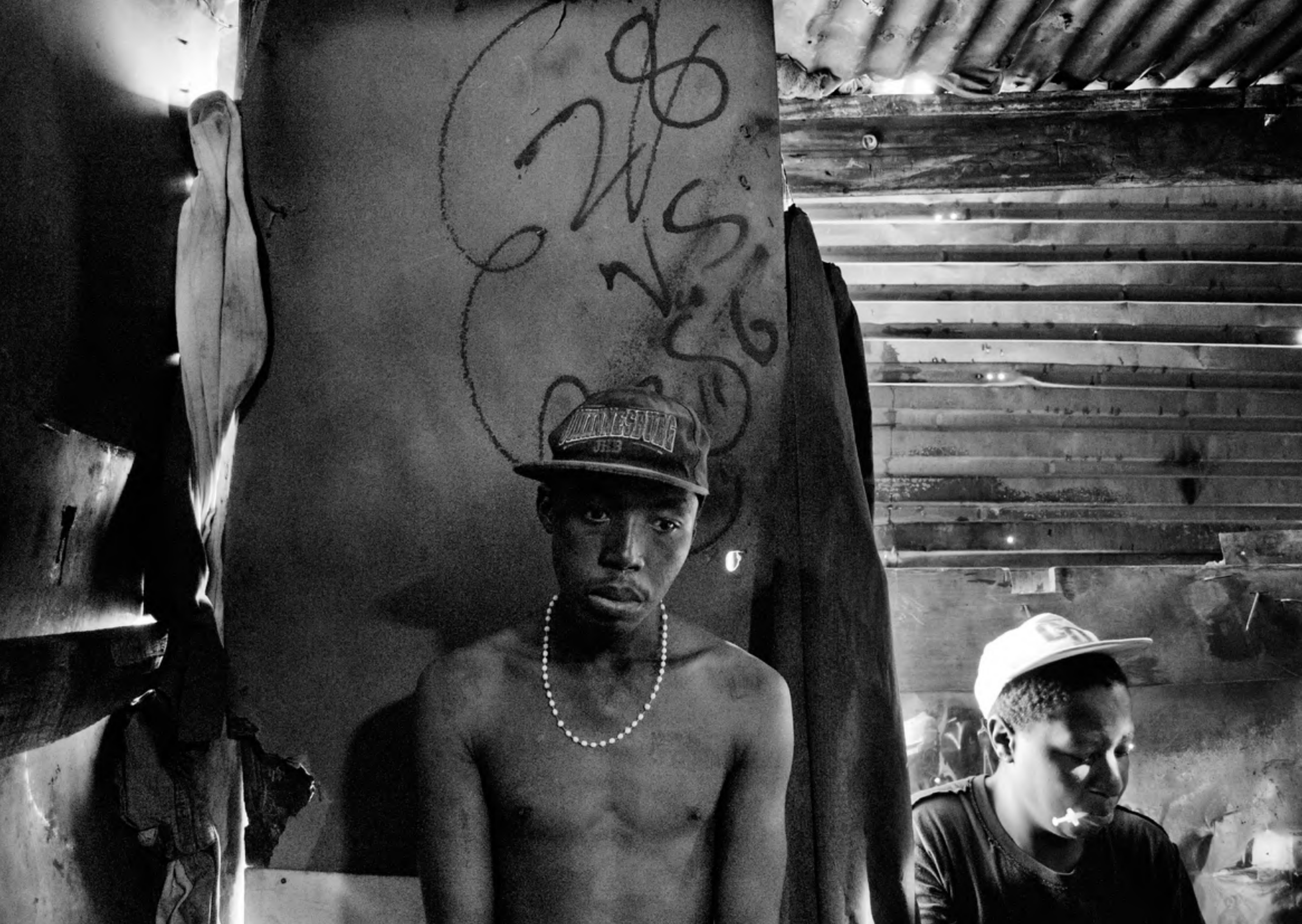
NYAOPE. EVERYTHING YOU GIVE ME MY BOSS, WILL DO

