



1949

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Walter Battiss screen prints

On the edge

Walter Battiss was the first South African artist to pioneer screen printmaking as a medium in its own right. He was also the first South African artist to make an artist's book entirely of screen prints (*Nesos*, 1968). In addition, he mounted the first art exhibition in South Africa consisting solely of screen prints, and he organized the first group exhibition of South African screen printmaking.

“The serigraph is the artist's cheapest printing medium and new effects can be obtained with it. It is a wonderful process for the industrial artist who can use the silkscreen in a hundred different ways” (Battiss, 1955:51).

Screen printmaking suited Battiss perfectly: it provided him with a technologically advanced medium that he incorporated in his perennial quest for being at the cutting edge of the latest developments in the art world. In addition, it suited him perfectly as a medium to explore the use of bright colours and the rendering of the movement of figures. “Way back I became interested

in ‘hard-edge’ art and experimented with the colours and screens being used commercially” (Battiss, 1967:22).

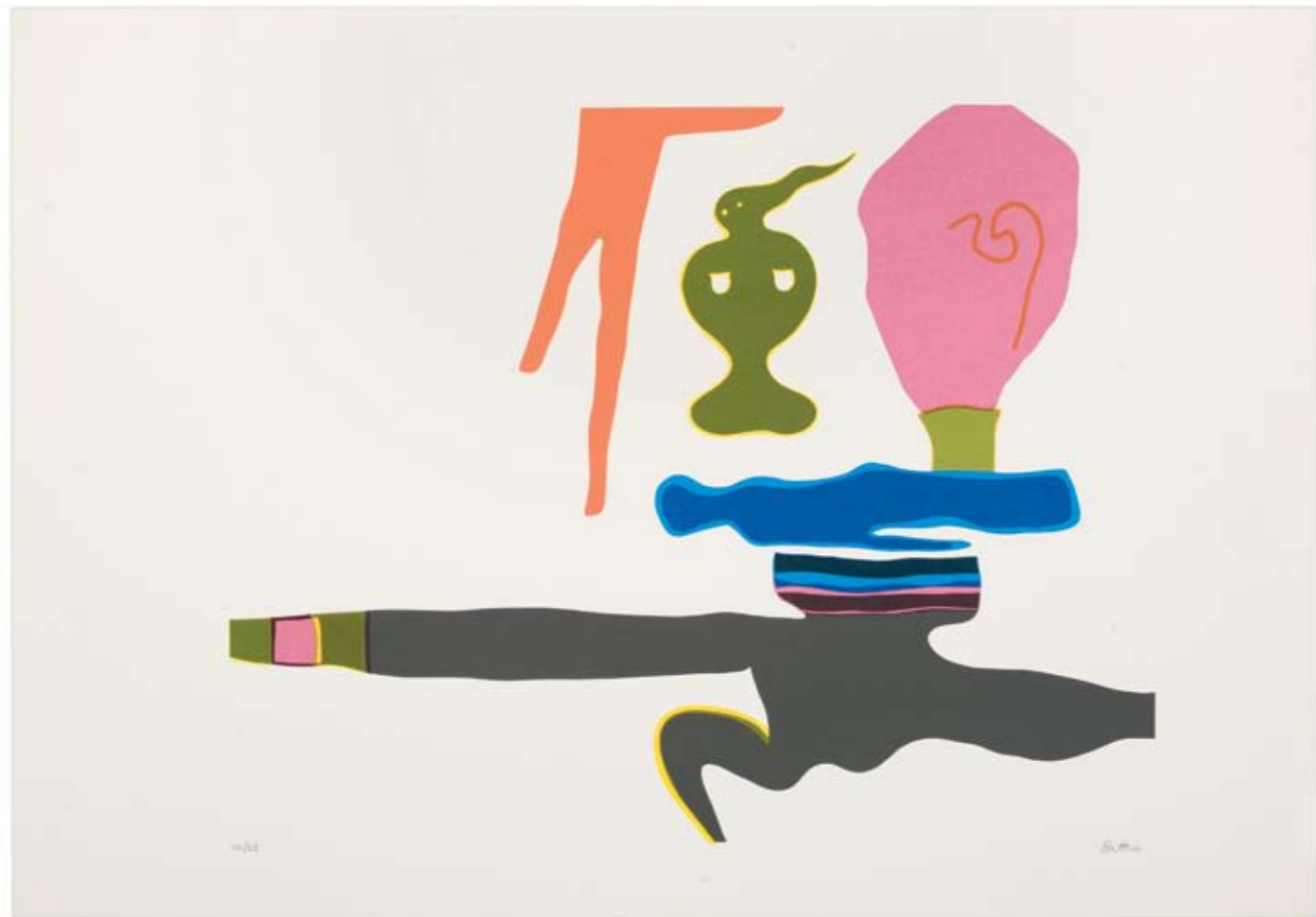
His journey in exploring screen printmaking started as early as 1954 when he exhibited some of his oil paintings in Maputo (the then Lourenço Marques), Mozambique. A fellow artist, Fernando Fernandes introduced him to the screen print technique. In September 1954 he held an exhibition of ‘auto-serigraphs’ at Galerie Nicol in Pretoria.

