TWENTY JOURNEY

Three photographers on a journey to explore South-Africa

TWENTY
JOURNEY

An exhibition of
photographs by

Sipho Mpongo
Wikus de Wet
Sean Metelerkamp

Curated by

Khanyisile Mbongwa

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Preface

Words by: Khanyisile Mbongwa

Twenty Journey is an exhibition that conveys the photographic journey of three South African photographers. These young makers are on a quest to discover democracy twenty years after a new political dispensation. Sipho Mpongo struggles to grapple with the question: What is a 'born free?'; Wikus de Wet seeks for meanings of 'Land'; Sean Metelerkamp explores unsuspected 'Idiosyncrasies.'

Artworks by these young photographers relate to each other by questioning, engaging and exploring intersections of past, present and future. The photographers ask us to pause and take a moment to look at the lived experiences of South Africans beyond standard histories. These images are collected memories, archives full of possibility. The secrets are buried in the land, but its power is with the 'born frees' and their impact lingers in unwilling moments.

Traveling for seven months, Mpongo, de Wet and Metelerkamp traveled 24000 kilometers across South Africa. The photographers made pictures, focusing on their respective subject matters. The result of their making is this exhibition that gathers 45 photographic moments. Each moment is a document of: encounter, mourning, and history, but also of birth, death and grief. Together, the pictures offer a view of the present as it gathers memory, possibility, and through imagination, the future.

Sipho Mpongo was born in the Eastern Cape in a rural village called Nqamakwe in 1993 and was raised in Langa, Cape Town. Illiso Labantu, a local photographic mentorship programme, provided the platform for Mpongo to launch into a photographic career. Sipho has recently completed a full time course in study at the Cape Town School of Photography whilst simultaneously contributing to various photographic group shows and projects in Cape Town and internationally. Notably Mpongo had a fundraising exhibition at Pace MacGill Gallery in New York to help children in South Africa through children'a radio foundation. Mpongo recently won Magnum foundation Photography and Human Rights fellowship in New York University.

Wikus de Wet (born 1990) is a Cape Town based freelance photographer. He graduated with a BA Applied Design degree at Stellenbosch Academy of Design and Photography in 2011. In 2012 he was selected as a participant at the Nikon-Noor Masterclass held in Cape Town, South Africa. In 2015 he was selected to be part of the Beyond Photojournalism Masterclass at the International Summer School of Photography in Latvia.

Sean Metelerkamp (born in 1984 in Knysna, South Africa) works mostly on autonomous photo and video projects. His video for Die Antwoord – Zef Side was exhibited in the Guggenheim Museums in New York, Bilboa, Venice and Berlin where it won an award for Top 25 Videos of 2010.

Zef Side also won the Yellow Pencil at the D&AD awards in London for Outstanding Achievement in 2011. Sean completed a six month residency in New York with Residency Unlimited.

Curator's Note

Learning how to Unlearn, Learning how to Learn: Twenty Journey

Words by: Khanyisile Mbongwa

In 2014, we entered twenty years of democracy and after the whirlwind of all sorts of promises – what democracy has failed to do, is give people back their sense of dignity.

27 April 1994, marked a new era, a new dawn, a new day. The horizon of South African history shifted, and like children excited for Christmas morning, South Africans marveled at a previously unimaginable freedom. Powerful was the dream of "one person one vote," a new ideal that would orient, stabilize and reconcile democratic citizenship. Citizens of South Africa have learned on what foundations democracy is based. It is not grounded in a common language, not dependent on dissolving cultural particularity, nor must it ignore biological difference. Democracy, instead, is built on ideals, convictions, and principals. It is, most importantly, perhaps, the commitment and recognition that all human beings are born with equal rights. If this is true, and our government is guided by this sort of moral compass, we live under a government by the people and for the people.

Beginning with these lofty ideals, this exhibition titled Twenty Journey presents three South African photographers who want to picture the pulse of a young South African democracy. The photographers do this by focusing on three main themes: the 'Born Frees'; issues of 'Land'; and personhood and Idiosyncrasy .

BORN FREES

Truth and Reconciliation came together to make the Born Free. Oceans of tears flowed out of the atrocious historical fact. Mandating amnesty, reparation and rehabilitation, the TRC's response to countless violations of Human Rights was designed to forgive without forgetting, thereby allowing the 'beautiful ones' to rise above grief. The results are less idealistic. For example, Sipho Mpongo writes:

> *"I'm one of the self-made, art-driven young people in South Africa. [As such,] I am suffering from schizophrenia in a supposedly Utopian rainbow country. I find it disappointing that as a generation coming of age – there is a burden upon us but no one cares about the dark cloud soothing the nation's psyche. To heal the new generation, the older generation must be cleansed psychologically"*

Mpongo has both the fragility and the carelessness of youth, which comes with eagerness and optimism. This can be seen in his image titled South African Illusion where two black boys are chilling on a couch with their laptop and cellphones – laughing. Mpongo is eager to tell us something in this image and its caption –something about being 'born free' – it is in the tone and mood the caption sets for the image that highlights his optimism. At some moments his pictures do not always account for the perusal of 'Born Free', but rather reminds us of the even more contested realities of freedom and historical privilege post 1994. In each photograph, the viewer may feel him lingering behind the lens as he sees his beloved landscape broaden beyond the world he use to know. If viewers are lucky, they may see a break from an established history. Alternately, viewers may see the "entanglements" of the past as they reach into the future.

In To Never Grow Old: Brief Notes on Sipho Mpongo's Photographs and Writings, Athi-Mngezeleli Joja holds Mpongo accountable for the photographer's reluctant commentary. Joja writes:

> *"If there's success in post 1994 ideology, it isn't only the discombobulating of the general public, but also foreclosing the very futures by intellectually disarming the youth. Sifting through Sipho Mpongo's photographs and his frantic words, we bear witness to a refusal, almost unexpected, as it is recalcitrant, from today's youth. Each image is accompanied by a caption that relays the moment captured as the artist's words wrestles, almost impatiently with the images. There's something intriguing about retelling moments captured by a camera; sometimes it blocks us from fully engaging with what we see"*

Viewing Mpongo's work, viewers find pictures of the Born Frees as they lament the historical past and search for the freedom long promised, if not delivered. Mpongo describes it this way:

> *" This idea of blame ... everyone kept saying that they cannot blame history but they have to live: black youth blame the apartheid regime for their position – whites and afrikaaners say they can not feel guilty for being born into wealth... WHO ARE THE BORN FREES?. It was important for me to listen – to myself and those I spoke to and what this "born free" could possibly mean".*

Maybe, it is clear, that historical white privilege, questions the concept of born frees more than we would like to admit and that black dispossession suggest to us to whom the concept of born free might possibly mean and to who it actually refers to.

ISSUES OF LAND

Complex intersections shape issues of land after twenty years of democracy. The complexities cannot be narrowed simply, and economic terms fail to capture everything. South Africa's

land question is about more than land reform —it is also about interconnected issues of social, economic, political and cultural meanings related to land and natural resources.

