

Robyn Sassen

Your Name, My Body

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"THE WORDS THAT describe you — your name — are among the things that unequivocally define you. It's a proper noun in the world and something that when you are no longer there, will evoke you to strangers. It is upon this premise that much of Paul Emmanuel's work on his current exhibition reflects. Entitled Impermanence, the pieces on show draw from several bodies of work created over the last decade or so; there are photographs of installations in the fields of France, Mozambique and Grahamstown, and samplings of series of works contemplating mortality.

Remember-dismember (2015) is a single channel video playing on a loop in the gallery. It encapsulates the untellable, inscrutable nature of a name as it considers the vulnerability of the body as a receptacle for the names of those who are no longer here. Segueing with his thinking in *The Lost Men*, this video work sees Emmanuel intimately holding on to the anonymous young men who died in trenches, ignominiously rendered fodder by the war machines.

Indeed, on so many levels, Emmanuel becomes as a Wilfred Owen over a hundred years after the First World War. Only his poetry is in gesture rather than descriptive words. And he takes the names of the young men who fell in various wars and embosses them painfully into his flesh, which he photographs, and prints onto sheets of fabric, allowing them to billow in the wind, forcing the gesture from the realms of visual art into performative spontaneity on the arms of nature.

But that's not all. This exhibition touches on several streams of Emmanuel's thought processes, including works from his breathtaking stone lithograph series of 2011, dealing with different stages in life. Platform number 5 is a particularly poignant case in point, as is Table Number 12. The work is painstakingly fine yet bewilderingly wide in its reach. It's beguilingly simple in focus and dizzyingly deep at the same time.

In Platform number 5, people come and go anonymously through turnstiles in a railway station. In Table Number 12, an elderly man puts on his jacket. On a level, these are ordinary images. On another, they reach through the span of what it means to be alive, vulnerable and mortal in this world, thus irrevocably linking *The Lost Men* images to these that contemplate how transient it all is.

While it's always a treat to immerse yourself in Emmanuel's distinctive line work and intensely refined focus, this exhibition touches on the notion of retrospective even though it is not comprehensive and the space dwarfs the work. These bold and subtle gestures need the infinity of hundred-year-old battle fields, now grown green and fertile, as platform to the banners and flags of soldiers' names forced into the soft flesh, the yielding skin of the living artist. The exhibition in all its sense of preciousness and intimacy becomes as a cipher to the

breadth and depth of Emmanuel's focus on the tactile anonymity of war and the scars it leaves in society, implacably.

Impermanence by Paul Emmanuel is at Fried Contemporary Gallery in Brooklyn, Pretoria, until April 7.