

O'Sullivan, M. AT SMITHSONIAN'S AFRICAN ART MUSEUM: RITE OF PASSAGE, DRAWN PRECISELY in The Washington Post, The Washington Post Company, Washington DC, USA, May

"*Paul Emmanuel: Transitions*" is about invisible lines, in more ways than one.

The first sense is literal. To make the five "drawings" that form the core of the show at the National Museum of African Art, the South African artist used a razor-sharp blade to incise tiny lines in the black surface of exposed photographic paper. The result is a series of engraving-like images that, on casual inspection, are indistinguishable from photographs. Look more closely, however, and you'll see evidence of the cut marks, but they're so fine that the surfaces look slightly soft and fuzzy, like felted fabric.

The technique alone is remarkable. But there's another kind of line in this show. As the title suggests, it's the kind that we cross, without knowing it, only to realize -- sometimes years after the fact -- that we're no longer the people we once were.

In this case, the drawings document what Emmanuel terms "masculine rites of passage": circumcision, military head shaving, marriage, a father's birthday and, in the show's most literal interpretation of its title, commuters passing through subway turnstiles. Each drawing consists of a sequence of five images, arranged like pages of a book, to be read left to right. They're based on photographs the artist took.

What Emmanuel has done, in effect, is to hit the pause button on life and then to study it, like a forensic scientist, one frame at a time. "I wanted," he says in an interview, "to obsess over a moment."

Each moment concerns at most only a matter of minutes. Sometimes mere seconds. In one, a middle-aged man is helped up from his seat at his father's 90th birthday party. In another, a military barber buzzes bald the scalp of a new recruit. In a third, a baby boy is, er, snipped. Each of the drawings -- the artist considers a group of five a single drawing -- took six months to complete.

By freezing actions that are fleeting and painstakingly teasing them apart, Emmanuel invites us to share his obsessiveness, looking for something that isn't really there. Not what's happening, in other words, but what it means.

What we find is sometimes unexpected. In the circumcision pictures, for instance, there's a surprising tenderness. Rather than the violent drama, blood and tears that Emmanuel says he expected -- and that we might, too -- there's an eerie quiescence, as the baby sleeps through the whole thing. Questions about the controversial procedure linger in the air. However, the art is scrupulously neutral.

The head-shaving pictures are similarly ambiguous, suggesting both violence and tenderness. This is even more apparent in a 14-minute film that accompanies the show, in which barbers from the Third South African Infantry are shown, in slow motion, buzz-cutting

one young soldier's head after another. Reduced to its most elemental gestures -- a hand brushing hair clippings from the skin, for instance -- this initiation into a life of danger takes on new meaning and can be seen as an intimate, almost sensual act.

In the end, Emmanuel's "*Transitions*" isn't just about men. We all live too fast, he seems to be saying, men and women, young and old. What would we see if we could slow down the milestones that whiz past us on the highway of life and hold onto them for just a minute longer?

PAUL EMMANUEL: TRANSITIONS Through Aug. 22 at the National Museum of African Art, 950 Independence Ave. SW (Metro: Smithsonian). 202-633-1000 (TDD: 202-633-5285). <http://www.nmafa.si.edu>. Hours: Open daily 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Admission: Free.