2013 marked the centenary of the 1913 Land Act, a pivotal moment in democratic South Africa to take time out and look at the history of dispossession and the current state of land. de Wet's, initial naïve attempt was to investigate land from an economic perspective, reform and failing farms but he realized the complexity at hand. Wikus de Wet comments:

"Why don't the farms go to the people who been living there but goes to business people. Why are there so many empty government buildings?. There is definitely a class gap and I think class is becoming the new race but we can't ignore the historical whiteness that continues to stratify"

In some of de Wet's work the viewer is swallowed by the vastness the image presents about land, but some images are uncomfortably intimate, as if he forces the viewer to see and feel as he did behind the lens. As one looms over de Wet's work, you realize that every image deserves time, that there is too much complexity to be inserted in one frame. And this is echoed in Annemi Conradi and Natasha Norman's article about de Wet's work titled Tracing the real and the incongruous realities in an archive of the contemporary, "What this archive further testifies to, is this overwhelming complexity. It also shows how people, the climate and larger, local and global economic forces prohibit any formation to remain unchanged for too long, whether of state, social-cultural formations, or the land itself".

It is clear in de Wet's work that the contestation of land is the contestation of freedom, for what is a man without land?

IDIOSYNCRASIES

This is a careless term that has the readiness to be misunderstood. And as you parade through Metelerkamp's work, you see all sorts of things weird and wonderful, uncomfortable and playful, rich and poor as if he continuously pointed and shot at the right moment, that moment of pure bliss and discomfort – juxtaposing the Official South Africa and the Real South Africa.

In his peripheral vision there is a sense of an escape – a longing to be somewhere else rather than where he is and sometimes a sense of disturbia. Metelerkamp consciously decides to place himself in uncomfortable positions - he is looking for that moment where something happens, that rapture between self and everything else. Lindokuhle Nkosi in her article on Metelerkamp's work titled The Spectacle of Strange? writes "In the clutches of the white photographer, the camera is as light as a gun aimed by policeman at a black boy [...]Now, to say you are documenting idiosyncrasies says little-to-nothing. Existing somewhere between fact, fiction and feeling; "idiosyncrasy" tells us where to locate the camera, how wide to cut the frame. While it does not propose a thematic link, it does speak to the posture and position of the photographer. About the planets and stars and suns that compose his cosmology. About the ghosts that push and prod. About the impulses he reacts to when he points and clicks, when he points and shoots, when he points and frames. It tells us something about how he uses his camera, of white South African ideas of essentialism and exceptionalism, of reverence and importance, of dignity and deference". But Idiosyncrasy is telling us everything about nothing and nothing about everything – this is the fundamental moment in Metelerkamp's work. That between everything and nothing is YOU, that you are the extreme moment that has to navigate nothingness and everythingness through the vantage point of skin, race, gender, environment and circumstance.

Metelerkamp becomes the photographic cliché' he had a distaste for – 'what you shoot is a reflection about you'. One would notice that figures exist in lonesome, isolated, distinguished from the environment. The themes that arise in his work deal with his own childhood issues: the sense of loss or being lost, abandonment – so it goes through the lens YOU are everything and nothing.

CONCLUSION

The meeting of three young visionaries is bound to give our country new ways to see, if not, at least critical and engaging perspectives are born. The emergence of their subject matters, express their personal sense of urgency and agency – sitting squarely on the backdrop of Democratic South Africa. There are obvious intersections, sudden slippages and moments where the images bleed into each other. The selection is haunting, uncomfortable as we try to negotiate ways of finding a 'moment' no matter how small that helps us imagine. We sift through the 45 selected exhibition images and we stager with depression and excitement, things connect and disconnect so easily, things are locked and framed forever but we try to stretch beyond the lens, the frame. Some images refused to participate, they maintained their autonomy – floating outside the borders of our artistic and curatorial frame. They almost felt like rebels, or a resistant squad.

There is a burden having to curate such a project, given the context and content of South Africa's historical white privilege and black dispossession. Having to negotiate moments in each photographers work and selection that is strangled by history, dealing or its refusal to deal with the present and how we can possibly imagine ourselves into the future. There is a spillage of the past into the future, the present aggressively dances with the past – sometimes the movements are graceful and nuanced but the performance is still there. The negotiations might have been sealed as a post 1994 happening, but the images shot by these three photographers suggest that only now has the negotiations begun and the Rhodes Must Fall movement is but one indication of forcing democracy to engage.

Lightness, heaviness, uncomfortability, strangeness, newness – the moment you leave your natural environment, you encounter not only the places and spaces you visit but also yourself. Through Twenty Journey we witness over and over, a country in transition; a country becoming and the complexities of being Young, Black, White, Colored, Indian, Asian, Rainbow and South African.

But, what is still missing in Twenty Journey – is to see the imaginative in the image, where we can imagine ourselves beyond the historical and physical limitations. But the photographers clubbed together, give us the possibility to imagine, even if it's within our own little backyards. And as the three agree – what they walk away with 7 months and 24000 kilometers later - is the concept of Intentionalism ... What is your intent now South Africa?

To Never Grow Old:

Brief Notes on Sipho Mpongo's Photographs and Writings.

Words by: Athi-Mongezeleli Joja

"Fuck The Rainbow Nation: Coz '94 changed fokol!" boldly in red, read the t-shirt by black consciousness inspired movement, Blackwash. The subtitles were the movement's slogan, querying the continued structural oppressions of black people writ large. Inspired by Steve Biko's prophetic words that mere change of face at state level will not undo structural exclusion; Blackwash showed no disillusionment but impatience. "We will fight now" it opened its manifesto, significantly titled Blackwash Dream. Like a ticking time point, this impatience with the status quo, lead relatively by the cumulative numbers of so called born frees, keeps reverberating through the years. Today, by the name of Rhodes Must Fall (RMF), a largely student formation, clamor disturbs the official reticence. Their wave of rage shows a pervasive discomfort with complicity and lauded well adjustment to injustice. It's comets of black fists simultaneously shooting back against muted gods. Their demand is not "heavenly kingdom" tomorrow as Christ or Nelson Mandela for that matter, once promised, but liberation now.

Sifting through Sipho Mpongo's photographs and his frantic words under the title "born frees", we bear witness to this refusal, impatience and recalcitrance. Not necessarily through his documentation of RMF, but the asymmetrical social relations that structure post 1994 South Africa. In Mpongo's work each image is accompanied by a caption that relays the moment captured as the artist's words wrestle, almost impatiently, with the images. There's something intriguing about retelling moments captured by a camera; sometimes it blocks us from fully engaging with what we see. On other occasions, the mind wonders in curiosity about the details of 'priors' and 'afters' left suspended by the split second snap shot. After all the written word has the capacity to record moments, to travel better with time and perhaps more expansively than photographic images. Whereas photographs capture and freeze time - giving us still lives and moments. For art historian Gerhard Schoeman, "Looking at a photograph involves time lost and time regained. Time lost again." But for Ronald Barthes:

> *"...everything which happens within the frame dies absolutely once this frame is passed beyond. When we define the Photograph as a motionless image, this does not mean only that the figures it represents do not move; it means that they do not emerge, do not leave: they are anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies."*

This stasis which photography represents, and the eloquence that words bring, is Mpongo's preferred mode of practice. It is like tussling with silence and voice, life and death, bondage and freedom – the condition of the living dead. Ironically, photography means to write with light. And as we know, Sartre and many others have argued, writing serves a similar purpose. Following in the paths of Teju Cole, Simon Gush, Kabelo Mofokeng et al Mpongo ambidextrously transcribes our world with light and ink. However my interest here isn't just Mpongo's pictures and writings, but a shared interest between him and me. That is, both the conceptual and empirical plausibility in the notion of "born frees." My thoughts here travel with Mpongo ideas – visually and textually, sometimes in full blast agreement and other times like a volatile lover, I part ways.

