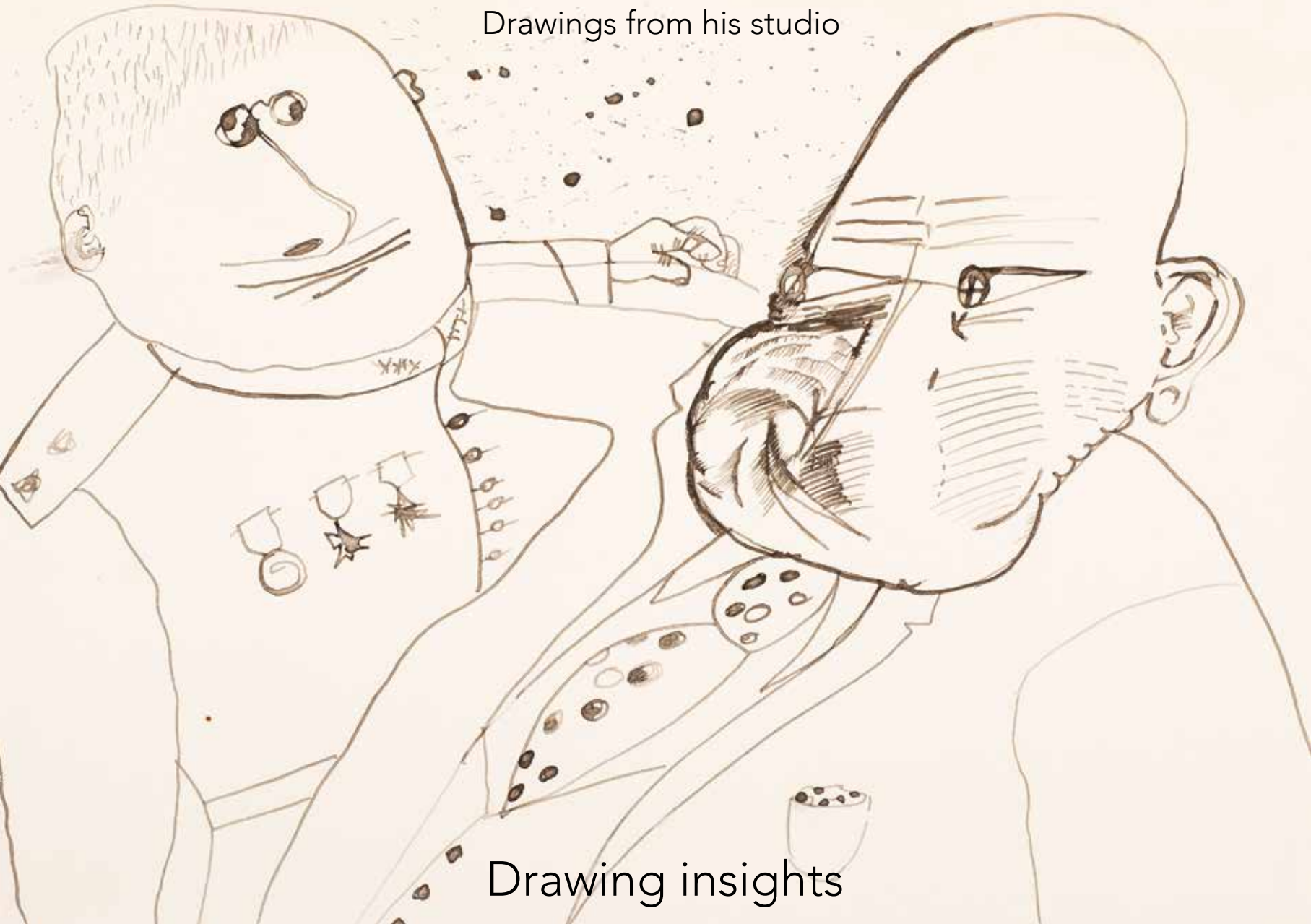


# ROBERT HODGINS

Drawings from his studio



Drawing insights



Robert Hodgins and Jan Neethling relaxing at home

Cover  
*Untitled (two men, one in military uniform)*  
 Ink on paper  
 295X418mm

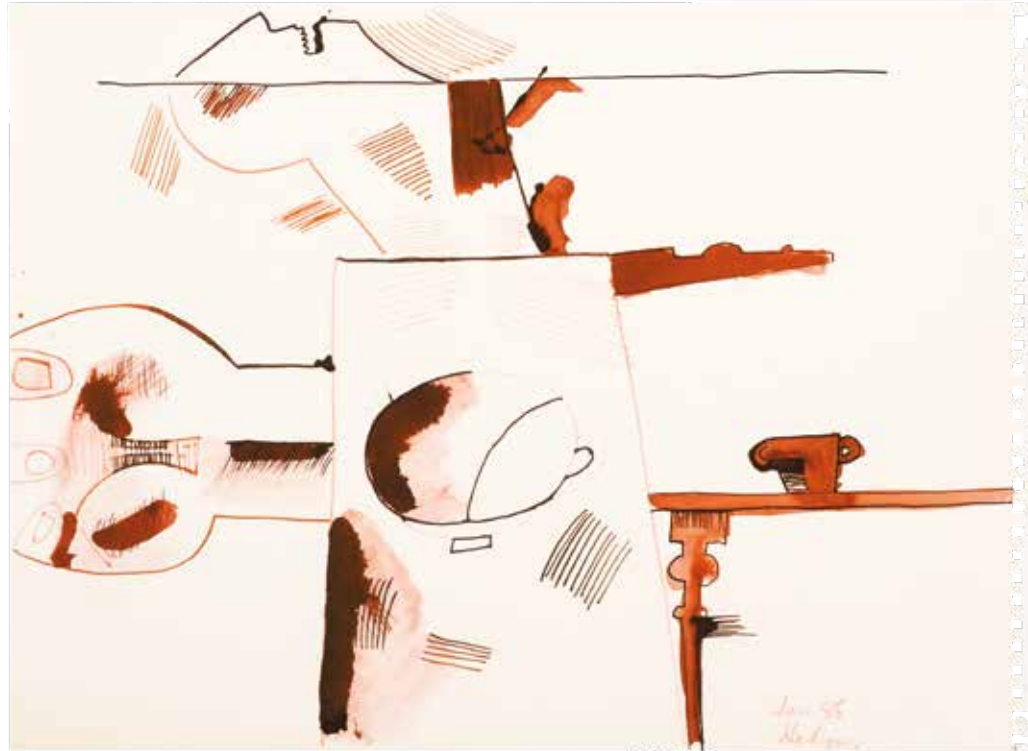
# ROBERT HODGINS

1920 - 2010

Drawings from his studio

This catalogue accompanies the exhibition *Robert Hodgins: Drawings from his studio*, held, in November/December 2019 at Hodgins House, Parktown, Johannesburg and guest curated by A Vorster.

The comprehensive collection of drawings by Robert Hodgins, spanning almost his entire career, are made available for the first time by Hodgins' longtime friend, Jan Neethling, on behalf of the Hodgins estate.



*Untitled (still life & figures)*  
Signed and dated: Jan 88 Hodgins  
Red & black ink on paper  
274X375mm

## Robert Hodgins: Drawing Insights

Close to ten years after Robert Hodgins' death in 2010, a number of his drawings have been released from his studio. Some of these were scattered across the floor or piled on every conceivable surface in the space. Hodgins, always a very private artist in his studio, clearly ascribed a very specific role to these drawings in his artistic practice. Says he in an interview: "I am a very bad copy draftsman: if I look at a face and try to do a drawing of it, I do a bad drawing. If I think about a face, however, then I can do sixty drawings in a sketchbook without stopping." And this is exactly what the wonderful drawings on this rare exhibition represent: they are Hodgins' cognitive visual tools for 'thinking and knowing' about art making.

