



Parallel worlds: A still from Paul Emmanuel's film *3SAI Rite of Passage*, which juxtaposes the abstract with reality

Fine artist shows a flare for video

Artist Paul Emmanuel's 12-minute film is both an intellectual and aesthetic triumph

3 SAI A Rite of Passage
film: Paul Emmanuel
review: Mary Corrigan

It wasn't the typical setting for a film preview. With an array of garden, lounge and dining chairs lined up in front of a white wall that would function as the screen, Paul Emmanuel had created a makeshift cinema in his loft apartment in Milpark for the screening of *3 SAI A Rite of Passage*, which is part of his *Transitions* exhibition at the Apartheid Museum.

Haunted by the *Hansie* movie preview, the small clutch of arts journalists gathered in Emmanuel's loft apartment looked apprehensive. It also didn't help knowing that the discipline of film is a completely new avenue for Emmanuel. He is a fine artist by trade, and though he has five solo exhibitions under his belt, he is not known as a video artist – the designation for those who employ film as their medium of expression.

Video art has experienced a bit of a revival on the South African art scene. The Spier Contemporary Award exhibition earlier this year boasted quite an array of video artworks and the exhibition that Simon Njami curated for the

Jo'burg Art Fair, called *As You Like It*, was dominated by video art. Almost every important exhibition of late has featured a video artwork. It's an immediate form of expression that demands viewers attention in ways that static objects can't. But it is mostly prized by artists for its capacity to represent altered states. Its dynamic nature allows artists to visibly map change. This is probably why it appealed to Emmanuel; his new exhibition is focused on transformation, the shifts in male identity.

Billed as a cinematic art film *3 SAI* (the Third South African Infantry Battalion), *A Rite of Passage* promised to be something different from the outset. And it didn't disappoint. Emmanuel is an obsessive art maker; not in the sense that he is simply fixated with his craft but the meticulous and detailed etchings for which he is known are clearly the result of a compulsive hand and thinker: How was this approach going to translate into film? And, more importantly, how did Emmanuel concede control of his art? After all, creating a film is not a solo project; ultimately, its success depends on the chemistry between all its co-creators. Perhaps this is why Emmanuel's art film took so long to craft. It is mind-blowing to think that it took Emmanuel and his team more than

four years to produce just 12 minutes of film. Drawing from art, photography and the documentary film genres, Emmanuel's film probes the politics of male identity through a series of non-narrative vignettes that move between images of vast and barren landscapes to army recruits being inducted into the South African National Defence Force. In this way Emmanuel juxtaposes reality with abstraction or truth with lyricism.

Most video art tends to draw on performance art; a set of artificially constructed or contrived actions that are designed to educe meaning. Emmanuel's film, however, captures slices of reality. The individuals in his film may be performers but they are presented as real-life folk undergoing change.

The poetic or lyrical imagery depicting picturesque landscapes that are spliced in between creates these two parallel worlds: one of control and order and another of wild, sensual abandon. They could also signify the contrast between one's empirical and emotional experiences of the world. Neither realm is static, however; even the seemingly untouched natural landscapes.

Using time-lapse photography techniques, Emmanuel shows this outwardly unchanging topography to be in a constant state of flux. In contrast, young men are shown

having their hair shaven as they enter the army in real time, presenting a different kind of shift.

The two worlds aren't necessarily separate and, as the film progresses, elements in the young men's lives filter into or are echoed in, the empty landscapes, such as the physical connection between blond hair falling and the honey strands of grass blowing in the wind.

Whatever compromises Emmanuel may or may not have made in assuming this new medium, the end result is impressive. The film's intellectual or conceptual dimensions are challenging, stimulating and rich: probing white identity, maleness, race and, on a more transcendental level, the link between our cognitive and emotional selves. Emmanuel has also achieved what no South African video artist has to date: he has created an artwork which fully utilises or exploits the qualities that only film can offer.

So many artists today are wont to employ various mediums in their art making, including photography, digital art and film, but more often than not they have no technical mastery over their medium. How can they, when they flit from paint to photography and then to sculpture? And though the value of art is no longer measured by the artist's proficiency with his

or her medium, one can't deny the impact that a well-crafted object can have on the overall communication. This is why big-wig artists such as Damien Hirst pay folk to make his art for him rather than fiddling with mediums that he is not completely au fait with.

With *3 SAI A Rite of Passage*, however, Emmanuel has created an artwork that has value as a cinematic initiative and not just as an art object. Most video artworks in this country have absolutely no visual appeal; they are completely concept driven. But *3 SAI A Rite of Passage* is as aesthetically pleasing as it is intellectually exciting.

□ *3 SAI A Rite of Passage* is part of *Transitions*, an exhibition by Paul Emmanuel that is showing at the Apartheid Museum until December