

BILL AINSLIE.

Bill Ainslie was killed in a car crash in August, near Potgietersrust, returning from an international workshop at the Cyrene Mission in Zimbabwe, where he and his wife Fieka worked when first married. Of his funeral, Pat Williams, who pays one of the tributes we publish below, wrote "People who could meet no other way came from far and wide to his funeral; all races and colours, all religions, all conflicting political beliefs; the wealthy and desperately poor, the influential and the dispossessed. They came together with warmth and love – and that was Bill's dream for South Africa." Amongst them were Christopher Shabalala and Moses Kumalo, two Howick factory-workers recruited into the Liberal Party by Bill in the 1950s, who sat through the service with the tears running down their cheeks – two of the earliest examples of his extraordinary capacity to breach South Africa's colour barriers.

The two tributes which follow come from two very different sources, London's sophisticated Independent and Afrikanerdom's bumptious, radical upstart Die Vrye Weekblad. Bill would have liked that.

ART AND CREATIVE ENERGY

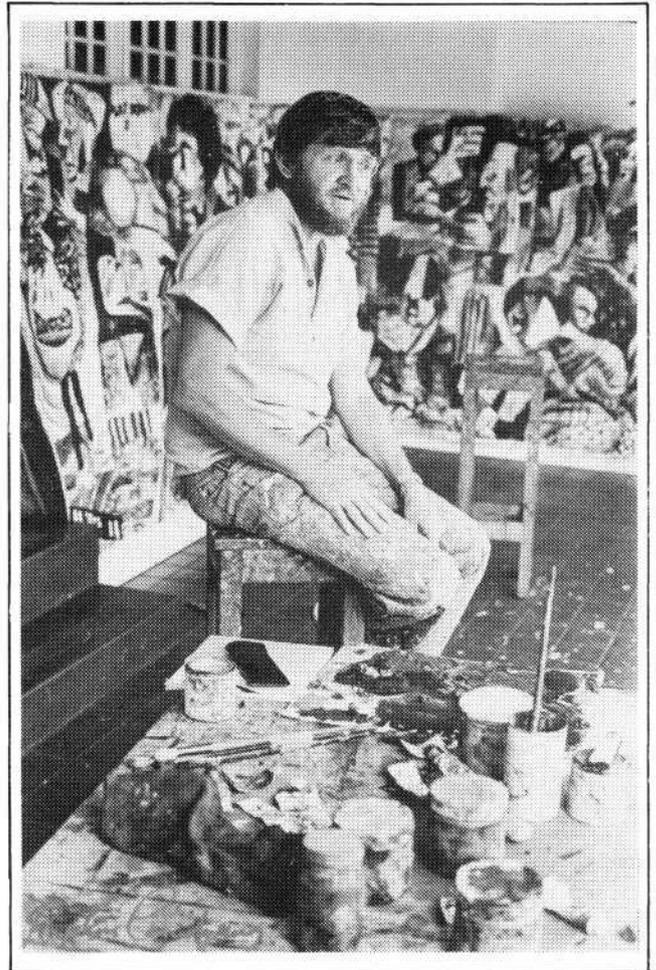
by PAT WILLIAMS (from *The Independent* 5/9/89)

BILL AINSLIE ran his extraordinary multi-racial art school in South Africa as a haven of sanity in that frequently mad country. The Johannesburg Art Foundation was a vision of south Africa's best future; the students' lives and creative work enriched by the differences, as much as the friendships, between the races.

Ainslie himself was one of those rare, irreplaceable men, a born leader, trusted by everyone, a humanitarian and master teacher. A fine painter himself, he was personally committed to abstract art, which he saw as the most rigorous and serious form of painting. To him, art was far more than making images or illustrating belief; it was where human creative energy found its touchstone. He believed that because art had been neglected in Southern Africa, much had been corrupted.

"What this meant," wrote his former student William Kentridge, "was running an art school open to all people at a time when all formal art institutions were racially restrictive; supporting, both spiritually and financially, many artists who would otherwise have had to abandon their activity; opening his school to students who, through inferior school education, would have been denied access to formal art training."

Ainslie started teaching in 1964 – privately, so he could enrol whom he pleased. Four years later he took on teachers and there was a "school". By 1971 it had a



noteworthy black presence and its first black teacher. That the school grew and flourished, sometimes in the teeth of hostility and suspicion, is a measure of the strength of both Ainslie and his Dutch wife Fieka, a brilliant organiser and inspiring presence who worked constantly at his side.

