



*Street Games (Pontiac Street D6)*, 2013. Pen and ink wash on paper, 29.5 x 42 cm





## Foreword

# Lionel Davis: District Six beginnings

The street as a metaphor is often used to describe the vibrancy of the District Six neighbourhood before its destruction under the Apartheid engineered Group Areas Act. The street was the space where the playful exuberance of childhood was enacted, where the festive season musical processions of the minstrels, Malay and Christmas choirs took place, where *fah-fee*, 'dams', kerrim and other adult games were played, and where family and neighbourly squabbles were often resolved, in the public eye.

In looking back at the District Six that was lost, it is its life and vibrancy that stand out for former residents of the neighbourhood. Its barren emptiness after destruction stands in stark contrast to its remembered vitality.

Lionel Davis speaks very vividly of his own youth in District Six. The essence of the community life which he encountered here, was recorded in his imagination and created an inner canvas in his mind's eye. In later life he was able to draw upon this remembered reference, and his District Six inspired works reflect this energy. Sites which have become iconic such as the Stakesby Lewis Hostel, and streets such as Hanover, Russell and Chapel, feature in Lionel's body of work which includes paintings and line drawings. These familiar references make his work accessible to a wide audience who share his referential framework along a particular District Six route of memory.

In addition, I was particularly struck by Lionel's repeated reference to the difficult years of his house arrest. He speaks of the resulting isolation and loneliness as being almost unbearable. Contrasted against the backdrop of a childhood spent in the close-knit community of District Six where he was constantly surrounded by family, friends and neighbours, he struggled with the absence of a community present in his life to the extent that he even risked re-incarceration by disobeying the terms of his house arrest.

Lionel's story is such a wonderful inspiration. His commitment to grow his own talent despite having been subjected to environments which were not conducive to personal growth – forced removals under Apartheid, incarceration on Robben Island for seven years as a political prisoner convicted of 'conspiracy to commit sabotage' followed by house arrest. None of these circumstances stood in the way of his furthering both his practice and his pursuit of formal studies. It is a remarkable testament to his tenacity and resilience to hear that, despite all of this, he started formal art studies when he was already in his fifties.

### **Bonita Bennett**

*Bonita Bennett is director of  
the District Six Museum*

Masques and masquerades, special places and special people, train rides and work-day blues, struggles for freedom and the joys of struggling – *Gathering Strands* presents a wonderfully layered encounter with Lionel Davis's artistic works as well as his life.

