

Dominic Thorburn

### **Borderline – Sweeping a Mind Field**

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The history of Africa, and indeed Southern Africa, is integral to global exploration and intertwined with loaded issues of land, property and ownership. In fact universally land remains one of the most contested issues concerning disputes of access and conflict of occupation. Borders are inevitably created – they are opened, closed, regulated, limited, extended, crossed, and cancelled. These margins, or porous borderlines, are not only pertinent print metaphors but also offer an apt introduction to this paper.

From 1967 until 1993 almost all able-bodied white South African men were called up for compulsory National Service - this was an enforced military conscription of two years and impacted the lives of all males of 18 years or thereabouts; in the region of 600 000 men - over half a million! They were put through demanding physical and military skills training in addition to mental 'ideological orientation', and during this period were deployed to fight in South Africa's so-called 'Border War' – literally on the geographic borders of Northern South West Africa and Southern Angola, and often as insurgent aggressors entering these neighbouring countries while conducting cross border raids and military operations.

Many white South Africans who were forcibly conscripted to fight for the apartheid military machine of the day still struggle to come to terms with the fact that their battle landed not only on the wrong side of the country's borders, but indeed 'on the wrong side of history' (Redvers 2012: 1). This Border War sent troops to support Angola's UNITA rebels, backed by the USA, against the then-Marxist MPLA government and its Cuban allies. This Cold War type conflict was portrayed at the time as a battle to ward off the threat of communism and militant black liberation. It was known colloquially as the 'Rooi Gevaar' or 'Swart Gevaar', translated literally from Afrikaans as the 'Red or 'Black Danger' – essentially military combat in support of the politics of apartheid government of the day. For most of the conscripted men (author included) there was little option but to perform their 'national duty'. Many young men did their military service directly after finishing high school while very young and impressionable, almost as a male rite of passage. One's call-up could be deferred for a few years if one did tertiary studies, but to evade it meant facing severe consequences. The options were limited to objection on conscientious religious grounds and face a six-year jail term, or flee the country as an exile – most often to make a new life in a foreign country abroad without an option of return.

The Border War, one that fundamentally maintained apartheid agendas, has in many ways become silenced and disremembered in the new South Africa. Recalling this 'silent war' during a post conflict period, and indeed the honeymoon of democracy, would mean engaging in a demanding dialogue and confronting a struggle to reconcile political ideologies, propaganda, trauma, victimhood, patriotism, bravado and racism. Theresa Edlmann, a university colleague and history researcher, has compared South Africa's border war and resultant psychosocial legacies to America's Vietnam and the time it took for people there to speak openly about their conscription experiences – 'The trauma of a war

experience is so intense that you almost need that period of silence before people are ready to talk' (Edlmann 2012: 2). This denial or suppression, what another fellow researcher Sasha Gear calls the 'silence of stigmatised knowledge', has though recently been broken by a range of differing voices giving rise to a new burgeoning of stimulating material concerning this critical point in South African lived history. Of late our contemporary cultural landscape has itself been infiltrated by new memoirs, novels, plays, films, photography and visual art. Until now few have dared cross their personal borders of amnesia to sweep the mind field of experiences, thereby contributing their micro-histories to a new and reconciled shared history. This paper will focus on two contemporary South African visual artists who have faced this past and its current impact on our country and present day psyche – not necessarily as catharsis or to find closure, rather to open necessary dialogue and continuing conversations. Notably both artists also work with print in an expanded and conceptually integrated manner; their work extends the borderlines of printmedia while remaining intrinsically printery.

Christo Doherty left high school and spent 1978 and 1979 conscripted to the South African Defence Force (SADF) serving in the notorious 32 Battalion, a counter insurgency unit. He admits he was not an unwilling conscript having been raised in typical patriarchal South Africa of the time, where mythical ideologies of manhood were deeply entrenched. Many his age were indeed positively motivated to serve their country and had brothers and fathers who had also done their patriotic duty – they were young, naive and politically ignorant; they enlisted readily with 'eyes wide closed'.

For most the army was unavoidably dehumanising and the experience of the border military conflict traumatic and emotionally scarring. Doherty, as with many thousands of conscripts, suppressed the memories of this time until decades later when he confronted them in his series of exhibition prints titled 'Bos' – meaning 'bush' in the Afrikaans language. The 'border war' was also often referred to as simply the 'bush war' and in addition the term 'bos' or 'bossies' in military vernacular also meant madness or psychosis brought on by posttraumatic stress of military conflict, a not uncommon occurrence.

