I first learned of Sue Williamson through an exhibit of her photo silkscreen prints, *A FEW SOUTH AFRICANS*, sponsored by On the Wall Gallery in Medford, Oregon, in November, 1985. Combining visual and verbal elements, Williamson's seventeen portraits focused on black and white women and their ongoing, historical struggle against political injustice as experienced by South Africa's predominant black population. In February, 1986, I had the opportunity to interview Sue Williamson in New York City and learn how her personal development as an artist became linked with the expression of her political views, resulting in *A FEW SOUTH AFRICANS*. The portrait series forms a powerful aesthetic and educational statement that has now been seen by audiences in South Africa, the United States and Europe.

Sue Williamson's development as an artist-activist is linked with her identity as a white South African engaged in the struggle against apartheid. Her vision of a just society, based upon the free movement and interaction of all peoples within a nation and their right to equal political representation, evolved during the five years she spent in the United States in the 1960's. When she returned to South Africa, she found it hard to accept how separate the two races were.

What is most extraordinary about Sue Williamson is that she forged her vision and subsequent political experiences into an artistic statement that has a significant impact upon black and white South Africans and now within the international community. In a personal interview Sue Williamson told me she believes "Art can certainly create the kind of awareness in people that is a necessary precondition to change. That is why most artists are a critical part of any society, particularly one like South Africa."

Using faces of women to tell an aspect of the story of the history of the struggle for liberation in South Africa, Williamson has created an ongoing series of poster-size portraits entitled *A FEW SOUTH AFRICANS*. These portraits are the faces of women who married, raised children and carried on the struggle for freedom in obscurity, or occasionally in the international spotlight, as Winnie Mandela did.

I first saw an exhibit of *A FEW SOUTH AFRICANS* in On the Wall Gallery in Medford, Oregon, in 1985, and a short time later fortunately had the opportunity to meet with Sue Williamson in New York City, thanks to the efforts of two American photographers, Susan Lloyd and Catherine Allport.

These photographers each met Sue on their separate journeys to Cape Town, South Africa, where they also saw her work at Cape Town's Gallery International. Subsequently Susan Lloyd arranged for the exhibit, *A FEW SOUTH AFRICANS*, to be brought to the United States, while Catherine Allport invited Williamson to speak on "Apartheid, South Africa: The Role of Art in the Struggle for Liberation," at a panel for the Women's Caucus for Art in conjunction with the College Art Association annual meeting in New York in 1986.

When I finally met Williamson at this conference, we took time to go together to a nearby cafeteria where we could quietly talk. Still fatigued from the long plane journey
and the intense pace of her activities just hours before her departure from South Africa, she was nevertheless willing to share with me some of the life and death events of the past ten years that encompassed her development as an artist, her work with the Women's Movement for Peace, and her family. I soon became aware that a key to understanding Sue Williamson was in her calmly spoken statement: "You must face very freely that you can be jailed at any time. Otherwise, you would become so paralyzed that you don't do anything. I'm not prepared to let that fear dominate my life." During our ongoing conversation for the conference duration, I developed respect for Williamson, not only aesthetically, but in her outspoken personal commitment to justice.

Williamson was born in England in 1941. She moved with her parents to South Africa in 1948, where her father worked for a construction company in Johannesburg. Throughout high school her professional goal was to be a newspaper reporter. After high school graduation Williamson took a secretarial course, and then obtained a job as assistant secretary to a news editor on a major newspaper. At that time, women were generally hired only as social event reporters, and, though Williamson's job included verification of the news reporters' stories, the newspaper management would not let her advance to that position.

Williamson told me that she was always interested in art, but it was not until 1964 when she married and went to New York City with her husband that she pursued this interest. Her husband was a management consultant while she worked for an advertising agency. Then one day, "after a friend took me to an exhibit of Sumi-e style water color paintings, my study of art began." She first enrolled in a Sumi-e class. "At that stage my ambition was no more complicated than doing Christmas cards." But soon Williamson began to study seriously, at the Art Students League, drawing with John Groth, painting with Thomas Fogarty, and etching with Seong Moy. From that time on Williamson began to carry a sketchbook with her wherever she went.

In 1969 Sue Williamson, her husband, and her year old daughter returned to South Africa, where she continued her studies in a Cape Town art school. In 1973 she had her first exhibit consisting mostly of landscape etchings. However, by this time Williamson had joined the Women's Movement for Peace (WMP), and her life and art were soon to merge and undergo dramatic changes. She says that the WMP is "based on the simple idea that if women refused to be bound by apartheid, they could form friendships across color lines. I came to know the black townships as well as I know the white suburbs." The focus of the WMP, an interracial group, was not only to witness the government's genocidal policies towards blacks but to try to stop these destructive activities peacefully, by educating the South African public, as well as the world, as to what was happening.

