

Watermeyer, N. MORTALITY, VULNERABILITY, MUTABILITY, in *Classic Feel* magazine, Desklink Media, Johannesburg, South Africa, December

Paul Emmanuel was the featured artist at this year's Joburg Art Fair. Natalie Watermeyer spoke to the artist about *Transitions*, a multimedia project in which he attempts to capture the fleeting moments of an identity in flux.

At the core of Paul Emmanuel's *Transitions* project is a short experimental film and a series of five drawings, each made up of five sequential images. These capture progressive moments during a significant event in the formation of a male identity: the first shows a male infant being circumcised; the second, the military head shaving of a new recruit; the third, the crowning of the groom during a Maronite Catholic Wedding; the fourth, an older man being helped with his jacket; and the last, a blurred rendering of the turnstiles at a station, an open-ended metaphor for death.

Throughout, Emmanuel is working with ideas around photography, in particular, 'Why we take photographs, why we want to hold on to moments.. and how those sorts of moments lose all of their power after we die and take on other kinds of power.' He quotes Susan Sontag: 'A photograph is only a fragment and with the passage of time its moorings become unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading'. But it is another of Sontag's quotes that comes to mind most often in considering Emmanuel's work: 'All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability.'

*Transitions*, as with much of his work, Emmanuel says, has its roots in a loss experienced in his relationships with men: 'I think a lot of my work comes out of that emotional place... photographs work with memory, and with loss – they are moments that are lost the moment you take them.'

The drawings that make up a part of the *Transitions* project are recreations of photographic images, painstakingly built up by scratching into light sensitive emulsion. His processes are themselves metaphors: he draws photo-realistic copies of actual photographs (albeit ones that he has manipulated) using an approach that takes months to reproduce what takes seconds. His technique is to scratch – the action of the obsessed, the irritated, the masochistic – at a light-sensitive, touch-sensitive black surface, bringing forth the light from the dark. If the line he etches into the film is light enough, it comes out red, if it is deeper, white.

A concept central to Emmanuel's work on *Transitions* is that of liminality, a term first introduced by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in 1909. 'Liminality' describes the intermediary stage of a three-part process that takes place during rites of passage, between 'separation' and 're-assimilation'. Victor Turner expanded upon the concept in the second half of the 20th century, describing liminal individuals as 'neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremony.'

Emmanuel is interested in liminality as that state in which an individual is stripped of one identity and about to assume another; with *Transitions* he relentlessly pursues such moments, attempting to capture that which can never be caught, to hold on to, that which is already lost, and throughout, negotiating the act of 'holding on/letting go, holding on/letting go, holding on/letting go', a dilemma peculiar to human beings.

The *Transitions* project was sparked by Emmanuel's decision to document a military head shaving, for the most part no longer performed en-masse at military bases, but in salons at the recruit's convenience. Only a few bases still held the traditional military 'rite' – one of which was 3 South African Infantry (SAI). At the outset, Emmanuel's expectations were shaped by the reports of friends and family conscripted during the 1980s, but instead of the humiliation, the shouting, the stripping of humanity and individuality that he had anticipated, he found 'a dispassionate, machine-like, production line-like' process, pervaded with calm. He was transfixed.

The military head shaving is also the subject of Emmanuel's short experimental film, *3 SAI: a rite of passage*, which in itself occupies a kind of liminal space, neither fish nor fowl. This made it awkward to find funding: 'the National Film and Video Foundation refused to fund because it was too conceptual, it was too interpretative ... and then the National Arts Council wouldn't fund it because it was film,' explains Emmanuel.

'I knew that it was going to be difficult, because it fell between two sorts of worlds ... I didn't want to make a film that was just going to be an artwork that was only going to be seen by a gallery and museum audience; I wanted something that was going to show to a much broader audience. It's not just a video artwork, and it's not just a film, that fits in the film world ... I wanted to make something that somehow can fit into both worlds.'

In order to fund *3SAI*, Emmanuel produced a number of editioned lithographs, which he and Art Source – which project manages *Transitions* – 'sold off plan'. Some of these draw on moments from the film, showing washing lines strung across vast stretches of otherwise empty veld.

In *3SAI*, Emmanuel filmed an actual military head shaving in high definition, harshly lit 'because it's a harsh setting, it's a harsh place. It's not sumptuous, and it's certainly not warm. I wanted that, in a documentary setting.' This was interspersed with 35 mm film footage of 'very close up, very intimate, sensual moments, of the same movements of the hands over the scalp, the shaver over the scalp ... but this time radically slowed down. The action is slowed down but [captured using] 200 frames a second – pushing the limits of the technology all the way, so that just by the slowing down of time, the meaning of those movements and moments, changes quite radically, and suddenly they became sensual – quite erotic, and intimate, in a military setting ... Into those two very different worlds, I've interspersed landscape imagery – timelapse sequences of the Gariep Dam, which is this very ambiguous landscape, something between sand dunes and water, and this big installation of a thousand t-shirts hanging on washing lines.'

3SAI: *A Rite of Passage* has toured with the drawings making up the *Transitions* project; it has also been shown at several international film festivals as an official selection, and picked up an award for best short film at the Africa in Motion Film Festival in Edinburgh in 2009, as well as Best Experimental film at the Sardinia International film Festival, Italy in 2010. It continues Emmanuel's use of method as metaphor, building on the ideas he has tackled in using photography, but introducing the element of time.

The drawings that make up *Transitions* are chronologically ordered according to the progression of a (male)life; thus, although the military head shaving was the initial starting point for the project, the series starts with the depiction of a male circumcision. Emmanuel was fascinated by the shifting of the meaning and motivation given for reasons for circumcision; over time, he says, the values and belief systems grounding the rite shift completely and yet, 'Circumcision is the oldest known human rite and it's universal ... Why?'

Emmanuel describes the infant circumcision as 'fraught. So is the military head shaving; parents used to go and take photos of their kids being shorn – why? Why are you drawn to those moments? But they are powerful moments; there is something very primal about it. Parents have very different reactions to it ...'

Third in the sequence comes the crowning that takes place during a Maronite Catholic wedding. 'I think the most powerful thing that spoke to me about the crowning – there was very little literature that I could find about this – was the symbolism behind the crown. The crown is a very powerful symbol and it's there for a Maronite Catholic wedding, for bride and groom – king and queen of some sort of kingdom, briefly – the crown is on for a moment and then it's taken off again ... The idea of "king and country" ... resonated with all of the stuff that I'm talking about anyway: constructions – how we construct ourselves.'

Emmanuel's depiction of an elderly man being helped with his jacket is perhaps the most obscure of the series; the putting on or taking off of a jacket ('You don't know whether it's arrival or departure') is hardly a defining moment – or rite of passage – in a man's life. It suggests, perhaps, a blurring of the apparent distinction between the significant and insignificant; every moment is important; an identity is always in flux, always a fleeting signifier of death.

And finally, the ultimate change, the event that instils every other change with its poignancy, its pathos and its terror, portrayed by Emmanuel as the turnstiles at an anonymous station. 'There was a time when I was going to photograph somebody dying, but I didn't want the literalness of that,' says Emmanuel. 'I preferred to leave it really open-ended at the end and more everyday. We go through transitions – in fact, everything is always in transition.'