Christo Doherty has harnessed documentary photographs from this period, often of violent or disturbing incidents, as a departure point and then reconstructed the scenes depicted as accurate miniature models at a scale of 1/35. These mini dioramas are re-stagings which are then in turn compositionally re-photographed and printed on archival rag paper. The constructed images quote military games and re-enactments and the resultant histrionic reimaginings prove disturbingly childlike. While the unfolding tableaux vivant ('living pictures') evoke haunting memories of Christo Doherty's time on the Angolan border they traffic as consciously removed and deliberately depersonalised narratives – yet a melancholy seems to permeate. Doherty's is a process tasked with accessing the emotion of memory while simultaneously distancing the viewer from the event ... 'a poetics of trauma' (Brits 2012: 3). A desolate quietude pervades these lingering images, like silent stop frames frozen in time. They do not so much witness violent incidents as represent the difficulties in the act of remembering the act of witnessing (Grey 2011).

Traditionally photographs capture and commemorate events in formal register while these prints employ strategies of disjuncture that offer us fleeting fragments of a disturbed and fractured memory. The images traffic in the form of documentary realism yet invariably become a dislocated record of the incident or event. Fluctuating camera angles, closely zoomed in views, narrowly restricted depth of field, and dramatic lighting are utilised to dislodge and distance the viewer, in so doing reflecting the punctuation of selective memory within the shape shifting of a traumatised mind. It is relevant that recent trauma research indicates that painful memories of incidents are often captured in heightened colour, sharp focus, and separated to be filed in a particular part of our brain. The very miniaturisation, meticulous model making and carefully painted generic plastic figures are a visual device that reinforces the minimising, the alienation and distancing from the authentic historic events and inherent political gravitas. The constructed vignettes fluctuate like moving targets within a borderline psychosomatic zone. Many conscripts have experienced feelings of actual state violation and being forced to be complicit in a war they had no say in, no control over – historian Gary Bains describes it as a ‘choiceless choice’ (Brits 2012:3) For many the borderline emotional experience between that of being victim and perpetrator became, and remains, a blurred and uncomfortable one.

Differing artistic voices exist in this post-conflict genre and that of Paul Emmanuel’s is certainly of a soft timbre, yet one with lasting resonance. His works address perceptions of masculinity and the construct of male identity – and notions of it in a perpetual state of flux. Central too is the historic resonance of the politics of power and patriarchy, and the relationship to the personal identity of a white South African male. The images are fluid and integrate interrelated tropes of remembrance, loss and mourning in a search for a contemplative space.

In his series *The Lost Men* Emmanuel approaches concepts of memorial and public grief through site specific installation – a personal expression extended in public spaces which contribute their own history through their loaded past. For these works he has accessed military archives of the names of men who have died in specific conflicts and had them cast in ‘hot-metal’ lead high type. He then imprints these lists on his own body as blind embossing – a temporary wounding and scarring results, a transitory ‘printed’ impression, a fleeting trace which is captured and photographed before it fades into a natural erasure. These photographs are then in turn digitally printed onto large, delicate, translucent silk voile and suspended in the landscape. The poignant prints evoke the fragility and vulnerability of life and the ephemeral impermanence of memory.

In the example, *The Lost Men Mozambique*, Paul Emmanuel anticipated including the names of Mozambican and South African soldiers who had died in military operations in the neighbouring country. Obtaining the Mozambican names proved impossible as there was a military moratorium on their release and so as a substitute he self-embossed the phrase ‘unknown soldier’ in the local languages of Portuguese and Shangaan. The prints were installed in Mozambique on the Catembe Ferry Jetty that is used by thousands of people daily to cross between the mainland and Catembe Island.

Irene Bronner in her research on Paul Emmanuel observes that:

In this installation, the body 'disappears', and thereby asserts an inability to fix or express, to any degree of completed certainty, its own subjectivity. Emmanuel turns on his own body to create *The Lost Men*. The body is both 'marked' and 'unmarked'. His body is 'marked' literally (when he blind embosses text into his body) and 'marked' conceptually (by the names of men who died in South Africa's 'Frontier Wars'). This marking becomes a mourning of prescribed and restrictive gender roles and the imprints of history. (Bronner 2011: 88)

A subsequent extended series, titled *Transitions*, developed out of Paul Emmanuel's further exploration of how the military has influenced and perpetuated notions of masculinity in South Africa. He states that 'One morning, while thinking about moments of change, I decided to photograph an actual military recruit head shaving while it was happening – to be witness to an unfolding drama' (Emmanuel 2008). This inspired starting point, and decision to document the en-masse military initiation of head shaving haircuts of new recruits, focussed in on what is practically an army rite of passage and central to many a conscripts first memories of the military (and one the author remembers vividly). Shaving of the head shifts male identity from that of civilian to state property – where as a recruit you could in fact be charged for getting sunburned and in so doing damaging state property! Emmanuel discovered that the 3rd South African Infantry Battalion (3SAI) in Kimberley was one of a few that still upheld this practice and sought permission to witness and document the event. He expected bigotry, brash shouting of orders and a vulgar humiliation and stripping of dignity. Instead of the anticipated 'drama' he explains that he encountered 'a dispassionate, machine-like, production line-like process, one pervaded with calm. These liminal moments of transition, when a young man either voluntarily - or is forced to - let go of one identity and take on a new identity as State Property with an assigned Force Number, prompted me to ask many questions: What was I actually witnessing? What is a 'Rite of Passage' and how have similar 'rituals' helped to form and perpetuate identities and belief systems throughout history? Why was I so powerfully drawn to and transfixed by these dramatic spectacles of subtle change and moments of suspended possibility and impossibility?' (Emmanuel 2008) He states that 'the equanimity of the scene was arresting' and he was 'spellbound' by the dynamic of this quite 'primal' and entrenched social ritual that placed the recruits on the threshold of a transforming experience (Emmanuel 2008).

