamin Pogrund, who was the editor of the anti-apartheid newspaper, the *Rand Daily Mail*. In the late seventies, Sassoon attended and drew at Steve Biko’s inquest and the 1976 Soweto uprising trial. Through exhibitions, she got to know artists Dumile Feni, Judith Mason, David Goldblatt and theatre director Barney Simon. The artist now lives and works in Jerusalem.

Her artwork series of four works in the Constitutional Court Art Collection, *Ishmael and Isaac*, was made in Jerusalem in 2001 and shown that year at Gallery Westland Place, London. She worked on draft paper so that the whole exhibition could be rolled up and carried under her arm. The characters in these works were drawn from a catalogue of photographs of twins in India, and from a shoebox full of photographs from studios in Diagonal Street, Johannesburg, which Sassoon collected in the 1970s and has carried with her around the world. Clients would come in off the street and have themselves photographed in tiny studios, posing in front of a curtain strung up on a piece of string. The photographs would be thrown away if clients didn’t come back for them – or given to anyone who wanted them. According to the artist, Black people during the most difficult years of apartheid, could present themselves as they wanted to be seen. “There is something about a twosome in a painting that I find challenging and intriguing – they echo and bounce off each other, and immediately set up a narrative.”

The artist expands on the narrative in these works: “I used to focus more on the female narrative in earlier work, but my interest in the male narrative is very different – and the difference is political. It start-

ed with seeing photographs of the Tibetan and Chinese boy lamas, and hearing how the Tibetan boy was kidnapped by the Chinese government and has never been seen since. He was replaced by the Chinese boy. Both children were forced into their roles by a powerful authority and found themselves, through no fault or desire of their own, at the centre of a dispute on the world stage. At first, I portrayed them singly as lost boys, but the relationship between the two increasingly interested me. Intimately linked as they are, the true and the fake lama have almost their whole lives in common, but are imprisoned on different sides of an implacable divide, and can never meet or talk. In the Middle East, the back-to-back Israel/Palestine relationship is like the famous gestalt drawing of the duck and rabbit, where either is clear to see but you can never see both at once. Each side has its dreams and hopes, and each side fears and dreads the other. But what about the individuals? They might get along fine – and there’s every indication that they do, when they meet and work together in hospitals, for instance, or mourn together in groups of bereaved parents, or play together in gay clubs in Tel Aviv. In strong patriarchal societies, there is a pre-existing male narrative awaiting the new born boy. It can force him into a role he didn’t choose, perhaps to fight and lose his life for the side he was born on.”

A queer reading of the work is also acknowledged by the artist, seeing the boys in childhood romance, but perhaps being split soon after due to societal pressures. Apartheid’s politics of Othering in terms of race, belief, class and gender is also addressed. “Otherness is a fiction invented for political purposes, and we see from apartheid and the holocaust how powerful it can be, yet we also have to look into ourselves for traces of it. From an art point of view, as soon as you put two figures onto a page, you set up a discourse and open up a two-sided narrative. Doubles can’t help relating to each other on a page. They animate each other – visually, politically and psychologically. This is why I keep returning to doubles in my work. The half-brothers, Isaac and Ishmael, Abraham’s two sons, seemed to embody what was in my mind. I wasn’t attempting to illustrate the Bible story in any way, or to comment on what is happening in the Middle East today, although all of that comes into my mind. Mostly the work is about the ambiguity of a half-brother relationship, where there is physical closeness and yet rifts and differences. And it’s about the roles that can be inherited by boys, in societies and families, so that ancient passions and conflicts have to keep being re-enacted by succeeding generations. I’d like these works to suggest duality – that instead of one privileged view, there is always another one to be taken into account and respected.” ♦