

Kaganof, A. PAUL EMMANUEL APARTHEID MUSEUM in Art South Africa, Bell Roberts Publishing, Cape Town, December

A young man stares at himself apprehensively, shifts his torso uncomfortably in the barber's seat, his eyes briefly connecting with the gaze of the camera reflected in the mirror opposite him. He looks away as the electric razor is switched on, the image slows down and the sensual surfing of the razor over his undulating scalp might be taken for a lover's caress, or it could be something a lot more ominous, perhaps the prelude to a suicide? It is this ambiguous quality that makes Paul Emanuel's first film such a powerfully unsettling achievement.

*3SAI A Rite of Passage* is the title of the 12-minute film, shot in Kimberley at the Third South African Infantry Battalion, which juxtaposes images of young army recruits getting shaved – often in micro-close-up – with epic time lapse sequences in the vast open expanses of the Karoo. The film isn't a documentary, it isn't "about" anything in the sense that the language of the documentary conveys pedagogic content. Emmanuel's use of film works to convey a sense of experience and the complex play of the edit serves to shave us, the viewer, of our comfortable viewing conventions leaving us as naked and vulnerable as the young men we are watching.

"The military head shaving environment is a liminal one – an in-between space," said Emmanuel. "A space where a man is in the process of leaving one identity behind, and taking on a new one. For a few moments, as the hair of his youth falls to the ground, he is undefined, identity-less."

Emmanuel is an artist whose obsessive attention to visual detail is legendary, so it is no surprise that the film looks so good. What does surprise is the sound design, by Wilbert Schubel, which has a defining impact on how the eye absorbs the imagery. *3SAI A Rite of Passage* has no dialogue; it is a non-verbal, intuitive flow of sound and image that is always beautiful, but not without leaving the viewer slightly disorientated. It feels like a highly political work but it is hard to put one's finger on exactly why this is so.

Obviously the use of the word "*transitions*" in titling the exhibition that the film forms part of marries the relatively abstract visual content to a particular time. "Transition is a place of subtle change," clarified Emmanuel. "You cannot even see it most times, but a head shaving is a visible, potentially poetic depiction of this change."

This rite of passage, which cinematographer Eran Tahor has filmed in images of scorching intimacy, is rendered through the subtlety of Matthew Kramer's editing and the almost aching wistful sound design by Schubel into something more than a mere documentation of an event.