



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

Saturday, 14 March 2020



Sibusiso Bheka | *untitled* | 2017-2019 | (courtesy of the artist and the author)

1

IN THE PICTURE

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Sometimes one needs a catalytic moment or episode to bring into focus in an articulate manner a number of thoughts and ideas, a bit like when we look at stars one by one for an extended period of time: we appreciate them in their uniqueness and yet we miss the constellation they form together; then a swift change in our position allows us a different perspective and connections emerge.

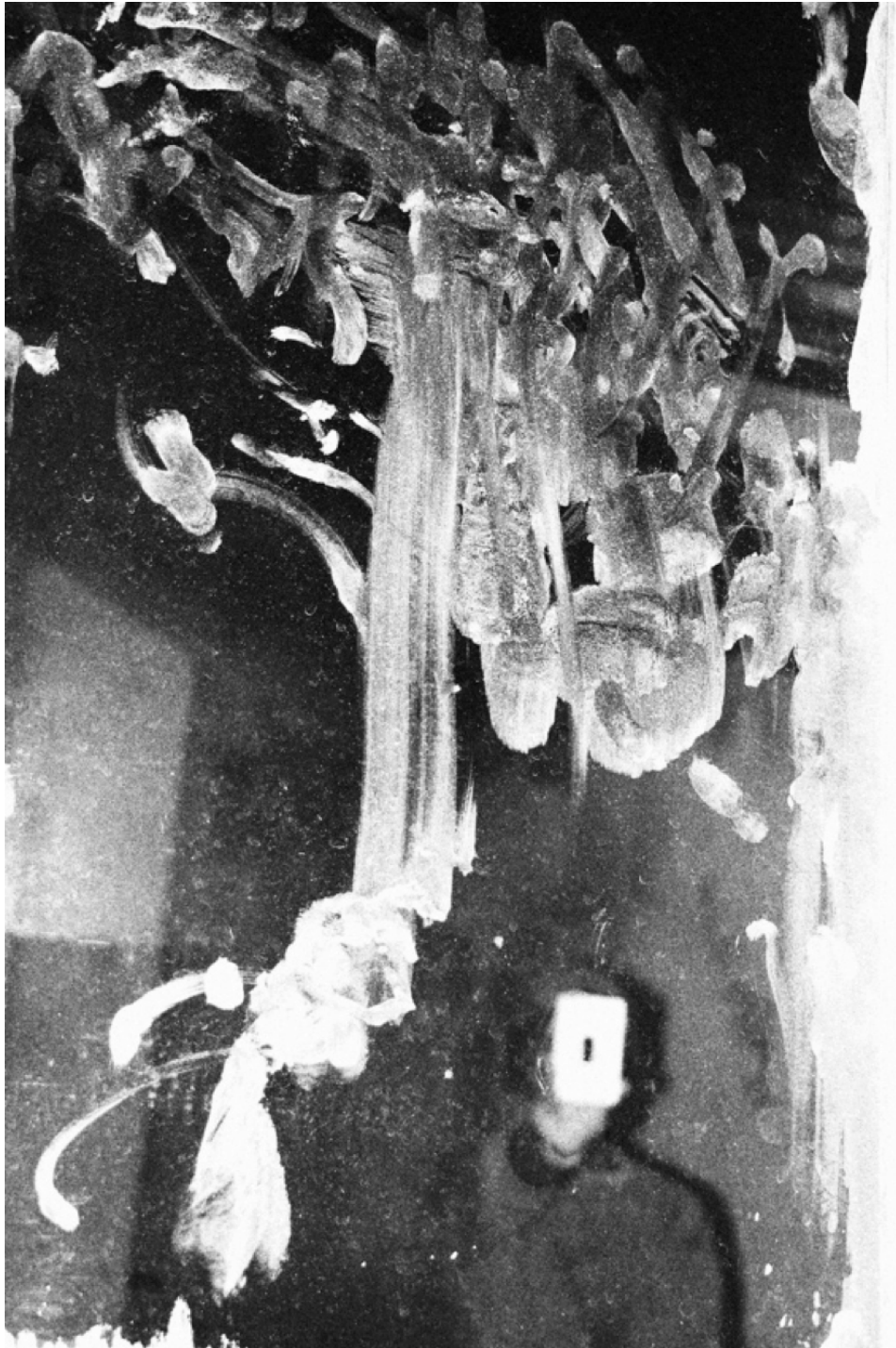
My exchange with the [Of Soul and Joy](#) (OSJ) photography project provided such an occasion for reflection on the current photographic language in South Africa. Last year marked the seventh anniversary of the initiative begun in 2012 by Rubis Mécénat and Easigas in Thokoza, a township in the East Rand, southeast of Johannesburg. Its aim is to develop skills in the field of photography amongst the township's vulnerable youth by providing an understanding of the medium and by offering a platform to reflect on its opportunities and challenges, both under a personal and professional perspective. The project organizes workshops and promotes encounters with professionals in the industry; it also offers students the opportunity to participate in events and showcase work both locally and abroad.