Questioning the claim of being black and born free, he writes: 'The environment I grew up in and the problems I had to face as a young person in South Africa fails to describe me as free.' There is a dissonance between his life, his environment and freedom. His freedom seems to amount to a failure, a contrived abstraction generalized to the point of meaninglessness. It is "freedom" but without something. Yet when he casts his eyes to the life of his friends, other born frees, perhaps even his fellow travelers on his trip around the country, he realizes something.

> *"The confusion began at calling every youth born in 1994 as free. We can all agree that the majority of white children were free compared to the majority of black children in South Africa before the first Democratic Elections in 1994."*

One wonders what late art historian Thomas McEvilly would say to these questions regarding his position that post independence children should not be held responsible for what they never did or hold not on to realities they never lived. Here Mpongo's honest questions help us to reconfigure and properly peruse what is casually meant by this notion of born free. What it means to both black and white children? As the young photographer implies, there is a heavy unspokenness about the race question in this term. Suggestive of post 1994's pervasive colourblindness, it collectivizes children into this composite and unspecified phrase: "born free." In the words of Pumla Gqola we could say it feigns an imaginary space of fraternity which "transcends race as power, even as it evokes race as colour, in its visual vocabulary." Thus Mpongo's inquiries bring into sharp focus and pressure us to seek, empirically, the tenability of this concept. The questions aren't new – they previously preoccupied the most critical of our liberation struggle heroes before. Already, Steve Biko famously bemoaned integration on the basis of ridiculous expectation that the slave master's son could never work against his historical privilege.

But at the same time there is a troubling relativization in Mpongo's articulation when he repeatedly says

"we can all agree that the majority [emphasis mine] of white children..." - a point I'll return to later in this piece. Of course, throughout his pictures the case of numeracy is substantiated by the excruciating poverty and marginal existence that sweeps across races – black and white. In the neocolonial situation it would be unsuitable to insist that all black people are poor and that all white people are rich. It is as if he's unraveling the post 1994's contradiction by way of a rejoinder to Frantz Fanon's remarks of the colonial world: "you are white because you are rich, you are rich because you are white."

His images seem take us through the varied lives of the born free, their daily activities like playing, partying, mischiefs, anxieties, dreams, schooling and others. But through this veneer of daily practice, each image surreptitiously and unavoidably divulges their varied backgrounds. From his images of township children, to affluent suburbs, to the countryside and marginal and self-excluding communities, the backgrounds of these children jump out. For those who don't know, they might be surprised by their dramatic different standards of living. Divided by a mere road, Sandton and Alexandra Township are a case in point. On the one side of the road we're beckoned by nauseating affluence and on the other, repelled by agonizing desperation.

In his pictures of affluent kids we see the typical enchanting scapes of land stretching in the background, maids at service and other signifiers of wealth. The eye travels beyond their young bodies into the far-reaching plains. Here we see the pleasures of the rich, the daily routine of waking up to the smiling plateaus and meandering rivers – to land, material wealth, security, medical care and cheese. With its miner adjustment, post 1994 is by and large an extension of the colonial set up, and like it, it is a world "divided into compartments" as Frantz Fanon once said. The gulf that separates the rich and poor is mediated by life and death. If we exist because we breathe, in the neocolonial situation "the poor" live a death-bound life. What do the poor breathe if not the surrounding stench of their jammed excretions – a life of deficiency – to be a corpse amidst corpses?

These are people, families and children who are numerically the majority, but are reduced to a minority by their hyper invisibility. In one of Mpongo's images, a white girl child's face jumps to the screen; her eyes indicate that she was beaten, perhaps by her mother disappearing into the background of the picture. Her hair is neatly tied though, as if it were prepared for the shoot. She stares straight at the viewer, while her smoking mother turns her gaze away. The mother too, seems puzzled, desperate and damned. On another, a poor white father stands in a confined space in a forlorn pose surrounded by his children who are as despondent. We don't see much of their background but the bleakness that writes dejection in their bodies. To poor whites, this might be a near-black experience but to blacks, it's the fact of blackness. A young black girl sits on a small colourful chair before a three-legged pot cooking on the floor. The house is ridden with smoke. She's barefoot and alone, disappearing, in a darkened house with out light and furniture. These frightening images consumed by darkness are details of post 1994's margins. For a moment a deep sense of primitive pain plumps the depths. These images momentarily seize to be art but become frozen instances of the real.

However we are told, sometimes rightfully, that such dissemination of images always easily bordering on romanticization of poverty and the poor. It is also argued that such flattening of a society deprives it of its complexity and dynamics. But there's latent power in repeating and dramatizing the obvious sometimes. These images are a reflection of the devastating reality of the majority. Their spectacular nature, though it might tend to obscure things, emanates from the system's own exhibitionist display. The fact that their hyper utility and visibility animates the rich's sense of humanitarianism and empathy, doesn't take away their unbecoming existence. So it matters little to point at the plurality of representational possibilities, like the 'other' moments of living in spite poverty. To live "in spite of" does not terminate or undo the conditions of continually recreated oppression. In a sense, to put in Jared Sexton's terms, a living death is as much a death as it is living. We thus have to contend with this disorganizing permanence or structure of the world. That is, what does it mean to have moments of laughter and dreaming in a world always already structured by the impulse to oppress and exploit?

Mpongo's images somewhat call us to ponder on this problematic durability of generalized marginality through the experiences of so called born frees. We have touched slightly on the fact the term itself has a penchant of being parasitic to blacks, while at the same time it exonerates whites from historical culpability. Historically the term, born free is associated with the 1966 drama with same title by James Hill which, by the way, Tommy Lee Wallace shot a sequel of in South Africa three decades later (1996). It's a story about an orphaned lioness called Elsa that was adopted by two white teenagers who battle for it to be freed from the zoo. Eventually Elsa is freed to live a life in the wild like all animals. But the story of the lioness, though it might be about the actual issue of endangered pieces, it clandestinely acts as a metaphor for human beings, black children or black people as children – hence analogous use of the "born free". Its production in Africa is also not just an issue of geographic and contextual coincidence. Like the film, the term extracts is assumptions from the typical colonial framework of human versus subhuman. But then for purposes of its renewed interpretation and expedient use in post 1994 South Africa, its colonial background is rarely factored in. And as Frank B. Wilderson III states somewhere that metaphors comes into being through a violence that kills, rather than merely exploits, the object so that the concept might live. Here the black dies again, so that ideological myth of unaffected children could live. Secondly, it is also not difficult to trace the classical case of the white burden and its civilizing impulse in the film.

In this sense, I agree with Mpongo when he says born frees can never be white because whites never suffered. The term can only refer to those who were historically under the guillotine of white racism. But there is a stubborn point that needs clarity. If blacks are the real born frees, and whites are not, can black children make claim to the term while at the same time in reality they are not free? On the other side of this logic is that, if whites have always lived a privileged life of democracy, freedom and agency, is it not supposable to argue that they are the real born frees? Some of these questions might require a larger space to be properly perused and engaged.

However it is quite an unfortunate thing that this term's preliminary premise have been uncritically accepted, even by those who agitate against its political limitations. But again, while these terms are always botched discursive representations, at the level of experience their violence is felt. There is a lot in the film's narrative, which is unavoidably analogous to the situation of colonial representation, subjection and oppression. Its logic borrows, almost profusely, from this lexicon. That is, the relation between slave and master, or colonizer and colonized operates within the sphere of both paternalism and dehumanization. Or as Hegel might put it, slavery was, despite its violence, a way of humanizing the slave. So black subjection isn't just dehumanization but also denigration. Fanon says "the terms the settler uses when he mentions the

native are zoological terms." Using cinema as one of his examples, Fanon argues that the white people satiate themselves through relentless racial humiliation of the black.

