
Making and Meaning: An examination of *Two Figures* by Albert Adams, c.1990



Alexandra Lawson: Postgraduate in the Conservation of Easel Paintings

Alexandra Coutavas: Masters in History of Art

Making and Meaning: An examination of *Two Figures* by Albert Adams, c.1990

The Project:

This report is the result of 'Painting Pairs' supported by the Sackler Research Forum at the Courtauld Institute of Art. The scheme brings together a postgraduate History of Art and Conservation of Easel paintings student. The aim is to combine art historical and technical analysis of a work that in this case is also being treated in the department. Two lectures were given in January and May 2017, and this article is a written version of these lectures.

Our research has been greatly assisted by the following people who we would like to thank. Edward Glennon, for allowing us to visit the studio and imparting his knowledge about Albert's painting practice. Salford University, for allowing us access to the studio materials in their possession, and to take samples from *Wild Animal*. Klaas Jan Van Den Berg for carrying out organic analysis of samples from *Two Figures*. Joanna Shepard, who discussed *Two Figures* and her research on Francis Bacon's studio materials with us. Lastly thank you to Dr Elisabeth Reissner and Professor Aviva Burnstock for their help throughout.

Table of Contents

Part 1:

Project aims.....	4-6
Introduction to the artist.....	6-8

Part 2: Two figures and two paintings.....9-12

Part 3: Visual sources and the creative Process.....12-16

Part 4: Sources and Influences.....17-20

Part 5: Making and Meaning.....21-27

Final remarks.....	27-28
--------------------	-------

Bibliography.....29-30

Appendix 1: Location of Sample Sites from *Two Figures*.....31

Appendix 2: Location of Sample Sites from *Locusts* and *Wild Animal*..32

Introduction and Aims:

Technical analysis of a painting frequently begins by confirming or investigating attribution and date. In the case of *Two Figures*, the author is not in doubt. It is our aim in this study to use available sources of evidence, technical analysis of the painting, and an art historical approach to contribute to our understanding of the painting and the artist's mind and message. We hope that this will also serve to illustrate the different methodologies utilised in the study of a recently deceased artist.

The impetus of this research was the damage of the painting *Two Figures* in transit back from a major exhibition in South Africa in 2008. The painting had been taken off its stretcher and folded into eight, which has caused major damage including large losses of paint, several tears and the lifting and cupping of regions of paint. There were loose fragments of paint in the packaging and upon the paint surface, many of which are too small and dissociated from their original place to be accurately put back. This means that we have been able to set an unusual amount of samples. The condition of the painting also means that under layers are exposed for the first time since they were painted. The damage of the painting is tragic, but its conservation represents an opportunity to gain new insight into the materials and the technique of Albert Adams and uncover the creative process.



**Left: Raking Light Right
image of *Two Figures* (after
the painting had been
unfolded)**

Sources of information available to us throughout this study include photographs of Albert working in the studio and a video of Albert discussing his work at the opening of an exhibition in Capetown. His long time partner and owner of *Two Figures* Edward Glennon's knowledge and memories have been invaluable. We were also able to access and take samples from two other paintings by Adams during this study, one in the possession of Edward Glennon (*Locusts*), and another in the possession of Salford University (*Wild Animal*). Some objects and materials remain in Albert's studio in Camden, where he had worked from 1967 to his death in 2006. However, the bulk of its contents are in the possession of Salford University, who very kindly gave us access for one day.

A previous example that has employed the methodology of using studio materials to build a picture of an artist's practice is Francis Bacon's studio at the Hugh Lane Gallery.

**Francis Bacon's studio
reconstruction, Hugh Lane
Gallery, Dublin**



The contents of the studio were examined and interpreted to identify the materials and colours most favoured by Bacon, and the range of media used.¹ The research and re-creation of his studio has also changed the shape and focus of exhibitions and the public's interaction with the artist ever since.² The materials from Albert's studio are starting to form such a role, having been included in an exhibition in 2012 in Salford, acknowledging the materiality of his works.

**Exhibition,
Salford University, Clifford
Whitworth Library, 2012.
(Image courtesy of
University of Salford Art
collection)**



Combining these sources of information with what we know about *Two Figures* has become key, as the first technical investigation of Albert Adams, in

¹ Joanna Shepard, "A game of chance: the Media and Techniques of Francis Bacon," in *Francis Bacon: a terrible beauty*, curated by Barbara Dawson and Martin Harrison (Dublin: Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane: Gottingen: Steidl, 2009), 153.

² Joanna Russell et al., "Investigation of the materials found in the studio of Francis Bacon (1909-1992)," *Studies in Conservation*, 57, no. 4 (2012): 195.

enabling us to enrich our understanding of his painting practice and put *Two Figures* into context.

An introduction to the Artist

Albert Adams was born in Johannesburg, South Africa, the son of an Indian father and 'Cape coloured' mother.³ At the age of four he moved to Cape Town with his mother and sister, where his early interest in the arts was encouraged by his primary and secondary school teachers. Owing to this interest he applied to the Michaelis School of Fine Arts in Cape Town, but was denied entrance because of the colour of his skin – during apartheid coloured students were not allowed into the art school because they might come into contact with white models in the life drawing classes. Adams continued creating art, and developed friendships with individuals involved in the arts scene of Cape Town who recognized his talent. With their assistance he applied to and was accepted at the Slade School of Art, moving to London to study there from 1953 to 1956. The formal training he received at the Slade, and the interaction he had with some of the great artistic talents and minds of the 20th century, provided Adams with a foundation from which to develop his own style. At this time he was awarded a scholarship to the Munich School of Art, studying there and at the expressionist painter Oskar Kokoschka's School of Vision in Salzburg for approximately two months. His time with Kokoschka had an enduring influence on Adams philosophically, saying "I had ten weeks with Kokoschka, and it took me ten years to shake him off."⁴

Adams returned to Cape Town in the late 1950s, with his first solo exhibition in 1959. Despite being chosen several times to represent South Africa in international exhibitions, Adams decided to leave the country and permanently settle in London. During the 1960s and 1970s, his art featured in exhibitions in

³ Biographical information derived from Marilyn Martin and Joe Dolby, eds., *Albert Adams: Journey on a Tightrope* (Capetown: Iziko South African National Gallery, 2008).

⁴ Charles Darwent, "From Cape Town to Camden Town," *Art Quarterly* (Winter 2012), 36.

