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| Ainslie, Bill (1934-1989) |
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| Born in 1934 in Bedford, Eastern Cape, South Africa, William (Bill) Stewart Ainslie was a painter and educator, and the founder of a number of visual art programs and workshops that countered discriminatory racial and educational policies in apartheid-era South Africa. These programs encouraged students to work in abstract and other modernist idioms not practiced in the country at the time. Until his untimely death at age 55, Ainslie melded his career as an artist with his vision of art as a means to combat apartheid. In the 1960s and 1970s, Ainslie fostered the only multiracial art programs in the country, culminating in a formal art school, the non-profit Johannesburg Art Foundation (1982). He helped found the Federated Union of Black Artists (FUBA) and the art schools Fuba Academy (1978), Funda Center (1983) (funda means ‘learn’ in Xhosa), and the Alexandra Arts Centre (1986). |
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The generation of modern African artists and educators trained at these institutions shaped the course of art after apartheid. Ainslie also organized short-term workshops, most notably the Thupelo Art Workshop (thupelo means ‘to teach by example’ in Southern Sotho) in 1983. Thupelo linked local and international artists and focused on abstraction, a radical departure from the social realist style expected of politically engaged South African art of the 1980s.    Ainslie’s life-long commitment to the arts and to combating racial prejudice began during his undergraduate studies. While studying at Natal University in the mid 1950s he met artist Selby Mvusi, who educated him about the need to develop modern art initiatives for black South Africans. After completing the BFA in 1958, Ainslie began his career teaching art at the Cyrene Mission in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). He established himself as an artist in 1960, exhibiting at Adler Fielding Gallery in Johannesburg. He achieved notable success, winning numerous awards from Art SA Today and exhibiting at prominent galleries including Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg. He refused to exhibit at venues that supported apartheid policies.  Ainslie’s early work was figurative and expressionist. The social-issues bent of his subject matter — farm labourers, African women, and street urchins — aligned him with the work of modernist black artists like Gerard Sekoto, Durant Shilahli, Ephraim Ngatane and Louis Maqhubela. By the late 1960s, he had embraced abstraction through exposure to South African artist Douglas Portway, who was inspired by American Abstract Expressionism. Ainslie looked also to the work of Jackson Pollock and Robert Motherwell, as well as the writing~~s~~ of Karl Jung and Sufi philosopher Idries Shah. In the Namib series he explored a minimalist colour field approach; later his work shifted to large-scale expressive abstractions featuring strong textural brush marks, layered colour, and expansive spaces as seen in *Pachipamwe III*. Ainslie’s shift to abstraction occurred at a time when politically conscious South African artists were increasingly expected to conform to a socially critical content and realist style. Ainslie considered abstraction to be a defiant and revolutionary form of art, one that offered black and white artists an alternative idiom to the accepted conventions of the day. His work is in the collections of the South African National Art Gallery, Cape Town, Durban Art Gallery, the University of Witwatersrand Gallery and the Johannesburg Art Gallery, in addition to collections beyond South Africa, including Chase Manhattan Bank and the ExxonMobil oil company, New York.  Of great importance is Ainslie’s role as educator. Ainslie offered informal lessons in drawing and painting to black and white students, a practice he started in 1964. These multi-racial art classes contravened the colour bar of the Group Areas and Separate Amenities acts; Ainslie was under constant pressure and surveillance by authorities. He also fostered workshop environments, sharing his studio with established artists such as Dumile Feni, Esrom Legae, Ben Arnold, Lucky Sibiya, and Eric Mbatha. These experiences informed his lifelong belief in the workshop as a means to create community, experiment with new techniques, and share ideas. By the early 1970s, instruction was formalized into the Bill Ainslie Studios, renamed the Art Foundation in 1982. Here Ainslie enacted the principles presented in a resolution at the seminal 1979 *State of Art in South Africa Conference*: modern art education should help create a post-apartheid society. Graduates of the Ainslie Studio and Art Foundation include David Koloane, William Kentridge, and Simon Stone.  Ainslie worked to create art centres and workshops throughout Southern Africa that were linked nationally and internationally. The centres that he helped establish in the late 1970s and 1980s, including Fuba, Funda, and the Alexandra Art Centre, provided black South Africans with access to modern art training at a time when there were few other options. Ainslie also helped organize the important anti-apartheid event, the Gaborone Festival of 1982. During the height of South African state repression and isolation from international arenas in the 1980s, Ainslie and David Koloane founded the Thupelo Art Workshop. At the two-week Thupelo workshops, artists such as Dumisani Mabaso, Garth Erasmus, and Lionel Davis experimented with novel techniques and methods in the form of abstraction and free-form expression. The Thupelo experiments had a notable impact on the direction South African art took after the end of apartheid in 1994. Thupelo also created international connections through its affiliation with the Triangle Workshop in New York. It brought visitors to South Africa, including American abstract expressionist Peter Bradley and art critic Kenneth Moffett.  In 1988, Ainslie helped to establish international artist workshops based throughout Southern Africa, including Pachipamwe (1988) in Zimbabwe and Thapong (1989) in Botswana. These workshops led to the establishment of a network of modern art workshops across Africa from the 1990s on. On August 26, 1989, Bill Ainslie was killed in a car accident while returning from the Pachipamwe workshop at Cyrene Mission in Zimbabwe.  File: ainslie1.jpg  1 Pachipamwe III, 1989. Source: http://www.billainslie.com/?page\_id=80 |
| Further reading:  (Peffer)  (Bill Anslie: Artist, Educator, Humanitarian) |