

Dodd, A. LOST & FOUND in Wanted, Business Day, Johannesburg, South Africa, March

Just before setting off to interview artist Paul Emmanuel I was reminded of a quirky scene from Douglas McGrath's 2006 biopic, *Infamous*, which tells the tale of Truman Capote and his literary masterwork, *In Cold Blood*, about the brutal murder of a farm family in their home in rural Kansas.

Rivaling Philip Seymour Hoffman's portrayal of Capote, Toby Young plays the young writer who was renowned for his distinctive, high-pitched voice and unusual vocal mannerisms. Hooked by reports on the unexplained murder of the Clutter family, Capote places a call from New York through to the police department in Holcomb, Kansas and tries to set up an interview with the principal investigator, who completely mistakes him for an uppity young female cub reporter. Far from being reactive and defensive, it's by playing his girl-self that Capote manages to get his foot in the door.

Like Capote, Emmanuel is a slim sprite of a man, who can't have had it easy during rugby team selections or compulsory physical education classes in senior primary school. These days he's not shy to attend a fancy dress party dressed as a manicured French poodle with a studded collar, or include in a presentation about the gender issues at play in his work a slide of himself kitted out in gold lamé space suit out of the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, preceding a snapshot of controversy-plagued Caster Semenya. But it has not always been this way.

Born in 1969 in Kabwe, Zambia, Emmanuel graduated from the University of the Witwatersrand in 1993. His work has always been delicate and beautiful in its painstakingly obsessive mark making, echoing the compulsiveness of his labyrinthine thoughts. For Emmanuel is a man compelled by the conceptual pageant on the inside of his own head. 'I have an older brother who is thirteen years older than me, so I was basically an only child – always such a loner, thinking, thinking, thinking,' says Emmanuel sitting alongside the polished white grand piano that takes centre stage in the studio loft in Milpark where he lives and works.

His work has shifted dramatically in scale from the small immaculate mezzotints of the early 1990s to monumental works, like the epic after-image, which today takes up an entire wall of the Randlord mansion, Arcadia, as part of the prestigious Hollard Collection. [The image is of a staff sergeant's uniform from World War II cast into an empty landscape at the Cradle of Humankind.] But regardless of scale, Emmanuel's laborious mark making has remained as intricate and multifarious as the hairs on a human head – tiny infinitesimal scratchings conjuring vast metaphysical landscapes in breathtakingly photographic detail.

His masochistic dedication to bringing abstract ideas to imagistic life by means of his maddening etching technique has always been awe-inspiring. 'I wanted to overwhelm the viewer's field of vision somehow, as I had felt overwhelmed by an experience of loss and absence,' says Emmanuel. 'And I was fascinated by the romantic ideas around capturing moments and losing them.'

In recent years, Emmanuel's work has taken on a bold new tenor. The more courageous he has got in expressing the complexities of his own nuanced sexual identity through his work, the more positively audiences and critics, both nationally and across the globe, have responded, lauding the courage and intense subtlety of his visual language. Over the years, masculinity – the sensual, lived experience of being in his own body – has come to play an even more pivotal role in his work. Emmanuel employs various media, including photography and film, to reveal layered visions concerned with his identity as a young white male living in post-apartheid South Africa.

For *The Lost Men*, a site-specific installation that engaged with the concept of memorial and public grief, the names of men who died in conflicts related to each particular site were cast in lead type and blind embossed onto the artist's body. These fleeting impressions were photographed before the temporary bruising faded. The photographs of the artist's marked body and skin were then printed onto large, delicate, semi-transparent voile and silk organza sheets and hung outdoors in the landscape and left to the wind...

But it is his latest project, *Transitions*, that has earned Emmanuel a new level of international recognition. Last year the 14-minute experimental film, *3SAI: A Rite of Passage*, around which a series of five sequenced drawings revolves, scooped first prize in the Africa in Motion Short Film Competition in Edinburgh, and in May this year it is due to travel to the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in Washington DC, USA. He is now producing a series of five lithographic triptychs for phase two of the project. 'The lithographs are also scratched onto stone through a layer of ink working from darkness to light,' says Emmanuel, whose etching technique is in itself a process of symbolic illumination.

The film documents the head shaving of new recruits at the Third South African Infantry Battalion (3SAI) in Kimberley, South Africa. It starts out in relatively straight documentary mode, but within moments you are drawn by the crucially timed montage of images of the ritual juxtaposed with haunting landscapes, into a world of deep affect.

Tensions between intimacy and alienation seem to converge within the enormously influential institution that is the military,' says Emmanuel, whose images set to Wilbert Schubel's dream-fuelled soundtrack pull the viewer into an impossibly poignant meditation on what is captured and what is lost in this distinctly male moment of transition. 'One of Paul's main focal points was the idea of the hair falling being a kind of loss of innocence, a loss of childhood, a kind of shaving away layers of identity,' says Schubel.

Perhaps the true beauty of Emmanuel's work is that he never resorts to didacticism or polemics. His intention is less to wage a political campaign in relation to gender identity than to explore it in all its mystifying nuances. 'I can't say the military is a terrible institution. I was never conscripted,' he says, 'But I have a right to have very deep feelings in relation to the military, as most people do.' Emmanuel's approach is intensely humanist, allowing people of different dispositions and beliefs to respond freely within a sanctified space. Even the former commander of the 3SAI military base responded positively to the film when he saw it during its run at the Oliewenhuis Art Museum in Bloemfontein.

The idea of documenting the shaving of the heads military recruits came to Emmanuel as he was making tea in the kitchen of his loft one morning and thinking about 'moments of change, holding on, letting go, the build-up of something you don't want to happen...'

Following the impulse, he visited the National Military Archives in Pretoria, where he uncovered a series of haunting black and white photographs of military head shavings dating back to the First and Second World Wars. These images formed the research on which he based the concept for the *Transitions* project.

After a few phone calls he discovered that the Third South African Infantry Battalion in Kimberley was one of the only two remaining battalions which still performed this ritualistic head shaving of recruits *en masse* on their premises. So he called the base and introduced himself to Colonel Grobler over the phone: 'Hi, my name is Paul Emmanuel from Johannesburg,' he explained.

'Yes, Paula, what can I do for you?' replied the colonel.

After numerous failed attempts to correct his gender identity, Emmanuel arranged to fly to Kimberley as 'Paula', the artist from Cape Town. 'I was extremely nervous,' he says. 'No matter how hard I tried, it seemed that everything about me was a confused misrepresentation. What would be the reaction when I got there? This was the military for goodness sakes! And experience has taught me that some people don't respond well to being confronted so directly with their preconceptions.

"As it turns out the giggle was on me,' he says. 'They were extremely sweet and cooperative and I got wolf whistled four times!' So it turns out that *Transitions*, like *In Cold Blood*, also started off with a crazy quirk of mistaken gender identity. And like Capote's masterpiece, Emmanuel's project seems destined for immortality.