Belgium, Brazil, Germany, and Yugoslavia. Adams was appointed to the staff of the City University, London in 1979, and lectured in art history there for 18 years. Adams lived and worked in Camden until the end of his life.



Wild Dog Devouring Prey at Night, 1968/9, oil on canvas



**Comparable
Waterhole paintings
by Albert Adams**

Albert Adams, *Wild Animal Drinking*, University of Salford. C1980 Oil on canvas.



Albert Adams, *Wild dog with carcass*, 1982, Oil on canvas, (1010 x 1010cm)

***Two Figures* and two paintings**

The painting *Two Figures* dates from the 1990s, and depicts two abstracted nude figures, one man and one woman. Their forms appear to be overlapping or intertwined, and they are set in an abstract landscape where the composition is created with large areas of bright colour. Body parts are delineated to varying degrees – some of the more clearly visible elements include the torso of the left figure, the breasts of the right figure, and the teeth of both. There is a strong contrast between the warm colours used for the flesh areas of the body and the cool colours of the background, which helps to focus the viewer on the figures.

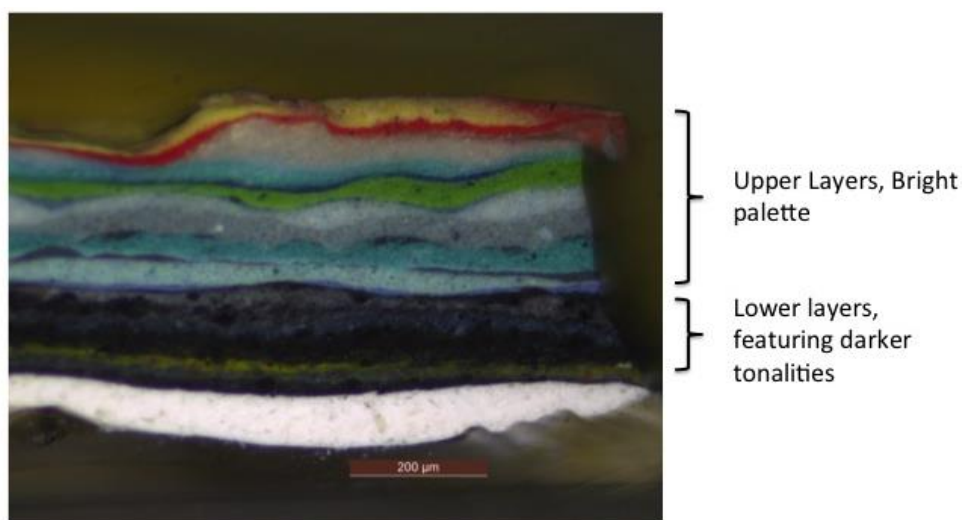
Underneath *Two Figures* is a work from the 1970s, from Adams' watering hole series of paintings. There is no photographic record of the composition beneath, but Edward Glennon recalled that it featured an animal coming down the canvas, made using a dark palette that consisted primarily of blue. This is supported by the inscription 'Blue Painting' on the back of the canvas.

Adams had submitted this first painting to the Royal Academy of Arts but it was rejected and he subsequently painted over it. According to Glennon, this was a regular part of Adam's artistic practice, calling him a "great destroyer." This practice could have been a response to unsatisfactory paintings that had a poor critical reception or failed to sell, but also to do with the economic considerations of being an artist.

An X-radiograph would be a particularly useful method of looking at the painting underneath, as high density elements such as lead are not penetrated by X-rays and as a result appear light. Adam's use of lead white in some layers

means we might be able to distinguish more of the composition, pentimenti, and also help make sense of samples which have so far given glimpses of the painting underneath but not the full picture. However the extensive damage to the painting means we have not yet been able to use X-radiography on the painting.

To get more information about the painting underneath, we can look at the cross sections that we have taken from the painting. Most cross sections show a broad distinction between the two paintings on the basis of palette, given the information we already have about the painting. The lowest layers frequently feature dark reds and blues. In contrast, the uppermost layers of paint show bright greens, yellows and flesh pinks.



Sample 1 *Two Figures*.
For location, see Appendix 1

However, while the dark blues and lowest layers very obviously belong to the first composition, the point at which the first painting ends and the second begins is not always clear. With scanning electron microscopy and energy dispersive x-radiography (SEM-EDX) analysis of these samples we had hoped to distinguish between the 1970s and 1990s work by identifying inorganic pigments. More specifically we hoped to see if Adams was using different pigments to achieve similar colours.

SEM EDX is a particularly useful analytical technique for this painting, as it is spatially resolved and this allows individual identification of pigments in each

layer. Frequently seen pigments in lower two layers include French ultramarine, bone black, red lake and a chrome green or yellow.

The upper layers of the painting include Cadmium red and yellow and synthetic blue and green pigments.

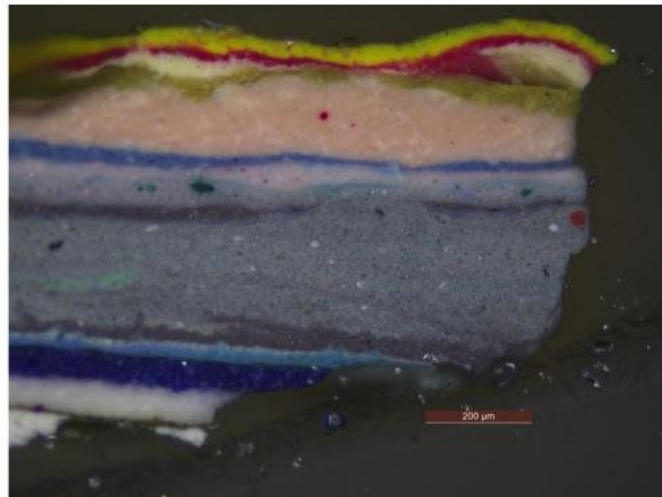
He used Cerulean blue and chrome green in top and lower layers, but he has chosen to use Mars black in top paint layer instead of the bone black that he was using in 1970s. Both Lead white and Titanium dioxide white are present throughout the samples. Lead white was not found at all in the other two paintings sampled for the research project, both of which were painted in the

1980s. It is probable that he found it increasingly difficult to get hold of lead white during the 1980s with health and safety legislation, but was able to source some again in the 1990s. Empty paint boxes amongst his materials at Salford that he had recycled for other tubes indicate that had bought Old Holland Cremnitz white (Lead Carbonate) and Flake white (a mix of Lead and Zinc whites) in the past. Old Holland lead whites are still available now, but at a much higher comparative cost than other white pigments.