It was within this context that I was invited by photographer Jabulani Dhlamini, who has been the coordinator of this program since 2015, to meet the students for a conversation about the fine arts side of the photography market, and to have an exchange on the work prepared for the festival to be held at Buhlebuzile secondary school in Thokoza.

In the 1990s, Thokoza was the scene of violent clashes between supporters of the Inkatha Freedom Party and the African National Congress; Khumalo Street in particular was a notorious no-go zone. The iconography of Thokoza at that time was mostly dominated by intense and graphic images such as those produced by the members of the [Bang Bang Club](#); there was an urgency for dramatic visual responses to the disorders that occurred almost daily in the township and the disruptions caused by death and displacement.

After 25 years of democracy, the young practitioners of the project, many of whom grew up in the township, had been invited to respond to the theme *Khumalo Street, post 1994*, reflecting on the local history, its legacy, and the challenges and changes of their time. In the words of [Jabulani Dhlamini](#): “Young people have a responsibility to know and understand their history and, in the process, use creative platforms to tell their stories boldly. The works created by the *Of Soul and Joy* students seek to reflect on and capture a Khumalo Street that is free from political violence but at the same time interrogate its current state.”

I reviewed the work of eight photographers, each presenting a profound and empathic impulse towards self-reflection and the definition of a personal and collective identity. The urgency to understand the past and situate themselves both as individuals and as part of the community emerged very clearly in each body of work. As the presentations went by, I was struck by a visual approach that was strongly intimate and that shied away from the visual conventions of a journalistic essay to embrace story telling with a strong fictional component.



Thembinkosi Hlatswayo | *untitled* | 2017-2019 | (courtesy of the artist and the author)

Most of the photographers had decided to engage with the theme of Khumalo Street from a very personal perspective, often featuring in the images themselves, recreating memories, making use of objects that form part of their daily life.

Lunathi Mngxuma presented a series of womanly figures whose faces are hidden by objects commonly found in township households; the series references the fact that mothers tried to protect their sons from being 'conscripted' by the factions in conflict during the turbulent 1990s; they disguised them as girls and kept them close to home.

A wall around the house is the main character of Sibusiso Bheka's nocturnal scenes in the series *Stop Nonsense*. Built to protect the family and to avoid conflict with the neighbours, this architectural element becomes a metaphor for the complex social interactions in Phola Park. The painterly stills are evocative and moody, deliberately abstract, quiet.

Theminkosi Hlatshwayo's *Slaghuis* in particular hit a nerve. "Slaghuis" is Afrikaans for slaughterhouse, and a vernacular expression for a place of violence. Hlatshwayo grew up in a home that was also a tavern, and this exposed him to realities unsuited to a young person. In the series he confronts his past trauma in a stream of consciousness in which he appears almost as a ghostly presence. The crucial questions underpinning such an intimate body of work seem to be: "where am I here? Did I emerge unscathed, or have I lost myself?" The images are imbued with tension; some of the prints' surfaces are scratched and reassembled, then photographed again. They are difficult to describe - mostly they depict nothing, then one notices a limb, the profile of a chair, and suddenly they hit the viewer in the gut. One perceives the quest for a place of refuge and self-individuation in a scenario of loss and violence.