The quick, deft lines of these sketches intimate a sure but rather impatient disposition as the ideas in Hodgins' mind tumble forth and are vigorously captured on paper. They explore spaces of uncertainty, risk and experimentation. Many of the drawings attempt capturing a specific facial expression, usually with wild lines that suggest a gaping mouth with rotting teeth, engaging in some or other animated discourse. Or they attempt to capture a specific bodily stance. If Hodgins were uncertain about a figure in a painting, he simply resorted to pencil and paper and generated a variety of human shapes, one of which would suggest the manner in which a shape evolves into a human form, perfect for his painterly purposes on canvas. Interestingly enough, there are few drawings with any suggestion of colour experimentation, but then again, the use of colour was Hodgins' strength as an artist when he encountered the empty canvas. The drawings suggest that it was shape he primarily had to explore.

The collection of drawings traces the unique development of Hodgins' attitude to the human body: from very early, academic drawings, clearly generated in a multiple life drawing sessions by him as an art student, to the more lucid and graphic quality of the human figure in his later career. These drawings constitute a veritable inventory of the subject matter for which Hodgins is famous: narcissistic body builders, nude bathers, military officers with their peaked caps, businessmen in their ubiquitous suits and the like.

The conceptualisation of the form of the human body did not stop there: Hodgins experimented with complex themes, such as the *momento mori* drawings of skulls. He also experimented with complex compositions, as a rare still life drawing attests: the table is rendered from different angles, and then he positions a clutch of human torsos at odd angles around the table. And thirdly with the possibility of animating his drawings into three dimensional ceramic sculptures.

Most significant are those drawings with regard to Hodgins' continuous interest in the fictitious Ubu figure, a character invented by 19th century French dramatist, Alfred Jarry and explored actively by the triumvirate William Kentridge, Deborah Bell and Hodgins in collaborative projects of the 1980s and 90s. Ubu provided the ideal objective correlative for the psychological impact an oppressive regime had on the hearts and minds of people. Hodgins attempts to capture Ubu's ambivalent character in a multitude of drawings. And although many of these Ubu drawings are reproduced in the double volume catalogue of the famous travelling exhibition, *Ubu: ±101 William Kentridge, Robert Hodgins, Deborah Bell* of 1997, no commentary on the significance of these drawings is forthcoming in the entire catalogue. The drawings therefore seem to be floating aimlessly throughout the written and the visual texts of the publication, but in fact they serve as the consciousness of Hodgins the artist.

Sketches can offer interesting glimpses into an artist's world unmediated by external social concerns. Often no more than an idea jotted down, a reminder or a note, they are not burdened by the expectations that come to bear on a final product. "And so it is that at any one time", according to Brenda Atkinson, "Hodgins' studio was full of 'works' in various stages of completion. Some are finished in a sudden moment of insight. Some remain as a line, a colour field, or a squiggle on paper for years." The drawings strewn all over Hodgins' studio have now been 'picked up' and in displaying them for what they are, we can get a rare insight into the internal workings of the creative mind of the artist.

Wilhelm van Rensburg, Senior Art Specialist, Strauss & Co





*Untitled (twin figures)*  
Ink on paper  
252X356mm



*Untitled (three figures)*  
Ink on paper  
252X357mm



*Untitled (figure)*  
Pen & ink on paper  
356X258mm



Untitled (figure study)  
Pencil on paper  
464X350mm

## A PERSONAL BIT by Jan Neethling

Rob Hodgins, as I said at his Memorial, was my mentor, my teacher, my critic, my advisor and my friend. He was an amazing man and to me he just seems to get more and more amazing as time goes on. This happens whenever I look at his work.

This Drawing Show is important to me because it is a reminder of him from the first years of my time at Art School (Pretoria College of Art) in Pretoria back in 1958. He was one of my teachers there and taught me at Life class, Painting and Drawing, mainly of the human form.

One sees an ongoing inventiveness in these drawings. Many of them are unsigned because to him I think they were just working drawings for painting, sculpture etc. I feel they were a continuous effort of a search for something else – not just renderings of the human form. Some are highly stylized with his incredible economy of line. His knowledge of the human form is very evident in his paintings and his drawings.

A biography of Rob written by Elizabeth Rankin tells of his eventual dissatisfaction of Pretoria Art School due to departmental politics and his subsequent departure. He joined Otto Krause who had started a kind of South African 'Time' magazine called *Newscheck* in 1962. He became an assistant editor and started writing. (Another of his many talents.) It was a full-time job for him and he had no time for art anymore. He shared a flat in Hillbrow with me and another guy who work at *Newscheck*. I, at the time, worked at an advertising agency in Joburg.

But later he decided to make time for art and he persuaded me to join him in an evening drawing class in Hillbrow. My favorite story is an incident which happened in one of those classes. Here is Hodgins sitting on a donkey-bench easel – just another pupil drawing from a posing model. The class instructor/teacher, (a Mr Know-all about drawing) is bending over Rob saying, "Listen fellow, you're doing this all wrong! You're not holding your pencil correctly and the slope of your easel is wrong." And he gives Rob a demonstration of how he thinks it should be done.

Hodgins looks on patiently and endures and finally says, "I did teach drawing and anatomy at Pretoria Art School, you know." Mr art teacher replies, "I don't believe you!" Rob says, "Look, whether you believe me or not is beside the point. Would you please just leave us alone and let us do our drawing in peace."

Another memory of him is his story of his stay at the Stevenson-Hamilton's farm in White River, Mpumalanga. This happened during his sabbatical leave at my first year at Art School. Hilda, the wife of James Stevenson-Hamilton, was commissioned to submit a drawing of James for a statue for the museum at the Skukuza camp at the Kruger National Park. She had done the top half of James posing in bed but could not complete the drawing as he was very ill and could not stand. So she asked Rob if he would pose for her, standing, in a pair of James' trousers.

Rob loved telling everyone – "If ever you go to the Skukuza Museum in the park you will see the statue of Stevenson-Hamilton. The top half is STEVENSON-HAMILTON but the bottom half is HODGINS!"

While Rob was away during my first year at Art School, he was made out to be a kind of paragon by the students. I was told that his teaching methods were unique and that he was quite a character – so I looked forward to meeting him in my second year.

Rob lived with me for the last sixteen years of his life and was very happy painting in his studio, cooking (another one of his many talents), gardening and socialising.





*Untitled (portrait)*  
Mixed media on paper  
Appr 546X436mm



*Untitled (female nude)*  
Grease pencil on paper  
332X214mm

*Untitled (reclining nude)*  
Grease pencil on paper  
204X332mm



*Untitled (reclining nude)*  
Grease pencil on paper  
204X332mm



*Untitled (portrait)*  
Ink, pastel on paper  
549X374mm



*Untitled (two heads composition)*  
Signed and dated: Signed 94 Hodgins  
Mixed media on grey paper  
322X479mm





*Untitled (profile, skull, table)*  
Signed and dated: BB 28/12/91 Hodgins  
Pastel, water colour on paper  
296X419mm

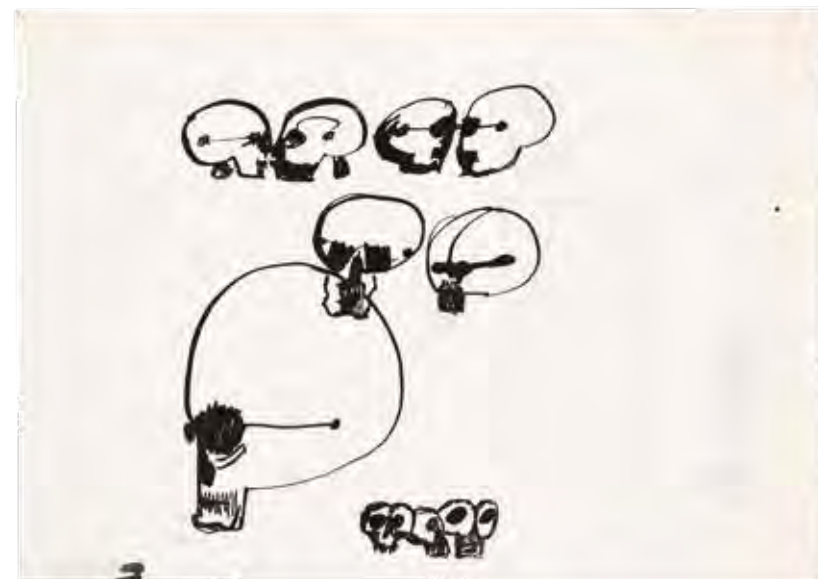


*Untitled (three heads/skulls)*  
Ink on paper  
293X419mm





*Untitled (skulls)*  
Gouache and pastel on paper  
Signed and dated: Signed 94 Hodgins  
322X494mm



