

McKenna, A. PAUL EMMANUEL: TRANSITIONS: IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN SOUTH AFRICA in *California Literary Review*, *California Literary Review*, Carlsbad, California, USA, June

Art has long served as a vehicle for exploring notions of identity and collective guilt. The German artist Anselm Kiefer creates large scale canvases depicting war-scarred landscapes. His pieces often include train tracks and other reminders of the genocide that took place on his nation's soil. The South African artist William Kentridge creates equally bleak environments visibly haunted by the memory of apartheid. His animated films are populated with characters whose psyches are as scarred as the landscapes they inhabit. *Paul Emmanuel: Transitions*, a new exhibition at the National Museum of African Art in Washington, DC shows us a different perspective on collective guilt and societal transformation. Paul Emmanuel, a white South African artist presents us with a series of images about ritual and identity construction. Emmanuel's pieces convey the notion that society organizes a man's life into different stages, each marked by a ritual. He also shows how these rituals can be consciously altered, or can take on new meanings over time. In this way, societal traditions can become an important vehicle for change.

In 2004, Emmanuel began thinking about how the military creates and propagates notions of masculinity. He became fascinated by the ritual of shaving the heads of new recruits. Emmanuel spoke to his brother and friends who had gone through the process during the apartheid regime in the 1980's. They described a frightening, dehumanizing experience. Emmanuel decided to see what this ritual had come to mean in post-apartheid South Africa. He attended and photographed the head shavings of the January 2005 intake at the Third South African Infantry Battalion (3SAI) in Kimberley. Rather than a cold, authoritarian nightmare, Emmanuel was amazed to find "quiet lawns with well-tended flower beds full of roses. No shouting...No evidence of the violent breaking down of the human spirit." As Emmanuel watched black and white soldiers go through the same seminal moment of transition, he discovered that the process now represented community building, national pride, and the overcoming of past evils rather than prejudice, violence and control.

In *Transitions*, Emmanuel explores this and other rituals that he calls "liminal moments of transition." The *Transitions* project, which was created between 2005 and 2008, consists of one film and 5 exquisite series of drawings depicting rituals that usher a man into a new stage of life, from birth through old age. In the first of this series, Emmanuel focuses on the circumcision of a young male child. We witness the moment in which this new-born is initiated into human society. In the next piece, we watch as a young recruit undergoes the tonsure that will transform him from individual to representative and defender of his nation.

Emmanuel creates his drawings by scratching away the black emulsion of photo paper, leaving small white depressions. A rust-colored medium tone is revealed where the black surface was partially worn away by the weight of the knife resting against the paper. From a distance, the images look like especially crisp charcoal drawings. Up close, you can see the tiny tears and the roughness of the surface.

While Emmanuel's drawings focus on the individual experience, the film, *3SAI: A Rite of Passage* takes us back to the idea of collective identity. In 2008, Emmanuel returned to Third South African Infantry Battalion and filmed the head shaving of a half dozen recruits. The imagery was interspersed with clips of flowing water and clotheslines of white t-shirts blowing in the wind. The film is a meditation on time and change. We see time passing as an inevitable, natural process that can't be stopped. At the same time, we zero in on a moment in each of the recruits' lives in which they were transformed into something new and given a new role to play in society. As we examine their faces, one by one, we see anxiety and vulnerability. One fair-complected recruit looks like his mind has been blown when he feels his smooth scalp and realizes that his long blond locks are no longer attached to it. While nervous and reflective, the men seem comfortable and at peace.

Despite their different races, ages and physical appearances, the men begin to blend together. We see countless locks fall to the ground and the shaving ritual begins to resemble the natural process of the water rushing by. We begin to see how human rituals, while man-made and changeable, can come to feel organic immutable, and how an individual can be transformed and carried along by them.

*Paul Emmanuel: Transitions* will be on view at the National Museum of African Art through August 22, 2010.