This visual pleasure garnered through denigration of blacks, not only gratifies the black middle class but the also proletariat class. Didn't Aime Cesaire say this already in Discourse On Colonialism? It is also no coincidence that large numbers of whites who immigrated to Africa immediately took on the role of the new master in Africa. Or worse, as Andile Mngxitama somewhere says, the white vagabond who looks at blacks with the stare of inherent superiority irrespective of class position. Fanon, again, tells of a similar encounter in the train, when an old Frenchman at pains to sow national pride, turned to him, the foreigner as a problem.

"It must be said in his defense that he stank of cheap wine; if he had been capable of it, he would have told me that my emancipated-slave blood could not possibly be stirred by the name of Villon or Taine."

Here Fanon meets not just the "intruding imago" as David Marriott might put it, and but the insignificance of his class positionality in an antiblack world. He is a slave amongst humans. This point illustrates and positions poor whites, fully, within the ambit of white supremacy and privilege. Fanon sympathetically implicates them despite their proletariat disposition. The old Frenchy understands that Fanon, despite his western education, cannot unblacken himself by quoting the French critic Hippolyte Taine. He's as irredeemable as he's inferior. Here we must split hairs, maybe to Mpongo's surprise and rupture, his subterranean universalization of the underprivileged, between the poor and the black. That is between Fanon's overdetermined existence and the old Frenchy's contingent suffering.

There's inferiority and animalization of blacks on one side, but there's also infantilization. Mpongo gets the emptiness of the born free concept, more so the ridiculous idea that he first is born free but will experience his freedom in the future. Secondly being free while his parents and his environment are denied the same freedom. This he shows more clearly in his photographs, more so the pictures around Marikana, marginalized families and communities. However what seems to elude Mpongo is the generalized infantilization of the black. That is, the juvenility that fixes him, his fathers and uncles in the category of perpetual minors. Blacks never grow old! As biko says, "blacks are asserting themselves in a society where they are being treated as perpetual under-16s."

The father is as much a boy, as his son. The mother is as much a girl as her daughter. This infantile and jungle status of the black encapsulates the black's generalized inferiority status. Critic Olu Oguibe described this as some form of ontologised loss on the part of blacks, when he reviewed the exchange between the white critic Thomas McEvilly and black artist Outtarra. He writes, "For Ouattara, though, the game is already over. It was over even before it began. It was over from the moment he was born, from the moment he was destined to be - designated as - an Other." Here Oguibe's proposition of "over" speaks to the existential vacuity and generalized interdiction that haunts blacks, as people who over-determined by gratuitous layers of human absence. Perhaps from this view we can say, black children can never be born free, but born dead, socially dead as it were. This angle isn't imagined or imaginable in Mpongo's photographic plenitude. It remains somewhat hinted, but not depicted. It is provoked but not invoked. Perhaps for now it is enough to say, we black children are nothing but our fathers and they are nothing but us. Let us let Fanon close it:

'Hardly has the second generation opened their eyes than from then on they've seen their fathers being flogged. In psychiatric terms, they are "traumatized" for life...After that, when it is their turn to be broken in, when they are taught what shame and hunger and pain are, all that is stirred up in them is a volcanic fury whose force is equal to that of the pressure put upon them. You said they understand nothing but violence? Of course; first, the only violence is the settler's; but soon they will make it their own...'

Born Frees

by: Sipho Mpongo

Domestic worker working at Inanda club, while the parents of the girls watching the Polo game. Sandton.
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Self made and art driven. Braamfontein.
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Longing to be sexy, What is sexy? in Saldanha.
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

"We are bokkoms". Velddrift.
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Vacant rich gold mine town, Carletonville.
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

A poor white family in Coronation Park.
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

What is next...(JJ Mulder) from Coronation Park.
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Mothering the motherless (Rudolph Mulder, 16 year old boy holding neighbor's child) from Coronation park.
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

"I see ghosts". Bloemfontein.
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

True leader (Ncane Mabuza)in Utah village.
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

South Africa is my home too (Samantha 5, from Ermelo, living with her mother and father).
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

South African Dream. Jane Furse.
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Determination in Qunu Village.
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Schizophrenia. Qakwini Village.
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Imagine. Port St Johns.
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Tracing the Real & the Incongrous Realities in an Archive of the Contemporary

Words by: Annemie Conradie & Natasha Norman

The bridge across the Ncome or Blood River, built to connect the two heritage sites that commemorate the 1838 battle between the Voortrekkers and the Amazulu, was closed when Wikus de Wet visited the area with his camera in August 2014. A contemporary aerial map [Fig 1] of the site shows the river punctuated on either side by two structures. On the left is the Bloodriver monument, inaugurated in 1971 and composed of 64 bronze replica ox-wagons drawn into laager formation. On the right bank is the Ncome Museum, its central structure designed to emulate the buffalo horn formation (impondo zenkomo), a strategy of attack initiated by King Shaka (c1787 -1828). This museum was opened in 1999, and part of the National Government's Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology Legacy Project redressing the exclusivity and bias of the nation's history under apartheid.

The designs of the two memorial sites are significant as both structures are designed according to the strategic battle formations of the people it commemorates. The bridge over the river was built to facilitate movement of visitors between the two sites, and to symbolise the postapartheid, 'rainbow nation' spirit of conciliation between the two former enemies (Marschall 2004:103). However, the bird's eye view presents the two memorials, ossified into their respective modes of defence or attack, remaining separate and apart.

This picture of the laager and the buffalo horn is instructive for contemplating how the postapartheid South African landscape is marked by the shifting ideological forces within the country and of people's relationship to the land. Looking from a 'post-rainbow nation' moment, de Wet and his two co-journeymen have created an archive of the contemporary. They have captured, through the lenses of their individual projects and subjective positions as young South African men, the oft paradoxical materialisations of how the democratic South Africa was imagined from the early 1990s.

Fig 1: Aerial view of the Blood River monument (left) and the Ncome Museum (right) on either sides of the Ncome River (formerly the Blood River, built on the site of the Battle of Blood River, fought on 16 December 1938.). Image: Google Maps (online 2015).

Wikus de Wet's engagement with the land, and people's relationship with it, reveals a palimpsest of layered and oft jarring inscriptions and through his eyes the viewer is shown the scars left upon the land, and its inhabitants, by former and contemporary hegemonies. His body of work presents opportunity for reflection on the myriad realities and lifeways of those inhabiting the land, the divergence and incongruity revealed in juxtaposing his images effecting inquiry as to contexts and causes. The photographer's eye has also sought out the creative and laborious ways in which inhabitants make the land their own, endow it with significance, their labour and struggles to make profits, make livings and make homes. De Wet's photographs in this project are further continuously oscillating in the dynamic between story and form, between the photographer's self-awareness as 'seeing-eye' and an incredible intimacy with his subjects.

DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY: REPRESENTING THE 'REAL' AND THE TWO-FOLD GAZE

De Wet describes himself first and foremost as documentary photographer, not an artist. Most importantly, he wants to tell stories (Ek wil stories vertel). He pursues his documentary work with an informed awareness of the complexity of that position both within the history of South African photography and international debates around the position of photographs in the space of art. In the context of this exhibition, de Wet's photographs are framed as art objects, but de Wet is adamant that despite this framing, they remain the work of a documentary photographer. In his insistence, we must recognise that the contextual information behind each image is of extreme importance.