*Untitled (skulls)*  
Ink on paper  
210X297mm



*Untitled (skull still life)*  
Ink on paper  
210X297mm

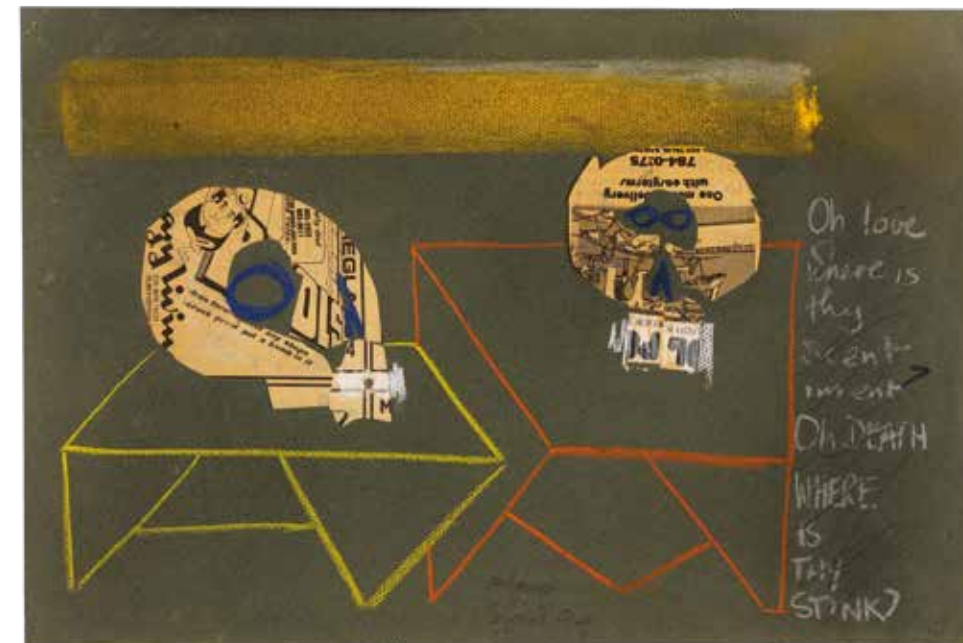




Untitled (skull)  
Signed and dated:  
Signed 94 Hodgins  
Gouache, ink on paper  
405X315mm



Untitled (skull)  
Signed and dated: Signed '94, Hodgins  
Sepia ink & water colour on paper  
210X297mm

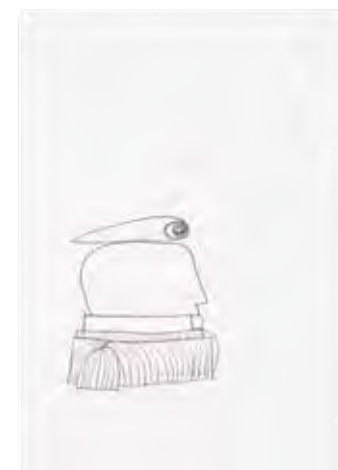


Oh love where is thy scentiment?  
Collage, pastel on green Canson paper  
322X486mm





*Untitled (torso)*  
Grease pencil on paper  
260X206mm



*Untitled (head 1 to 4)*  
Pencil on paper  
297X210mm

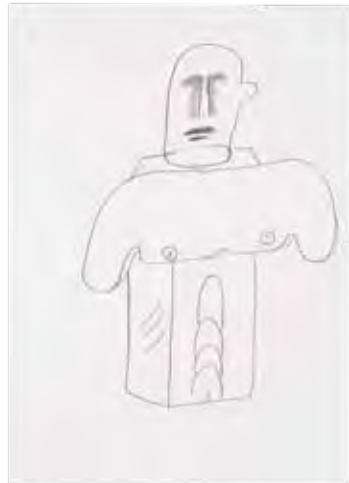


*Untitled (figure study and floating head)*  
Signed and dated: Signed 94 Hodgins  
Ink & pastel on paper  
389X313mm



*Untitled (woman 1 to 3)*  
Pencil on paper  
297X210mm





*Untitled (torso 1 to 3)*  
Pencil on paper  
297X210mm



*Untitled (heads)*  
Signed and dated: Signed 94 Hodgins  
Ink, pastel on paper  
304X449mm



*Untitled (seated nude)*  
Ink on paper  
210X148mm



*Untitled (head)*  
Ink on paper  
210X148mm



*Untitled (conversation)*  
Ink on paper  
374X549mm





*Untitled (face)*  
Signed and dated: 92 Hodgins  
Gouache, charcoal on paper  
296X418mm



*Untitled (double portrait)*  
Ink on paper  
293X419mm



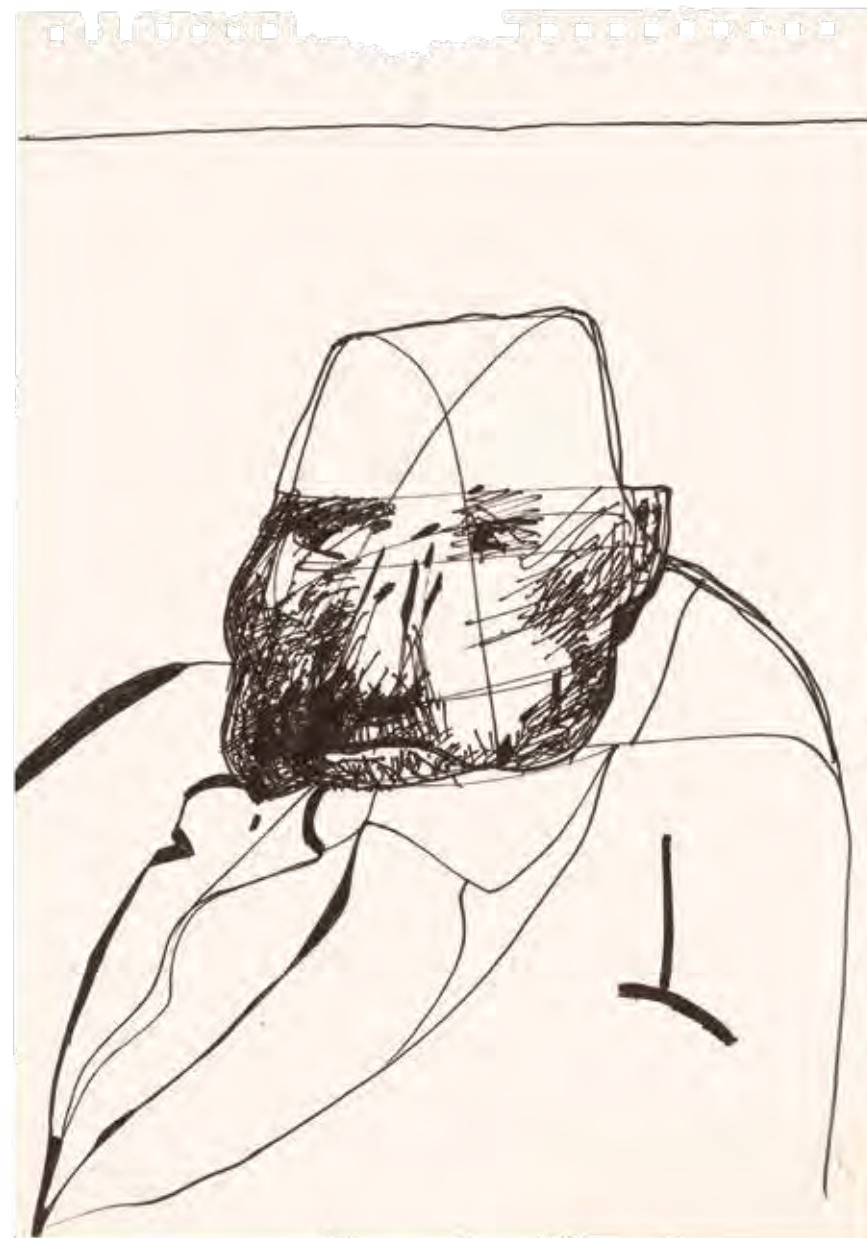
Top left  
*Untitled (portrait)*  
Ink on paper  
295X208mm



