



Cover design for IZWI No. 14 (detail) by Cecil Skotnes, February 1974

This brochure accompanies the exhibition *PRINTING THE SEVENTIES: Battiss, Burwitz, Skotnes and More* at GALLERY AOP (Johannesburg, June 2012) and tells the story of Stephen Gray's creative collaboration in the Seventies with Walter Battiss, Nils Burwitz and Cecil Skotnes. Artworks from Stephen Gray's personal collection will be on display and include screenprints, linocuts, woodcuts, a monotype and a pen and ink drawing. Annotations on many of the prints bear witness to his relationship with the artists. Three of the original print portfolios/books on which he collaborated with Cecil Skotnes also form part of the exhibition: *The Assassination of Shaka* (1973, AP III/XXV), *Baudelaire's Voyage* (1975, AP III/XV) and *Man's Gold* (1975-1979, 27/75). Photographs, letters and other ephemera are on loan from Stephen Gray for the duration of the exhibition.

Stephen Gray is a well-known South African writer, critic and erstwhile academic, born in Cape Town in 1941. He studied at the University of Cape Town, Cambridge University and University of Iowa. Until 1992 he was Professor of English at what is nowadays called the University of Johannesburg. He has published poetry collections, novels, short stories and plays. He has edited various collections of South African poetry and of the work of Athol Fugard and Herman Charles Bosman. In 2007 he was awarded the Literary Lifetime Achievement Award by the Department of Arts and Culture. Stephen Gray lives in Johannesburg.



Left: Covers for *Local Colour* by Nils Burwitz (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1975), *A World of Their Own: Southern African Poets of the Seventies* by Walter Battiss (Ad. Donker, Johannesburg, 1976), and *Love Poems, Hate Poems* by Cecil Skotnes (David Philip, Cape Town, 1982)