Williamson describes a typical incident that took place in 1968, at Modderdam, a squatter camp three miles out of Cape Town: "The government claimed that people had no right to be on the land and they must move as the government was going to knock the camp down. The day the demolitions were supposed to start, we went out there to try to stop the bulldozers. We stood in the road waiting for them to come, while we formed a human chain across the road. They were there, but they did not start up. But by three o'clock in the afternoon most of the mothers had to leave to pick up their kids from school, and then the bulldozers promptly moved into action. [It
was disappointing to realize] that we couldn't organize on a scale to stop them. It was too much of a last-minute effort on our part."

But Williamson remained at Modderdam over the next seven days with her sketchbook and recorded the police tear-gassing, homes being demolished and furniture being smashed down. In seven days, 2,000 homes were demolished. In response to this experience, she created a series of etchings depicting the demolition of houses being knocked down and people being tear-gassed. Underneath each image were phrases sarcastically representative of the government's point of view: "They shouldn't be there anyway," and that praised the government for "cleaning it all up." One etching was reproduced as a postcard and printed commercially.

Several hundred of the postcards were then sent all over the country and overseas to draw the attention of the world to these events. Within a week Williamson's postcard had been banned. The South African Publications Control Board told her, "While the postcard is not without artistic merit, it must be pointed out that it does not give an accurate image of the situation. Your postcard is a tool in the hands of the enemies of South Africa."

Williamson believes her postcard was banned because it embarrassed the government. It was not illegal. The government policy states that "you may criticize but not incite or make plans for illegal action."

According to Williamson, "With Modderdam down, the government turned its attention to Crossroads, another and far larger, banned squatter community that existed a short distance from the Cape Town Airport. Crossroads was a well established place many times the size of Modderdam. Its residents were determined not to be moved. The WMP was one of a number of organizations which launched an intensive campaign to save Crossroads. There were slide shows, photo exhibitions, public meetings, petitions, and events staged in the community to which influential people were invited. The confrontation at Crossroads was reported in papers around the world. The political cost of knocking down Crossroads had become too high and in the end the people of Crossroads and their supporters had won."

During this period of intense political activity Williamson did almost no art work, but gained an incredible first-hand knowledge of the women and the issues for A FEW SOUTH AFRICANS, which she started developing in 1983. However, as a result of her activities, Williamson began to receive nightly phone calls and death threats: "You'll get a petrol bomb through your window, you dirty Commie bitch!" She says, matter of factly, "Unpleasant phone calls are a feature of South African life. They can't be considered jokes. The ex-husband of the previous WMP chairperson was gunned down by unknown assailants before the eyes of his children. His wife could no longer take it, and for her children's sake she left the country."

When a Cape Town city councilor who was a friend of Williamson's confronted the police about the threatening phone calls, these calls finally ceased. Needless to say, all this was upsetting to Williamson and her family. As Williamson's activities increased both as an artist and an activist, her three children (now aged 12, 16, and 18) sometimes wondered, "Why aren't you a boring normal mother like those my friend have."

Williamson was not satisfied with her early attempts to express her feelings through her art during this difficult period. She admits, "My images were just not strong enough." She felt the need for further study and enrolled at the Michaelis School of Fine Art. "I had
a wonderful tutor, Jules van der Vyfer, and he gave me the confidence to attempt larger, technically more complex prints that I had ever done before," says Williamson. The works produced for the Advanced Diploma (for which she received a distinction) were the first nine prints of the series, A FEW SOUTH AFRICANS. These prints are 22 by 30 inches in size and combine the techniques of photo etching and silk screen printing.

This ongoing project represents a synthesis of Williamson's skills as an artist and a writer. Accompanying these images are Williamson's personal interviews with the woman portrayed, condensed to a concisely written statement and placed beside each of their portraits. The photo-etched portraits in the center of each print are amplified by a larger symbolically decorated designed border, inspired by pictures that Williamson frequently saw in black homes. These black images consisted of "family snapshots, any kind of certificate or award, religious mottos or reliquiae and were framed elaborately to amplify their importance. Sometimes gift wrap cut into bright patterns was collaged onto the frames."

Figure 1

ANNE SILINGA
Sometimes while Williamson was working on an image, she would receive a call to go to Crossroads because the police were tear-gassing or shooting. "There I am, working on an image, and the real thing is happening!" She also recalls the occasions when she had gone to Crossroads to observe a police action and it began to rain. "A woman, whose own house was under threat, went inside and brought out a blue pillow-case for me, the only thing she had to offer me to put on my head to protect me from the rain. You can't imagine how kind these people are!"] Williamon in her soft voice that reflects pride in both her art and political activities relates, "Working on A FEW SOUTH AFRICANS series has been a very moving experience for me. The strength of the women in the face of oppression gives one real hope for the future of South Africa."