Top right  
*Untitled (portrait)*  
Ink on paper  
210X293mm



*Untitled (man in hat)*  
Ink on paper  
210X297mm



*Untitled (man in jacket)*  
Ink on paper  
297X210mm





**Top left**  
*Untitled (profile with cigarette)*  
 Sepia ink on paper  
 210X293mm



**Top right**  
*Untitled (profile)*  
 Pencil on paper  
 280X380mm



**Bottom**  
*Untitled (profile)*  
 Signed: Hodgins  
 Graphite on paper  
 285X419mm



*Untitled (open mouth)*  
 Pastel on paper  
 213X419mm



Robert Hodgins in his studio

*Untitled (two heads)*  
Sepia, collage on brown paper 256X376mm

*Untitled (three figures)*  
Sepia collage on brown paper 251X376mm

*Untitled (two figures)*  
Sepia ink & brush on paper 280X378mm



*Untitled (two figures)*  
Ink on paper  
278X380mm





*Untitled (walking woman)*  
Signed and dated: 2002 Hodgins  
Pencil, blue & red colour pencil  
297X210mm

*Untitled (seated man)*  
Signed and dated: 2002 Hodgins  
Pencil, blue & red colour pencil  
297X210mm



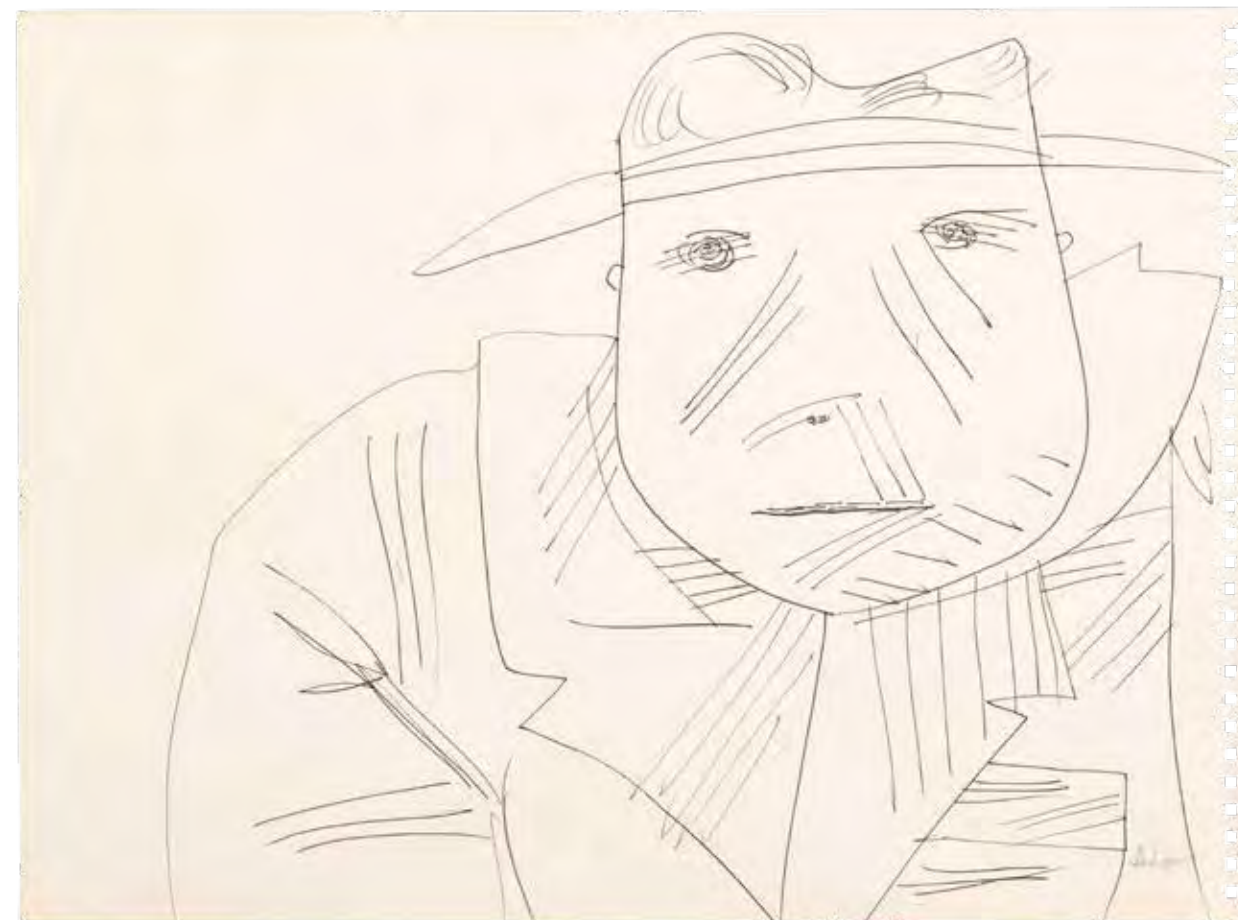
*Untitled (young man in t-shirt)*  
Signed and dated: 2002 Hodgins  
Red colour pencil on paper  
297X210mm

*Untitled (young woman having tea)*  
Signed and dated: 2002 Hodgins  
Red colour pencil & pencil on paper  
297X210mm

*Untitled (young man in jacket)*  
Signed and dated: 2002 Hodgins  
Pencil on paper  
210X297mm



*Untitled (striped suit 1 to 3)*  
Pencil on paper  
297X210mm



*Untitled (man with hat and coat)*  
Signed: Hodgins  
Pen & ink on paper  
280X378mm