Re-used paint boxes, amongst Salford materials

Another question raised by the samples from *Two Figures* is whether an interlayer was applied between the first and second painting, or if he painted directly on top of the original composition. There is not a consistent overall isolating layer across the whole painting,



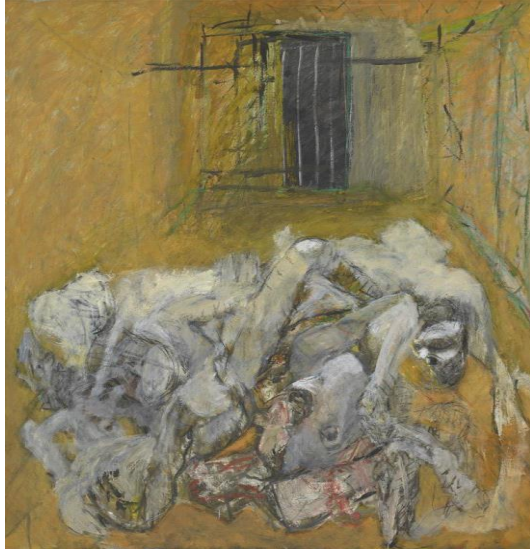
Thick Grey layer
Present in
upper third of
painting

Sample 5 from *Two Figures*

but in the upper third of the painting we see a thick grey paint layer that does not appear on the surface at any point. A similar thin layer of grey is present in the lower half of the painting, and this is visible in the space between the two figures. It is possible that the very thick layer on the upper part of the painting could be a localized barrier between the 1970s and 1990s painting.

Visual sources and the creative process

Adams often used depictions of animals as political statements. For example wild dogs could represent vicious human nature, baboons the weight and legacy of apartheid and racism, and locusts the swarming pestilence of government that strips the land and people bare. The source for both the content and sentiment of these works was his youth in Athlone, a suburb of Cape Town, and the continuing situation of the country that he witnessed from



Albert Adams, *Abu Ghraib*, 2004.
153x153cm. Oil and pastel on canvas

abroad, both of which Adams credits with providing the images and visual experiences that formed the basis of his work. Adams once said:

“My work is based on my experience of South Africa as a 'vast and terrifying prison' - an experience which even now, after a decade of democracy, still haunts me".⁵

In Kokoschka's 1959 recorded opening speech for Adam's first exhibition in South Africa he said, “we live with closed eyes not daring to see the

misery we create on earth. The task of the artist is to see.”⁶

This idea of an artist's social responsibility influenced Adam's choice of subject throughout his career, reflecting the darker fascination with human action exposed by Picasso's *Guernica* and Goya's 'Disasters of War' series. A heavily used book of the latter was found in Adam's bag of etching underlining the direct inspiration. He collected newspaper cuttings in his studio of contemporary human injustice, including the Iraq war, Guantanamo bay and War in Kosovo. His painting *Abu Ghraib* documents atrocities committed by US military prison guards during the war in Iraq, and was purchased by the Imperial War

⁵ Albert Adams, "In His Own Words", quoted in the University of Antwerp Exhibition leaflet (2005). Online: <https://adamsalbert.wordpress.com/in-his-own-words/>

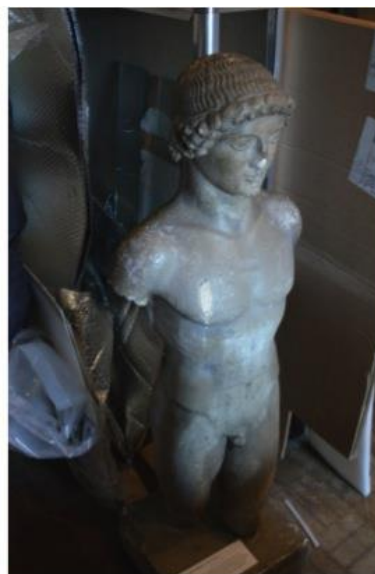
⁶ Oskar Kokoschka. *Recording for the opening of Albert Adams exhibition in South Africa*. August 1959, Villeneuve Switzerland. Transcribed by Alexandra Lawson, 2017. (Available at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B-BsBt8Vdxa7UVEwaGpuQ3BQZDA/view> as of 17/05/2017)

Museum.⁷ In it, Adams depicts naked convoluted bodies on the floor of a prison cell, based on newspaper cuttings of Iraqi detainees. Far from being a literal representation of the event, his painting transcends the specific horror and represents the universal anguish of war.

Many of Adam's compositions came from the newspaper photographs that filled his studio, or from his own photographs. This allowed him to capture the uncomfortable realities of the downtrodden, and then translate this into drawings and paint. While his compositions were an interpretation of these



Work visible in background of a contemporary photograph of Albert's studio. Apollo, snake, easel and brushes.



The Strangford Apollo. Plastercast. Salford University

images, the authenticity provided by his source material was an important part of the artistic process.

Adam's also used objects to aid his compositional plan, evident in photographs of his studio and its contents now in

store at Salford University. When Adams began his studies at Slade, students still practiced drawing by copying casts, such as the Strangford Apollo. However as the practice became outmoded the Apollo was thrown out and Adams rescued it. It remained in his studio for the rest of his life. This magpie like tendency was also demonstrated by the mannequin parts from the skip belonging to a factory that made surgical boots in Camden, and inflatable

⁷ Jeremy Kuper. "Imperial War Museum exhibits SA artist Albert Adams' last work," The South African. Last modified October 16, 2012. <http://www.thesouthafrican.com/imperial-war-museum-exhibits-sa-artist-albert-adams-last-work/>

snakes from London Zoo. These can be seen in photographs variously propped on boxes, or hung from the ceiling, arranged by Adam's to provide a direct source for his paintings.

From his starting point,



Contemporary photograph
from Albert's Studio



Untitled Painting from
the 1980s



Albert Adams, Female
Nude with Snake (date
unknown).



Albert Adams,
Strelitzias

Photographs from Albert's studio 1980s

whether photographic or object-based, Adam's worked out his idea for a painting by creating a drawing. This is clear from photographs of Adams in the studio, and also from drawings still in Camden. A drawing we found rolled up in Camden appears to be a large-scale plan for *The Captive*. Adams said:

“My premise is graphic. I much prefer drawing and etching because of its immediacy. Painting I find a little bit... I can't work as quickly as I wish to, as the ideas come, the thoughts come.”⁸



Photograph of Albert Adams painting *Monkey in Signal box* 102x76cm
A sketch is pinned to the adjacent board

By creating these large-scale drawings, he was able to capture and reference this spontaneity in his painting process.

