

GATHERING STRANDS: Keynote address for opening of Lionel Davis retrospective exhibition, Iziko South African National Gallery, 21 June 2017

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by Mario Pissarra

(It is indeed a great honour to have been invited by Lionel Davis to open his retrospective exhibition. I wish to congratulate the curators, Tina Smith, Ayesha Price, Ernestine White and their team, as well as District Six Museum and Iziko Museums for this historic occasion, and for making the artist's 81st birthday an unforgettable one, Happy Birthday Lionel!)

Many people know of Lionel Davis as a former District Six resident, and as a former political prisoner. Many will also be aware that he has a long history as an educator in the arts and heritage sector. Many too will know that he is an artist.

Lionel has often said that he has been fortunate to have not relied on his art for a living, as this has allowed him to pursue it on his own terms, unfettered by the commercial pressures that beset most professional artists.

Instead, his professional career has been that of an educator and trainer, notably with the Community Arts Project, and as a tour guide for the Robben Island Museum. Since his retirement from formal employment, he has, as he loves to say, earned his living by talking about his experiences.

While Lionel has not pursued a career as an artist, he has been consistently active in producing art for over 40 years, and this exhibition provides us with a unique opportunity to engage with some of the works he has produced since 1977.

The title of this exhibition, *Gathering Strands*, comes from Lionel. *"For me Gathering Strands somehow sums up not only my political journey but also the artistic. It was in Jail that we first had an opportunity to live together as South Africans. We represented different cultures, ethnic groupings and political persuasions. For our salvation it was imperative to break down the barriers that had kept us apart for hundreds of years. My journey through life ... has also been about bringing people together. It is about learning to work together and learning from each other. The strands are about binding us together: socially, culturally and artistically,"*

It is revealing that Lionel explains the title by emphasising a quest for social inclusion and justice. While he acknowledges that the title also sums up his artistic career, he does not elaborate on this nor does he foreground the resonance of the ideas *Gathering Strands* for the very function of a retrospective exhibition, that of taking stock of a life-long body of work, of gathering the strands that define him as an artist.

In other words, there is a degree of self-effacement happening here. At the very moment when the spotlight falls on his art, he subtly shifts the gaze to broader social imperatives.

That is perhaps why I am here. My task is to help shift the focus away from the broader social issues that concern him to the question of Lionel's contribution as an artist. When we consider Lionel's contribution as an artist we can think about his contribution at several levels.

There is Lionel the art educator, the trainer, the facilitator, the teacher.

Then there is Lionel the stalwart of community arts organisations, notably CAP, Vakalisa, Thupelo Workshop, and Greatmore Artists' Studios.

And there is Lionel the maker of images and objects, the producer of his own artworks. It is this strand, that of his own creative production as an artist, that this retrospective focuses on. This does not mean that his making of images and objects is unrelated to his practice as an educator or activist, certainly these roles are mutually complementary, but the work of this retrospective, in my view, is to begin the process of looking at his images more closely, to think more deeply about what it is that he articulates and expresses as an artist.

While we can identify Lionel's visual practice as one among many strands that make up the composite figure that is Lionel Davis, his artmaking is in turn composed of many strands. We can distinguish these by media, theme, or chronology. If we consider media, we can reflect on his use of a wide range of materials and techniques. But it is perhaps more revealing to think across lines, than to restrict one's enquiry to specific media. One thing we can observe is a healthy disregard for rigid visual conventions. You will find that he has little concern in pursuing the purity of specific media. You may consider him a printmaker, but few printmakers will paint or draw on their prints, or cut them up and use them for collages. You may admire his drawings, but you will also see that some of his drawings use collage, or incorporate the marks of a print roller, or paintbrush. You will see too that words and phrases interface with the visual. It is as if an analogy can be drawn between challenging social boundaries and the barriers that define particular media. If one challenges social boundaries to reject histories of exclusion and marginalisation in favour of inclusion, one can reject too the constraints imposed by distinct art media forms and techniques in return for dynamic and hybrid visual expression.

Lionel's biography too, defies that of the trajectories most followed by visual artists. He began making art in earnest at the age of 41, and he studied Fine Arts at UCT in his mid to late 50s. In fact, as much as he has a rich history as an art educator, he has also never stopped being a student. He still attends workshops and drawing classes.

It becomes clear that Lionel's tendency to mix media is not unrelated to his ongoing education as an artist. His artistic practice embodies the principle of life-long learning, as much it reveals a spirit of perennial search and discovery, hence his appropriate use of the term 'journey' to describe his artistic and personal development.

If we look at his artworks across media, and across time, we can identify a strong biographical strand that informs much of his work. Much of this draws on personal biography, on events in his own life. But much of it is also a form of collective biography, for lives are not lived in isolation, but in relation to others, including those that came before us. This is where Lionel's story comes to stand for more than his own – his images of District Six, of Robben Island, and of lives lived under apartheid resonate beyond the autobiographical, whilst still being rooted in his own lived experience.

Much of this work is produced in the aftermath of trauma, as a way of processing past events and making sense of their meaning. This may explain why Lionel speaks so often of art as a form of healing. Still others are less about the past than they are responses to the moment, this is most dramatically evident in his posters, but also in his images of everyday scenes.

Seemingly remote from the biographical strand there is what we may call the experimental strand, which is most obviously expressed through his abstract works. In these non-figurative or semi-figurative works, he plays with colour, line, shape, tone and texture, exploring the sensory qualities of producing images, and frequently conjuring metaphysical or psychological states of being.

We can distinguish these strands, the biographical and the experimental, as prominent threads, but strands are prone to entanglement, and the lines between them can overlap, or dissolve.

For instance, while the biographical strand most frequently plays out through figurative work, through picturing scenes that bear resemblance to visual appearances, many of his figurative works possess experimental qualities. This is evident in his use of mixed media. It is also evident through the collaged aesthetic that characterises his District Six and Robben Island images, where multiple points of view compete for our attention, with vignettes or semi-autonomous scenes juxtaposed for dramatic effect. There are also narrative works where formal elements are used expressively, decoratively, or symbolically. If one looks at his *Dark Day Eighties* series, look at how the colour introduces expressive content that enhances the tragedies depicted in the images.

What this dialogue between realism and abstraction, and across multiple media underlines, is the ongoing creative journey that Lionel's work embodies. If he embodies the principle of lifelong learning, he also embodies the idea of creativity as an ongoing process and journey.

(Earlier I said that my task here was to focus attention Lionel's artwork. Some of you will be aware that, together with my colleagues at ASAI, we are producing a book on Lionel's art. The book features ten specially commissioned essays, each addressing a specific aspect of his art. The book will be launched here at Iziko in September. We are currently busy raising additional funds to help cover the printing costs, and there is a table in the atrium where you can find out more about this book, and where you are welcome to pledge support for the book.)

I thank you for your attention!