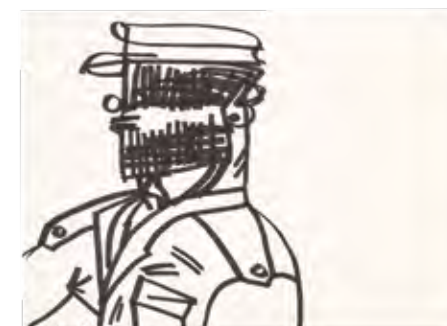
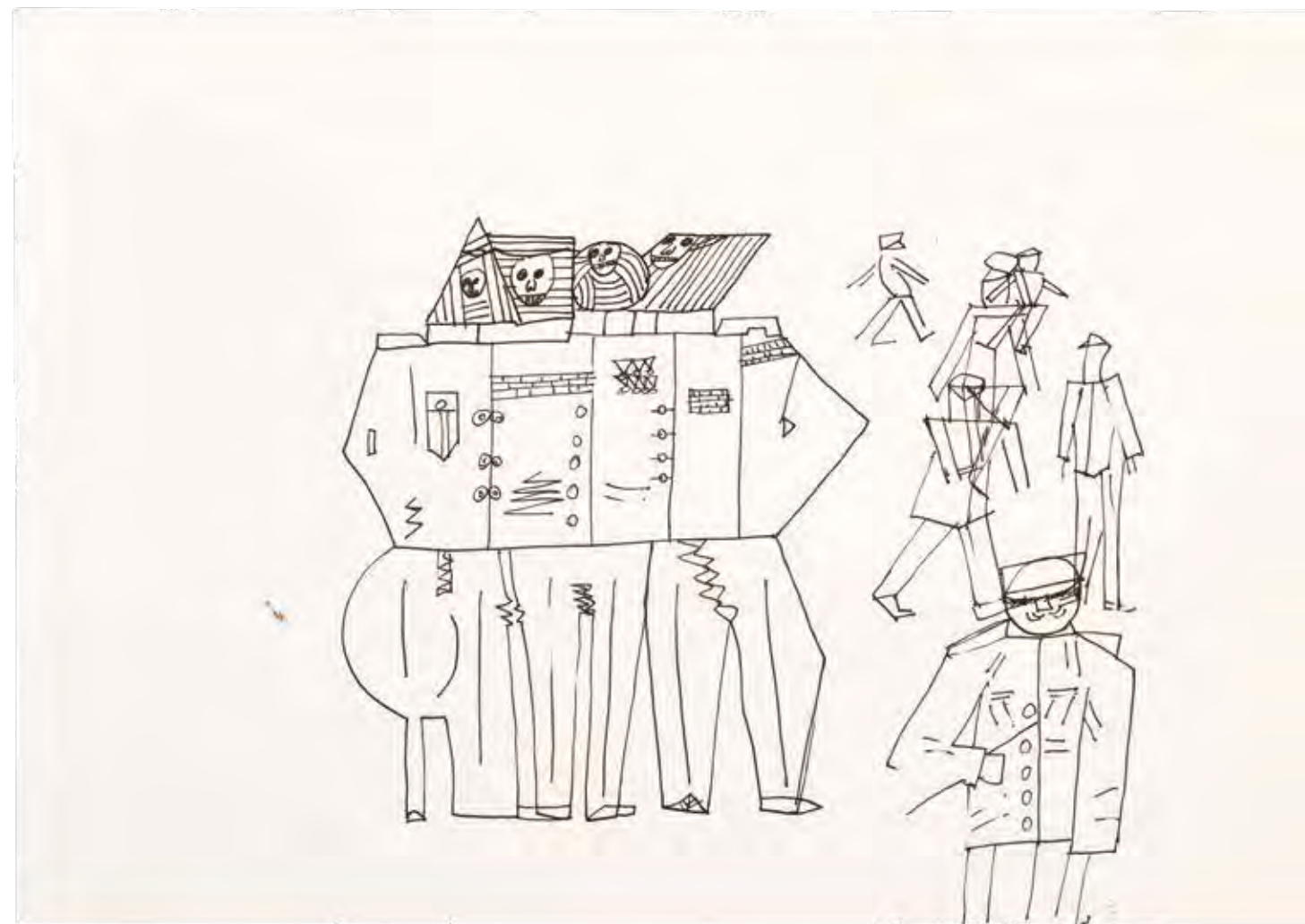


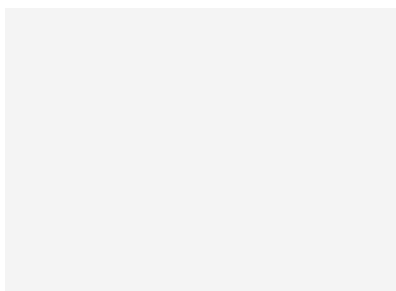
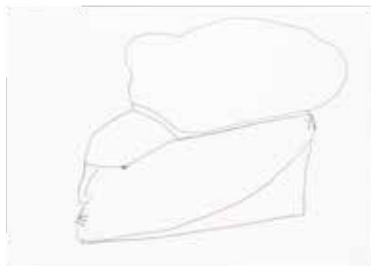


but relative to UNISA's NEWS OUT OF WEIMAR  
Signed and dated: Signed 94 Hodgins  
Ink pen on paper  
280X378mm

Untitled (military group)  
Ink on paper  
294X419mm

**Opposite**  
Untitled (military officer)  
Ink on paper  
209X293mm





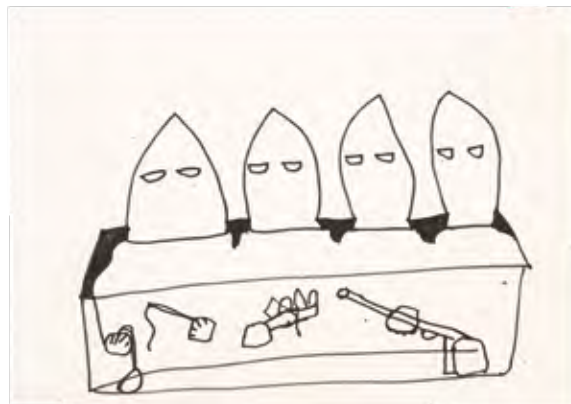
Untitled (military hat 1 to 12)  
Pencil on paper  
210X297mm