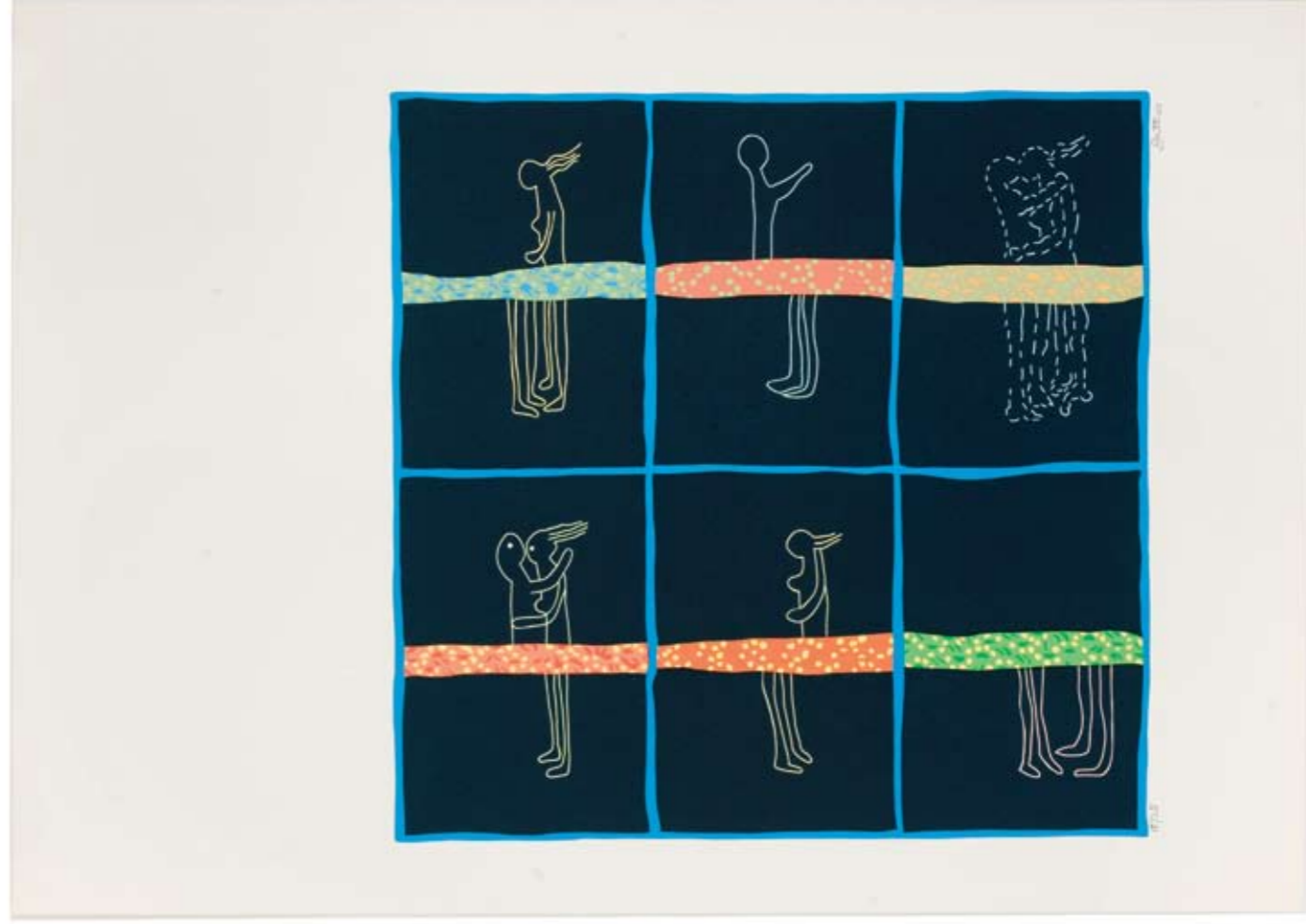
The very first two screen prints Battiss ever made were printed by Fred Schimmel in 1954. One is the well-known image, reproduced in Murray Schoonraad's Battiss-monograph (1976: 29). It depicts a Basuto-village and contains all the salient elements of screen printing he developed later on: the huts are all the same size, regardless of their positioning in the picture plane; near and far are treated in the same way. There are no shadows in evidence. The colours are very bright and contrast sharply with one another, like the pink huts and the blue sky, the green plants and the orange earth, and so on.

