

REVIEW: WAM exhibition a ghostly memorial to men lost to war

by Amanda Khumalo | Apr 21, 2021

The names of men who died at war in three different countries are pressed onto skin, photographed, printed on banners that are hung outdoors, exposed to the elements.

The Wits Art Museum (WAM) reopened on Friday, April 9 with the Paul Emmanuel: *Men and Monuments* exhibition, a retrospective collection of three installations titled *The Lost Men* that speaks to patriarchy, masculinity and the loss of men.

The first installation one sees as one enters the museum is *The Lost Men Mozambique* (exhibited in 2007), a series of photographs printed onto banners lined next to each other. Pictured on these banners is a nude Emmanuel, in different vulnerable positions clutching parts of his body, with the words Unknown Soldier in Shangaan and Portuguese, embossed repeatedly on his skin, to represent soldiers who died in the Mozambican Civil War fought from 1977 to 1992.

As one continues into the space, one's gaze is drawn up to the ceiling from which tattered, ragged silk banners of *The Lost Men France* (2014) are hanging. These depict the names of South African men, black and white, alongside those of the Allies and Germans who fought in World War I on Emmanuel's skin. *The Lost Men Grahamstown* (2004), depicts names of those who fought in the Battle of Grahamstown (Fifth Xhosa War, 1819).

None of the photographs show the artist directly looking at the viewer. This is symbolic of the patriarchal society where men were not allowed to express vulnerability.

Zambian-born Emmanuel tells *Wits Vuvuzela* that his work is informed by his personal experience as a white, gay South African man. The *Lost Men* series addresses Emmanuel's broken relationships and loss of men in his life.

His work reflects the male body and the stigmas attached to the humanity of the man. He then portrays his loss by putting it into retrospect by portraying it alongside public loss.

A video on WAM's second floor documents the process by which Emmanuel achieves the print on his body. We see the artist carefully placing the letters in plaster of Paris moulds, fitting his body into the cast, laying there for 30 minutes while several sandbags are placed on his body to press the names onto his body.

One of the names, Emile, which happens to also be Emmanuel's father's name made him bleed from his head upon exiting the mould, Emmanuel explains in WAM's first webinar, [Men and Monuments: A Conversation with Paul Emmanuel](#).

His choice to particularly document the names of men who participated in war is interesting, as that was perceived as an act of masculinity. He says he titled the show *Men and Monuments* because he wanted to address how traditional memorials have been steeped in an imperialist colonial language of patriarchy. "I liked the idea of talking about [patriarchy] especially in how men are depicted in those memorials," Emmanuel told *Wits Vuvuzela*.

He is currently working on his final installation of the show which will be on display in the USA.

A [review by Bubblegum Club](#), a cultural organisation based in Johannesburg, states that "The artist's counter-memorials are rooted in impermanence." This speaks to the artistic process, how the imprint of names on Emmanuel's body fades away a few minutes after exiting the moulds. This becomes a metaphor for the sense of personal loss he experienced and the absence of bodies.

"The kind of knowledge that Emmanuel explores is a disappearance, the impossibility of rediscovery," according to Irene Bronner's thesis titled [Intimate Masculinities in the work of Paul Emmanuel](#).

Idara Udom of WAM tells *Wits Vuvuzela* that the museum is the first to show all three installations at the same time, as each has been displayed once-off at memorials of the specific war that the installation is named after.

The *Men and Monuments* is at WAM until Friday, April 30. The museum is open from Tuesday to Thursday, between 10:00 and 16:00. Due to covid-19 regulations and restrictions, bookings have to be made at info.wam@wits.ac.za or 011 717 1365/58.

FEATURE IMAGE: *The Lost Men France* installation on a farm adjacent to the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing of the Somme in France, 2014. Photo: *Courtesy of WAM*

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