Andy Grundberg – an American critic and scholar of photography – identifies the two-fold gaze of the art world at photographs as that of connoisseurs and contextualists. The former he defines as embracing photography's inclusion in museums, galleries and the art market where formal qualities are valued while the latter is identified as those who feel that photography's new "museumization" has robbed it of its

business of social meaning (Grundberg 1999: 167). Photography as a medium does engender a reliable and stable relationship between signifier and referent, the image and the thing – put more simply, that something has stood before the lens to produce an image. Yet both photographers and viewers are aware of the possibilities for invention and deception offered by the camera, today boosted by the wealth of digital tools of manipulation in post-production.

Produced within the Twenty Journey framework, de Wet's photographs hold a formal and aesthetic beauty particular to the nature of the camera and skill of the photographer, but they are – as de Wet insists - particular types of visual stories that address the stable relationship between signifier and referent. As Grundberg says,

A photograph traces something real, and it is the mission of the contextualists to open our ideas about art to accommodate this fact (Grundberg 1999: 171).

It is through the tracing of reality of experience that de Wet tells stories.

The commercial role of the documentary photographer trained to work for news media has found scope for greater agency on the part of the photographer, who can now control the display and consumption of their images within the politic of an art space. The translation of the image from news media to gallery brings with it a shift in its consumptive context to include that of art history. De Wet is acutely aware of these shifting contexts - having worked at freelance reportage photographer, he was confronted with the ethics of his craft as his camera embodied the eye of the public, forcing itself into acutely traumatic, private spaces.

In his images of the land, de Wet engages a particular depth of field that speaks to the luxury of space so many foreign visitors have noted about visiting South Africa. Vastness, loneliness and isolation are themes evoked from his particular gaze. Far from the empty land visualised and mythologised by de Wet's forefathers arriving at the Cape, his gaze speaks to an empathy with the great distances between communities, the complex relationship between space and destitution produced by the racist, expropriating laws of the union and apartheid governments. The space in de Wet's images speaks to the great divide between those who access resources, infrastructure and economy, and those who do not, and twenty years after 1994, those who do not are still predominantly black South Africans. The image of a mother and child outside a make-shift home, constructed partly from a discarded concrete road barrier [Fig. 2], shows them very physically isolated from the evident economy and infrastructure on the gentrified fringes of District 6. A settlement of new RDP (named after the African National Congress's Reconstruction and Development Programme) homes, in Kwezinaledi, near Lady Gray,[Fig. 3] seem equally remote within the dry winter landscape, both cocooned and cut-off from the economy of the rest of the country by majestic mountain peaks.

De Wet contains the tension of space as provoking both freedom and isolation in a number of his works. His camera records his gaze of wonder at the particular natural beauty of his country. Reverence is revealed in his portrayal of the seeming tensions of natural beauty and the daily hardship of surviving upon the land, echoed in images like Cattle and sheep grazing in Qunu [Fig. 4]. This is epitomised in the photograph of the young Xhosa initiate [Fig. 5] facing his journey to manhood alone in the land. It is clear from de Wet's imaging of the

landscape that South Africans have a specific identity defined by the demands of living in and claiming the land they inhabit.

In all instances, de Wet's gaze is one of engaged curiosity and self-awareness. This is perhaps most particularly evident in the incredible bodily closeness that he has with his subjects. The images of illegal mining demonstrates the extent to which subjects collaborate with de Wet. He was permitted to photograph the miners provided he did not reveal their identity in the images. This belies an incredible ability of de Wet to engage a deep level of trust with his subjects in a relatively short time of engagement. In the images of miners sifting rocks and washing sand, the camera is conspicuously close to the men. Using a 17-40 mm lens, the photographer leans over the shoulders of the men to capture their work [Fig. 6]. These are thus images taken from within the personal space of the subject and they have the endearing gaze of one wanting to see what the subject sees, to understand and show what the subject reveals. For a viewer, this creates a disarming sense of intimacy with the miners – 'illegal workers' who toil secretly, cautiously away from view. The demands of their physical labour become palpable in comparison to the small reward of a piece of gold that sits, a rice grain, in the hand of a labourer worn rough by the hard work of eking out a living. Perhaps the most confrontational of de Wet's images of bodily closeness is the marching EFF member who raises his boot at the camera at the same time that he fixes the lens with a steely gaze [Fig. 7]. In such an image one becomes self-conscious of the photographer's body in the face of such closeness to the subject, particularly given de Wet's choice to photograph this march with a 17mm lens, compelling him to come into close contact to take the photograph.

In some images the self-awareness of the photographer comes through with particular effect and one is able to muse on the curious character of de Wet who is invited to the initiation ceremony of his friend and Twenty Journey companion, Sipho Mpongo. The same figure also stands within the crowd of khaki-clad bidders at a wild life auction. In both images de Wet remains the outsider – not inside the kraal of either culture. This is suggested by the reframing of the camera's gaze by elements within the photograph such as the branches of the kraal or the heads of the auction members [Fig. 8; Fig. 9]. In this way, de Wet self-consciously creates a particular type of looking or representing a scene.

LOOKING BACK FROM THE FUTURE IMAGINED THEN

In looking through De Wet's photographs one is not only faced with the immense complexity and multiplicity of people's relationships to land, but through contextualised comparisons one can also explore disjunctions between imagined and ideal futures on the one hand, and lived realities within and upon the land on the other. This provides inroads for thinking about the imagining of the new nation and a re-imaging of its history and its people's identity.

The Cradock Four memorial – opened in 2001 to honour the activists brutally assassinated in 1985 by South African Secret Police - is shown by de Wet as abandoned and neglected [Fig. 10], its mangled and rusted balustrade a skeleton in the foreground echoing the concrete skeleton of the memorial it once fenced in. In Orania, de Wet photographs visitors at the busts of former apartheid leaders [Fig. 11.] ejected from public spaces in the newly democratic country, now

arranged on a koppie of the white, Afrikaner-only enclave. A sense of desolation permeates both scenes as the photographs document the abortive aspirations of commemorating and immortalising, of political acts of remembering deeply intertwined with conceptions of personal and group identity.

De Wet's photographs of housing developments are particularly insightful as it highlights the ways in which participation in democracy and the freedom to realise contemporary ideals is increasingly framed by corporate capitalism. He fixes the viewer's gaze upon the enormous gaps between, on the one hand privilege, ostentatious wealth and the power to shape and exploit the land, and on the other, dire poverty, the struggle to access land and its resources, and a population's subjection to the forces of big business under neoliberalism.

At Thaba Tholo game reserve and breeding farm in Thabazinbi, Limpopo province, private helicopters deliver prospective buyers to an auction of rare and endangered species. In the picture Game Buyer [Fig. 12] wildlife shoppers sit in the back of an open vehicle, the man paging through a catalogue of trophy game. The photograph is taken from above and next to the buyer sits what one assumes is his wife, herself a trophy with tan, breasts and blonde highlights artfully manipulated for ultimate visual effect. The couple is multiply framed: from above by the photographer's gaze; within the confines of the vehicle; and by the game fences that run along the road behind them. Here is a man who can purchase and build his dreams, who has the money to manipulate nature and fashion it to his will. This image is in stark contrast to depictions of subsistence or emergent farmers- some of them still boys -who make do with what they can to construct implements, enclosures or protection for themselves and their animals.