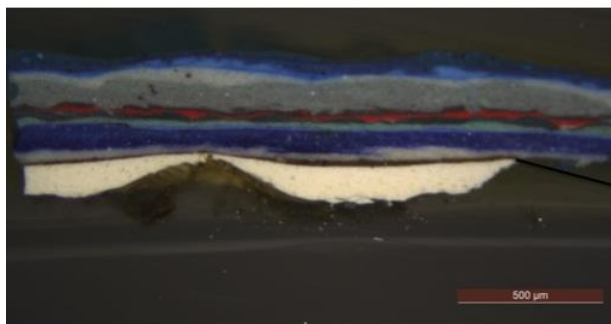
Despite his skill as a draughtsman, it appears that Adam's used paint to sketch his composition onto canvas rather than charcoal. In an infra-red reflectogram of *Two Figures*, infra-red rays are absorbed by paint strokes that outline the figures' bodies, appearing dark. Much of this paint is visible on the surface of the painting. It doesn't reveal any outline from the 1970s painting, perhaps in part due to the thickness of the paint layers

and carbon containing layers.

⁸ Albert Adams, Albert introducing an exhibition at the South African National Gallery, video recording for 'Kunskafee,' 2002.



**Albert Adams, Reverse of
Seated Ape. Date Unknown.**



Thin
pigment
ed layer

Sample 4 from *Two Figures*

In some cross sections and losses in *Two Figures* you see a thin pigmented layer directly above the ground layer, relating to the 1970s painting. This washy layer was not visible in cross sections from the other two paintings sampled. A preparatory painting on the back of *Seated Monkey* indicates that he worked out his ideas in paint directly on the canvas, rather than using drawing media.

A photograph showing a painting in process shows the simultaneous development of background and figures, with the background being brought to a mid stage before the figure and monkey have been sketched in with paint. The red and black paint used to outline the figurative composition shows the leg has been re-positioned at this stage.



Contemporary photograph of a Monkey in Signal Box composition in process.

Albert Adams, *Monkey in Signal Box*, January 1996, Oil on canvas.

Sources and influences

Adams expressive application of paint and use of bold colours was inspired by the German Expressionists like Kokoshka, as well as his own contemporaries. While in South Africa Adams spent time with the art collectors Siegert Eick and Rudolph von Freiling, who had fled the Nazi regime in Germany in the 1930s, and also viewed Irma Stern's collection. It was through these collections that Adams was exposed to Dürer, Rembrandt, and the German expressionists, and his early drawings evoke the drama of the human condition seen in the work of these artists.⁹ Adams is often associated with a circle of painters known as the School of London, a term invented by the artist R.B. Kitaj to describe British artists based in the city in the 1970s pursuing different forms of figurative painting.¹⁰ Artists associated with the group include Kitaj himself, as well as Frank Auerbach, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Leon Kossoff, and David Hockney (although Hockney was living in the United States). When looking at Adams' *Two Figures* in conjunction with works by Bacon, Auerbach, and Kitaj,

⁹ Maria Pissarra, ed. *Visual Century: South African art in context* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press; Oslo: Visual Century Project, 2011), 107.

¹⁰ On these artists, see Elena Crippa and Catherine Lampert, *London Calling: Bacon, Freud, Kossoff, Andrews, Auerbach, and Kitaj* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2016).

one can see the influence of Bacon's distortion and blurred movement, Auerbach's layering of paint, and Kitaj's bright and flat colour planes.

Francis Bacon was a self-purported influence on Adams' style during his time at Slade. The British art critic and curator David Sylvester lectured regularly at the Slade in the early 1950s on Francis Bacon's work, lectures which Bacon sometimes attended, and several of the artist's paintings were accessible to Slade students at the Hanover Gallery, where Bacon exhibited continuously from 1949 to 1958.¹¹ The influence of the works of Francis Bacon on Adams can be seen with some of Bacon's compositions from the late 1940s and early 1950s.

In *Head I* (figure A), Bacon reduces the human form to a head with a snarling mouth with teeth, which produces a sense of agony or tension similar to Adams screaming figures like *Head* (figure B), or figures with rows of teeth but no heads like *Two Figures*. White lines against the black background in Bacon's image suggest a cubicle or cell to contain and restrict the figure, paralleling Adams' drawings and etchings of heads in cells he created to represent those imprisoned on Robben Island during apartheid, which we will see later on. In *Study of a Baboon* (figure C), Bacon again paints a snarling mouth and fangs, this time on a caged animal; the painting evokes both Adams' many compositions of wild animals, as well as his works featuring baboons and apes as representations of vicious human nature and the weight of apartheid, such as in *Man Carrying Ape* (figure D). How Bacon uses brushstrokes to create a violent energy and sense of motion in the work is similar to the way Adams evokes motion through brushstroke and paint texture.

A principal characteristic of Bacon's paintings is distortion of form, which has been related to themes of war, existentialism, and the traumatization of

¹¹ Emma Chambers, "Prototype and Perception: Art History and Observation at the Slade in the 1950s", pp. 189–214, in *The Concept of the 'Master' in Art Education in Britain and Ireland, 1770 to Present*.

humanity.¹² This quality makes many of his works confrontational and unsettling. These same themes, and the artistic method of evoking them, can also be found in Adams' paintings, much of which engages with apartheid and government oppression in South Africa.

Two works that address the themes of the cruel aspects of human nature and the repercussions of conflict that are found in Bacon's works, but from the angle of personal experience and South African identity characteristic of Adams, are *Celebration* (figure E) and the *Prisoner (from the Incarceration Series)* (figure F). In the former painting, the figure is naturalistic enough that the viewer is able to identify it as a disabled person, but the face and its surrounding area has been manipulated, creating an unsettling effect. About this painting, Adams has said:

"This was inspired also by an event which is peculiar to Cape Town and takes place every New Year. It the minstrels or the coons or the klopse. Many people, of course, would find not only the subject of a legless man in a wheelchair disturbing, but also the very fact that it is a coon. There is great criticism amongst certain sections of the community about this particular event."¹³

In the latter drawing, a disembodied head of a prisoner spews some substance while the large looming head of a guard peers through the bars or window. The impression is one of torture and terror, with the curving and dashed strokes giving the viewer a sense of the speed with which Adams worked to get this emotion on paper. Adams has also spoken about this etching, saying:

"This is a series of six etchings I did. It deals with Robben Island for two reasons: one because of the significance of the island in the history of South Africa, the other because I had a cousin who was incarcerated on the island. The images themselves were taken from press cuttings, usually of atrocities that were perpetrated in Africa. So although they

¹² Lawrence Gowing and Sam Hunter, *Francis Bacon*, (London: Thames and Hudson), 1989.

