

2011

FNB Joburg Art Fair Featured Artist Paul Emmanuel interview with Michael Smith, editor of ArtThrob.

This year the FNB Joburg Art Fair's featured artist is Johannesburg-based Paul Emmanuel, represented by an installation titled 'TRANSITIONS MULTIPLES'. The installation, presented in association with Gallery AOP, consists of five compelling lithographs produced in the subtractive *manière noire* method, along with a 14 minute film 3SAI: A RITE OF PASSAGE showing recruits having their heads shaved on entry into the South African military. ArtThrob Editor Michael Smith spoke to Emmanuel on the second day of the Art Fair about process, transitions and hard work.

Michael Smith: The notion of transition is obviously central to your concern with this installation. From where does this interest stem?

Paul Emmanuel: It started with the army. A work I did previously entitled **AFTER-IMAGE**, made on incised exposed photographic paper, contained a staff sergeant's uniform from World War II. Also, the military was central to the notions of masculinity and its construction I was exploring in *Lost Men*, a major installation project I began in 2004.

I was interested in exploring certain romantic notions around photography, such as why we choose to take pictures of moments in order to try preserve them, the nostalgia attached to wanting to take and keep photographs. The photograph indulges our belief that we can hold onto things, onto moments. Especially with **AFTER-IMAGE**, there an interest in the movement back and forth between the idea of the photographic image, which is generated instantaneously, and the image constructed over a very long period, and through an extremely obsessive process.

Then, I became concerned with what kinds of moments I would choose to use, and I have a recurring interest in moments of shift and change, especially when identity and status shift, and the construction of masculinity. All of this led to the military and military head-shavings.

MS: Your technique in this sprawling set of five large lithographs worked in the *manière noire* method (rolling solid black ink on a litho stone and then subtractively scratching away lighter areas) is emphatically time-consuming: have you ever thought of cutting corners or simplifying your process?

PE: Of course! I oscillate between losing myself in the process, absolutely loving it, and then going through considerable physical pain to make the works. The skin and nails on my fingers gets worn away, and the hours spent hunched over the stone or whatever other surface I'm working on take their toll on my back and shoulder muscles. I've thought about getting assistants, like Damien Hirst, but then one has to pay them! (laughs) But, over the years, I've realized I couldn't really outsource my work to anyone else: it really is all about the highs and lows, the enjoyment and then the suffering through long hours. There's an element of masochism to it, I guess. That's kind of the nature of the beast.

The rhythm of it is great, though: the regular rhythm of the day, working on set tasks and processes. I go to gym almost every day, to punctuate the day, but mostly I get lost in the process, listening to music and working.

MS: What music goes with your process?

PE: October Language, Murcof, a lot of experimental music. Some of it is just really experimental sound, musicians taking old instruments and producing experimental sounds with them. But then I'll just as soon revisit the '80s: I'm listening to a lot of Springsteen at the moment!

MS: Do you have the same work ethic for filmmaking as you do for printmaking and drawing?

PE: I think so, but making a film is so much more collaborative than drawing or printmaking: there are so many more people involved in the process. The making of 3SAI was very time-consuming: I worked with Matthew Kramer, and we spent many long hours together, with me obsessing over details I'm sure he thought I was crazy to obsess over for a 14 minute film! During the process of production he moved to Cape Town, so closer to finalizing I had to travel there to spend time with him and oversee the process. And then there were plenty of Skype chats and emails before we got to the end: exhaustive! One develops a special relationship through such an intensive process, and in his own way he was as thorough as I was about certain details and aspects.

MS: Viewing the installation on the Joburg Art Fair, I was struck by how your lithographs (and the drawings that preceded them) have a very different character from the film: they are soft and dream-like where the film deals in rather a harsh documentary-style realism.

PE: Well, one could question the notion of documentary, and evaluate to what extent it is 'real' and how much is staged. I was certainly interested in that dynamic playing out during the film: to what extent are the military recruits observed unaware, and to what extent does their awareness of the camera alter their behaviour?

But, in the interplay between the lithographs and the film, there is definitely a sense that two worlds are being explored. The harsh reality of the environment in which the head shaving occurs is unavoidable: it is a cold, indifferent environment, with little opportunity for even the most cursory of human relationships to develop. The barber must shave each recruit's head within five minutes, and the barbers are brusque with the recruits as a result.

The other world is the sensuality of the physical experience of head shaving. This whole project started with simply wanting to explore that sensuality, the change that occurs when footage of an indifferent head shaving is slowed down through filmic devices and the action, the contact, develops a sensual quality...

Of course, this is shot through with the awareness of the fact that I didn't need to get permission from the recruits to film them, as they have few rights in the military service; they

are essentially the property of the state for the duration of their military service, so permission only had to be sought from the base general. So while the moments of sensuality are apparent, the entire process is built on a kind of indifference. The installation explores the tension between these.

Aesthetically, with the lithographs, I consciously wanted to remove them from the purely photographic. With *After Image* I wanted to retain much of the harsh photographic realism, but this time I first manipulated the photographs digitally in order to remove them from their original quality: there are areas of negative and solarizing, which change the feel from harsh documentary. I wanted the works to create a dialogue with the photographic, with the feel of documentary.

MS: And your research for this project? How did your ideas develop from conception?

PE: Well, for years I've kept a book beside my bed in which I write down my dreams. So they develop from a very intuitive start. But with this particular work I went to the National Film and Video Archives in Pretoria, and found a film called *Kaptein Caprivi*, which was a great reminder about the apartheid propaganda machine and the way it constructed masculinity for white males.

In this film, President Swart talks to the intended audience of 16-18 year-old scholars about the threat to SA society from the 'Swart Gevaar' and the 'Rooi Gevaar', and how their duty was to join the military and go into the 'bos' to 'beskerm' ... very telling.