Untitled  
Signed and dated: Hodgins Signed 94  
Ink on paper  
210X292mm

Untitled (ref painting Clubmen of America: The Klan)  
Ink on paper  
210X296mm



Untitled (two men, one in military uniform)  
Ink on paper  
295X418mm



*Ubu prêtre et penitent?*  
Ink on paper  
293X419mm

*Prêtre; Ubu – bridal scene;  
Ubu & bridegroom*  
Ink on paper  
293X419mm



*Untitled (Ubu figure studies)*  
Ink on paper  
294X419mm



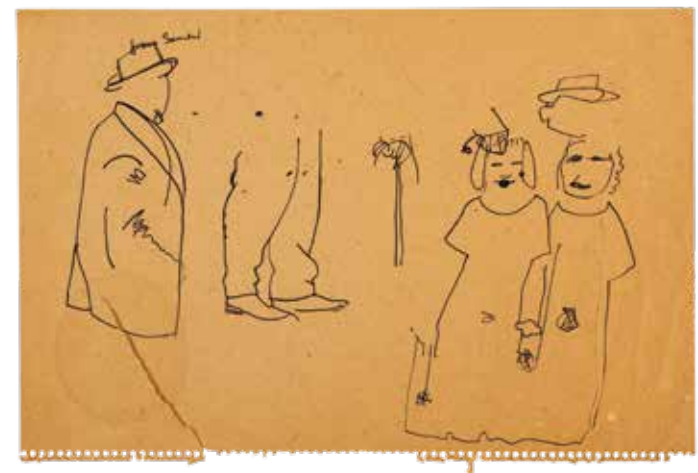


*Untitled (officer with mirror)*  
Ink on paper  
210X297mm

*Untitled (seated Ubu figure)*  
Ink on paper  
210X297mm

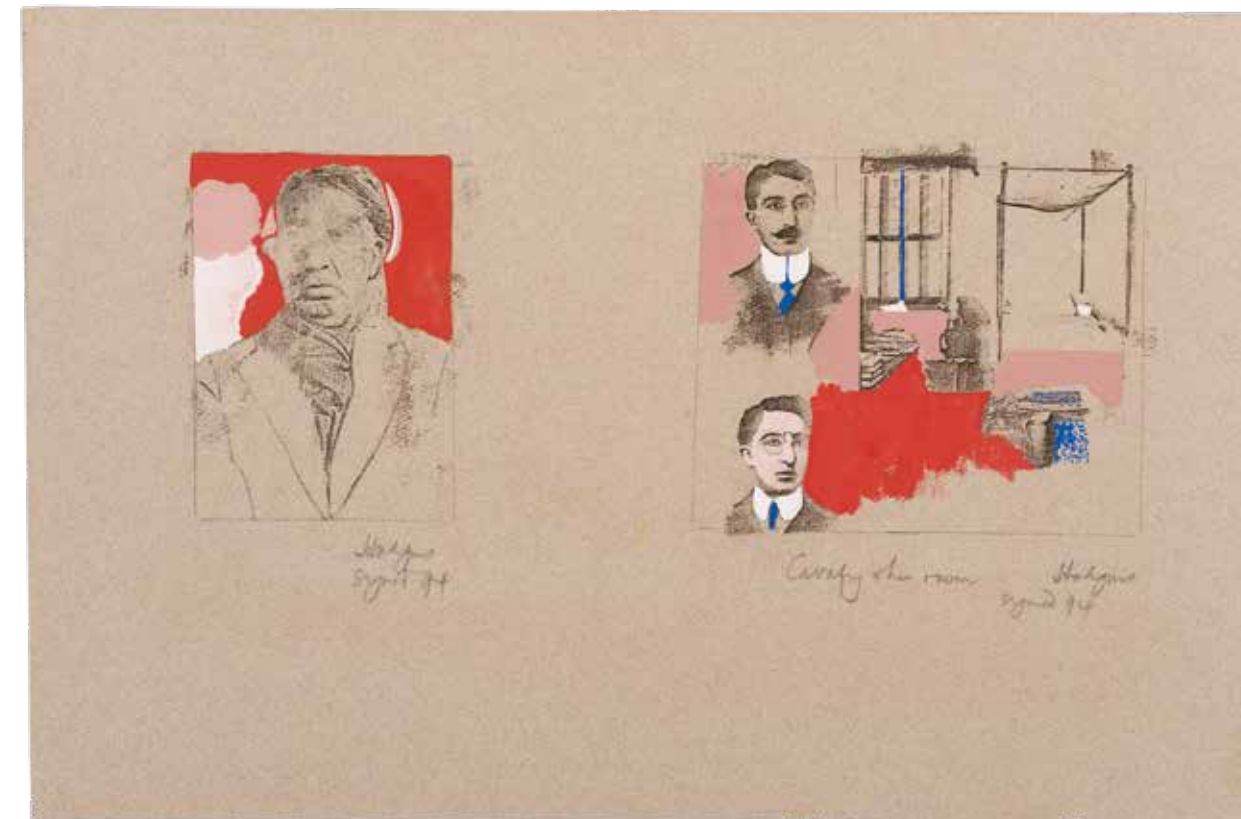


*Untitled (figures)*  
Pencil & ink on paper  
419X213mm



*Untitled (Figure studies 1)*  
Signed and dated: Hodgins Signed 94  
Pen and ink on brown paper  
250X370mm

*Untitled (Figure studies 2)*  
Pen and ink on brown paper  
250X370mm



*"Cavafy & his room"*  
Signed and dated: Signed 94 Hodgins  
Photo copy, gouache on paper  
317X482mm





*Untitled (man in hat, figure studies)*  
Signed and dated: Signed 94 Hodgins  
Pencil & water colour on paper  
420X595mm

**Opposite**  
*Untitled (figure in military cap, head studies)*  
Pencil & water colour on paper  
420X594mm





*Untitled (dancing nude)*  
Signed and dated: '94 Signed Hodgins  
Pen & ink, colour pencil  
210X297mm



*Untitled (nude looking over shoulder)*  
Pencil on paper  
204X332mm



*Untitled (reclining nude)*  
Ink on paper  
297X209mm





*Untitled (reclining figure)*  
Signed and dated: Signed 94 Hodgins  
Mixed media on paper  
292X419mm

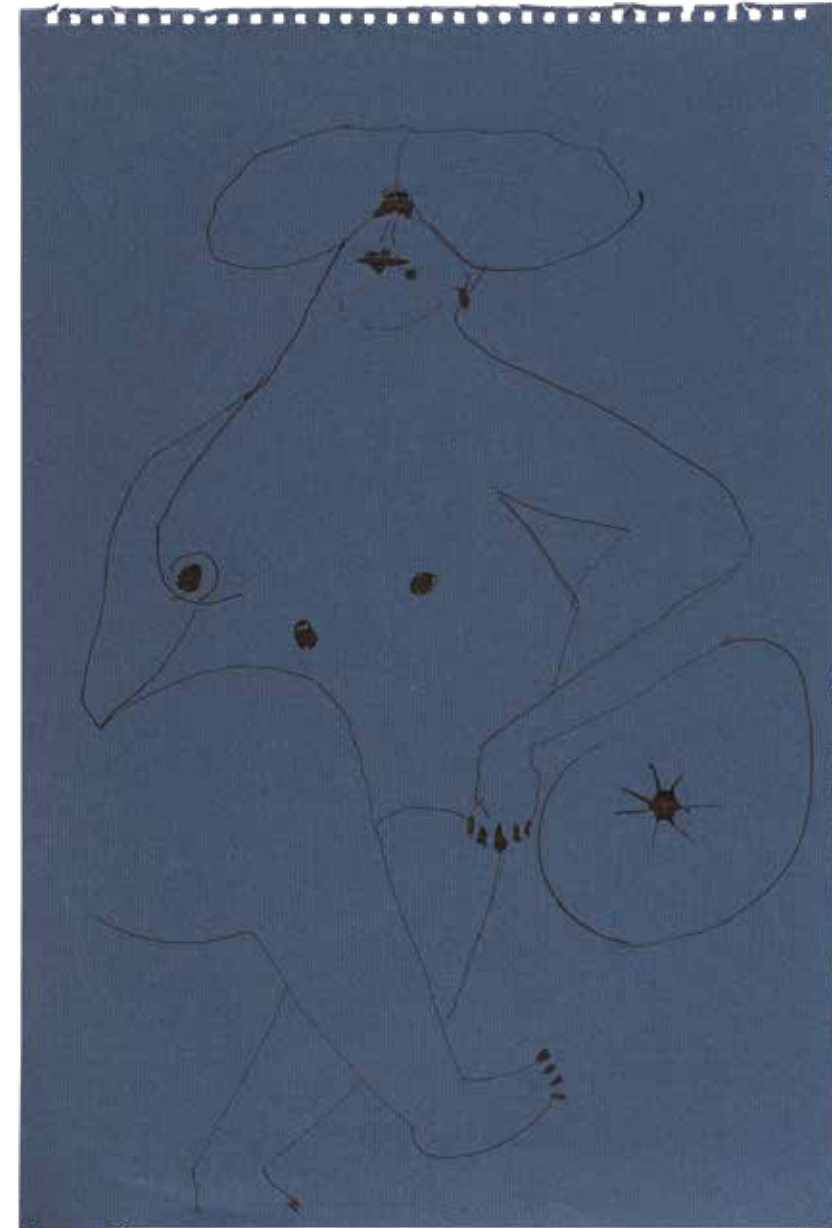


*Untitled (nude in stockings)*  
Ink on paper  
297X210mm



*Untitled (figure, big ear)*  
Signed: Hodgins  
Ink on paper  
373X530mm

*Untitled (couch)*  
Ink on paper  
372X550mm



*Untitled (seated nude)*  
Ink on blue paper  
450X304mm



*Untitled (standing nude)*  
Signed and dated:  
Signed Hodgins 94  
Wax crayon, pen on paper  
559X380mm

