

CCAC email interview with Anne Sassoon

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Interviewee name (and acronym): Anne Sassoon (AS)

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START OF INTERVIEW

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

AS: Drawing and painting have always been like an alternative language to me, an entrance to another world that made school less boring. I was encouraged by my mother who was an artist, and didn't mind that my bedroom walls were covered with paintings from floor to ceiling. I was born in Llandudno, North Wales, but lived in Johannesburg from the age of five. After school I got a job painting sets at the Alexander Theatre in Braamfontein, and would gatecrash life drawing classes at Wits University which was nearby.

Then I went to art school in London, where everything was about abstraction at the time, 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. I focused on the painting and hardly thought about my subjects, they just came.

The first time I exhibited was at Artists of Fame and Promise in Johannesburg, a competition that was won that year by Louis Maqubela. My painting was entitled Political Party and it showed a young Alsatian dog standing on a table surrounded by grinning women. After this I was taken up by Gallery 101. I got to know a lot of artists including Dumile Feni - we were both about 21 and he was already at

the height of his creativity. I worked as a visualiser in a series of advertising agencies, a job I was really bad at and was always getting fired. My first solo exhibition was opened by Judith Mason, whose work I so admired that I hardly heard a word of her speech.

There's a problematic relationship between art and motherhood, in my opinion, because while an artist has to be something of an anarchist and an iconoclast, a mother has to impart stability and optimism. While my children were growing up I tried to do my painting at night so that I could give it free rein.

I have always had wonderful artist friends in South Africa; with all the difficulties there is such massive creativity. But I haven't really lived there since we left Johannesburg for London in 1987, following the closing down of my husband's anti-apartheid newspaper. Since then I have worked and exhibited in several countries and returned to South Africa many times, often working there for months at a time and showing at galleries in Cape Town and Johannesburg. In Jerusalem, where I now live, I am lucky to have a rooftop studio near my home, and as long as I can get up the steps I don't think I'll ever stop painting.

FLC: Can you tell us more about how, when and why *Ishmael and Isaac* was made?

AS: They were part of a series made in Jerusalem in 2001 and shown that year at Gallery Westland Place, London. I worked on draft paper so that the whole exhibition could be rolled up and carried under my arm; and I used ink and glue, scrubbing with brillo pads to achieve the effect of charcoal.

I borrowed my characters from a catalogue of photographs of twins in India, and from a shoebox full of photographs from studios in Diagonal Street, Johannesburg, which I collected in the 1970s and have carried with me around the world. Clients would come in off the street and have themselves photographed in these tiny studios, posing in front of a curtain strung up on a piece of string. The photographs would be thrown away if the clients didn't come back for them – or given to anyone who wanted them.

Two friends, the photographer David Goldblatt and theatre director Barney Simon, were collecting them too, it turned out, and we decided to exhibit them together for the opening of the Photographers' Gallery at the Market Theatre. We put up a sign that said people who recognised themselves could now collect their photographs – and some did. After the exhibition, David and Barney let me keep them all.

A theatrical atmosphere was magically created inside these simple studios, and it inspires me still - I hope it shows in my work. There was the backdrop and a few props, like a dummy telephone and vase of plastic flowers, but it was the ordinary people who turned it into a theatre, with their vitality and the way they acted out something in their lives in front of the camera. They might be celebrating a new job, a new relationship, even showing off a new pair of shoes. Sometimes a young woman would strip to her underwear and languish on the cement floor as if it was a beach. Often it was just two friends wanting to pose together.

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 London exhibition was based on the idea of a double narrative: two viewpoints in the same frame. It was a reflection of my environment. Twins or brothers and the blood ties that bind them; boys and men, tied together by a common destiny or born to be in opposition, as were the biblical half-brothers Ishmael and Isaac. As I worked towards this exhibition, my interest and feeling grew increasingly towards the male narrative, and I began to see it in a perspective that was new to me.

FLC: You said you focused on male narrative for various reasons - what are these reasons? Does it relate to patriarchal societal systems?

AS: The short answer is yes.

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 started 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, while being 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 newborn 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.

FLC: To which historical and current day themes would you say *Ishmael and Isaac* speaks to?

AS:

- The occupation of Tibet by China and the disappearance of the Tibetan Panchen Lama, mourned by Buddhists worldwide.
- The conflicting historical narratives of Israel and Palestine, and of the Bible and Koran.
- Today's gender fluidity and LGBT+.
- The idea of boys as pawns or victims with little personal choice in a bigger, predominantly male narrative; the story of boys and battlefields throughout the generations. For me the main feeling behind the work is that they're human, vulnerable, and have feelings, and can cry.
- The studio photographs from the 1970s and 80s show Black people during the most difficult years of apartheid, presenting themselves as they wanted to be seen. They were the clients, and for this short moment could express whatever they wanted.
- 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.

FLC: Previous readings of *Ishmael and Isaac* have placed a queer perspective on the series, i.e. seeing the boys in childhood romance but perhaps being split soon after due to societal pressures. Is homosexuality something you can relate to these works?

AS: Certainly this is part of the story. Behind these works is the theme of how societal pressures force people into roles that are not of their choosing, which is like kidnapping somebody else's life and taking it over.

FLC: Adding to the question above, “Otherness” comes through in these works, that can be related to apartheid's politics of Othering in terms of race, but also on the basis of belief, class and gender.

AS: Othering is intrinsic to my basic idea although the word didn't exist at the time. 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 - as you say, it takes many forms. 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.

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

AS: Albie Sachs was visiting London during my exhibition in 2001, and even though he had a broken leg he kindly came to see it. He bought three of the works for the Constitutional Court and the fourth was bought and donated by a friend, Gill Polonsky.

FLC: What inspired the title of your artwork?

AS: 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.

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?

AS: I couldn't be more proud! The CCAC stands for a combination of true justice and imaginative creativity for all South Africans. It represents everyone and is there to serve everyone: a place to come to for help, justice, and cultural sustenance.

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

AS: Art is a form of individual self-expression, where everyone can have a voice. As long as art is open and free of legislation, and as long as viewers can look at art without prejudice, I think there is a natural connection between art and human rights. But it's complicated because what the art looks like doesn't always reflect the way the artist thinks: the fabulous German painter Emil Nolde, for instance, was a committed Nazi - but does his politics need to spoil our enjoyment of his work?

FLC: Are you mindful of conservation when making art, i.e. the preservation and restoration requirements to ensure the longevity of the work? Do you have specific recommendations for the conservation of these works?

AS: This was a new medium for me, but I feel confident that the good ink and glue that I used will last well.

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

AS: I am appreciative of the care you have taken and I think you have done a great job

FLC: Is there anything you would like to add to be recorded in this interview?

AS: Just my thanks.

END OF INTERVIEW