The building of dreams, and the promotion by corporate capitalism of the shapes that those dreams might take, is regarded with some irony in a photograph of a housing developer's advertisement in Bloemfontein, Orange Free State. Promoted with the catch phrases 'comfort, safety, investment', 'Eden Park' is presented as epitome of bourgeois, suburban bliss [Fig. 13]. In everything but the black models, this dream home is a simulacra of western, middle-class living: the architecture with arch, clay-looking roof tiles and classical columns, the green lawns and even the nuclear family. Promising to mold the rural landscape into this idyll, the image reveals significant assumptions about the aspirations of prospective buyers. "Can I be part of that family when I buy that house?" reads Wikus's caption to this photograph, highlighting for the viewer the limited freedom and individualism one has when imagining and building one's dreams through consumable ready-mades. His caption may also reveal something about the dream of taking control through consumption, not only of where one lives, and how, but also of one's belonging, in this instance within the family of the Rainbow Nation.

mages of low-income or RDP housing developments present a revealing foil to the middle-class dream of Eden Park. Photographs taken along the entire Twenty Journey show rows and neighbourhoods of the mostly square RDP houses in various stages of development, completion or decay, inhabited and customised. Whether photographed in the Eastern Cape or KwaZulu-Natal, whether situated amongst parched koppies or green vineyards, the houses and the developments look the same. The photograph of houses under construction in De Doorns [Fig 14] sets

the eye and body of the viewer between two rows of concrete skeletons. One is reminded of international style solutions to problems of mass housing following the second world war, of its dreams of universalism and the terrific failure of city planners and architects to acknowledge local social, infrastructural or climatic particularities. Here too, in the interest of cost effective and swift delivery on pocketed government tenders, the heterogeneity of South African cultures and lifeways, and the country's climatic realities are denied and suppressed. When contrasted to de Wet's images of the ways in which people are living, and the types of families that inhabit dwellings all over the country, the unsound ideals of both the RDP and the bourgeois idyll are highlighted. As such, de Wet's photographs show how democracy is envisioned and exercised in terms of consumption, and how freedom is equated to the achievement of a particular middleclass ideal. Such dreams can be fulfilled, capitalism promises, providing one can afford the freedom to choose from its array of ready-mades.

A stage for readymade fun is that of the holiday playground of Diaz Strand in Mosselbay [Fig. 15]. Shot from the top of the waterslide, de Wet's lens positions the viewer as if ready to take off and one's gaze is guided into and across the abandoned waterpark. Here one finds a surplus of housing: luxury, seaside apartments standing empty. Densely packed to optimise the view, these apartments are second homes or provide rental accommodation for those visitors who can afford to spend holidays away from home. Devoid of the bodies at play and leisure, the emptiness and coldness of the wintery scene magnifies the artifice of the environment and its guarantee of fun and enjoyment. Upon a second look down the blue slope one notices that the waterslide is broken, its defectiveness potentially lethal. The focus on this defect, the hint at a possible nightmare, deepens the exposure of the dream and artifice sold by this complex.

De Wet traces a particular reality in his experience of landscape through Twenty Journey. In some instances it is the juxtaposition of seemingly incompatible realities taken by a single lens that tells his story of a landscape.

In his photograph of the Inanda Polo Club in Sandton [Fig. 16], founded in the early 1930s, de Wet positions the pitch as a manicured theatre against the backdrop of the central business

ten deaths, including that of two police officers and two security guards.

De Wet's photographs of Marikana and the nearby Nkaneng informal settlement speak of caution – how does one represent the site of such trauma? For him, the photographer has a responsibility towards the people he photographs. Aware of the very real impact of his presence on his subjects and his own subjective position on his acts of representation, he feels entrusted with the responsibility of representing accurately what people show and share with him. It is for this reason that his photographs form part of essays and are always accompanied by notes or interviews with subjects. He tells of meeting Shadrack Mtshamba, one of the mineworkers who narrowly escaped death on the 16th of August. Mtshamba continues to suffer from nightmares of the day's events and says, "That memory will come back. The pictures of what happened will come back."

How to represent the nightmares, the unspeakable suffering of fellow human beings? How to represent in ways that may speak to the viewer without indulging in spectacle and sensation of violence and suffering? It seems as though de Wet sought answers to these

district characterised by the glass, steel and concrete of big business. Faint clouds of dust rise as thoroughbred horses and trim riders pursue the seemingly timeless game of the English gentry. It is not only the heritage of the game, and the cost of pursuing it that speaks of privilege, but also the very soil upon which it is taking place. Hectares of prime real estate worth hundreds of millions, utilised here for recreation and not business or housing, contributes to the conspicuous consumption of the club members.

In de Wet's same lens and at a distance of less than 70 kilometres as the crow flies northwest of the Sandton club is Marikana. On the 16th of August 2012, Marikana became the site of the most terrible massacre and the worst instance of police brutality seen in South Africa since the fall of apartheid. From 9 August tensions at Lonmin platinum mine in North West province escalated as miners continued their strike in demand of a wage increase, of safer working conditions and improvement to squalid living conditions. Following orders to disperse and lay down weapons, the South African Police Service opened fire on the workers, killing 34 people and injuring 78. Violent confrontations prior to the 16th resulted in another ten deaths, including that of two police officers and two security guards.

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How to represent the nightmares, the unspeakable suffering of fellow human beings? How to represent in ways that may speak to the viewer without indulging in spectacle and sensation of violence and suffering? It seems as though de Wet sought answers to these questions by focusing on the land – the site and cause of the violence - rather than those involved. In the Marikana photographs, one is only shown the koppie where miners gathered and were gunned down [Fig. 17], and in another the lone yellow marker, the trace in the dry, grey landscape that testifies: here a human was murdered, here his body fell [Fig. 18].

CONCLUSION

The careful and probing witness born by de Wet's lens is testament to how the recent history of people's relationships to land can be investigated and imaged. The Twenty Journey is expansive, dispersed over the three projects and perspectives of the young South African men who created it, with its manifestations in the art gallery, this catalogue publication, the website and a Facebook page. Such an archive of the contemporary becomes a monument to the recent past that is fragmented, polyvocal and dynamic in its memorialising of people's struggles and victories upon the land. Access is not limited to the gallery, or the publication. "This project is too big", notes De Wet, "the more I photograph, the more complex it becomes". What this archive further testifies to, is this overwhelming complexity. It also shows how people, the climate and larger, local and global economic

Fig 18: Wikus de Wet. 30 September 2014. An evidence marker to where one of the miners that was shot dead was found.

forces prohibit any formation to remain unchanged for too long, whether of state, social-cultural formations, or the land itself.

This balancing of tensions that arises in an overall view of de Wet's photographic essay identifies a young South African photographer of extraordinary talent and engagement. His awareness of the history of representation in South Africa emerges as his strength in evolving a new and informed documentary vision that grapples not only with the connoisseurship of the photograph but also a personal honesty to the importance of context in reading the photograph in a contemporary milieu.

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FIGURES:

Fig 2:
Wikus de Wet. 28 November, 2014. A structure built by Sean and Monica in District six where they live with their two year old daughter, Monisha.

Fig 3:
Wikus de Wet. 10 August, 2014. RDP houses in Kwezinaledi.

Fig 4:
Wikus de Wet. 14 August, 2014. Cattle and sheep grazing in Qunu.

Fig 5:
Wikus de Wet. 24 December, 2014. A Xhosa initiate running in a field in Nqamakwe

Fig 6:
Wikus de Wet. 27 September, 2014. A teenager turns a customised gas cylinder filled with metal balls to crush the gold ore they extracted from under the ground.