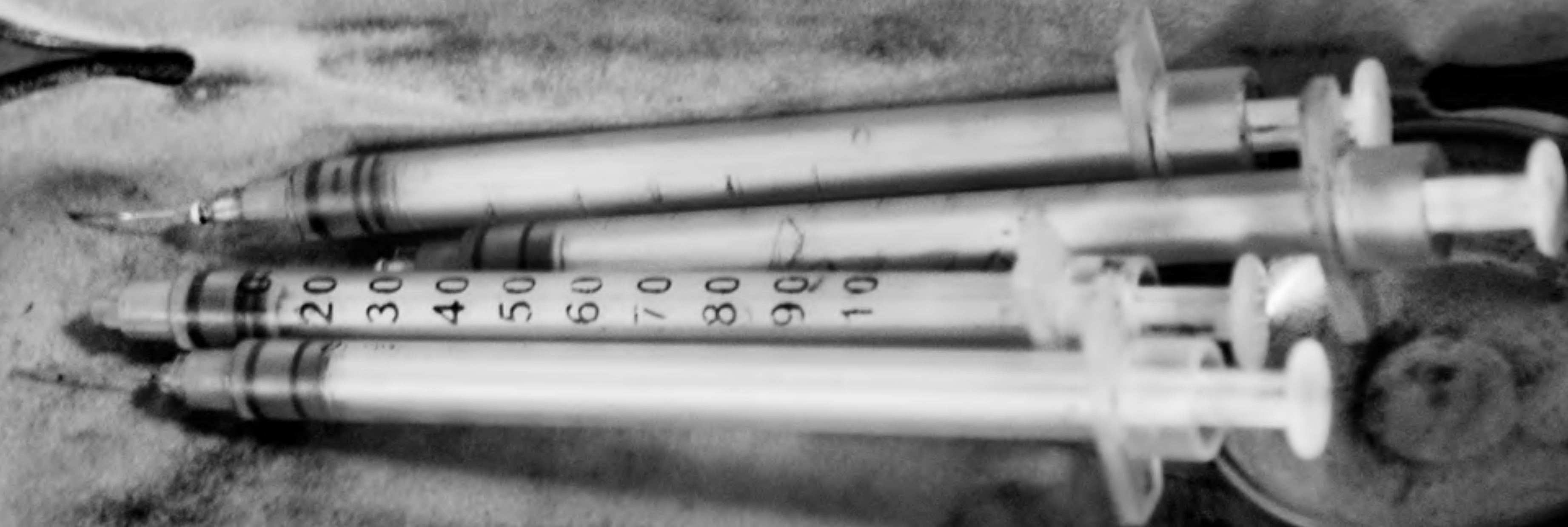
LINDOKUHLE SOBEKWA

LINDOKUHLE SOBEKWA

Nyaope.
Everything you give me my Boss,
will do

With an essay by Sean O'Toole


JHB


M. PRETORIUS
OOGKUNDIGE - OPTOMETRIST
Colorimeter Sentrum / Centre
Monumentweg 23 Monument Rd
Kempton Park 1619
Tel / Fax: 975-3316 / 975-3611

100%
PURE REFRESHMENT

EBUHO
FUCK
All
LET'S
GO
50/50
NO JOB
NO FOOD?
&
PLEASE HEP
NOMA
YINI
BOZA
YAMI
Fuck THE EAST
Fuck THE WEST
AND fuck the WORLD

Always Restless.

NGK
BOUGI
AUTO PA
CASTLE

JHG644 GP

NYAOPE EA BOLAYA
DRUGS DESTROY LIVES
A BETTER PLACE TO LIVE IN
GAUTENG PRO
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

das

OLWOR
WORTHS

The Unflinching Witness

By Sean O'Toole

South Africa has a long tradition of news reporting. It is worth briefly recounting as a way of contextualising Lindokuhle Sobekwa's essay on township drug abuse. The country's first newspaper, a pro-government mouthpiece, was established in 1800, although it was only 24 years later with the launch of the *SA Commercial Advertiser* that an independent press was born. During the years of high apartheid (1948-90) news reporters and photographers often found themselves at odds with government. Partly this had to do with the muckraking traditions of reporting here, but it was also an outcome of witnessing the impoverished material circumstances of everyday South Africans against the backdrop of a cruel system. Despite his youth, Sobekwa undoubtedly slots into this vigorous and unapologetic tradition. His essay on nyaope users unflinchingly witnesses the complexities of present-day South Africa, where the country's youth face bracing poverty and widespread unemployment.

