

Sassen, R. EMMANUEL EXPLORES EVOLUTION OF LIFE in Cue, Grahamstown, July

What does your culture do to a baby boy, a young man entering the army, a bridegroom — to ensure that he is recognised by you as a man? Anthropologist Victor Turner first made the notion of liminality sexy in academia, allowing the potency, magic and nakedness of the initiate to throw light on a reading of non-western social practices. Turner was looking at specific and what he considered to be primitive cultures, which either existed outside of western culture or were determined by ritual gesture.

In *Transitions*, Paul Emmanuel considers liminality through the social rituals which frame it—the circumcising of a male baby, the shaving of the head of an army incumbent, the wedding ceremony, dress ritual and a point of nebulous departure. Eighteenth century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau once said: “Man is born free but is everywhere in chains”.

Rules of Life

Emmanuel’s series of images relate quintessentially to this, offering a gloss on the set of rules that make us human and define us in the society which we call our own. His focus draws from within his own broad social values, as white male, but the images defy direct links and leap off into the ephemeral, rendering the overall statement of *Transitions* a profundity which pushes the cultural content over into the universal. Understanding the framing of that liminality, being on the margins, provokes an engagement with the personal—you can only look at the anti-liminal gestures Emmanuel represents, through your own cultural values.

A middle-aged man steps up to make a speech at a party. He puts on his jacket in order to do so, a gesture about respect and convention. It’s subtle and unobvious, far from that of circumcising a neo-natal boy, or from marrying in a religious context, or from having one’s head shorn preparatory to entering into the army. As such, it is very provocative and becomes about identification.

So, a penis is a signifier, as are hair and clothing. It is what we do to these things that give us a sense of belonging. How does one slip the boundaries of liminality and shift, from being an outsider to an insider?

Life Transitions

Each culture has its own initiation imprints that define its members and celebrate qualities it deems important. In making these drawings that glance deeply at transitions into different stages of life, Emmanuel doesn’t critique the gestures. He doesn’t critique the society, which is of his own ken. He doesn’t point political fingers at the forced transition that young white men were compelled to make in conscription into the national defence force. He acknowledges these gestures for the shift in values and self-identification that they represent.

He engages with the freshly circumcised discomfort of the neo-natal, not that different from the freshly shorn head of the young man about to serve his country. He is new, he is

vulnerable, and he has been made by society to appear in a particular manner. The final set of images in Emmanuel's series annotates contemporary liminality.

Complex World

The hurried and blurred coming and going of nameless faceless individuals through a busy turnstile becomes a metaphor for that point just before transition, just before the initiate is stripped clean, preparatory to being broken or shaved or renamed or ritually extinguished and relit, and before he becomes a part of a new world.

As Emmanuel articulates, our world is a complex nexus of values, some diluted over time, but practised with unquestioning consistency. It's about holding on to an evanescent sense of stability in a constantly evolving world.

Transitions is at the Alumni Gallery, Albany History Museum daily, from 9.30am to 5pm. A version of this article appears in the exhibition catalogue.