¹³ Albert Adams, Albert introducing an exhibition at the South African National Gallery, video recording for 'Kunskafee,' 2002.

may seem very grotesque, they were in fact happenings that were real.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Albert Adams, Albert introducing an exhibition at the South African National Gallery, video recording for 'Kunskafee,' 2002.

Sources and Influences: Figures



Figure A. Francis Bacon, *Head I*, 1948, oil and tempera on cardboard, 100.3 x 74.9 cm. Collection: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure B. Albert Adams, *Head*, 1999, charcoal on paper, 148 x 149 cm. Collection: Albert Adams, London.



Figure C. Francis Bacon, *Study of a Baboon*, 1953, oil on canvas, 198.4 x 137.5 cm. Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York.

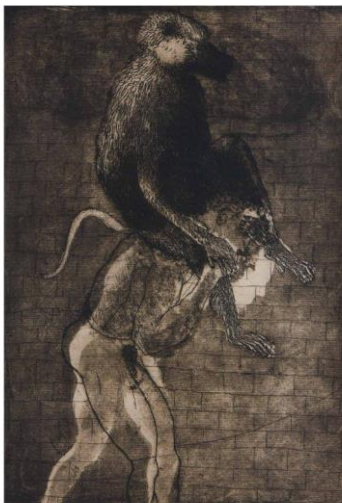


Figure D. Albert Adams, *Ape on Standing Man*, 2001, etching and aquatint on paper, 41.5 x 29 cm. Collection: Albert Adams, London.



Figure E. Albert Adams, *Celebration*, 2002, oil on canvas, 158 x 160 cm. Collection: Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town.



Figure F. Albert Adams, *Prisoner (from the Incarceration Series)*, 1999, charcoal on paper, 164 x 150 cm. Collection: Albert Adams, London.

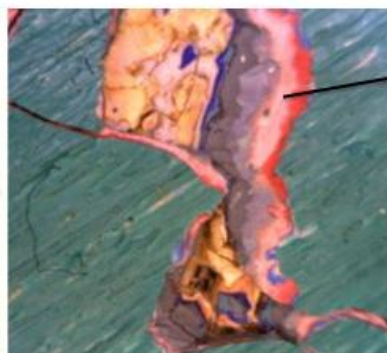
Making and meaning

Another Baconesque motif, figures without heads, are also often found in Adams' works; we see the obliteration of the face in works such as *The Captive* and a *Portrait of a Man*. This leads to the question of if the lack of a head is a deliberate planned absence from the start of the composition, or if it involved a more active obliteration or removal of heads on the canvas during or the creative process or after the work's completion.

The layering structure indicates a deliberate action of obscuring the figures' face. By looking at areas of loss, we are able to see that pink and red layers associated with head of right figure extend upwards, but were covered in later stages of work with the green of the background. This is not the case with the left figure, which was possibly worked in later.

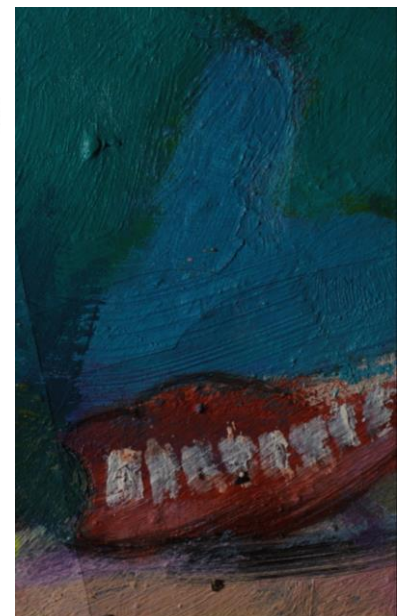


Estimated area of flesh layer underneath the background



Pale pink and red layer visible beneath green background

Pale pink layer



'Heart' detail from *Two figures*

In place of the heads that Adams has removed from these two figures is a blue shape between the mouths that could be interpreted as a heart. The blue was painted after the pale pink of the flesh, but before the greens of the background were added. The later green areas very deliberately preserve and reinforce this blue shape, lending it significance to the composition that is aided by its central location. In this sense, Adams both destroys and preserves significant elements of the composition in an expressive yet also deliberate creative process.

The surface of the painting was clearly significant to Adams, and he created variations of texture in different ways. In other works, we see the use of the palette knife to apply thick ridges of paint, and also the end of the brush to scrape away upper layers to reveal paint beneath, reminiscent of the etching process that he was so expert in.

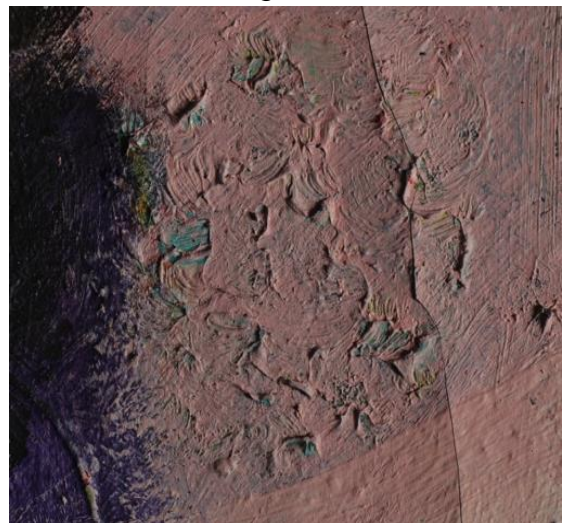


Curved drag of the brush in background of *Two Figures*



Drag of brush in *Untitled* work by Albert Adams. Camden House

The sweeping curved motion of the brush in the trees in *Two Figures* is visible in other works such as the quick drag of the brush in *Untitled*. In *Two Figures* there is a divergence between the sweeping brush strokes in the background and in the breast of the right figure, where the aggressive pull up of the brush has dragged the paint layers beneath up with it. He also allowed paint to drip down the canvas across contrasting colours, and we can see protrusions resulting from the application of dried paint on the palette.