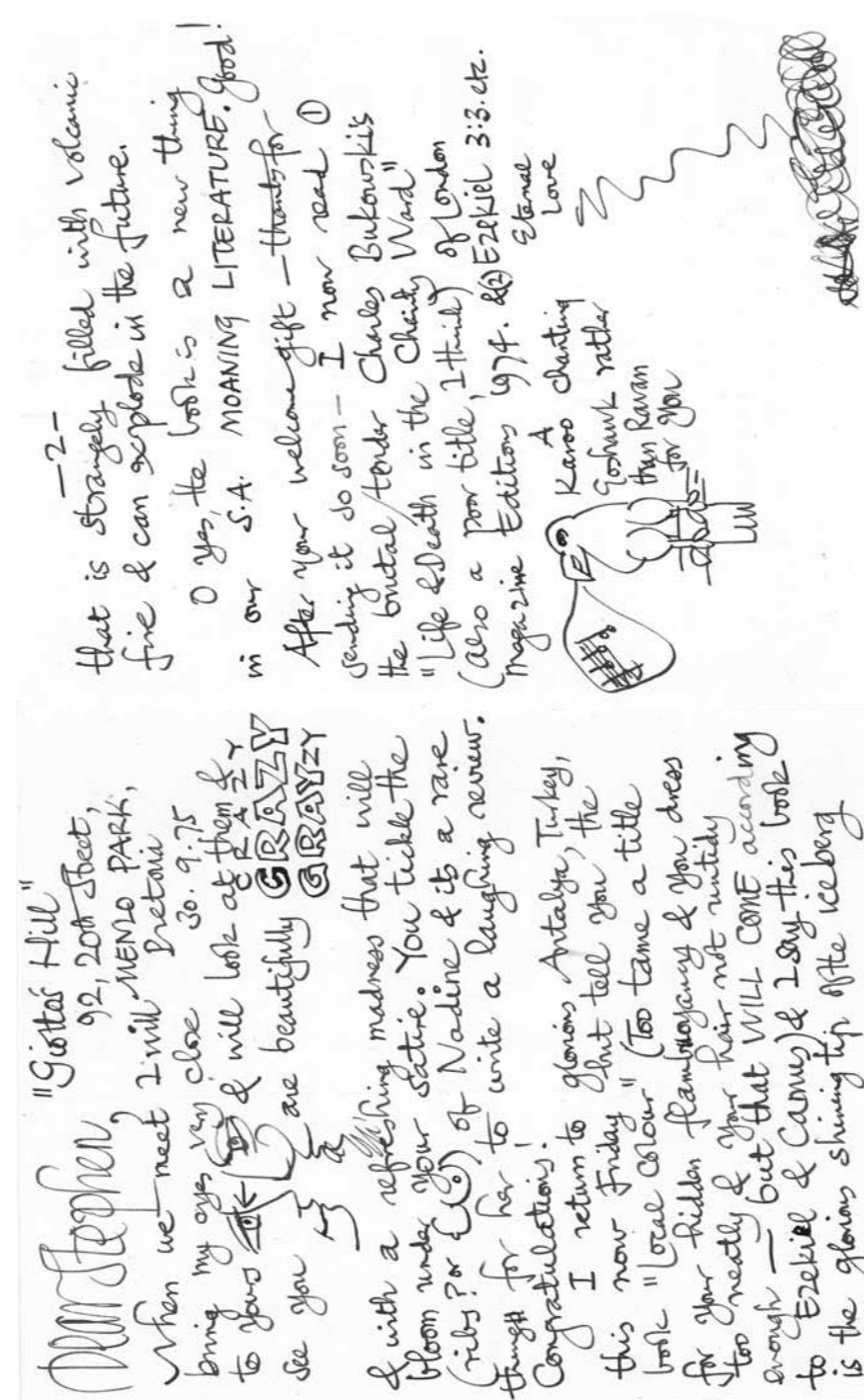


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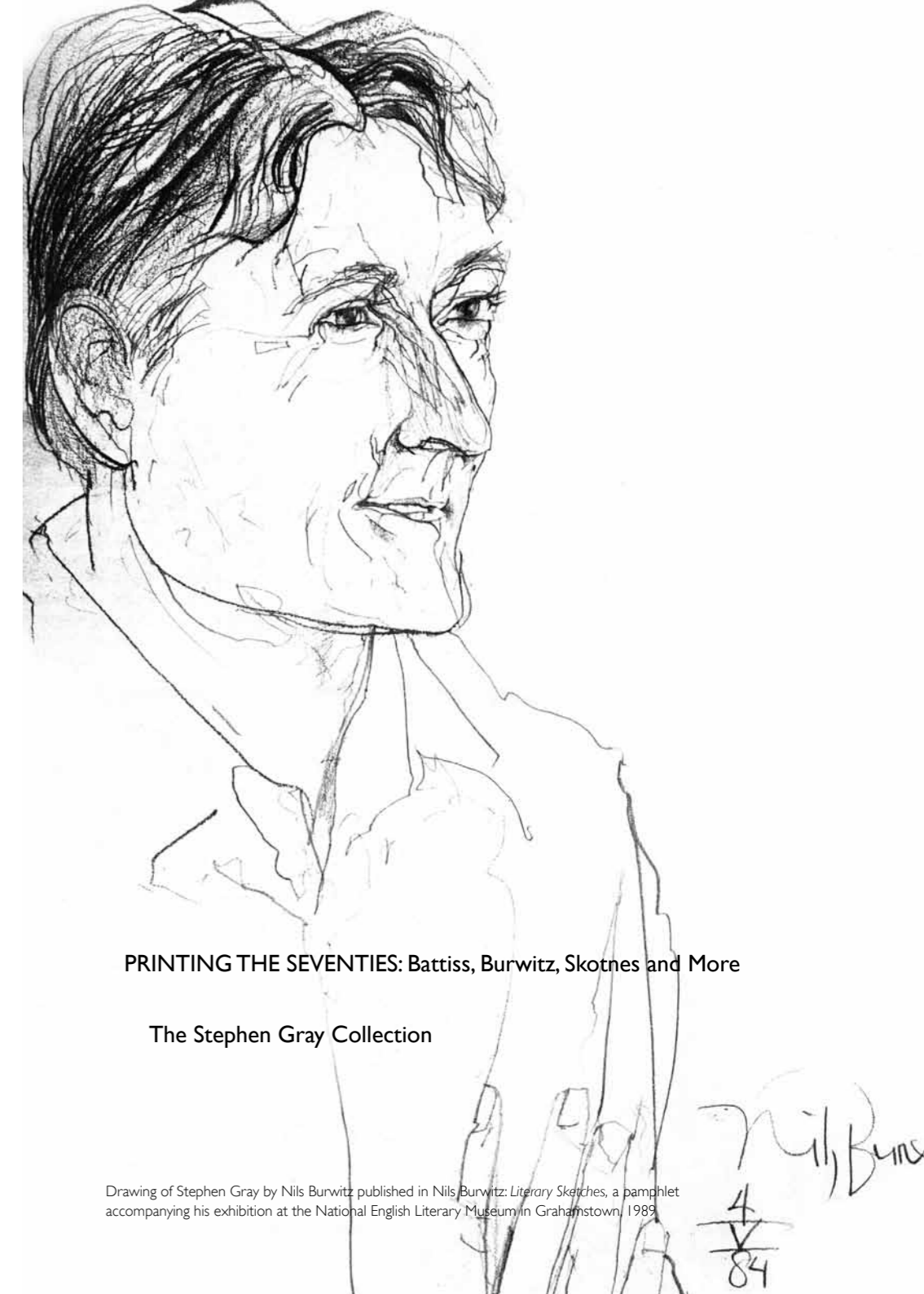
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Stephen Gray and Cecil Skotnes standing in the doorway of Skotnes's studio, Observatory, Johannesburg, Photograph Die Transvaler, 21 June 1974