In his statement for the 2019 Cap prize Hlatshwayo [writes](#): "A drunken violence A drunken depression A drunken fear A drunken last A drunken happiness A drunken abuse A drunken love A drunken rape A drunken fuck A drunken anxiety A drunken death A Societal trauma. The personal is political. The microcosm is the macrocosm. And vice versa."

The last line made me think of Jo Ractliffe's *Nadir*, realized between 1986 and 1988 during the height of South Africa's States of Emergency. The sophisticated montages, depicting feral dogs in apocalyptic



Lunathi Mngxuma | *untitled* | 2017-2019 | (courtesy of the artist and the author)

landscapes, are akin to the symbolic and metaphorical realm and quite removed from the mainstream documentary work of the same period, with its clarity of narrative, coherence and sharp tonal contrasts. Yet the images are full of political intensity; the animal figures roaming in barren surroundings, rubbish dumps or abandoned industrial areas convey a sense of profound dread and displacement, evoking the trauma sweeping the country at the time.

In a similar way, Hlatshwayo does not take self-portraits, but he is in the picture, unequivocally; he straddles social issues and emotional territory with equal incisiveness, with a language made of photography, drawing and collage.

This was my catalytic moment: it made me see a way of being in the picture, different from the *modus operandi* of contemporary self-portraiture that on our side of the world is deeply indebted to Rotimi Fani-Kayode. Such approach was, and continues to be, instrumental in the debate on identity and politics of representation. Quoting Fani-Kayode: “My identity has been constructed from my own sense of otherness, whether cultural, racial or sexual. The three aspects are not separate within me. Photography is the tool by which I feel most confident in expressing myself. It is photography therefore – Black, African, homosexual photography – which I must use not just as an instrument, but as a weapon if I am to resist attacks on my integrity and, indeed, my existence on my own terms” (1).

Prominent examples are Zanele Muholi’s [Somnyama Ngonyama](#) and, going back a few years, the work of Berni Searle, in particular the *Colour Me* series. More recently, digital networks and social media such as Instagram have also influenced artistic practice, giving impulse to the performativity that is so pervasive in [photography today](#) and making the representation of the self practically ubiquitous, whether as a selfie on the fly or as an elaborate staged affair. [Tony Gum](#) comes to mind: her carefully constructed portraits came to the fore through the author’s digital presence, and then subsequently migrated from the screen to the gallery wall. Phumzile Khanyile’s *Plastic Crowns* chronicles femininity and aspects of women’s lives through a series of softly focused and gritty confessional images recreated from the author’s own experiences.

Another example is the work of [Lebohang Kganye](#), who engages with her family history in *Ke Lefa Laka: Heir-story* and with the memories linked to her mother in her series *Ke Lefa Laka: Her-story*. Whether appearing in a scenography of life-size silhouettes to re-enact the salient events of her grandfather’s



life or in photomontages combining pictures of her mother with self-portraits wearing the same attire, Kganye doubles as performer, plying her body much like an actor would do, and director.

The 19th century novel might be considered one of the main modes of reflection on the human condition, surely more accessible and in some cases more poignant than the philosophical treatise; similarly one could argue that some TV series are the contemporary incarnation of the novel, fulfilling the same function of platform to make stories talking about humanity available to the large public. Bringing the comparison further to include photography, the shift from a predominant documentary or reportage approach to a visual language that allows for nuances and magical representations of reality is noticeable.

The photographic series discussed are the visual equivalents of short stories, or orally transmitted tales; they are no less effective in conveying memories and accounts of events than news articles, and the fictional element allows for different avenues of enquiry and modes of understanding of the highly personal and inevitably fragmented perceptions of the world.

(1) "Rotimi Fani-Kayode (In Memoriam)", *Autograph* Newsletter, No. 9, December 1989/January 1990.

Federica Angelucci graduated with an Honours degree in Political Sciences. She is one of the senior partners at Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg, heading up the gallery's photographic programme. Since joining the gallery in 2007 she has regularly edited monographs and curated solo exhibitions for the photographers represented by the gallery: Edson Chagas, Pieter Hugo, Zanele Muholi, Mame-Diarra Niang, Jo Ractliffe, Viviane Sassen and Guy Tillim. Among the group shows she has curated are *After A* (Atri, 2010) and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (Cape Town, 2011).