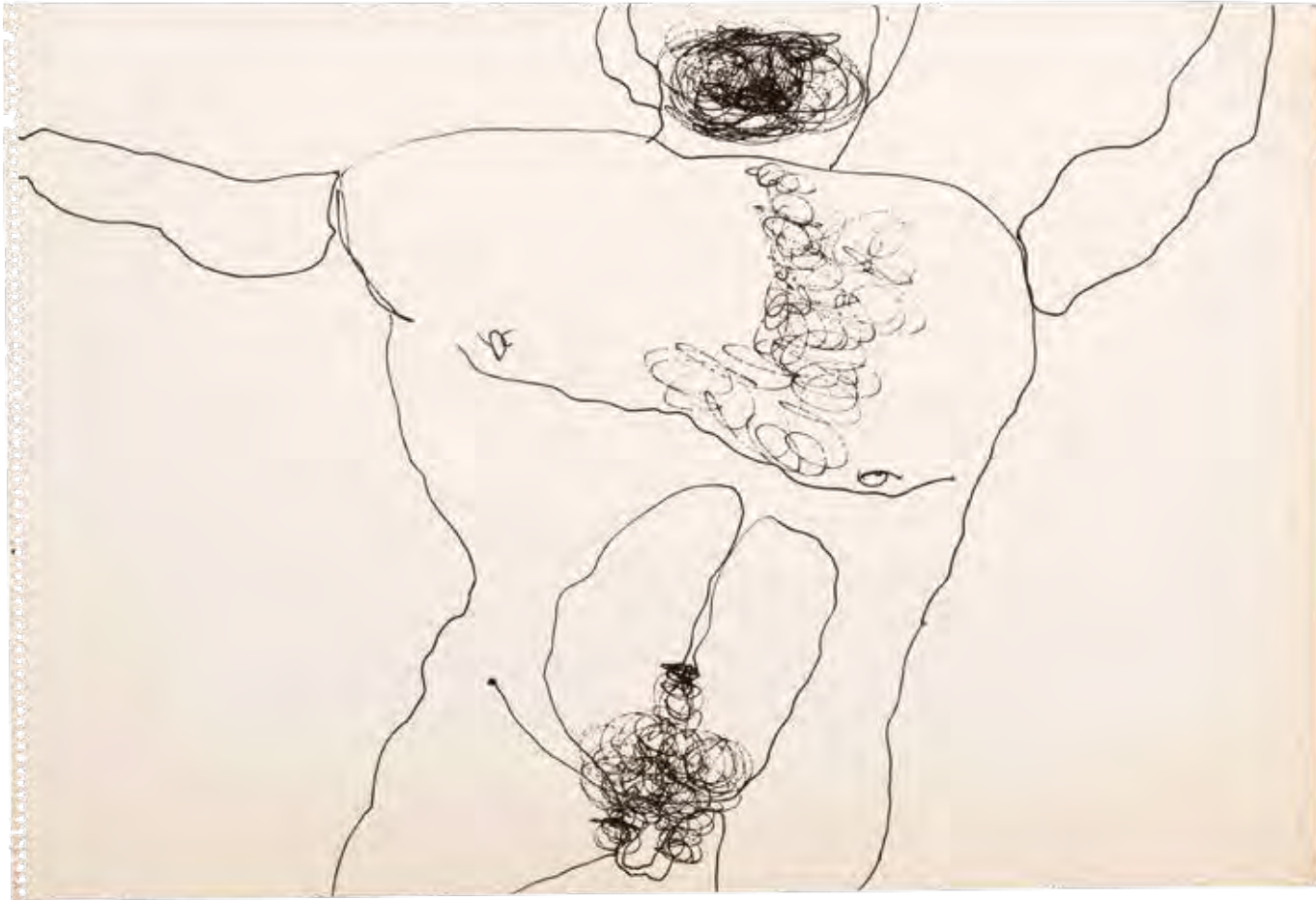


*Untitled (seated nude)*  
Mixed media on paper  
280X380mm



*Untitled (nude)*  
Signed and dated: Signed 94 Hodgins  
Pastel, ink on brown paper  
304X448mm





*Untitled (nude with raised arms)*  
Pen & ink on paper  
374X550mm

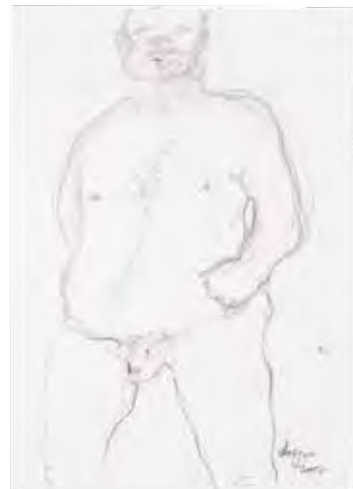


*Untitled (nude)*  
Signed and dated: Signed Hodgins 94  
Pen & ink on paper  
295X208mm

*Untitled (nude)*  
Pen on paper  
297X210mm



*Untitled (male nude)*  
Signed and dated: 2002 Hodgins  
Pencil on paper  
297X210mm



*Untitled (standing nude)*  
Signed and dated: Signed Hodgins 94  
Pencil & pen on paper  
558X380mm



*Untitled (two figures)*  
Blue colour pencil on paper  
280X378mm



*Untitled (three male figures)*  
Ink on paper  
293X319mm



*Two lovers*  
Dated: Jan 15  
Red & black ink on paper  
275X374mm

*Untitled (acrobats)*  
Signed and dated: Jan 80 Hodgins  
Red & black ink on paper  
274X374mm



*Untitled (seated nude)*  
Signed and dated: Signed 94 Hodgins  
Oil on paper  
413X565mm



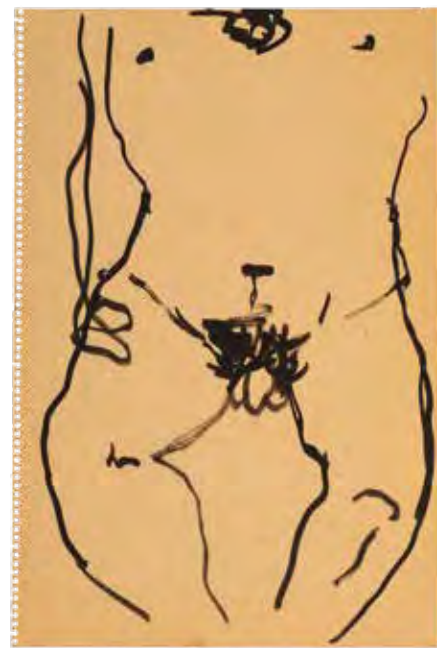


*Untitled (nude in motion)*  
Ink on brown paper  
376X251mm

*Untitled (male nude)*  
Ink on brown paper  
376X252mm



*Untitled (shadows)*  
Ink on paper  
210X148mm



*Untitled (dancing nudes)*  
Ink on paper  
293X419mm

*Untitled (squatting nude)*  
Ink on paper  
294X420mm

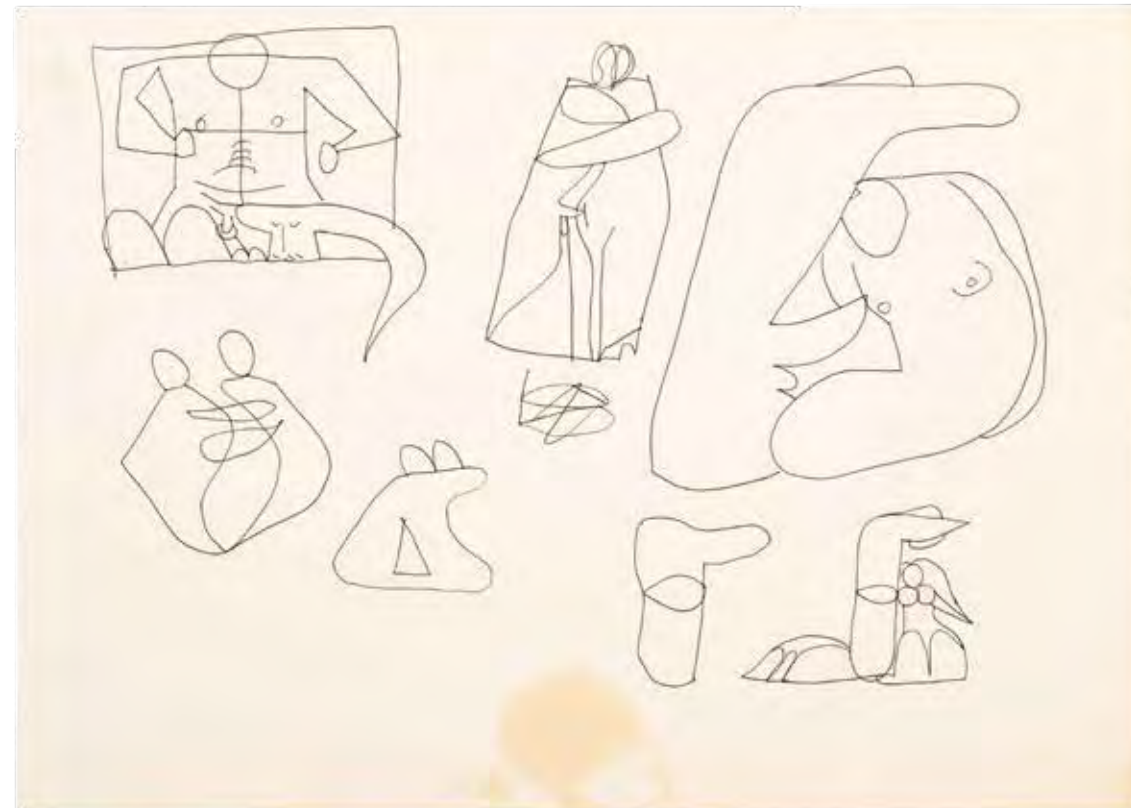




*Untitled (beach scene)*  
Pencil on paper  
297X379mm



*Untitled (figures on beach)*  
Pencil on paper  
297X379mm



*Untitled (erotic scenes)*  
Ink pen on paper  
299X418mm





*Untitled (three women in bikinis)*  
Drawing pen on paper  
278X380mm



*Untitled (two women in bikinis)*  
Drawing pen on paper  
278X380mm



*Untitled (beach scene)*  
Pencil on paper  
278X380mm

## Robert Hodgins: his life story in part

Robert Griffiths Hodgins was born to Edith Emma Hodgins, a London waitress, on 27 June 1920. She had to work to support herself, and he was brought up in a series of foster homes. Thus the young Hodgins became gregarious in large foster families and enjoyed the countryside of rural England. Mr Kirk, the schoolmaster, encouraged Hodgins’ reading and fostered confidence in his academic abilities, including him in a group of schoolboys he was coaching for public school examinations. His well-intended interest back-fired, however, for when his wife offered to adopt the ten-year-old, the boy’s mother, who had been content to visit her son once a month, became possessive and reclaimed him to the single room in Paddington which she shared with a woman friend.

