



CAP screen printing workshop, c. 1984. Photograph courtesy of Lionel Davis





Foreword

Lionel Davis: the composite artist

Something of an ethos of the shared commitment of a composite artist may be recalled when strolling down Chapel Street in the once bustling neighbourhood of District Six in Cape Town. For decades, Chapel Street was home to the Community Arts Project where hundreds of youth activists, artists and educators worked, learnt the art of art making, screen-printing and drawing under the watchful eye of Lionel Davis. There, the barrenness of apartheid was countered by a process of making and crafting in a daily ritual of the imagination. The entry of thousands of youth into the Community Arts Project in Chapel Street allowed for a distribution of the sensible that defied apartheid's blunting of the emotions. As if to recall the cycle of artistic and social production, Lionel Davis' artistic offering testifies to what it might mean not merely to receive the gift of freedom, but more precisely to craft freedom as a desirable outcome.

As we work through the pages of this book of celebration and tribute, we will soon realise that Lionel's gift was neither entirely held in the message nor in the medium, but in the gift of an educator who cultivates the senses, nurtures the aesthetic, and directs youthful energies away from the hardening ideological inheritance of apartheid and its multiplying forms of race hatred. A cobbler and a philosopher, artist and educator, Lionel Davis was the embodiment of a spirit that has far too often been allowed to wane, to our detriment.

Reflecting on so vast an oeuvre we now realise that the landscape of apartheid gave us many Lionels. Alfred Qabula, Nise Malange, Mi Hhlatswayo, Mafika Gwala – so many worker poets and weavers of dreams whose trace now is to be found in the inheritance of an aesthetic practice that deeply marked a yearning for freedom. Now more than ever, as the world again faces the spectre of disenchantment, we look to Lionel Davis to breathe life into our moribund world. The traveller of the long road will not disappoint. He has arrived to tell us to pick ourselves up, to work with quiet demeanour against the imperious affectless claims of the age of anti-intellectualism. We are on our way, with this book, not to recall, but to know that where there is art there is life, and where there is life, there is desire.

Lionel Davis is a composite artist, one for whom the work of art is already an act of shared commitment. Not unlike the paintings of Akbar, Lionel Davis has helped us paint the future we once desired, making each of us belong to his creations so that we may return to the wonder even after we turn the last page of this book. Then too, his images will stay with us, peppered with the chuckle that is uniquely his, reminding us to dance in our freedom. That at the very least is what we promised ourselves. At the very least, that is what we owe ourselves.

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