Wet in Wet brush strokes in the breast *Two Figures*

The blocks of colour and texturally rough application of the paint builds gives the painting a spontaneous feel. The Expressionist influence here is clearly visible, the work reading as an outburst of emotion created by the strong diagonal lines and bold colours, which as we have seen were developed during the painting process. Adams spoke of the tightrope that an artist walks, between the emotions that direct creativity and the objectivity required in the

development of the work, which is something that parallels the balance of spontaneity and planning during the creation of this composition.

Adams varied his application of paint to achieve contrasting visual effects within each figure. In some areas, such as the yellow upper body of the left figure, the broad area of colour has a two-dimensional flat effect.

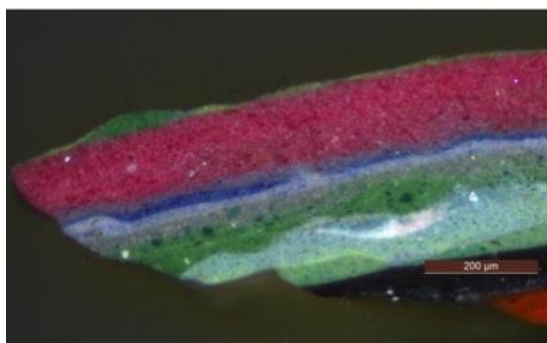
An overall layer of red was first applied, with strokes of blue delineating the torso on top. The cadmium yellow followed, painting around the areas of detail, and last Adams reinforced these areas by going back in with red paint. He created musculature in the black torso and the red legs in a similar way. In other areas, such as the arm of the left figure, Adams creates a three-dimensionality and illusion of depth by the brushy build up of paint, where the red and purple underlayers show through.

The variation between flat and dimensional areas gives the impression that the bodies are turning or in motion.



Contrasting visual effects in the left figure of *Two Figures*

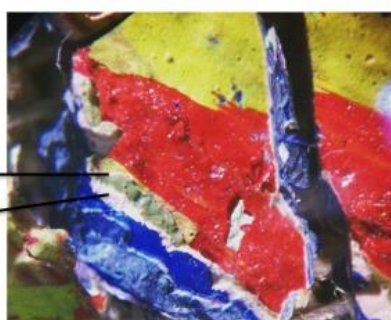
The edges of the bodies are delineated either by a brush stroke applied late in the painting process, or by leaving underlying layers exposed to create negative space. While the edges of the outer limbs appear blurred, precise lines are created at the connection of the two figures along the left edge of the right figure. This is the centre of the composition and the point of physical or sexual tension between the bodies.



**Sample 11, *Two Figures*.
Example of Wet-in-Wet paint
application**

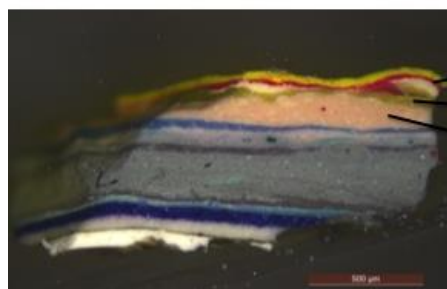
While the pull up of paint in the breast and some cross sections show evidence of wet in wet painting, the cross sections from *Two Figures* are characterised by many distinct layers, in some cases as many as twenty. The samples from two other paintings by Adams show almost equally complex layer structures, indicating that the paint build up in *Two Figures*

is not just due to the presence of two paintings, but indicative of his general technique. In the case of this sample from *Wild Animal*, a green layer that does not relate to the finished surface of the painting is visible. This is evidence that the Adam's was making decisions about colour on the canvas, with sometimes radical changes.



Ochre layer
Flesh Pink

**Photomicrograph of loss
in yellow torso. 3x
magnification**



In
Two

Red and yellow
paint layers
Ochre layer
Flesh pink layer

**Sample 5 *Two Figures*. From
loss in yellow torso**

Figures, we see the development of the torso of the left figure, from flesh pink, to ochre to the bright yellow, visible in cross section 5.

This flesh pink layer continues under the red legs and black upper torso of the right figure. Perhaps this evolution of palette on the canvas is related to Adam's

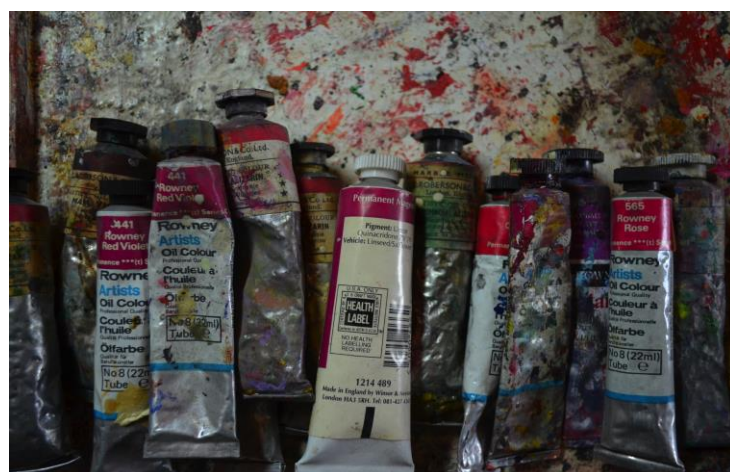
working from black and white sketches, without planning out the choice and distribution of colour on paper in advance.

We can return to Adam's own words:

"I can't work as quickly as I wish to, as the ideas come, the thoughts come."

This sentence implies the evolution of his ideas through the creative process, which we have seen evidence of in the cross sections. It also indicates his frustration with the drying time of oil paint. Edward Glennon mentioned that Adams might have several paintings in progress at once, which would have allowed the numerous thin layers to dry between each application. He also remembered that Adam's would place a sheet soaked in water rung out over his artworks to stop them drying out- a practice more commonly associated with acrylic paintings.¹⁵ We know that Adam's experimented with other media including acrylic paint.