The transition from a relatively protected country town environment to the tough city was a difficult one. Moreover, while his problems were eased by his ability in the classroom, he was not encouraged academically at home. Nonetheless, he did well enough to avoid trade school and went on to Buckingham Gate Central. There he did receive some encouragement from an English teacher, Miss Lock, who started him reading Shakespeare by persuading him to choose *The Complete Works* as his prize, when, at twelve, he won an award for the best essay in school. As soon as the law allowed, however, his mother took him out of school, not even waiting till the end of the term in which he turned fourteen.

At a time of wide unemployment Hodgins was lucky to find a job with a bookshop in Soho, mostly delivering newspapers. He attended bookkeeping classes at a Country Council night school and took their examinations. The dullness of the job was alleviated by visits to the public lending library where his education continued on an informal basis. He was enjoying Somerset Maugham, Thackeray and Dickens and doggedly tackled *War and Peace* at fifteen. Hodgins suggested that it was as much snobbery as pleasure that took him to plays at the Old Vic and Sunday afternoon concerts at Covent Garden.

During these early years Hodgins’ art experiences were limited and sporadic. His first recollection was being taught by Kirk to shade precise drawings methodically downward from right to left. In contrast he remembered Miss Gibbs, the art teacher at Buckingham Gate, who encouraged a freer approach on a large scale. Significant were visits made to galleries and museums in the many hours he spent alone in the London streets while his mother was at work, finding these places to be warm and dry, and, of course, free.

As the young Hodgins lived and worked in different parts of London, so the experience was extended, depending on the proximity of various institutions. In this way he visited the Imperial Institution in Paddington, the Indian section of the Victoria and Albert, the Tate Gallery (where Van Gogh’s

*Chair with Pipe* made a vivid impression), the National Portrait Gallery (which did not appeal) and the National Gallery (where he admired El Greco’s *Agony in the Garden*). Hodgins confessed that he had little concept of the objects until later, when he came across William Orpen’s *History of Art*.

After two years in the bookshop, he was able to find a better-paid job in the offices of C.S. Cadel, suppliers of builders’ materials. Efficient, but bored, he was challenged by the ideal of going abroad by a great-uncle, visiting from South Africa. His uncle sponsored a berth on the Union Castle, and Hodgins arrived in Cape Town on his eighteenth birthday. He found employment as an insurance clerk with the London and Lancashire Insurance Company. His uncle insisted on him resuming his studies: he attended night school and passed his matriculation examinations, passing Afrikaans and achieving firsts in English, History, Bookkeeping and Commercial Arithmetic. He was soon promoted to accountant, but did not find office work stimulating, and on 27 December 1940, he left Cape Town with the army. After a brief training at Sonderwater, he was sent to a post in what was then Northern Rhodesia, then off to Nairobi and Alexandria, where he rose to staff sergeant, but he remained non-commissioned throughout the war.

His years in the army provided many formative experiences: the comradeship of life in the ranks, with its overtones of crude obscenity, rowdy drinking sessions and visits to the brothels of Alexandria – the latter appalled him, and on the other hand he met people like the Austrian baron who had been confined to his villa in Alexandria. This wealthy and cultivated man owned a fine library and art collection, and Hodgins was to become a regular visitor to the villa. Here he could listen to music, read widely and enjoy conversation on art and poetry. When he was transferred to Horsham, England in 1944, he went out of his way to visit London and the galleries, and particularly remembers the sharp realism of an early still life by Lucien Freud in a mixed exhibition at Leicester Galleries. These opportunities were undoubtedly to be of great importance in redirecting Hodgins’ career after the war.

England was short of male teachers and when Hodgins was demobbed in 1945, he was offered a subsidized one-year training scheme. After some consideration, he decided to take English and Art as his two specialist teaching subjects. He recalled an exhibition of Matisse at the Victoria and Albert at this time and, more importantly for him at this time, Picasso, whose brutal forms made a considerable impact. Hodgins found a teaching post in the East End of London and for the first time he seriously had to confront the making of art.

To complete his teaching qualification, he was required to specialise further in one of his subjects. Art now took precedence for him and he enrolled at Goldsmiths College Part-time and soon began to attend evening classes more regularly, while teaching during the day. He also attended History of Art classes under John Mansbridge, the vice-principal, who encouraged him to enroll full-time. By November 1950, he had saved up enough to finance

full-time studies at Goldsmiths. He had to work very hard to complete what was normally a two-year course in six months.

On completing this qualification, Mansbridge encouraged him to continue with the National Diploma in Design. He managed to get a grant of twenty pounds a year from the Walls Sausage Trust, which was sufficient to supply paint and equipment for both himself and his friend, Michael Sarjeant. To support himself, Hodgins took a job at the London Telephone Exchange four evenings a week. He had to work extremely hard at his art classes during the day and stay on longer on Saturday mornings to compensate for the time spent on his part-time job. It was a period of intense receptivity in his confrontations with art. His style at the time showed the influence of Rouault and his interest also focused on Rembrandt’s self-portraits, Daumier and the late Goya. Art books were scarce and colour reproductions almost unknown, but he visited the Tate or the National Gallery every Sunday afternoon with Sarjeant.

At the time, there were few art jobs in England. Hodgins made enquiries of a wartime friend then studying at the Johannesburg College of Art, who assured him that many art posts were available in South Africa, and offered him a place to stay. After selling his possessions to buy a passage on a mail ship, Hodgins arrived in Johannesburg in 1953, only to find that the situation was little better than in England. He arranged to train as a cinema manager, but just before he was due to start, heard through Walter Battiss of a vacant post at the Pretoria College of Art, and was successfully interviewed for the position. He took up the post on 27 January 1954. At the age of thirty-three, Hodgins was at last launched on a career in the arts.

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Hodgins House is a working studio started five years ago by Sarah Ballam in homage to her friend, mentor and colleague, Robert Hodgins. It presents a short season of select exhibitions annually from September to December.

The Pretoria College of Art at the time had limited resources and few students. Hodgins was engaged to assist the new head, Thelma van Schalkwyk, who was developing the courses and beginning to attract a far bigger intake of students. There were only two members of staff including Hodgins, and he taught in all areas – life drawing, design, painting and sculpture. To South Africa in the 1950s his ideas, which drew on such artists as Klee, Braque, Picasso and Matisse, were quite avant-garde. Hodgins enjoyed teaching and found that his new post provided time to paint and to become involved in the South African Association of Arts.

In 1956 Bettie Cilliers-Barnard suggested that his work was ready to exhibit, and she introduced him to Lidchi Gallery in Johannesburg where he held his first exhibition and succeeded to show a profit. It was the beginning of a period of growing popularity, which, coupled with his first taste of financial security and comfort, might have been the cause of the gradual disappearance of the pessimistic subject matter of his early work.

This personal biography of Robert Hodgins was adapted from Elizabeth Rankin’s “Biographical Notes; based on reminiscences of the artist” in the exhibition catalogue *Robert Hodgins: Images 1953 – 1986* published by Standard Bank when Hodgins’ was their Young Artist of the Year in 1986.

From this point, Jan Neethling picks up the life story of Robert Hodgins (page 7), their lives intersecting in 1958 when Neethling began his studies at Pretoria College of Art.