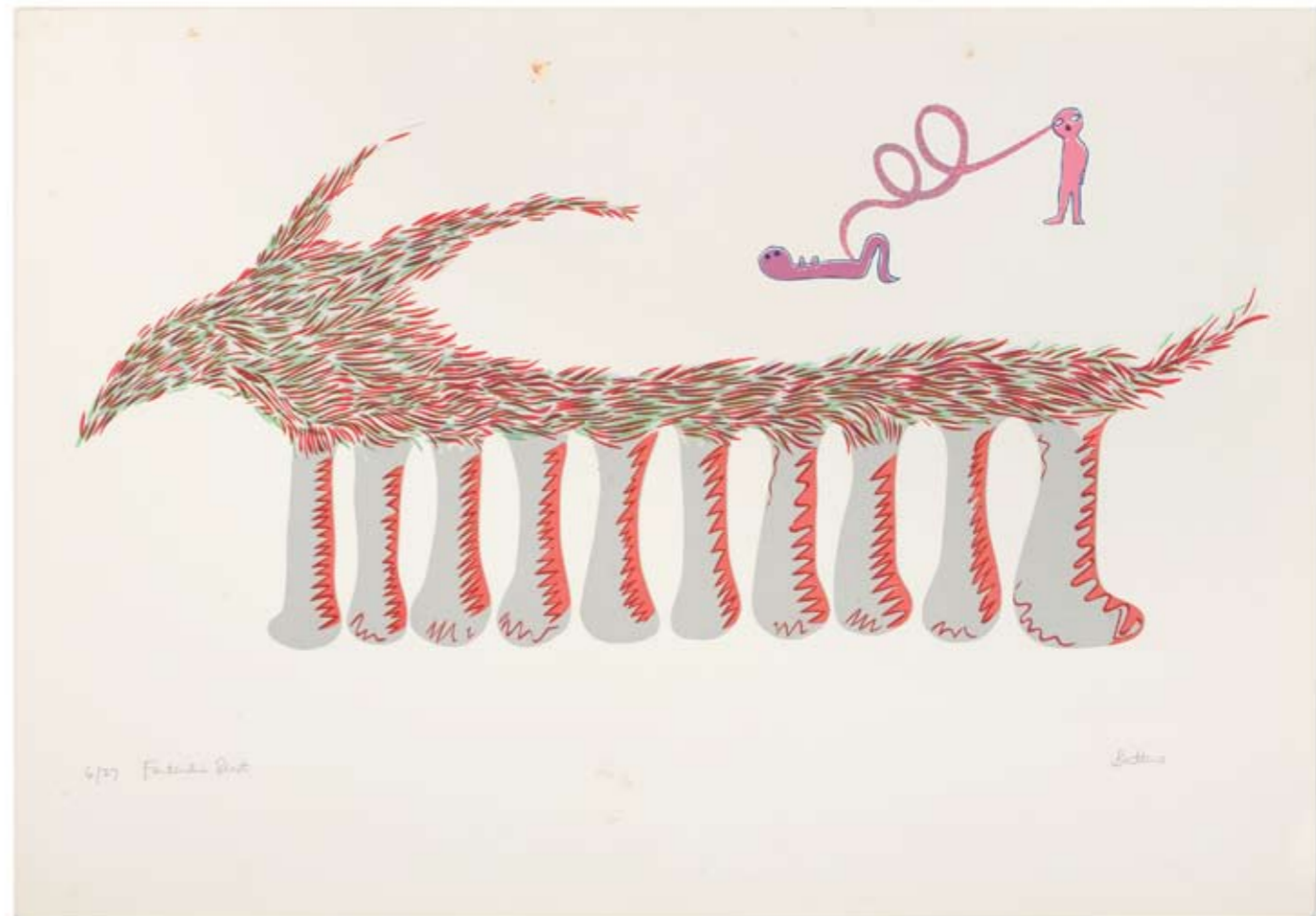
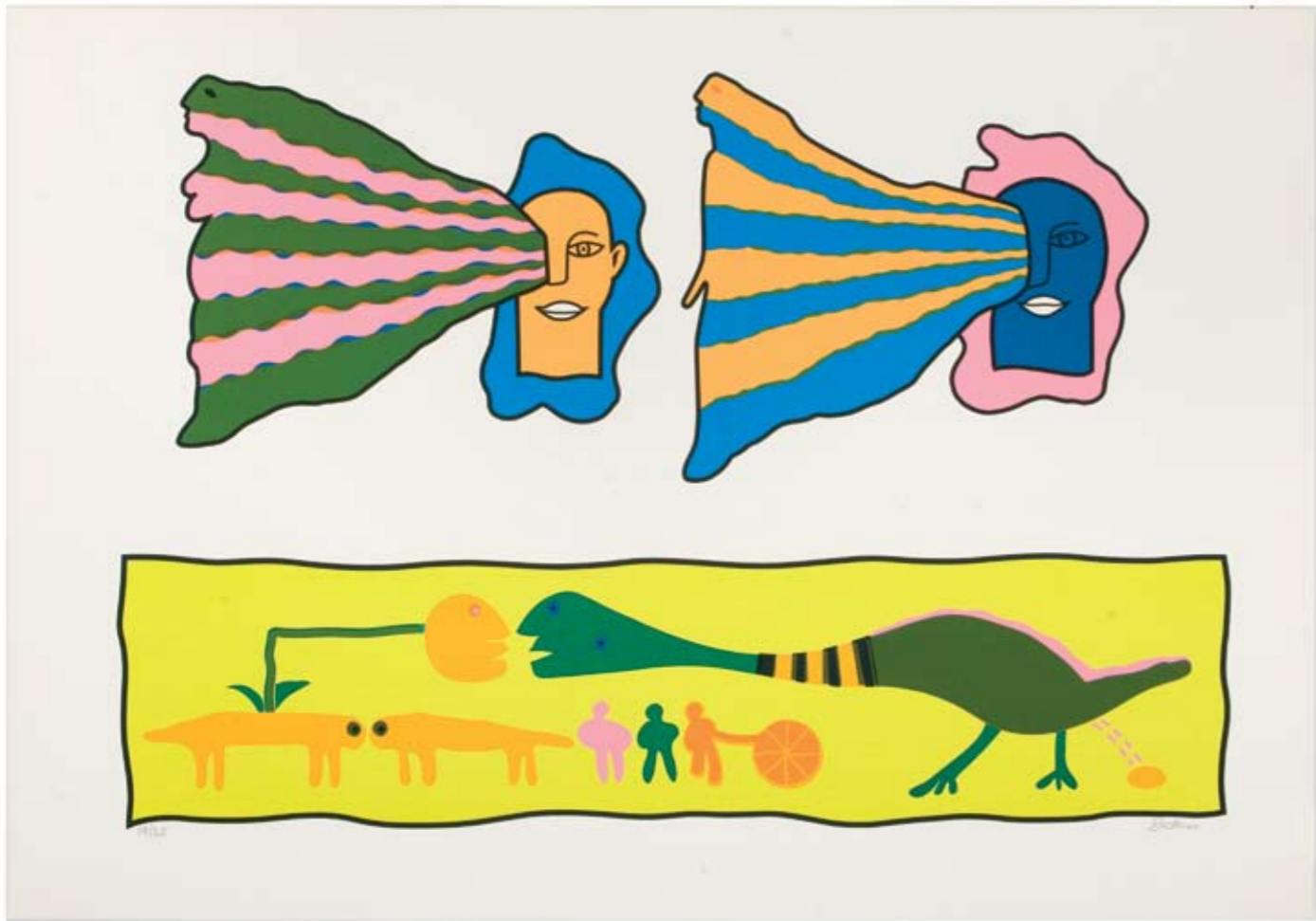
Battiss consolidated his interest in the screen printing process in 1956 when he