Williamson also described people's reaction to her work when it was exhibited in Cape Town. "The feeling of the women is that I've taken their history out of the closet and put it on the walls for everyone to see. It was touching to me to see the response of black women."

The print of Annie Silinga, who took a lifelong decision never to carry an identification pass (Fig.1), shows her seated and enclosed by a narrow red frame and then by a wider, purple-striped border that contains two South African policemen standing guard on either side of her. The accompanying statement reads in part:

"I will carry a pass the day the Prime Minister's wife carries a pass," Annie Silinga declared publicly during the Defiance Campaign in 1952. And to the day she died in June, 1984, she never did.

For her steadfast refusal to submit to the indignity of a pass, Annie was constantly harassed and arrested and was one of the accused in the 1956 Treason Trial. But even when old and poor and carrying a pass would have enabled her to receive a pension, she refused.

Her steadfastness in the face of oppression directed her life.

In another print, a tall, pyramidal figure of a mother with a child in her arms and another beside her as she surveys the devastation is titled Case No. 6831/21--from Crossroads Squatter Camp (Fig.2). On the left of this mother are smaller collaged images of the clustered camp shacks with women and their laundry, while the right side shows the back of the police as they destroy the shacks, smashing and scattering the few belongings of the people. The warm tones of this brown photo portrait are bordered with a pale orange edge forming a center arch. The wider beige border extending around the portrait contains brown linear drawings of adobe and thatch huts of Transkei or their distant tribal lands.

The accompanying statement reads:

Case No. 6831/21. Nameless, for she is but one of thousands like her, 'Case No. 683121' has appeared several times in the Langa Courts for being illegally in the area.

Born in the Transkei, she came to Cape Town some eleven years ago to be with her husband, a contract worker on a construction site.

In those years she has lived in many places, but in 1977 she came to Crossroads, where she and her family lodged. Her landlord moved, the shack was demolished and for most of this year she had
been a "bed person," living with her family in the open. Flimsy shelters of sticks and plastic erected over the beds against the bitter Cape winter have been continually destroyed and confiscated by officials in regular raids.

Twice this year she has been arrested and had to appear in the Langa courts ... 'Case No. 6831/21' on charges of being illegally in the area. But returning to Transkei is not an option. There is no work there. No medical attention for the children. And she would see her husband only once a year, when he is between contracts. So she remains in Cape Town, strong and determined. Her will to survive is matched only by her capacity for endurance.

Some of Williamson's portraits are of white women like Helen Joseph, "the mother of the struggle," shown
sitting in her home with her hands folded and with a determined facial expression.

Now over 80, Helen Jones still travels the country, attracting huge audiences to hear her speak out against apartheid.

Over 40 years ago she became secretary of the newly formed Federation of South African Women and was one of the leaders of the 20,000 women who marched to Pretoria, protesting against the carrying of passes by African women. In 1962 she became the first person to be put under house arrest in South Africa—a restriction which lasted ten years.

Perhaps the only woman who is known internationally from A FEW SOUTH AFRICANS is Winnie Mandela (Fig.3), "the symbol of resistance." She is shown in three-quarter view with a scarf-covered head and calm eyes. In a brief quotation from the biographical statement, Williamson says:

Since 1977 she has been banished to the small, dusty Afrikaner dorp of Brandfort in the Orange Free State, where she lives in House No. 802 in the treeless location outside town.
Perpetual harassment has extended even to the confiscation of a bedspread in the colours of the African National Congress, and a conviction on a charge of contravening her banning orders, when she called at a neighbour's house regarding a chicken.

But nothing has been able to crush the indomitable Winnie Mandela or prevent her from speaking out fearlessly when she has been able to.

When I asked Williamson about her studio or work space, she told me that her studio consists of an old Cape Town house that was cooperatively bought with two other people. "We have an etching and litho press and facilities for silk screening. Approximately eight other artists can rent this space and equipment."

Williamson is proud that A FEW SOUTH AFRICANS has been purchased for the Oppenheimer Library in Johannesburg and the Durban Art Gallery. Three of the prints from this series are also part of TRIBUTORIES, an exhibition of South African art in West Germany.