Letter to Stephen Gray by Walter Battiss, 30/09/1975



PRINTING THE SEVENTIES: Battiss, Burwitz, Skotnes and More

The Stephen Gray Collection

Drawing of Stephen Gray by Nils Burwitz published in Nils Burwitz: *Literary Sketches*, a pamphlet accompanying his exhibition at the National English Literary Museum in Grahamstown, 1989

Nils Burwitz
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Because the prices of original works on the South African art market were increasing out of the reach of your usual buyers, the 1970s became the decade of the printmakers. Original works reproduced in limited editions, signed and numbered, now were becoming accessible. As a newly-wed settling into life in this city (Johannesburg), and for the first time a home owner, I could, for example, take to the Graphic Club of South Africa and purchase a Noel Bisseker or Judith Mason serigraph for R11 each. Thanks to such printing techniques making original art more affordable, Cecil Skotnes was to say that he hoped to see an image of his reach every South African living space.

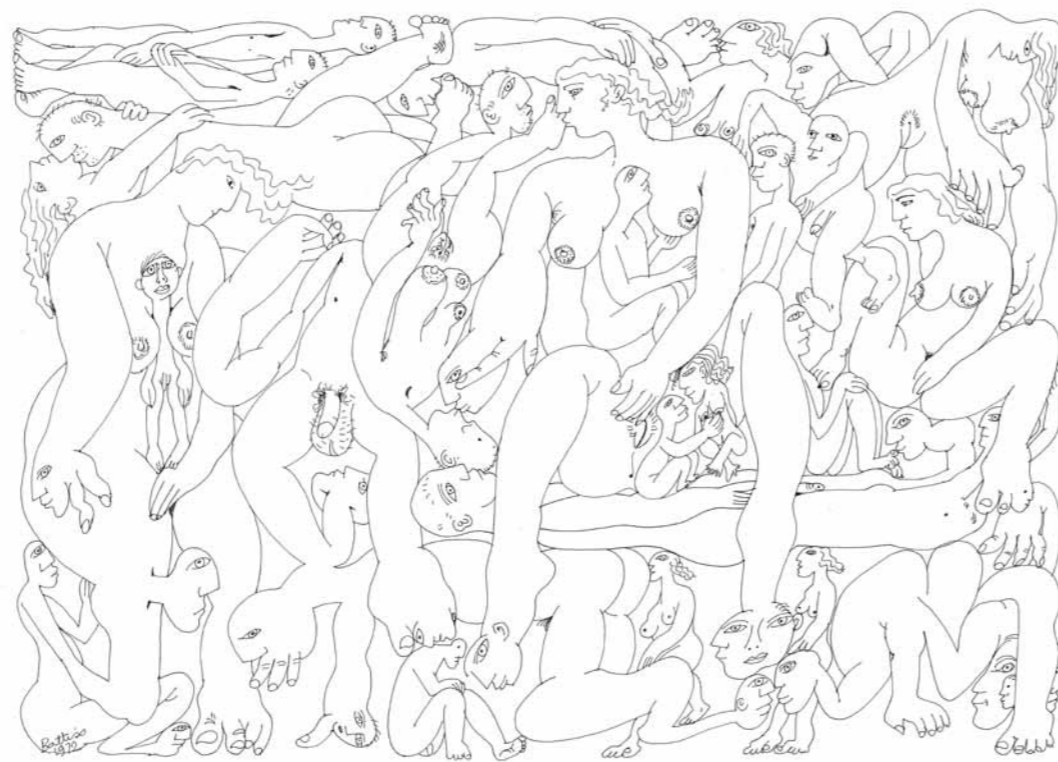
I had stayed away overseas for most of the 1960s, but now that I was returning to my home country I needed to inspire myself with South African images. During my rigorous school years in Grahamstown I had always walked past the house of black-bereted Walter Battiss and his wife Grace, marvelling at how she could approve of his puttering about in public in unmatched takkies, with oil paint in his fingernails. I was sharply warned off becoming close to such Bohemians, yet I was secretly aware of how he alone went against public opinion (everyone else considered them childish graffiti) by stumping in periodicals like *Lantern* for the aesthetic merit of Bushman cave murals.



Stephen Gray with Elfie Duminy, Walter Battiss and Pieter Duminy. Alice, South Africa, July 1974

A copy of his Inaugural Lecture, given in 1965 when he was appointed Head of Fine Arts at UNISA, was posted to me. There he called on each of his younger fellow artists to be 'alive to his hour and conscious of his future.' This applied to himself, of course (born in 1906), but he also referred to several others by name, including Cecil Skotnes (born 1926) and Nils Burwitz (born 1940). This rousing call was a factor in my decision to repatriate and join the artists.

Since literature was my vocation, I fell in with the likes of the late Phil du Plessis, who had been editing *Wurm*. Together with Wilma Stockenström, we were to edit the new *IZWI*, which ran from October, 1971, to December, 1974. Each of twenty numbers, selling at 50c. each, was to contain one graphic as an incentive to buyers. Soon we learned to staple these free gifts inside the texts, which were typed out on stencils and duplicated on the rotary machine.



The pen and ink drawing by Walter Battiss (1972, 260X370mm) of which he signed 250 copies for *IZWI* No. 8

Battiss himself out at Giotto's Hill in Menlo Park generously signed 250 copies of one of his erotic fantasy drawings for us (see above). Likewise did Christo Coetzee, Peter Clarke, Helmut Starcke, Raymond Andrews, Berenice Michelow, Wopko Jensma and more. Covers were donated by the likes of Alice Goldin, Mike Costello, Alexis Preller and even Skotnes himself for No. 14. By No. 13 Burwitz had outdone them all by offering us a 7-colour silkscreen poster, including printed poems of mine called *The Beast's History*, in a limited collector's edition of 240. These were available to raise funds for the journal at R10 each (postage included).

That independent press initiative of the high apartheid period was naturally anti-censorship. Indeed, after the Soweto 76 Uprising, when Welma Odendaal had taken over our enterprise in the form of *Donga* and *Inspan*, they were banned to extinction, as were several of our contributors.

