

Johan Thom

Impermanence: Paul Emmanuel

Paul Emmanuel: Impermanence exhibition catalogue, Fried Contemporary Gallery, Pretoria, South Africa, March, 2018.

I want to extend the sensory, bodily experience of encountering Paul Emmanuel's artworks into the black and white realm of text. I am not interested in the kind of writing that flattens an artist's work by explaining it to death. Rather, I want to respond in kind, in a gentle conversation with Emmanuel's solo exhibition Impermanence exhibited here at Fried Contemporary.

I confess that I am interested in how the body is written, or rather, in how the body writes itself. That is to ask the question: Does the body leave a trace of itself in the world, in text, in art and in the objects that surround it? And if so, how may we identify these traces?

On the simplest level we all understand that bodies make artworks and that they may be the subject matter of artworks. For me the thing that happens in Emmanuel's work is more complex than that. The body is not only the subject matter of Emmanuel's work. It is also the medium and the methodology – animating the work and giving it its power.

When I say that "I am moved by the work" I do mean an emotional and mental experience, but my own body also feels as if the work has impacted upon it in an intimate and unexpected way. When I first saw photographic stills from the video Remember-dismember (2015) I literally felt the letters imprinted on the artist's body somehow also traced upon my own face, shoulder and stomach. I suppose you could call it an empathetic response to the work, identifying with the content of the work to such a degree that I experienced it in and on my own body.

Other lithographic artworks in the exhibition including Platform number 5 (2011) reveal themselves to be the product of an almost incomprehensible number of lines methodically drawn by the artist to form the resulting black and white image. As a viewer I step back and forward, playing an optical game with the image and marvelling at the sheer complexity of it. The closer I get to the work the more deeply I am drawn into the material network of lines and marks upon the surface. This is more than looking. This is a conversation in which different images and ideas appear and disappear in my mind, mirroring the coagulation or dissolution of the ghostly bodies in the work.

As I see the line up close, I am acutely aware of the artist's hand making the lines. My own hands share in that experience through some kind of corporeal identification with the painstaking effort. To see is to feel is to share.

In the series of works The Lost Men (2004–2014), thorny questions of masculine bodies and identities are poignantly brought to the fore through a series of windswept installations in different landscapes comprising large banners bearing detailed images of a male body (the artist's in actual fact). Here a shaven head, there an arm, a foot and a leg. Subtle imprints, or bruises, of text appear on the skin (all 'printed' with a stamp to leave a legible trace of the

written word). The text comprises the names of individual servicemen lost during a number of wars including World War One (1914–1918), The Frontier Wars (1779–1878) and the border wars during apartheid with its geographic neighbours including Mozambique.

There is something deeply vulnerable about these works, these bodies, unhinged as they are from their individual context and left to their own devices. The wind and the sun wreak relentless gentle havoc upon them day after day. If left long enough they will fade, tear and eventually disappear.

When I look at The Lost Men installation in Mozambique (2007) I am reminded of the macho bravado so brazenly flaunted by the apartheid government. During forced conscription young white men from vastly different backgrounds and with vastly different identities were routinely conscripted to protect the nation, their families, their culture and their values. In the process their personal identities were subsumed to a larger national project that had no space for dissent or any variation.

Thinking about it today, these young soldiers were mostly just confused young boys left to the elements and the violence of a conflict (often even against their own countrymen) they did not even understand. The process was brutal and relied on the ignorance of young white men. As with almost all wars the only sure, safe thing in the perceived chaos was a flawed ideology – a lonely flag (or banner waving in the wind) to which one's absolute allegiance held the only possible promise of life. To threaten such a thing by questioning your masculinity and the use of it against others, or by asserting a less masculine sexual identity, was to threaten the state and to become the enemy.

Whilst many young men are physically lost to war, buried and largely forgotten, many more are ultimately also 'lost' to themselves and to society upon their return. They have become other people for the sake of their nation or simply in order to survive. And when all is done and dusted, who are they? How will they sensibly fit in to the world upon their return?

As the title of this exhibition by Emmanuel reminds us, things have a way of changing. What seems certain today may not last. Memory endures but even that will eventually fade, become distorted and disappear into larger institutional narratives that have little space for the individual body, its experiences and its history. Things are indeed 'impermanent'.

I want to engage with Emmanuel's artworks because the body is so very present in them. I want to write my own male body and place it in the works, because the work draws me in. This for me is the strength of his artistic practice.