Some of her current work includes silk screen projects such as Freedom Charter T-Shirts, "A Pillow for the President," and a section of a very long protest banner. "Gallery art is important, but I also like making art in more accessible forms," says Williamson. Thus, she has had postcards made of eight of her prints, posters of three, and last year she designed a T-shirt which featured the historic Freedom Charter of South Africa, a document recently revived after 30 years of being banned. This famous document, drawn up at the Klipton gathering of the Congress of the People in 1955, lists the basic human rights that should be guaranteed to all regardless of race:

The People Shall Govern; All National Groups Shall Have Equal Rights; The Land Shall Be Shared Among Those Who Work It; All Shall Be Equal Before the Law; All Shall Enjoy Human Rights; There Shall Be Work and Security; There Shall Be Houses, Security and Comfort; The Doors of Learning and Culture Shall Be Opened; and There Shall Be Peace and Friendship.

Making such T-shirts can be a risky business. Williamson describes a recent incident that occurred during a Saturday flea market in Cape Town in which a third-year art student was selling T-shirts containing the slogan, "Liberation for Education." Since the police can arrest anyone they consider subversive, this student was "arrested, thrown into jail where a noose was put around his neck and he was told he was going to be hanged." It took a lawyer a week to get him released. Therefore, Williamson was also worried about her 16-year-old son when he was selling her brightly designed Freedom Charter T-shirts at a similar flea market, but she is very glad that "so far he has not been arrested."

During her New York Women's Caucus for Art presentation, (1986), Williamson questioned the dilemma and motives of the white artist working in South African society. "And for the white artist, may he be sure that if he does produce socio-political art, his motives are pure? Steve Biko, the great black consciousness leader who died in detention, said: "How many white people fighting for their version of change in South Africa are really motivated by a genuine concern and not by guilt?"

Williamson continued to raise other, more significant issues:

"And what of the black artist from his disadvantaged position in our society? He has had no art training in school, and in fact the white-directed school curriculum had discredited his culture. For him to choose art as a way of life requires an especially loving commitment to his craft. If the white artists..."
cannot survive by art alone in a phylistine society, how much harder is it for the black artist?" The Women's Caucus for Art audience was stunned by many of Williamson's personal experiences that reflect the art historian Ernst Fischer's (1959) position that: "The artist has the responsibility to arouse and stimulate understanding, to emphasize social responsibility." Williamson then added: "And if he or she takes this position, a position critical of the ugly face of apartheid, may he expect the Security Police at his door at 5 A.M. one morning? Please rest assured, the Security Police monitor cultural activities in the broadest sense. In fact, if the South African Embassy is doing its job, there will be someone in the audience here today monitoring what I am saying." Williamson concluded her talk with the statement: "Though it would be naive to believe that artistic protest in itself, no matter how effective the art, will bring about immediate social change, the artist does and will always have a crucial and indispensable role to play in any society. This is the vision that can bring about new perceptions, and the climate of awareness that is a necessary precondition for change."

I decided to ask Williamson what she would really like to do and also express in her art if South Africa ever became liberated, and she smilingly answered: "South Africa is a most amazing and beautiful country. If I could do what I wanted, I might go live in the bush somewhere, or to Botswana and do animal research. I love that life." Unfortunately, in the near future there seems to be little likelihood of Williamson's dreams being fulfilled.

Williamson plans to return to South Africa and continue with her series, A FEW SOUTH AFRICANS, as well as with collective projects such as the protest banner. This project was initiated late last year by an anti-apartheid group in Johannesburg and is being coordinated by the prestigious Goodman Gallery. Artists from all over South Africa were asked to visually portray their deepest feelings of what they would like to see for South Africa. The banner is to be a strip, 24 inches wide, but indefinite in length as the artists can make their sections as long as they desire. The final protest banner is to be used in some significant way, maybe to wrap a government building. Using the silk screens Williamson made earlier for her Freedom Charter T-shirts, she printed a four-foot length with the words "Freedom Charter" and all the clauses in many different colors. "I wanted to produce the effect of a brilliantly coloured, happy South Africa which we might have if the provisions of the Freedom Charter could be realised," Williamson says. She completed her section the day before she left for the United States.

While in the United States, Williamson not only attended the conference but also shared her experiences with students at several college campuses, as the struggle against the inhuman conditions of apartheid has become part of an international movement for justice. Williamson is also pleased that A FEW SOUTH AFRICANS is now a traveling art exhibit which will be seen throughout the Northwest of the United States, sponsored by Visual Art Resources of the Museum of Art, in Eugene, Oregon. An excellent summation of A FEW SOUTH AFRICANS appeared in Women Artists News (1986) by the Oregon-based artist and writer, Corinne Tee. "The words that came to mind looking at these prints are: inspiring, superb, accomplished, mature, fully realized. Williamson, in her seamless blending of appropriate form and heart-wrenching content, has created an art that is both informing as well as enforming, meaning an art that can form (change) people's lives" (p.2).
References


Footnote


1All quotes by Sue Williamson are, unless otherwise noted, from a personal interview with the author in New York City, on February 11 and 12, 1986.

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