While the organic Gas chromatography mass spectrometry (GC/MS) analysis hasn't identified any acrylic paint in *Two Figures*, the plastic quality of some of the thin upper paint layers in the painting and in other works sampled during this project means there are still questions about his use of mixed media. His studio supplies in Salford included a box of



Collection of paint tubes from Adam's work station
University of Salford Art collection.

acrylic paints, as well as a 'matte medium' acrylic polymer emulsion. There was also a container of matte black chalkboard paint and a variety of metallic effect paints. Jars of raw unbound pigments and a muller to grind them were also amongst his supplies in Salford, supporting Glennon's recollections of Adams

¹⁵ Edward Glennon, Discussion with Edward Glennon. Interview by Alexandra Lawson, 9th January 2017.

making his own paint, as well as priming his own canvases.¹⁶ However analysis of paints in all three paintings sampled so far show particle size and paint additives consistent with tube paints.

The paints in Adam's studio materials at Salford are diverse in brand and pigment. Similarly, SEM EDX analysis of samples from all the three paintings does not show a particular continuity of palette, but rather a willingness to use many different pigments to achieve the colours he sought. He did consistently use Cadmium pigments, and French ultramarine was found in all three paintings sampled and in the studio. However, the presence of something in studio doesn't mean it was frequently used, and likewise the lack of a pigment can also be significant. For example there were no tubes of white paint at all, despite, and perhaps because, white pigments were used in abundance in every painting.

Documenting the pigment and brand of the oil paints was sometimes difficult, due to the amount of paint on the outside of the tubes. These splatters of paint evoke an image of chaotic application, and the activity of the artistic process. A makeshift palette at Salford where thick paint entirely covers the back of a woodcut corroborates this. Belying the initial impression of chaos, is the order of each draw in his work station into colour groups, from earths, reds and yellows in one, crimsons, deep reds and purples in another, and blacks, blues



Verso of a woodcut, used as a makeshift palette by Adams. Salford University.

Recto

¹⁶ GC-MS analysis results indicated an alkyd priming. Other canvases in Camden had Roberson stamps on the stretcher. Joanna Russell's PhD on Francis Bacon's materials showed Roberson applied priming from the 1970s was alkyd in composition.

and greens. Further analysis of the paint tubes, linking additives in brands to samples from paintings is outside the scope of this project, but would be a valuable investigation. Time limitations also meant that it was not possible to look in detail through every box of materials at Salford on this occasion, so there is more information to be gleaned from these materials.

Final Remarks

Materials mattered to Albert, and his paintings emphasise the physical quality of paint, and his own manipulation of it in the artistic process. Scholarly interest in Adams is growing, and his studio materials are part of this legacy. The amount of information is huge, but there are still many unanswered questions. We haven't yet been able to build as full a picture of the 1970s composition underneath the current *Two Figures*, but research will continue in parallel with the conservation treatment. However, we hope that we have shed light on his artistic process from the source of his compositions to the materials he used and the way he painted them, and how they relate to the message he was trying to convey.

Adams depiction of sometimes shocking events was central to his ethos as an artist; as he said himself he sought to “face up to the unpleasantness in life.”¹⁷ Yet the subject matter of *Two Figures* is not referencing a particular event. In fact, it is notable how different the painting appears in comparison to the rest of his oeuvre. While the subject is not overtly political, that both figures have parts that are light and dark coloured speaks on one hand to racial identity and confusion, and on the other to an effort at unification across racial barriers. Adams personally struggled with his racial identity, and Glennon said of his partner:

“Albert was living in a society where people above him who were white were superior because of their whiteness and the people below who were black were worse off than him because they were blacker. It was so crazy that it robs you of your sense of identity.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Albert Adams, Albert introducing an exhibition at the South African National Gallery, video recording for ‘Kunskafee,’ 2002.

¹⁸ Clare Clayton, “Great South African artist Albert Adams Recalled at Newcastle Art

There is an intimacy created between the two figures owing to the abstract nature of their intermingling body parts, as if the viewer is witnessing two become one. Here the abstraction contributes to a sense that these figures can be anyone, and the connection between them a universal one.

Adam's described the difficulty of establishing who he was, on a personal level, referring to:

"The conflicts that arises with ones own being. And indeed painting pictures of conflict resolves ones own conflict at times."¹⁹

This demonstrates the strong link between the creative process and his subject matter, which function as an exploration of his own identity. The evolution of *Two Figures* through the creative process may well embody a very personal examination of gender and race.

Bibliography

Adams, A. "In His Own Words," quoted in the University of Antwerp Exhibition leaflet (2005). Available at <https://adamsalbert.wordpress.com/in-his-own-words/>.

Clayton, Clare. "Great South African artist Albert Adams Recalled at Newcastle Art Gallery." Chronicle Live. June 24, 2014.

Crippa, Elena, and Catherine Lampert. London Calling: Bacon, Freud, Kossoff, Andrews, Auerbach, and Kitaj. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2016.

Darwent, Charles. "From Cape Town to Camden Town." *Art Quarterly* (Winter 2012): 34-39.

Feaver, William. Frank Auerbach. New York: Rizzoli, 2009.

Gallery," Chronicle Live, June 24, 2014. , <http://www.chroniclelive.co.uk/whats-on/great-south-african-artist-albert-9518689>

¹⁹ Albert Adams, Albert introducing an exhibition at the South African National Gallery, video recording for 'Kunskafee,' 2002.

Gowing, Lawrence, and Sam Hunter. Francis Bacon. London: Thames and Hudson, 1989.

Kokoschka, Oskar. *Recording for the opening of Albert Adams exhibition in South Africa*. August 1959, Villeneuve Switzerland. Transcribed by Alexandra Lawson, 2017. (Available at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B-BsBt8Vdxa7UVEwaGpuQ3BQZDA/view> as of 17/05/2017)

Kuper, Jeremy. "Imperial War Museum exhibits SA artist Albert Adams' last work." *The South African*. Last modified October 16, 2012. <http://www.thesouthafrican.com/imperial-war-museum-exhibits-sa-artist-albert-adams-last-work/>

Martin, Marilyn, and Joe Dolby, eds. *Albert Adams: Journey on a Tightrope*. Cape Town: Iziko Museums of Cape Town, 2008.

Morphet, Richard, ed. *R.B. Kitaj: A Retrospective*. London: Tate Gallery, 1994.

Muniz, Benita. "Adams: Most Relevant." *Cape Times*. April 16, 1994.

Pissarra, Maria, ed. *Visual Century: South African art in context*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press; Oslo: Visual Century Project, 2011.

