

Robyn Sassen

**Of Circumcising and Circumscribing and Understanding Where I Fit In**

*Transitions*, Art Source South Africa, Johannesburg, South Africa, 2008.

ISBN 978-0-620-41945-1

It was anthropologist Victor Turner who first made the notion of liminality sexy within the academic world, allowing the potency, magic and nakedness of the initiate to throw viable light on the reading of non-western social practices. Turner was looking at specific and what he considered to be primitive cultures, which either existed outside the construct of western practices or were determined largely by ritual gesture. In *Transitions* Paul Emmanuel considers liminality through the social rituals which frame it – the circumcising of a male baby, the shaving of the head of an army recruit, the wedding ceremony, dress ritual and a point of nebulous departure.

While I was working on this essay, I was commissioned to interview Johnny Clegg, one of South Africa's foremost crossover musicians. From the mid-1970s Clegg represented groundbreaking re-thinking in South African popular music. Born in England and having lived in Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa, he aligned himself with Zulu traditional music and dance and became known as the white Zulu. He interviewed well and spoke with candour of many things; as the publication I was writing for was one with a primarily Jewish audience and Clegg is of Jewish parentage we spoke of traditions in both Jewish and Zulu cultures which honour manhood. At 55 Clegg engages with much that made me think of the kernel anachronisms in Emmanuel's body of work.

Eighteenth-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote: "Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains". Emmanuel's series of images relates quintessentially to this, offering a gloss on the set of rules that make us human and define us in the society we call our own.

His focus draws from within his own broad social values, as white male, but the images defy direct links and leap off into the ephemeral, giving the overall statement of *Transitions* a level of profundity which pushes the cultural content over into the universal. Understanding the framing of that liminality provokes an engagement with the personal – I can only look at these distinguishing anti-liminal gestures Emmanuel represents through my own cultural values.

Clegg was defined by the Jewish roots of his mother. He was circumscribed by apartheid rulings which did not allow him to associate with black people. He disregarded and dismissed these rules, and emerged as an outsider on many accounts. He refused to have a barmitzvah – a coming of age acknowledgement for Jewish boys of thirteen. He learnt to dance and play the guitar in traditions specific to Zulu practice, in the servants' quarters adjacent to white-resident buildings and in the men's hostels attached to the mines, where Zulu migrants were housed. But he also followed the paths society had pre-established for him. He married a Jewish woman. He had two sons. His pattern of breaking tradition was not perpetuated. At the barmitzvah of his oldest son in 2002 Clegg realised the value and potency of being brought back into the ritual fold, but refused to deny his liminal status.

A middle-aged man steps up to make a speech. He puts on his jacket in order to do so, presenting himself in a particular manner, which is about respect and convention within Western society, thus consolidating the role of dress in the equation. It's a subtle and unobvious gesture, far from that of circumcising a neo-natal boy, or from marrying in a religious context or from having one's head shorn preparatory to entering the army and, as such, it is hugely provocative and powerful and becomes an issue of identification. So, a penis is a signifier, as are hair and clothing. It is what we do to these things that give us a sense of belonging.

How does one slip the boundaries of liminality and shift from being a foreigner, a stranger, a creature in exile, to one who belongs within the society? It's a complicated set of values, and each culture has its own initiation imprints that define its members and celebrate qualities it deems important. In offering these drawings, which probe and reflect transitions to different stages of life, Emmanuel doesn't critique the gestures. He doesn't critique the society, which is of his own ken. He doesn't point political fingers at the forced transition that young white men were compelled to make through conscription into the national defence force under apartheid rule. He acknowledges these gestures for the shift in values and self-identification they represent.

He engages with the freshly circumcised discomfort of the neo-natal, not that different from the freshly shorn head of the young man about to serve his country in the army. He is new, he is vulnerable, he has been made by society to appear in a particular manner.

The final set of images in Emmanuel's series annotates contemporary liminality. The hurried and blurred coming and going of nameless, faceless individuals through a busy turnstile becomes a metaphor for that point just before transition, just before the initiate is stripped clean preparatory to being broken or shaved or renamed or ritually extinguished and relit, and before he becomes a part of a new world.

Charles La Shure comments on the slipperiness of liminality, particularly out of its ritual context. As Emmanuel articulates, our world is a complex nexus of values, some of them diluted in context over time, but practised with unquestioning consistency by communities and individuals, who have let the ritual elements of their culture go. It's about holding on to a sense of stability in a constantly evolving world. "Liminality," Shure adds, "is evanescent, like a wisp of smoke in the wind."

This text forms part of the book published by Art Source South Africa to complement the touring museum exhibition *Transitions*.