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Chasing Shadows

SANTU MOFOKENG
THIRTY YEARS OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAYS

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SERIOUS LAUGHTER: THE TWISTED HUMOUR OF SANTU MOFOKENG

ADAM ASHFORTH

Santu Mofokeng's work is in danger of being smothered with reverence.

Make no mistake: the man is serious about his art. But his work is also funny. Above the gloomy grey smog of a black apartheid township a billboard proclaims 'OMO.' Why? Because, as everyone knows, 'Omo washes whitest'. (Or was their slogan: 'Omo washes whiteness brightest?') Mostly, the jokes are more subtle. But they're usually there if you know where to look. I learnt this from the man himself.

In the early 1990s I found myself living in Soweto. It happened quite by accident. I was a visiting scholar in South Africa – from Australia via the United States – based at the Institute for Advanced Social Research, where Santu worked. Friends and family of a former student of mine, a Sowetan studying in the United States, invited me to spend the weekend in Soweto with them. I went for a weekend and ended up staying for the better part of four years, remaining connected to Soweto ever since. I found myself, with Santu's help, learning how to live in an apartheid township and observing the transformation of a racist state from the point of view of everyday life. I ended up writing books about witchcraft and South African democracy, amongst other things. Every week or so during those years, I would visit the university to hang out with Santu. We would spend hours together in his darkroom or his flat in town looking at and talking about pictures, my snaps of everyday '90s life – *isnephi*, as my Sowetan friends call photographs – made in service of

Sowetan family photo albums, and his, including many that appear in this book, that embody a unique perspective on the world. From Santu I learnt how to read an image. I also learned that it is impossible to talk with Santu Mofokeng about his photographs without laughing a lot.

Sometimes the joke is a simple sight gag, like the one of a goat seeming to grow out of another goat's back in the cave at Motouleng, or the headless three-legged horse grazing peacefully in the grounds of a Buddhist retreat. Sometimes the irony is in the situation: a dopey-looking white photographer is lined up with whip-wielding cops facing down, we assume, black protestors amongst whom the hapless Mofokeng must have been. Surely in this distorting mirror the artist is not suggesting equivalence in their positions? Maybe.

Or, consider the forlorn figure of the man in the showers of Jabulani Hostel, scrubbing away alone in a corner, doubtless oblivious of the fact that Mofokeng is committing him to posterity. (When I look at this picture I like to imagine the bather turning on hearing the camera's click and clopping the cameraman for intruding on his privacy.) In his nakedness before a bleak expanse of communal showerdom, Mofokeng's bather echoes Ernest Cole's famous photograph of naked mineworkers lined up for inspection, all sinews and buttocks. But whereas Cole depicts black men stripped of their humanity by the apartheid system, Mofokeng introduces us to someone trying to get clean and probably glad to have access to running

water. The world this poor soul inhabits is lonely and decrepit compared to the land of Cole. If you can't see the humour in that, you'll never be able to read a Mofokeng photograph.

Often the humour arises from the flouting of rules and conventions of his art. Look at the portrait of the sharecropper Maine in which we get a little bit of Maine's head and a whole lot of his horse – and even then the poor beast has had his head and legs chopped from view. Looking at this one, I laugh too at the thought of poor old Prof. van Onselen, an historian with a prodigious appetite for the documentary detail in life. He commissions Mofokeng to document the disappearing world of an impoverished African farmer whose life he has devoted a decade to writing, staking his reputation in the process, and the photographer returns from the western Transvaal with pictures of chickens scuttling through shafts of light and a horse's flank, or someone's knobby knee, not to mention a doll in a bucket. Yet the images Santu made on these trips to the *bhunduland* speak of the depths of connection in an old man's love for his horse, not to mention a chicken's place in a family, in ways no amount of literal 'documentation' ever could. Bless van Onselen for recognizing and supporting this genius when his post-apartheid sense of purpose was foundering. Those years after apartheid were hard on all who wanted to make art in South Africa.

Mofokeng's humour is always gentle – which is another reason why he was a lousy struggle photographer. Look at his portrait of the old man Moabi reading a book. The man is probably illiterate; the book beyond readable, even were the reader to have his spectacles. You have to laugh, but the image doesn't mock. Nor are we invited to mock the small boy in a crowded kitchen decked out in his suit and hat for a township wedding. But we can't help recognize he is an African doing something odd, like the boys searching for their golf balls in the grass of Soweto or the Pretoria churchman distracted from tuning his radio by the fine-figured woman marching into his church.

Often the humour in Mofokeng's work is at the photographer's expense. Who would take a picture of a funeral cortege meandering through empty fields *en route* to nowhere? A cameraman who was late arriving for the main event and missed the opportunity to get up front and snap the dignitaries, that's who. Or, take the Train Church. Yes, *take* that train, early in the morning because you don't have any other means of transport. Maybe you have a hangover when you take that train with all those fanatics making noise, because these are not the sort of faithful who are devoted to quiet contemplation. Take that train and

you too might be inclined to poke a camera in their faces and say to hell with their feelings.

Who could find humour in the plight of Aids orphans? Mofokeng. As he picks out the details of the ways kids living alone have decorated their houses with graffiti and old compact discs he reveals, at one stroke, both the sadness and the advantages of not having a mother at home. Another commission fulfilled.

But surely, I hear you say, there can't be any humour in those haunting images of the caves or the portraits of a brother dying of Aids? Why not? A sort of reverential stupor fell over critics when Mofokeng first exhibited those images under the rubric *Chasing Shadows*. After all, they are about religion and spirituality, not to mention illness and death, and surely must be spoken of in hushed terms. But as these photographs show, people are living in these caves: doing their laundry (is that a symbolic flag marking sacred space or someone's knickers drying on a stick?), cooking (they'll eat that goat with two backs after the ancestors have had their share), laughing, crying and much else, too, if the Sotho equivalent of the 'Kilroy was here'-type graffiti on the cave walls is anything to go by. Here is a photograph of a sacred landscape. Or is it a big rock that looks like a toad? A toad. A half-open car door frames another landscape, surely the whole mystical scene. What is going on here? Is this a sly reflection on the way ethnographic photographers, of whom Duggan-Cronin, a master Mofokeng admires, was the greatest, used to frame their studies of natives in their natural habitat with a nice opening panoramic landscape shot? Is Mofokeng playing tricks or the same game? Both.

Like the photographer Mofokeng, the people in Motouleng Cave are chasing shadows. Literally. They are working amidst invisible forces that leave traces in the tangible world. Like the photographer in his pursuit of the play of light and shade, their work might also be futile. They might be chasing shadows. It is unavoidable, nonetheless, for it is the work of life and death. And the brother? Poor Ishmael? He was a *sangoma*. A healer. And he died. *Eyes Wide Shut*. Just because there is pain doesn't mean there can be no laughter. Bitter irony can also be funny.

To read Mofokeng's images, it seems to me, requires imagining how the situation photographed, or the effect of the image, or the plight of the photographer, or the predicament of the planet – anything, everything – can be twisted in such a way as to squeeze out a laugh. But remember: humour need not signify happiness. Laughter can be serious. Or, as we say in Soweto when they know we are lying: *Serious!*