

Weaver, A. M. PAUL EMMANUEL, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN ART, WASHINGTON DC, in *Art South Africa*, Bell Roberts Publishing, Cape Town, South Africa, Spring

Paul Emmanuel's film and photographic works from his touring museum solo exhibition *Transitions* crosses the colour line and constructs vignettes based on a white male's transition from infancy to maturity. Emmanuel condenses a lifetime into his 14-minute film and five hand-drawn tableaus, *Transitions 1 – 5* (2005-08). There is an overriding emphasis on heads and hands throughout his work. Faces are rarely shown, possibly inferring the figures are stand-ins for the everyman.

Emmanuel's High Definition film *3SAI: A Rite of Passage* (2008) focuses on recruits from the Third South African Infantry Battalion in Kimberley, mostly young black men who relinquish their identities to become army men. Emmanuel captures this moment by recording the ritualistic shaving of their heads. In the film and drawing series the artist depicts himself in the barber's chair. However, for many blacks, this moment may not be as symbolically charged as for whites (remember Samson); black men shave their heads on a regular basis to be considered well groomed.

Emmanuel's film includes a scene showing a young white recruit sitting down to have his shaggy golden locks shaved. Maybe he is self-conscious about being filmed, because he smiles impishly before settling down under the barber's confident hand. His response to this experience is a far cry from the pressure Emmanuel's brother felt to join the South African National Defence Force in the spirit of nationalism and white solidarity more than 30 years ago. Times have changed and Emmanuel finds his clues on masculinity within constructs not bound by race. The SANDF is now a multiracial army attempting to keep peace throughout Africa. The last shot of the film shows black hands caressing a white shaven head. Is this a paradoxical emblem of black and white relations, or rather a loaded homoerotic moment revealed in slow motion?

Woven between the footage of new recruits Emmanuel includes a scene of one thousand billowing white T-shirts from an installation mounted in the Karoo some years ago. Scenes shift from shirts fluttering like Egrets to barren horizon landscapes and languid bodies of water. The film ebbs and flows with no apparent crescendo; in slow mode, images of shirts are montaged with falling strands of hair, like fresh cut grass. Amidst the buzz of clippers and the whirr of speeding trains, electronic bells and chimes waft through the background, marking the passage of time. Recalling, for me, Edgar Allen Poe's 1849 poem *The Bells*: "Keeping time, time, time/ In a sort of Runic Rhyme/ To the tintinnabulation that so musically wells/ From the bells, bells, bells/ Bells, bells, bells ..."

The exhibition includes a series of "photo realist" drawings, five framed tableaus depicting a sequential narrative. Using a knife as a drawing tool, Emmanuel engages in an arduous disciplinary exercise, rendering each beautifully articulated image by hand on exposed and processed colour photographic paper. A work showing an infant undergoing circumcision is the most compelling. In contrast to the expressive positions and views of the baby, the obscured stills of male figures marking the passage from adolescence to adulthood and old age, are mostly seen from the rear. One sequence shows a man at a wedding ceremony.

There is no bride, only a priest, whose hands place a crown of gold on the head of the groom. A halo of white light surrounds the groom's head in two of the sequences. Whether an unintentional photographic moment or not, this glowing aura is brightest before the youth is crowned at the close of the wedding ceremony, connoting innocence to cardinal knowledge.

In *Transition 4*, an old man is aided putting on his coat by a black woman – it is his seventieth birthday celebration. Again, the male has his back to camera; the gesture of the woman is like a mystical force surrounding him. Enveloped by a bright light, the scene, perhaps, marks the subject's slipping from one ontology to another. As I traversed along Emmanuel's cosmic path, there was joy in the revelation. There was joy in the revelations. The work's efficacy is clean and brilliant in its execution. Nothing is left to chance. If only life were really this blissful.

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