depicted various abstractions of animals in two of his prints. “These abstractions... combined with the even colour of the silkscreen process, has the effect of an African heraldry. In both examples the rocks are less original than the animal shapes which are in advance of Picasso's dog in his *Les Meninas* and of which one is strongly reminded” (Scully, 1956:44). Battiss, however, experienced problems with the commercial inks of the time, and with overprinting. This resulted in a hiatus of almost ten years before he picked up the medium again. “One of the serious drawbacks in 1955 was the thickness of the stencil which gave a raised surface to each colour when printed on the paper and made overprinting a hazardous process. In 1955 the colours were limited and worked best only in certain temperatures” (Battiss, 1967:22).

In 1968 he printed the famous *Nesos* artist's book, containing 54 screen prints. The accompanying text in the book was also hand cut stencil prints. Battiss wanted to indicate his alliance with the natural, with the handmade, as opposed to the machine manufactured products of much of the art being reproduced at the time. *Nesos* is the Greek word for island, and the book captures Battiss's impressions of all













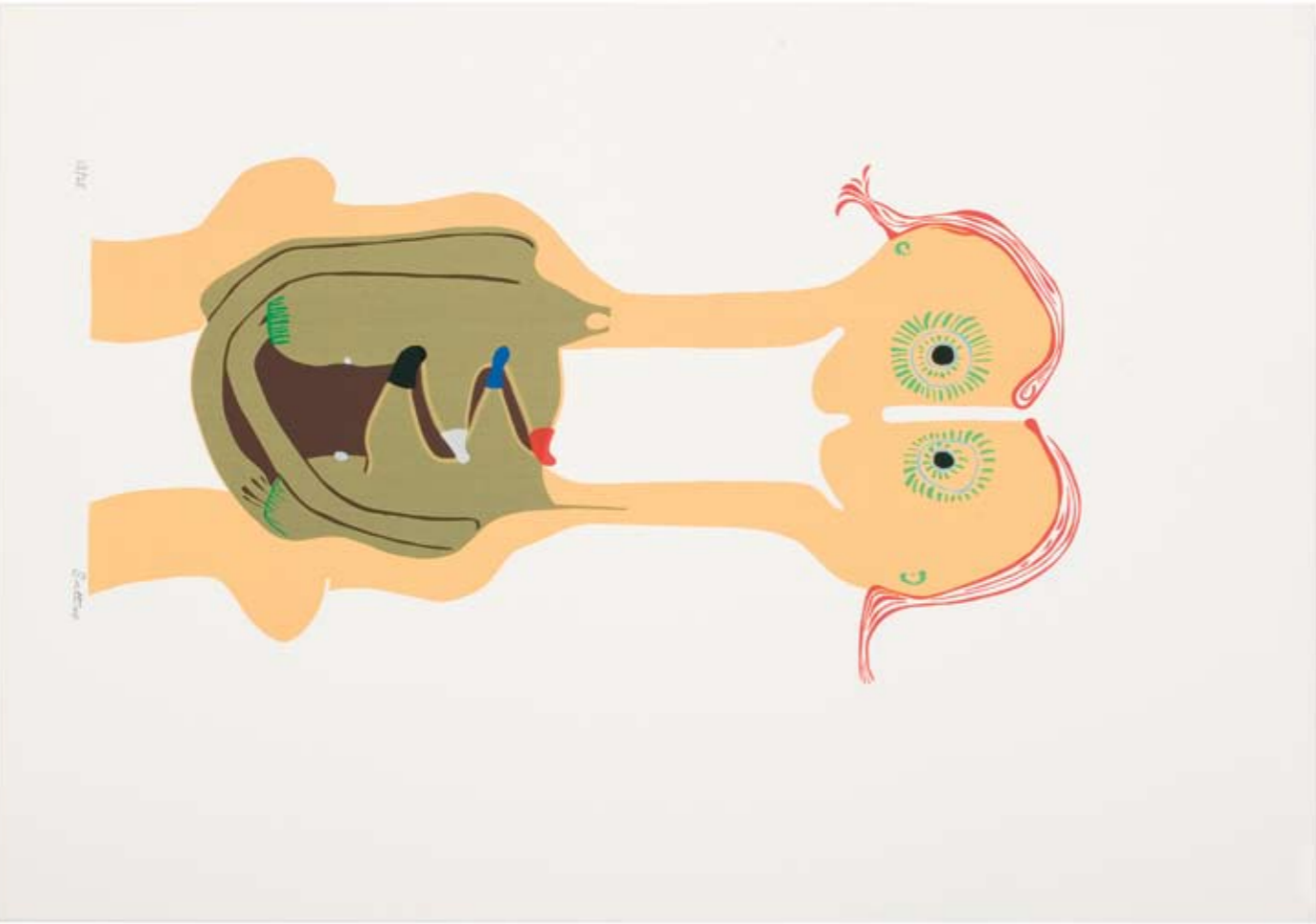
Prof. Flying Objects. 2005



Untitled (Mother and child) 7/25 Illustrated: Skawran, 2005:191 13



Untitled (Goddess) 18/25 Illustrated: Skawran & Macnamara, 1985:77 15

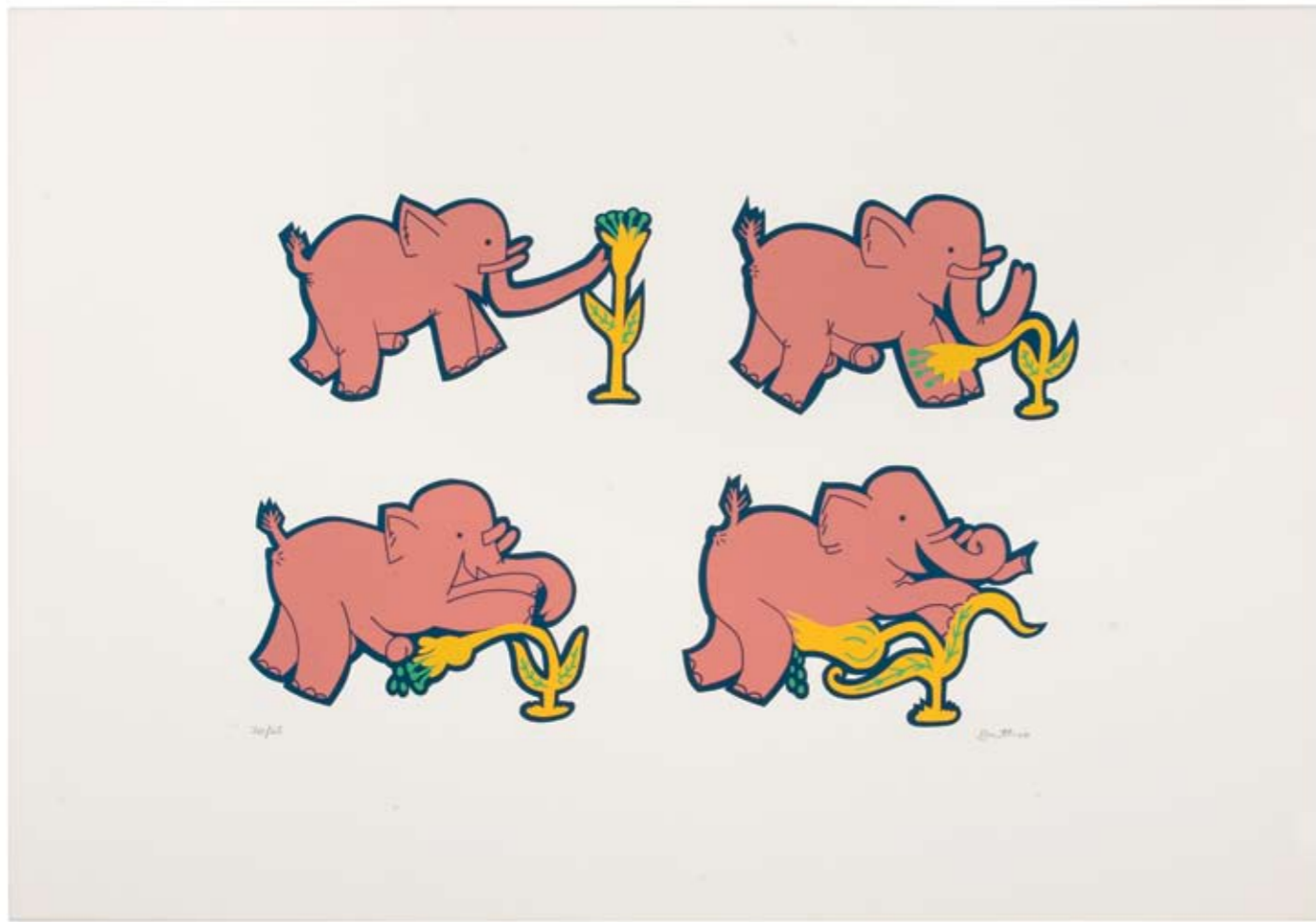


14. Untitled (Their fathers wanted them to be boys) 13/25 Illustrated: Skawran & Macnamara, 1985:81









