

Dobson, W. IDENTITY IN FLUX: THE TRANSITION TO NEW PERSPECTIVES in The Cape Times, Cape Town, South Africa, March

On first impression it would appear you are looking at five black-and-white pictures. On closer inspection of Paul Emmanuel's exhibition, *Transitions*, it transpires that what you are faced with is a series of pictures portraying the transitions that face the white male in modern South Africa.

Exploring life's progression from circumcision to old age, the works have been obsessively incised by hand into photographic paper, exposed and processed, thus rendered completely black.

The exhibition also includes a 14-minute film of men having their heads shaved as part of their initiation into the army – a rite of passage that shifts identity from civilian to state property. Although conscription has ended and this change is voluntary, the artist asserts that this idea remains relevant to a society in which the white male is battling to figure out his role.

The use of different media is indicative of Emmanuel, who is unable to categorise himself into a single discipline. For him, the medium and the process are as important as the artwork itself.

While the pictures are based on photographs he has taken, the effort to create the final work – months spent scratching with a steel blade "into the black paper – is, he says, as significant as the end result".

It adds depth and richness, as well as emphasising that the ephemeral images are in fact created over months, years and life times. For instance, one image shows the coronation of a man of Lebanese extraction at his wedding, a cultural phenomenon common in families of Middle Eastern origin, as Emmanuel himself is, and another a scene from a grandfather's 90th birthday celebration.

There is in Emmanuel's work a sense of liminality – that idea of ambiguity, openness and indeterminacy, that disorientation leading to new perspectives. Identity is in a constant state of flux, especially of white males in a country such as South Africa.

Emmanuel sees a struggle to embrace the radical changes, positive and negative, happening all the time, a fear of something new. The idea of patriarchy has been a dominating influence, et now there is a dichotomy.

There has been a huge shift to freer and looser ideals, yet as men and women re-evaluate their roles, conservative values try to assert and establish themselves.

This is reflected in Emmanuel's work – images of rites and rituals that seem often to have been almost predetermined, such as circumcision, marriage, and death.

He points to a society which on one hand has begun to re-embrace religion in a conservative manner as an affront to globalisation, yet on the other is beginning to come to terms and be comfortable with its multicultural identity and other previous taboos.

There is a duality in Emmanuel's thinking. While his artwork is intimate and incredibly personal, through its very nature it becomes collective.

He strives for timelessness,, and hopes that despite the exhibition being a reflection on his life and how he relates to society, it will be a relevant in 100 years as it is today, causing people to stop, think, and perhaps even change their perceptions.

He points to the image of a baby's circumcision, an image that in previous generations would have evoked very different associations to now – in the past to religion, now seen as a cosmetic or hygienic procedure.

Again, the same is true of the head-shaving ritual, something that will resonate in a manner different for men over 40, who lived through conscription, from that of young men for whom joining the army is voluntary.

Transitions it to be displayed in the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in Washington later this year. The short film, *3SAI: A Rite of Passage*, won the jury prize in the Short Film Competition at the Africa-in-Motion Film Festival at the Edinburgh International Film Festival.

The exhibition is on display at the Spier Old Wine Cellar Gallery until March 31.