



Edited by
Polly Savage

MAKING ART IN AFRICA 1960-2010



“We started reacting, standing up and speaking out.”

51. Lionel Davis

Lionel Davis (b. 1936) was imprisoned on Robben Island from 1964 to 1971 for conspiring to commit acts of sabotage, and was held under house arrest from 1971 to 1976. He lives and works in Cape Town. On 7 August 2010, he spoke with Polly Savage at the District Six Museum, Cape Town, about his life and his work *Untitled* (1993, ill. 196).

I was born in District 6 and had a happy childhood, but the apartheid government forced my family into these newly created townships for those classified as coloureds. It happened all over South Africa. They didn't want you cheek by jowl with people classified as white, so you were removed, although at the time of the actual forced removals, I was in jail.

As teenagers, we'd begun to become aware of the inequities within society, the racism and the despicable behaviour of those who had the power. We started reacting, standing up and speaking out, and I got into lots of trouble. I got into physical fights for not respecting white authority, in my work, in the street, on the bus, in the train. I didn't know how to deal with the issues. I also started going to rallies and that was the awakening of my political consciousness. I joined a political organisation, where I learnt not to be antagonistic to white people, but to take my anger and focus on the government because they make the rules. This group focused on theory though, and, being young and impatient, I longed for action. So I joined another organisation, the National Liberation Front. It was really small, but we had these big dreams of taking on the might of the government, one day, by armed means. And of course the state had dreams for us also, so they rounded us up and put us in jail for conspiracy to commit acts of sabotage. That was our charge. Four women were sent to another jail and seven men went to Robben Island. I had a seven-year sentence.

Being there was an education in getting to know other people and the cultures they came from. You learnt to speak their language, to respect people, to listen, to become tolerant and respectful of other people's way of seeing things. That was the most challenging but also the most rewarding experience. I was released in 1971 but placed under house arrest and couldn't go anywhere near Cape Town until April 1976, by which time most of the buildings had been erased and my family had been removed from the place we had lived for decades.

Being under house arrest is a very traumatic experience. You're your own jailer. At the time, I was looking for a channel, for something to heal myself, although I never thought of it in that way. I had an urge to become creative. Then, by sheer chance, or synchronicity, I discovered this place called the Community Arts Project, CAP. In 1978 I started formal art education there and it transformed my life, changed my life completely. They taught basic drawing, painting and printmaking. I also worked there as a labourer, administrator, handy-man, you name it. Then in 1980, I went to the ELC Art and Craft Centre in Rorke's Drift, KwaZulu-Natal as an art student for two years. The standard of art education was basic but the most wonderful thing was meeting so many artists who had been there before me. That was a wonderful chapter in my life. Eventually, I came back and went to university.

I was invited to the second Thupelo workshop in 1986. I'd come from a school where everything was conceptual and you were taught to draw up a

“We had these big dreams of taking on the might of the government”

196. Lionel Davis
Untitled, 1993
Acrylic on paper
118 × 87 cm (46½ × 34½ in)

blueprint of the work you were going to do. I got to this workshop and people were working on big canvases, with lots of paint and so on. I didn't know what the hell I was doing! I started up with a sun, moon and stars but it wasn't working out, so I decided just to do, to splash, use your hands, use a stick, use anything! It was the most amazing thing and I made my first abstract painting. I've got it at home. I came to the realisation that you don't need Winsor & Newton to make art, you don't need the best materials, you don't have to plan, you can just allow your spirit to go. In colleges, you learn about perspective, form and anatomical drawing, but the problem is that once you've learned these technical things, you become a slave to them. The Thupelo workshop broke that for me. It allowed me to do what I was doing, so this was another of those transformative experiences.

After Bill Ainslie died in 1989, Thupelo started floundering a little, so Jill (Ch 46, Trappier), myself, Garth Erasmus (Ch 50) and Velile Soha decided to take up the challenge of running it. Our first



workshops were at the Community Arts Project, during the holidays, and this work (ill. 196) was done there in 1993. Ever since then, we've been running Thupelo from Cape Town. We just had a workshop in Woodstock. It was interactive, in that we went

197. Lionel Davis (right) with Wanini Hill at the Community Arts Project, Cape Town, 1996



198. Meeting of the Thupelo Workshop Committee in The Company's Garden Café, Cape Town 2013. Left to right: Vuyile Vuyiya, Robert Loder, Ndikhumbule Ngqinambi, Wonder Marthinus (the back of), Lionel Davies, Velile Soha, Garth Erasmus

199. Lionel Davis
Reclamation, 2004

Screen Print
62 x 90 cm (24½ x 35½ in.)

This was made at a workshop at the Caversham Press in Kwazulu Natal of visual artists and writers. The artists had to write and the writers had to make art. The writing at the top of my head is in the Afrikaans patois spoken by the local people of Cape Town. My writing is about women from the black community that in my youth and even today do all sorts of funny things to their hair to get rid of the kink or wooliness. It is a sickness that seems to permeate not only South Africa, but wherever black people are influenced by a European or an American culture. The street map is of the old District Six where the inhabitants were forcefully removed in 1969. The right side of my face is a segment of Robben Island and is open to interpretation.
Lionel Davis



to meet the community and asked for permission to create artworks on their stoops, or fences, or the walls inside their houses. We had a wonderful welcome from them. The whole street was lined with paintings, tons of rubble was cleared away, children were painting on the walls, and we had a festival with music and dance. The whole street was alive with light and laughter.

From 1997 until 2007 I worked on Robben Island as an educator and a tour guide. After 21 years,

going back there was not easy but every day was a catharsis; you just got rid of all your angst. Every day is an opportunity to learn something new about yourself, about people, about so much, so it's a joy to be living. All of these experiences were transformative for me, wonderful growth points, and so I'm tall now! Even today, when I look back, I just think, thank God that I went that way because it has helped me to grow tremendously.