Few South Africans knew of the foundation but, from Robert Kennedy onwards, visitors of like mind beat a path to its door. Today, the school's lines of contact extend to New York and London, through scholarships and international workshops organised by Ainslie, Sir Anthony Caro and Robert Loder. In the 1970s Caro put together a permanent exhibition of modern work, to enable black artists to see what was going on, to show solidarity, and raise money.

NETWORK

Ainslie's school extended beyond the Arts Foundation. To him school was a network of people, not necessarily in one place, growing and developing together as they moved to their goal; all contributing, all learning from each other. When it was still inconceivable, he worked towards a situation in which there could be arts centres throughout Southern Africa, linked nationally and internationally. Recently the time grew right; such centres are opening. Ainslie helped start FUBA (the Federated Union of Black Artists), FUNDA (which means learn in Xhosa) and the Alexandra Arts Centre.

Bill was capable of seemingly endless concern and

generosity. Because of his extraordinary capacity to communicate with people of any race, station, or political hue, he could, on behalf of student or friend, effectively cut through South Africa's bureaucracy or prejudice to find the place, even sometimes in bigots, where they were flexible, fair and humane. He was politically unclassifiable. Some labelled him a dangerous radical, yet he saw himself as conservative. He wholeheartedly supported the cause of black African liberation; at the same time, a U.S. state department official this week described him as 'a great man, who had helped America's image in Africa'. He was constantly stretched between finding time for his own radiant abstracts, work which was beginning to be recognised and sold internationally, and his vision of art as the means of growth and communication, ultimately of reconciliation, between the people of South Africa.

He was from an old Scottish family. His father's great-grandfather, an 1820 settler, married the sister of Thomas Pringle, the anti-slavery and freedom for the press campaigner. He had intended to become a priest, until art claimed his imagination when he was a student. In 1956, while still at Natal University, he met a black artist Selby Mvusi, 'who alerted me to the needs of the country. Through him I saw the crucial necessity for the development of black art', Bill told me recently. 'The work I have done in my life was a consequence of the period I spent with him'.



Figures in a landscape
Oil 91 x 122
Durban Art Gallery

Bill Ainslie

MAKING IMAGES FOR A REBELLIOUS CONTINENT

(This tribute to Ainslie by Elza Miles first appeared in Die Vrye Weekblad 8/9/1989 and has been translated by Marcelle Manley).

Bill Ainslie did not turn his back on Africa when, in the seventies, his painting found connections with American abstract expressionism. On the contrary, his involvement in South African life never diminished for one moment. With the same conviction that expanded the vista of his paintings, shifting its focus, he bypassed the restrictions of statutory apartheid. Bill and Fieke's house was open to the homeless and in Bill's studio, and later at the Johannesburg Art Foundation, all students received equal attention.

In 1965 Bill Ainslie received the Cambridge Shirt Award for his entry "African Mother" at the Art South Africa Today exhibition in Durban. Today, in retrospect, one can see how natural his transition to abstract expressionism actually was. To local opponents of nonfigurative forms in plastic art this move was heresy, and to this day Ainslie is blamed in these art circles for freeing his art and his emphasis in art teaching from the narrative vantage point based on representation.

Bill Ainslie could have continued painting in the vein of his award-winning "African Mother". Even so, 21 years later, he preferred to use different artistic terms to depict the anxious mother and her defenceless child. Instead of the fears of the dark woman, an earthy passion for life emerges. The generalised reference to a mother makes way for the specific "Mooketsi I and II" near Soekmekaar in Lebowa. Now, one realises, Ainslie finds in abstract expressionism not a descriptive representation but his own image for this rebellious continent. Thus those paintings of his that bear the names of places in this country are the counterparts in paint of his friend Mongane Seroté's poem "The Long Road". In Ainslie's case this road was also the way of the Sufi.

David Rossouw, a former student at the Art Foundation, remembers that during workshops Ainslie read to them from Sufi wisdom. In view of the controversy surrounding Ainslie's espousal of abstract expressionism, one looks for an answer to his critics in Idries Shah's "Thinkers of the East". There one reads about Rumi who was accused of straying from the True Way by encouraging and permitting acting, song, music and other unconventional activities. Some say that he ignored the charges, others claim that he defended himself thus: "Let us see whether in time to come it is our *work* that is remembered, or the names of our critics."