

Cavanaugh, A. TRANSITIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA: PAUL EMMANUEL'S 'TRANSITIONS' AT SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN ART in Express Night Out, The Washington Post Company, Washington DC, USA, May

At first glance, Paul Emmanuel's artwork looks like photographs, but the South African artist actually creates painstaking drawings on photographic paper. Emmanuel depicts people undergoing life-altering changes in "*Transitions*," his show at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art.

Emmanuel's five drawings each have four frames and capture an important moment in someone's life — in one drawing, a young man's head is shaved; in another, a baby is circumcised. They're thought-provoking images, even more so when you realize the process used to create them.

"It's a very unique drawing process and spectacular when you understand what he's done," says Christine Mullen Kreamer, the museum's chief curator. "He takes a long piece of photographic paper and removes the emulsion using an X-Acto knife. He works from dark to light, revealing images in it."

Head shaving also appears in "*3SAI: A Rite of Passage*," a video on display in the show (a clip is above). "*3SAI*," which has screened at film festivals around the world, follows military recruits as they have their heads shaved at the Third South African Infantry Battalion (3-SAI) in Kimberley, one of the last two South African military bases to perform the ritual.

Emmanuel thought about how the military influences masculinity in South Africa and looked at head shaving as a moment of transition — a man gives up his identity and becomes part of the state. "Emmanuel wasn't conscripted into military service," Kreamer says. "It's all volunteer now, but during the apartheid, you had to serve."

Kreamer says that the video isn't "an overt political statement," but rather about "the particular moment of transition, the sense of wanting to belong, and being associated with a group of people and a nation."

The rituals that Emmanuel explores in the video and drawings aren't exclusively South African but can resonate with everyone.

"Emmanuel explores the moments of transition we all have," Kreamer says. "They're important milestones in our lives, so how do we remember and mark those? How are they connected with others? We're not isolated out there; we're connected."

Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, 950 Independence Ave. SW; through Aug. 22, free; 202-633-4600. (Smithsonian)