

CCAC interview with Amos Miller on 06/09/2020 via email - transcript

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Interviewee name (and acronym): Amos Miller (AM)

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List of acronyms:

SAIC: School of the Art Institute of Chicago

MI: Michigan

UAW: United Auto Workers

NAACP: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

CA: California

NY: New York

US: United States

START OF INTERVIEW

FLC: Please tell us a bit about where you grew up and how you became an artist?

AM: I was born in Cleveland, Ohio. I grew up in a suburb of Cleveland.

My parents recognized and supported my artistic nature from the time I was very young.

I attended several art schools throughout my primary, secondary, and college years.

These included The Cleveland Institute of Art, Cooper School of Art in Cleveland, University of Arizona, and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I had the support and continued to pursue painting.

I met South African artist Sharon Lombard at SAIC in Chicago in 1984 and became involved in the anti-apartheid movement amongst Chicago art students. I read and learned what I could about Nelson Mandela during this time.

Sharon and I were married in Chicago in 1986.

FLC: Can you tell us more about how, when and why *Nelson Mandela in New York* was made?

AM: In 1990, upon his release from prison, Mandela came to the US to thank his supporters. Sharon and I traveled to Detroit, MI to attend his speech at Tiger Stadium. Coincidentally we were staying at the Renaissance Hotel, former headquarters for General Motors Corp, where Mandela was also a guest. We were in the lobby of the hotel, on our way to hear him speak, when Nelson and Winnie both arrived from their United Auto Workers Union visit. They were both wearing blue UAW caps and jackets and were accompanied by Rosa Parks, Harry Belafonte, and other Detroit African American luminaries. Our daughter, Zinzi, then 2 years old, was crying as I tried to get her to look Nelson's way. We were able to make eye contact and exchange smiles, for we were mere feet apart as he passed through, en route to the stadium for his speech that evening. It was a memorable day, and resulted in a number of paintings, including *Nelson Mandela in New York*.

FLC: To which historical and current day themes would you say *Nelson Mandela in New York* speaks to?

AM: I have, over the years, done a number of portraits of Mandela, and other South African political figures.

The struggle against apartheid, and the transition that occurred when the apartheid regime ended, were themes in my work during that time.

As a child my mother was a supporter of the NAACP in Cleveland. She had many black friends and acquaintances, so I have had wide exposure to African American people. My grade schools, through high school, were very integrated, close to an even mix of black and white students. My mother moved to Jamaica, my sister married a Jamaican, my sister in law is married to a black man from Oakland, CA. My nieces and nephews identify as black, and are identified as African Americans by those around them. So black, brown, and white people are and have been subjects in my work, and loved members of my family.

This reality clearly made me available to attempt to paint images of Mandela. I have also painted, drawn, and carved portraits of Steve Biko, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Graça Machel, FW De Klerk, Winnie Mandela, Albie Sachs, Albert Luthuli, Langalibalele, Hendrik Witbooi (no particular order to this listing), etc, along with many portraits of other international and US figures.

The historical and political themes of the painting Mandela at NY Harbor are many.

As I watched my wife Sharon come to terms with her former life in South Africa, her involuntary departure to the US at 16 years of age (her parents choice due to the difficulties facing most South Africans at that time), and her decision to become a US citizen as she and I decided to marry, a sobering and unsettling understanding became clear. The economic and racial apartheid that existed in the US appeared in many ways more pervasive, and seemed to be more refined, not as easily unmasked, as the South African apartheid system.

Sharon was trading her life in her beloved South Africa, which she deeply missed, and continues to miss, for a life in the US with me.

Today, with the current political and economic reality in the US being what it is, I know she is very disappointed and disillusioned about where she finds herself, which of course affects me greatly. The current racial tension and resulting violence here, the protests and confrontation between police and protesters, calls on us to find solutions, and choose leaders who can help us find our way.

The issues Mandela grappled with as the newly freed leader of SA were the same issues we have needed to resolve here.

Mandela was that sort of leader- a champion of democracy, freedom, and equal rights, all very crucial and immediately threatened ideals and values globally today.

FLC: Could you tell us the story of when and why this artwork was donated to the Constitutional Court Trust?

AM: I had the privilege and opportunity to donate the painting to the Constitutional Court upon meeting Albie Sachs in Chicago. Albie was collecting for the soon to be constructed court house in Johannesburg, and fortunately I had photographic slides of my paintings with me. Albie chose the portrait and I agreed to donate it.

FLC: What inspired the title of your artwork *Nelson Mandela in New York*?

AM: The title of the work simply describes what the painting depicts.

FLC: How do you feel about having your work part of the Constitutional Court Art Collection (CCAC) today? Additionally, what does the CCAC represent to you?

AM: I feel honored and humbled that the painting is in the Court collection, and very inspired having met the great freedom fighter and leader, Mr Sachs.

I painted his portrait twice, and made a linoleum-cut print portrait of him, as a result of that meeting.

FLC: How do you see art as being connected to justice or human rights in South Africa, or more universally?

AM: The image of Mandela is recognizable and associated worldwide with justice and human rights. The strong tradition in South Africa, the US, and globally, of art informing the public of current events, sometimes reflecting new thinking, and challenging the status quo, goes back to the beginning, and continues to be instrumental in how we progress and change as societies.

FLC: Do you have any recommendations on the preservation and presentation of the artwork?

AM: Thank you for caring about, and for restoring the painting.

The painting is fragile, as the materials (and some techniques) used to paint the picture were not optimal. Acrylic paint from days gone by is unstable, resulting in failing finishes. Although I took every step to promote durability in the work at the time, the painting is vulnerable and will decay if exposed to certain elements, such as direct sunlight. The photos of the painting I have seen since the restoration took place appear to show the colors and finish as I remember them to be, thank you.

I think you folks have preservation and presentation down.

END OF INTERVIEW