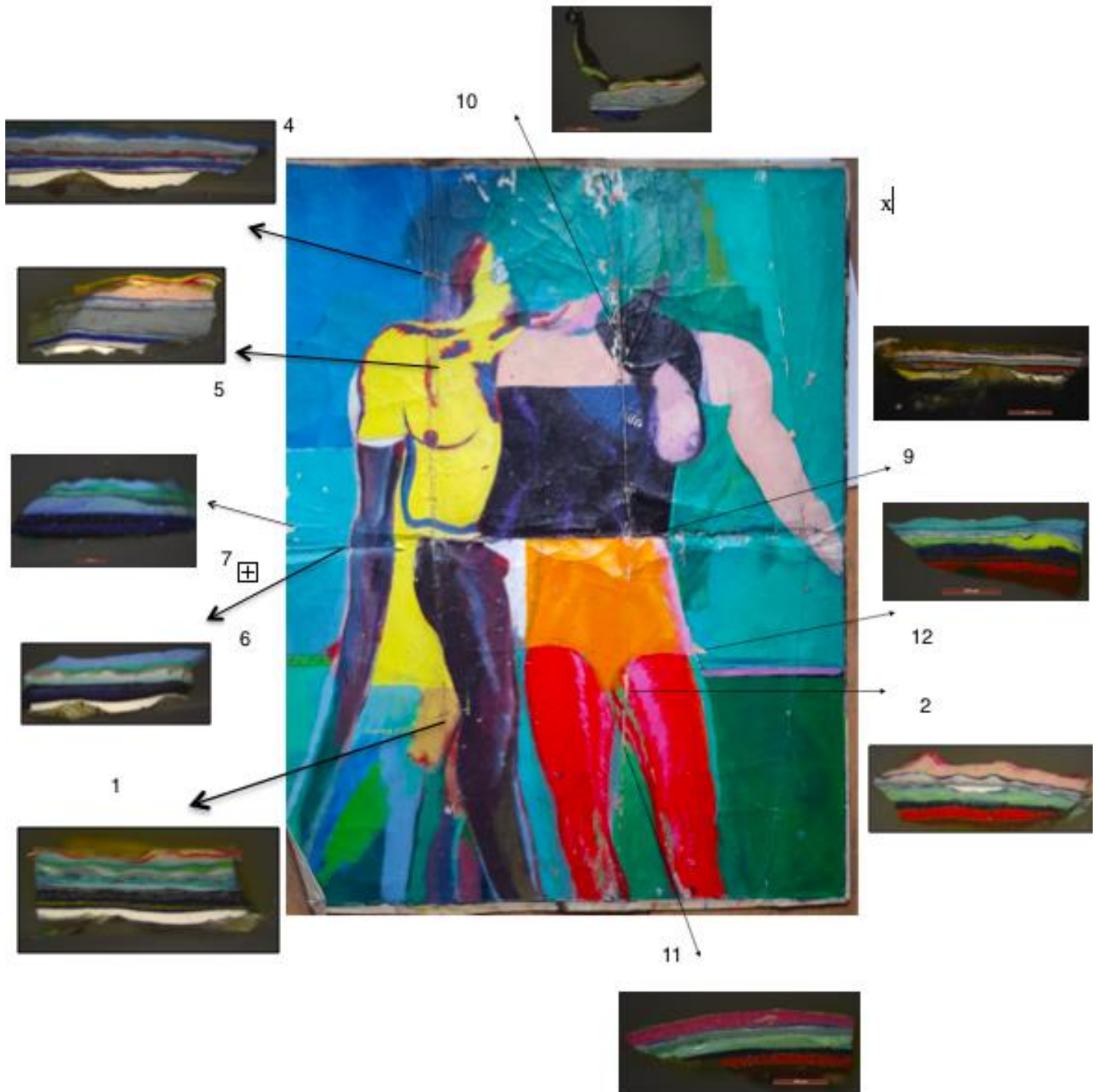
Potter, Matthew, ed. *The Concept of the "Master" in Art Education in Britain and Ireland, 1770 to Present*. London: Ashgate, 2013.

Russell, Joanna. *A study of the materials and techniques of Francis Bacon (1909 - 1992)*. Doctoral thesis, Northumbria University, 2010.

Russell, J. E., Singer, B.W., Perry J.J. and Bacon, A. "Investigation of the materials found in the studio of Francis Bacon (1909-1992)." *Studies in Conservation* 57, no. 4 (2012): 195-206.

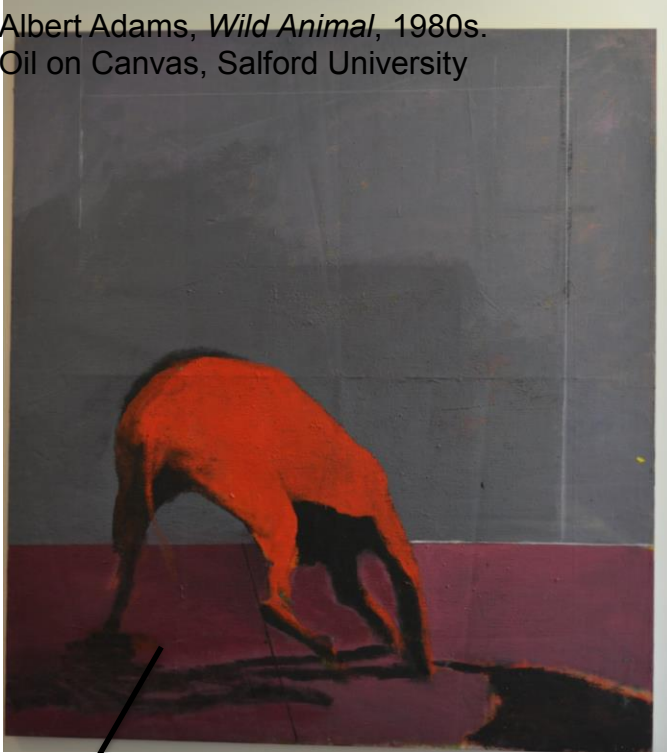
Shepard, Joanna. "A game of chance: the Media and Techniques of Francis Bacon." In *Francis Bacon: a terrible beauty*, curated by Barbara Dawson and Martin Harrison, 152-175. Dublin: Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane; Gottingen: Steidl, 2009.

Appendix 1: Location of Sample Sites from *Two Figures*



Appendix 2: Location of Sample Sites from *Locusts* and *Wild Animal*

Albert Adams, *Wild Animal*, 1980s.
Oil on Canvas, Salford University



Albert Adams, *Locusts*, c1980s.
Media Untested.
Camden.