22 *Untitled (Adolescent young elephant)* 20/25 Illustrated: Skawran, 2005:155



Moving Birds 11/30 Illustrated: Skawran, 2005: 183 23

the 16 Greek islands he visited from time to time. Some of the prints depict sportsmen, referencing the sports heroes of classical Greece. This time the inks appeared to rise out of the paper, an effect Battiss liked very much. He further experimented with the inks by letting them dry a bit in the screen so when he squeezed through the second colour, some of the dried bits of ink would be forced through as well, creating a marbled effect on the paper. The layering of thick, raised ink surfaces created a three-dimensional effect, which Battiss particularly liked.

A new challenge with regard to screen printing awaited Battiss when he visited Germany and England in 1969. Master printer Josef Kroll introduced Battiss to the use of photography in the screen printing process, a technique Battiss fully explored by taking photographs of the youth on the streets of München and Berlin, and by utilizing these images in his prints of that time. These prints are not widely known and are some of the most sought after of Battiss's prints. The late 1960s also saw the use of the famous coco de mer-fruit from the Seychelles. Photographs of the fruit were screen printed on a bright green background, which he later adorned with stamps and travelling brochures.

The 1970s saw Battiss organizing the first group exhibition of screen prints in South Africa at Unisa. Battiss maintained that screen printing was the medium in which artists had to show their mettle; the sharp edge of the screen had to be manipulated very precisely while proofing or otherwise the print would be a disaster. "Artists who want fuzzy effects better steer clear of this medium", he maintained.

From 1973 Battiss integrated his own calligraphic fook-script writing into his prints, in, for example, the famous *Desert* print. His screen prints were printed by Chris Betambeau, of Advanced Graphics in London, a master printer working with such eminent British artists as David Hockney, Allen Jones, Victor Vasarely, Eduardo Paolozzi, Bridget Riley, R.B. Kitaj and Richard Hamilton. But it was in 1974 that Battiss really took to screen printing, exploring and experimenting with colour and lively forms. He was particularly interested in erotic art and the elongated, entangled nude figures in erotic poses provided him with the perfect subject matter for his screen prints. This was the time when Battiss deliberately made a public stand against censorship in South Africa while a ferocious debate raged in the press about the difference between

erotic art and pornography (B Rudden, Battiss turns to 'wider areas of erotic art', *Sunday Times*, 2 December 1973; Skinny dipper Battiss wants nude bathing, *Sunday Times*, 2 December 1973; Dis pornografie, sê kunstenaars, *Die Transvaler*, 3 December 1973; B Wessels, *Orgy II* laat my skaam kry, *Die Vaderland*, 5 December 1973; P. Kony, Erotic art is certainly not pornography, *Pretoria News*, 13 December 1973). Walter Battiss's screen prints give an edge to this debate!

Wilhelm van Rensburg

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