But for the record let it be noted that in *IZWI* were launched Ingrid de Kok and Jeremy Cronin, with Barney Simon (in No. 1), Don Mattera (No. 2), Achmat Dangor and Jane Fox (No. 3), Lindsey Collen (No. 9), Njabulo Ndebele (No. 10) through to Sheila Roberts (who joined the editors for No. 14) and Siphosiphiso Sepamla (No. 15). Uys Krige and Lionel Abrahams were included (in No. 17), the former connecting us up to a tradition of 'little magazines' stretching back to *Vandag* of the 1940s, the latter to an ongoing private publishing venture.



Nils Burwitz and Walter Battiss at William Plomer's house, Entumeni, South Africa. Photograph Tom Phillips, January 1976

Out of all his hectic declaring of the freedom of the arts, as Battiss recommended, came for me a fine friendship with my age-mate, the bearded, pipe-smoking Nils Burwitz. From his studio in Oak Avenue, Ferndale – as I recorded in a cover story I contributed to *Lantern* (in September, 1969) – he was pioneering those resin etchings of his. In 1971 when the Liberian tanker the *Wafra* made its oilspill off Cape Town, he did a jacket on the topic for my first novel; then *The Beast's History* was expanded into an exhibition in the Main Gallery of the S.A. Association of Arts on the first floor of downtown Carlton Hotel (in August-September, 1973). In 1974 he used the title of my first volume of poems, *It's About Time*, on which to hang a satirical series of his own. Drivers by in rush hour will remember his mottoes on his blackboard: THIS IS NOT THE WRITING ON THE WALL, etc. When I opened an exhibition of his in March, 1976, we were considered to be in bad taste for being amusing. A year later he and his wife Marina had packed up and left the country for Majorca. Subsequently I saw his portrait drawings of South African writers into the collection of the National English Literary Museum (see cover of this brochure).

My teamwork with the late Cecil Skotnes spanned the period, up to the date when he too decamped – from his studio at Mons Road, Observatory, for Cape Town. Our collaboration is well recorded in the catalogue Frieda Harmsen edited for his 1996 retrospective, with full bibliographical details and reproductions given in the chapter on 'The Skotnes and Gray Blockbooks'. Battiss himself had opened Skotnes's first one-man exhibition in 1957, and thanks to *News/check* in the late 1960s the few dozen panels on that Mountain View front door to the Meneghelli household, illustrating the Shaka story, were becoming known.

Soon Skotnes had on hand his willing scriptwriter and was cutting from 8" kias to 104 blocks of Finnish birch. These would be shipped to that flatbed press in Cape Town to print our first portfolio. The downstairs Goodman Gallery at Johannesburg's Hyde Park became our launching pad, with a sell-out of *The Assassination of Shaka* (on 21 October, 1973). *The White Monday Disaster* followed, with *Baudelaire's Voyage* (by 6 December, 1975) and *Ten Landscapes* (11 September, 1976).

There were other joint projects on the side, including Skotnes's tribute to Charles Eglinton and a privately printed edition of Herman Charles Bosman's *The Rooinek*. We also set up a regular publishing effort to relaunch Sol T. Plaatje's *Mhudi* and too see Athol Fugard's *Tsotsi* into print. Others were attached to the team: Egon Guenther with his developing multi-colour techniques and Peter Carstens the binder. Then again the files show several ventures that, for lack of real two-way inspiration and the wrong timing, just would not take off. The culmination, however, was our *Man's Gold*, launched on 1 March 1980. That brought the fruitful decade to a close.



Photograph of Cecil Skotnes taken by Stephen Gray at the Isandhlwana battle site, KwaZulu-Natal, December 1973

Thanks to Cecil and Thelma we enjoyed many travels together: for instance, there was our visit to the battle site of Isandhlwana, which gave rise to those monumental paintings of mythical figures on his incised panels. Discovering our own country about us, and its literary and pictorial traces, was becoming an unforgettable way of life. The synopsis runs on, to be sure, with the output rising into incredibly marked up prices. But for me it is all part of the archive now.

Stephen Gray
Johannesburg, 2012