Fig 7:
Wikus de Wet. 16 December, 2014. A Member of the EFF during the National People's Assembly at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein.

Fig 8:
Wikus de Wet. 23 December, 2014. Sipho Mpongo in a kraal at the start of celebrating his manhood after he finished his initiation

Fig 9:
Wikus de Wet. 17 September, 2014. Prospective buyers view one of the buffalos named Jonathan who is on auction. Jonathan sold for R5.8 million on the auction.

Fig 10:
Wikus de Wet. 22 July, 2014. The neglect of the Cradock Four Memorial site that was opened on the 6th of May 2011.

Fig 11:
Wikus de Wet. 31 October, 2014. People on the hill looking at the busts of prominent Apartheid figures in Orania

Fig 12:
Wikus de Wet. 17 September, 2014. Prospective buyers look at the catalogue while driving through the camp to view the animals on auction.

Fig 13:
Wikus de Wet. 23 October, 2014. Can I be part of that family when I buy that house?

Fig 14:
Wikus de Wet. 4 December, 2015. RDP houses being built

Fig 15:
Wikus de Wet. 1 July, 2014. Diaz Strand.

Fig 16:
Wikus de Wet. 28 September, 2014. Inanda Polo Club in Sandton, Johannesburg.

Fig 17:
Wikus de Wet. 29 September, 2014. The koppie in Marikana where striking miners gathered.

Land

by: Wikus de Wet

RDP Houses in Kwezinaledi
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Benoni Gold
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Inanda Polo Club
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Thabo Tholo
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Thabo Tholo
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

EFF Supporter
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

"Mayibuye iAfrika" (translates fo 'bring back Africa')
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Stuart Malony
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Reginald Nondala
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Willowmore
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Cradock Four Memorial
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Dias Strand, Mosselbay
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

RDP houses in Abbotsdale
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Marikana
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Blood River
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

The Spectacle of Strange?

Words by: Lindokuhle Nkosi

"It would seem the very denial of dreaming that society seems to impose on black folks, while it hasn't made us dream less, does seem to punish us for what dreams we do have."

Kevin Young
The Grey Album

In the clutches of the white photographer, the camera is as light as a gun aimed by policeman at a black boy.

Images taken:

- In De Doorns, empty unfunished structures force themselves tightly out of the ground. RDP housing- a forest of brick, and sand and cement. They seem to push against each other, a mouth with too many teeth. And in front, a turgid mound of sand impaled under a wooden cross as though to remind us that the state-subsidised structures might as well be a graveyard.

-In Worcestor, a man is cornered like a wounded animal. Standing where the walls meet, his eyes are startled, his shoulders hunched. The massive Teddy Bear behind him, however, seems unperturbed.

- In Mitchell's Plein the boy is suspended horizontally in mid-air. His body twists, a mobius strip of misshapen skin and sky and blood and bone. Shattered glass paves the path, a broken river. The not-so-yellow brick road.

-In Upington, currogated iron that flashes hot white draws lines on either side of the misshapen head. He eyes look at us, but we aren't certain what he sees.

- There's a sister in a white habit. We know this even though we never really get to see her. What we see; a white vest worn over a white shirt, a silver cross on a white rope lightly lying on her chest. In another image, the figure in white has her back to us, the image repeating itself in a puddle of water.

- In Potchefstroom, the decapitated body begins mid-way through the back, and the legs that pour out of denim shorts are caught and puddle in a pair of white socks.

-At the fun fair we find a red-head in wheelchair; a snow-capped head with an arched or humped back.

- In Johannesburg, more disjointed pieces. Floating heads in Panama hats watching Polo. Idiosyncrasy- A characteristic, habit, mannerism or the like, that is peculiar to an individual/ a distinctive or peculiar feature or characteristic of a place or thing.

Idiosyncrasy- A characteristic, habit, mannerism or the like, that is peculiar to an individual/ a distinctive or peculiar feature or characteristic of a place or thing.

Now, to say you are documenting idiosyncrasies says little-to-nothing. Existing somewhere between fact, fiction and feeling; "idiosyncrasy" tells us where to locate the camera, how wide to cut the frame. While it does not propose a thematic link, it does speak to the posture and position of the photographer. About the planets and stars and suns that compose his cosmology. About the ghosts that push and prod. About the impulses he reacts to when he points and clicks, when he points and shoots, when he points and frames. It tells us something about how he uses his camera, of white South African ideas of essentialism and exceptionalism, of reverence and importance, of dignity and deference.

Imagination is the realm of the white man. The black artist must just follow, carefully towing the line, straddling the line, walking the line. Dragging behind them, bound by rope, the impossibility of being black, of being an artist.

Now, what it means to be a white artist is never having to explain. This is the true unbearable lightness of being. The bastardised buoyancy of knowing, absolutely, that the bungee cord will never break. That you will never land face down on the ground, and break. The cord will always snap back, snaking through the sky, pulling you with it. It will not break, and neither will you.

Snapshots have always existed, for black people, as sites of struggle. Within the delineations of a photograph we find content and contestation. These light-photo's provide us with an opportunity to create counter-hegemonic images. To document. To construct a black aesthetic. Photo's can give and take, expand understandings or shrink them. Photographs can devastate both the seer and the seen.

Black artistry carries a particular burden. What W.E.B Du Bois termed "Double Consciousness", the sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of the other. Each artist takes it on unknowingly. It is the withdrawn and thunderous dark sky under which we dream, breathe, live, create. And that sky is heavy, always threatening to split herself apart and pelt sharp broken fragmentations down on the black artist. This unique weight is the heaviness of never walking alone, of

carrying nations and 5000 years of history in your back pocket. When you speak to the black artist, you will understand that his voice is always hoarse. Cause and effect: you tire of speaking when every word you utter is meant to be representative of a tribe, chosen or forced, regardless of whether or not one affiliates with any.

The artist becomes the lonely truth-speaker, charged with the task of forever explaining the black condition to white people, to black people. Of having their work only distil down to one thing, their melanated skin and whether or not it means that they came from a broken home, grew up in a shack, performed any rituals that deviated them from the "normal path" of life, and landed them on this self-alienating journey. As though drinking blood-water and eating flesh-bread were a better kind of cannibalism.

Under Sean Metterlerkamp's gaze, the white body is never intact. It's somehow disembodied, floating, fragmented. The white body exist in pieces- a puzzle that forces the viewer to be involved, to complete the image. To paint, with their empathy and history, a finished pentimento.

The breaks do more than disrupt our way of seeing, they distort the ways in which we engage with the image and comprehend it. The splinters force the viewer to insert themselves into the fissures. The breaks allow the subjects to never become that, a subject at the end of a barrel of a camera. The white body, relying on our empathy and imagination, remains human and three-dimensional, irreducible to stereotypes and flat platitudes. By denying the ability to actually see, the viewer becomes a spectator but the subject remains alive, stretching outside of the frame, living beyond the image and in the imaginative faculty. In the frame, the white subject is protected. The ones unprotected by the frame are the ones unprotected by society. The under-privileged ones, the dirty ones, the black ones, the little ones; they all appear in full. Snatched from their context, they are imprisoned in the delineations of Sean Metterlekamp's eye. The photographs produced here will mislead those who are vulnerable to them. You will not find yourself here, bathing in dignity. Instead you will be broken, bored into, bent over, black. In this photographer's frame, the disenfranchised body is the body cornered.