Paul Emmanuel's first response to this experience was the making of a film entitled *3SAI: A Rite of Passage* - a short, cross-platform, non-narrative documentary in an experimental nonverbal genre. In its simplicity it is a poetic sequence of high-quality footage documenting the head-shaving rituals of young army recruits combined with evocative landscape imagery, time-lapse and slow-motion cinematography, as well as a compelling soundtrack. 'This presentation of a male rite of passage asks us to re-examine these moments of transition in masculine identity and consider what is captured and what is lost ...' (Cohn: 2010). The result is an engaging and evocative work, the seriality of the head shaving and punctuated editing reflect the artist's printmedia sensibilities, and the stereo soundtrack of ambient noises (including electric razors) underpins the captivating visuals.

Emmanuel, who is a highly accomplished printmaker, harnesses his knowledge and love of print technique in the *Transitions* series of works which grew out of this film. The works which

extend his central conceptual concerns include process manipulated drawings and lithographs.

The Transitions drawings are, as with Christo Doherty's works, recreations of photographic images and they share a keen interest in the photograph as archive. Emmanuel physically reproduces the actual original photographs as realistic copies meticulously built up by scratching into light sensitive exposed photographic emulsion - essentially utilising a drypoint engraving technique and working reductively from light to dark. This is not dissimilar to a mezzotint and is really a personally developed and meditative 'manière noir' ('black method'). The intrinsically printerly works 'express in their execution the 4 paradox and impossibility of capturing fleeting and indeterminate moments' (Bronner: 2011). While the photographic source of these images took a fraction of a second to make these drawings often take months to complete, and extend a new graphic meaning to 'photorealistic' and 'time based' work. Paul Emmanuel's approach to medium is inescapably one of metaphor – the engraving and incising, 'the painstaking obsessive scratching the action of the obsessed, the irritated, the masochistic – at a light-sensitive, touch-sensitive black surface, bringing forth the light from the dark' (Cohn: 2010). Emmanuel describes his work in Transitions as 'a love affair with concept and surface' (Cohn: 2010) and he integrates the refined technical process of the making of his work with passion and conceptual veracity. He is equally comfortable drawing into an etching plate as he is drypointing photographic emulsion, or blind embossing his body or pulling an inked impression on dampened paper.

A concept central to Emmanuel's work on Transitions is that of liminality - Emmanuel is interested in the liminal as it relates to that state in which a male individual is stripped of one identity and about to assume another. He constantly reflects on and pursues such moments of transient life stages attempting to capture that which can never be caught, to hold on to, that which is already lost, and throughout, negotiating the act of 'holding on/letting go, holding on/letting go, holding on/letting go', a dilemma peculiar to human beings.

The works in this series are chronologically ordered according to the progression of a male life, and although the military head shaving was the initial starting point for the project, the series starts with the depiction of circumcision of a male baby. Subsequent images include the crowning that takes place during a Maronite Catholic wedding, a series of images depicting an elderly man being assisted putting on or tacking off his jacket ('You don't know whether it's arrival or departure') And finally, the ultimate change, the event that instills every other change with its poignancy, its pathos and its terror, portrayed by Emmanuel as the turnstiles at an anonymous railway station. 'There was a time when I was going to photograph somebody dying, but I didn't want the literalness of that,' says Emmanuel. 'I preferred to leave it really open-ended at the end and more every day. We go through transitions – in fact, everything is always in transition.'

## References

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List of illustrations (for conference publication)

1. Christo Doherty Casinga, 2011, Archival Print on rag paper (Photograph and constructed model)
2. Christo Doherty Bridge Crossing, 2011, Archival Print on rag paper (Photograph and Constructed Model)
3. Christo Doherty Koevoet Trophy, 2011, Archival Print on rag paper (Photograph and constructed model)
4. Paul Emmanuel The Lost Men Mozambique, documentary photograph (Digital print on silk voile)
5. Paul Emmanuel 3SAI: A Rite of Passage, Still image from film.
6. Paul Emmanuel Transitions 3, 2008, Detail (Drawings, hand incised on exposed and processed colour photographic paper)

(Additional supporting images were included in the conference presentation)