

Santu Mofokeng

Chasing Shadows

30 Years of Photographic Essays

24 May – 25 September 2011





Train Church: Laying of Hands, Johannesburg-Soweto Line, 1986

His significant contribution to understanding and research on human development in the South African context, outstanding quality and content of his work, his innovations in photographic representation, his acute insight into the cultural meanings in landscape, and his reciprocal relations environment and development, all make Santu Mofokeng a major artist. This exhibition, his first retrospective in France, offers a broad introduction to his work with over 200 images (photographs and slide show) as well as texts and documents. The selection from the photographic essays that he has produced over the last thirty years affords insights into the Soweto of his youth, everyday life on farms and in townships, religious rituals, and landscapes. Among the latter, the *Radiant Landscapes* were made specially for this occasion.

Early days

Santu Mofokeng started as a street-photographer during the 1970s, portraying his family and friends in Soweto. In 1981, he begins work in the darkroom of *Beeld* newspaper, before moving the following year to the Chamber of Mines newspapers. In 1985 he joins *Afrapix*, a photographers' collective founded in 1982 and documenting the anti-apartheid struggle.

Covering what is topical, his work gets published in *Weekly Mail* (now the *Mail & Guardian*).

"It was an ideal place for me to publish, because I could never keep deadlines, and I don't drive. When we were covering a story, the other guys who had cars would run into the darkroom and place their work. I couldn't do that. In the end, it informed how I worked. I would cover things in the week and I knew I wouldn't make the deadline for tomorrow. [...] In my mind, I began to think more in book terms, not necessarily in newspaper terms. [...] Being slow became a strength for me."

In parallel, Mofokeng started covering stories for the *New Nation*, as well as starting to develop a project called *Fictional Biography*, a sort of metaphorical biography of his life, looking at his own community.

The first photographic essays: from *Train Church* to *Black Photo Album*

At a time when the Apartheid regime was becoming more desperate and very harsh, Mofokeng adopted the form of the photographic essay, since this allowed for greater complexity than documentary photography and its over-politicised depiction of repression and resistance. *Train Church* (1986), in which he began his ongoing exploration of religious rituals and the displacement of places of worship, is considered



Rumours/The Bloemhof Portfolio: Chief More's Funeral, GaMogopa, 1989

his first photographic essay.

In 1988, at the suggestion of the photographer David Goldblatt and the historian Tim Couzens, Mofokeng was invited to join the African Studies Institute (ASI), where he stayed for almost ten years as a researcher and photographer. There he produced his photographic essay *Rumours/The Bloemhof Portfolio*, which constitutes a genuine archive of rural life in South Africa based on research and investigation. For his 1990 exhibition *Like Shifting Sand* at the Johannesburg Market Galleries, showing life on the farms and in the coloured communities, Santu Mofokeng received the first Ernest Cole scholarship allowing him to study for one year at the International Center of Photography (ICP) in New York, where he attended, among others, Roy DeCarava's workshops.

For his 1995 exhibition *Distorting Mirror: Townships Imagined* at the Johannesburg Worker Library, Mofokeng brought together private images i.e. photographs people keep in their homes, and public images made by himself. In creating this juxtaposition, he explored a different way of telling by establishing a dialogue that raises new questions about the politics of visual representation.

The African Studies Institute gave Santu Mofokeng the necessary space and time to develop his

research on the representation of everyday life in the townships that goes beyond the stereotypical news pictures of Soweto depicting violence or poverty. One of his projects on images of the self and family histories of black South Africans would result in *The Black Photo Album/Look at Me: 1890-1950*, comprising old photographs that he found or purchased from family collections, and then re-photographed, and paired with the stories of the circumstances surrounding them. "These are images that urban black working and middle-class families had commissioned, requested or tacitly sanctioned. They were left behind by dead relatives, sometimes hanging on obscure parlour walls in the townships. In some families they are coveted as treasures, displacing totems in discursive narratives about identity, lineage and personality. [...] When we look at them we believe them, for they tell us a little about how these people imagined themselves. We see these images in the terms determined by the subjects themselves, for they have made them their own."

Chasing Shadows and Mofokeng's work on landscape

In 1996 the artist began work on his photographic essay *Chasing Shadows*, which is still in progress today. His focus here is on religious rituals and the sites in which they are practised, the caves of Motouleng and Mautse. With these images,



Landscape and Memory: Katse Dam, Lesotho, 1996

Mofokeng probes the relation between landscape, memory and religion.

"Many people who come here to worship believe that the spirits of ancestors repose in the deep belly of this cave [...]. This project steered me to places where reality blended in freely with unreality, where knowledge of photographic technique was really challenged. While the images record the rituals, fetishes and settings, I am not certain the film captured the essence of the consciousness I saw displayed. Perhaps, I was looking for something that refuses to be photographed. Perhaps I was only chasing shadows."

Mofokeng went further in the exploration of landscapes begun with *Chasing Shadows* in *Trauma Landscapes* and *Landscape and Memory*, for which he photographed places imbued with historical significance and memories and thus questioned the very idea of landscape. Travelling to parts of South Africa that, as a Black, he could never have gone during apartheid, he also went to Europe and Asia, trying to find out how other countries were dealing with places associated with negative memories and had resolved similar problems to what democratic South Africa experienced, and which it must deal with in order to take psychic ownership of the land it has inherited from the apartheid ancestor. *"During apartheid there were places I could never go to –*

being black, places we were not allowed to see or to visit. Also, after 1994 I began to travel more. [...] And I realized that I didn't even know the country. In one sense, it was getting to know South Africa a bit more through searching for places with memory, especially heavy memories. [...] I found it amazing. What is not in the photograph is in the memory, in the mind; there is no violence, it is what you know that is violent."

With *Radiant Landscapes*, Santu Mofokeng continues to examine those "invisible evils" that are apartheid and AIDS, by photographing people's relationship with the spiritual world, and even with spirits. In a sense, these concerns also inform the polluted landscapes where human and geographical bodies are poisoned and forced to undergo gradual metamorphosis, as the uneven and parallel precipitates of both climate change and photography itself.



Soweto Township : Comrade-Sister, White City Jabavu, 1985

around the exhibition

■ discussion with Santu Mofokeng and Corinne Diserens, curator of the exhibition.

Tuesday 24 May, 7pm

■ symposium "Art, history, politics: contemporary interactions and reflections," moderated by art historian Elvan Zabunyan.

session 2: "Deconstructing clichés," with Angela Ferreira, artist, Thierry Hoquet, philosopher, Griselda Pollock, art historian and critic, and Santu Mofokeng, artist.

Claude Cahun and Santu Mofokeng are two avant-garde photographers from totally different historical and cultural backgrounds, but both show a way of going beyond sexual and racial clichés. This symposium will refer to their experiences in order to deconstruct the stereotypes that beset all thinking on "gender" and "race."

Friday 17 June, 6pm

■ Mardis Jeunes Tours:** tour of the exhibition by Santu Mofokeng, followed by a discussion with the artist in the educational area, with a Jeu de Paume guide.

Tuesday 28 June, 7pm

■ publication: *Santu Mofokeng, chasseur d'ombres – Trente ans d'essais photographiques*

Texts by Adam Ashforth, Okwui Enzewor, Patricia Hayes, Sarat Maharaj, Santu Mofokeng, Ivan Vladislavic, Sabine Vogel, conversation between the artist and Corinne Diserens
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■ **Santu Mofokeng, Chasing Shadows:**

30 Years of Photographic Essays

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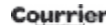
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