In an unconventional family portrait shot in Onverwacht, a man sits staring at us. He's surrounded by three small children in various states of undress, a head pokes into the image from the bottom right corner of the frame. Metterlerkamp captions the image " Family portrait of 'I cannot recall their names but remembered the stories we shared.'" The story he shares:

"Onverwacht is a quaint Afrikaans community with neat dirt roads, healthy trees and it is filled with BLACKS! and COLOUREDS! Excluding the two other WHITES! shuffling about, I was the only WHITE! I found the village to be an anomaly because of this and because of that.

I stuck out like a sore one. The stale dog squinted at me from behind the fence and snapped an embarrassed bark at me. A COLOURED! slash BLACK! family shared a laugh with me from their stoep and invited me in. In that moment, from behind the fence, my daily confusion faded and I understood a little bit more of this and perhaps just a little bit more of that."

This anecdote, like the images he makes, is also a snapshot. It's a picture in which he turns the camera on himself and reveals the thinking that guides his gestures and his lens. We see here, with a little more clarity, Metterlerkamp's fascination with the freakish other. The Caps-lock, exclamation point other. BLACK slash COLOURED slash POOR slash NOTFULLYABLED. The people photographed exist as canvasses on which we can pour out our judgements. Where we can tut-tut-tut, and point and stare from the safe distance of two-dimensionality. The artist has positioned himself behind the clerical fence, and he stays there, peering at the weird and wonderful freaks. In his anthropomorphisizing presence, even dogs become embarrassed.

Metterlerkamp feels like "an alien". "I've never really felt like I belong anywhere. As a kid I moved around a lot," he explains, "and so I kind of existed in my own head." He lived abroad for a while, in London and New York but upon returning to South Africa, he began to view the country differently, to notice things that had never commanded his attention before.

"I have like a love-hate relationship with South Africa," he says. "When I managed to escape South Africa, I could not connect to any of the 'weirdness' that I'm used to at home. It was only a realisation once I came home. I began to hear all the sounds, all the sights and the smells. I like how weird this is and how strange this place makes me feel. I feel now I understand South Africa better. So I decided to stop making all this escapist work and deal more with reality. With the day to day." The work he's referring to are the music videos and highly stylised portraits he used to shoot. Most notably, he filmed a short video "Zef Side" featuring the controversial collective, Die Antwoord. He decided to "deal head on with things. And so I decided to put myself in uncomfortable situations as a manner of challenging myself and learning. I'm attracted to the dark side of things. I'm interested in finding things that don't work and finding out why they don't work. So for me, exploring idiosyncrasies means looking at the [juxtaposition] of the weird and the wonderful, the good and the bad. I decided for this work to just respond to my instinct."

THE SPECTACLE OF STRANGE?

The square face-brick block has no windows, only a metallic vent and a white, flat slab roof. It's stifling, stuffy. It would be imposing if it didn't have a hole blown into its side, spilling tangled wires like the entrails of a gutted beast. The sky is as hard as the arid ground beneath it. Impenetrable. A billowing cloud casts an ominous shadow. Alien Abduction. A black child sits on the sandy ground. Dust is the brown of the skin, of the skinny angled legs, of the ground she sits on. Although she hides her face behind a blonde-haired, blue-eyed doll; we feel we can still see her. The man wears bulky leather shoes. Bending down, he grabs the iguana by it's scaly red tale. He looks down at the ground. Body turned away from us. Visage invisible. A man waits at a concrete bus-stop, looking out at the road. The stop was painted once. Bright, solid colours. Blocks and lines. The paint has faded now. The naked man's skin is glistening with what could be sweat. Is he running away from the camera or towards something else? If you just saw the head, you would believe the bull to still be alive. The eye, while crying blood, is still looking, still searching. Resting on its own dismembered body, the red of the blood bounces off the patchy blue wall. The bananas are covered by blanket. Their thick, green skin may not be sufficient to insulate them from the cold. Walking past the pink wall, her purple dress streams out behind her. A green sign sells funeral plans, she covers her head with a jersey.The Tin Men stand guard, watching their colony from a 360 degree view. A black man in jeans is strewn on the ground. Playing dead or practising. With their back turned towards us, the heads float under straw. Some of the body- never all. Cows are wealth. Black

blood fertilises the ground in Marikana. The legs are balanced on cans of baby food. A rudimentary circus act. Blacks on the green when it's not so green. Some reflective surfaces will distort your image. Some eyes will look and not see.

Living on the road, the journey forces the photographer into perpetual foreignness. He is no longer at home, and stays nowhere long enough to attempt to temporarily construct one and so he flits, like a shadow person, in and out of our consciousness, in and out of his own. He will come alive at times, when the perfect image makes itself, when the bulb flashes and the shutter clicks but still, in his own words he will remain an alien. Social distance reduces empathy. It revels in the spectacle, in the bizarre; creating the other from those who belong. Forcing them to be as tired, as strange and as lonely as the lensmen.

White South Africans will generally attest to their feelings of foreignness. As settled sedimentation of the colonial project, they feel themselves existing in place of porcelain fragility, as though one day, the 500 year old system that maintains them might just give out right under their feet. Their pedagogy allows for them to feel like outsiders, while never recognising those who belong. They can create "the other", centering themselves as the norm and still feel as though they validly occupy the margin. Sean Meterlerkamp speaks as though his images are self-portraits, every snap containing pieces of him; but when he raises the camera to subjects similar to himself, he can not allow them to occupy the frame. He can not allow himself to occupy the frame. And this then is the idiosynchrasy- the imagined porcelain fragility of whiteness.

Idiosyncrasies

by: Sean Metelerkamp

Port Elizabeth
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Lady Grey
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Qunu
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Hluhluwe
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Thohoyandou
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Pretoria
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Johannesburg
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Marikana
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Onverwacht
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Batshobela
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Upington
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Victoria West
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Phillips Town
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Bloemfontein
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Nqamakwe
2014
Digital Photographic Print
on 308gsm Hahnemuhle photo rag
40,5 x 51cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

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Curator’s Biography.

Cape Town based Khanyisile Mbongwa is an award winning performance and installation artist/ curator, who uses movement, poetry and sculptural works in her practice. She has a strong passion for youth development, which has formed a focus in her career.

In 2006, she was amongst the founding members of a robust and innovative arts collective called Gugulective, focusing on performance-based practices around re-imagining the psychological and physical spaces of the township using photomontage, video and sound.

She exhibited and performed in and around Cape Town and Johannesburg, in Berlin, Spain, Pakistan, Scotland, Hamburg, New York, Switzerland and Sri Lanka. In 2014 she interned at GIPCA under the supervision of Jay Pather, curated the PreLIFE talks and assisted with the general running of Life Art Festival. Engaged in various curatorial and artistic projects, in 2014 she won the Africa Centre - Artist In Residency Laureate and took up residency at JIWAR in Spain in 2015. Continuing to create and curate, Mbongwa was the Special Guest at Liste Art Fair Basel 2015.

As part of Cape Town Art Week, Mbongwa curated a collaborative performance piece titled ‘My Body Is Not An Apology’ involved was Buhlebezwe Siwani and Thando Doni. In 2013, she curated ‘Demonstrations: Performing Being Black’ at Brundyn+ Gallery, a two part exhibition that focused on photography, installation pieces and performances in township public spaces. In 2012, together with the late Unathi Sigenu, she won the MTN New Contemporary Artist Award. In 2010 she had a solo experimental exhibition at Blank Project Space entitled ‘Ndizakuyivula Ibhayibile’.

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