Youth unemployment is a major social problem in South Africa and is a key socio-economic challenge. Around 3.2 million youths are unemployed. This represents nearly two thirds (63%) of the productive workforce aged between 15 and 34, a 2014 report by the Brookings Institution revealed. Tellingly, given the somnolent action depicted in Sobekwa's essay, these very high figures include youths who are not actively looking for a job. They are sometimes referred to as "discouraged work-seekers". With economic growth sluggish, prospects for future work remain slim, leaving many youths to improvise.

Informal work is however perilous and, without a family network for support, youths from impoverished circumstances are forced to live contingent lives. Sobekwa's

essay offers a study of personal collapse seen against the backdrop of larger economic circumstances. Although set in Thokoza, where he was born and schooled, the situation Sobekwa depicts is commonplace across many urban and poor black settlements across South Africa. This statement needs clarification. Despite South Africa's transition to a non-racial democracy in 1994, many facets of formal apartheid remain in place, notably the quarantined living circumstances that still define South African cities. In a 2013 speech President Jacob Zuma referenced many of these communities during a sombre appraisal of the country's social problems.

"Alcohol and drug abuse in particular are slowly eating into the social fibre of our communities," Zuma told a gathering in Newcastle. It was Youth Day, nominally a day of celebration, although the subject of speech suggested otherwise. "Drug and substance abuse have serious implications for the millions of citizens because they contribute to crime, gangsterism, domestic violence, family dysfunction and other forms of social problems." Parents, he added, were at a loss and in pain as children as young as eight were being snared in the net of drug abuse. But what drugs? According to the 2014 World Drug Report, cannabis remains the most common illicit substance used in South Africa. It also noted that there has been an increase in the use of methamphetamine and heroin, a low-grade variant of the latter is typically mixed in with cannabis and antiretroviral drugs to make nyaope.

But drug abuse is merely part of a complex set of problems defining life in Thokoza, an apartheid-era settlement created in 1957 outside Alberton, southeast of Johannesburg. Sobekwa was born in 1995 in Natalspruit, a settlement just

The Unflinching Witness – By Sean O'Toole

north of Thokoza. His father, who died in 2004, was a carpenter. His mother continues to work as a domestic help. He spent his early childhood living with relatives in the Eastern Cape, a rural Xhosa-speaking enclave, before returning to Thokoza in 1999 to pursue his schooling. He attended Buhlebuzile Secondary School in Thokoza. Uninterested in football, he joined the choir and participated in Zulu dance classes. Although born five years after the violent clashes initiated by Zulu-speaking hostel dwellers on largely Xhosa settlements in Thokoza and Katlehong, Sobekwa says aspects of his neighbourhood's "previous predicament" continue to endure.

He witnessed them first-hand at school, mostly as clichés spread around the schoolyard. "Xhosa people are liars and Zulu people are cowards," he offers as an example. But, he adds, for the most part, calm prevails. Conflicts in Thokoza, as elsewhere across South Africa, now tend to focus on national rather than local ethnic identities. The larger Ekurhuleni region – an amalgamated metropolitan area established in 2000 that encompasses Thokoza – is a notorious hotbed of anti-immigrant violence. But neither these two social problems, ethnic rivalry and xenophobia, are the focus of Sobekwa's essay. Rather, it is the scourge of low-grade drug abuse that has increasingly beset black settlements across South Africa.

While its constituent elements of nyaope are hardly new, the origins of this drug are hard to track. The first reliable mention of nyaope is from 2006, by journalist Hazel Friedman who writing under a pseudonym in the book *Hijack!*, describes nyaope as "all the rage with the youngsters in Soweto, Mamelodi, Soshanguve and Atteridgeville," black settlements surrounding central Johannesburg and Pretoria.

The Unflinching Witness – By Sean O'Toole

Also known as "whoonga" and "Taiwan", Sobekwa heard of nyaope in 2009. His decision to focus on this addictive street drug grew out of an encounter with a nyaope user on a Thokoza street in 2013. Already a participant in the *Of Soul and Joy* photography project initiated by Rubis Mécénat a year earlier, Sobekwa was walking with his camera when a neighbourhood youth asked him to take some photographs with his crew.

"I was nervous, but I told myself if they try anything I would run away with my camera," says Sobekwa. "I held my camera very tightly." That evening, reviewing his photographs, he was struck by the access he had been given. "I showed them to my mentor who said it could be a good project." Central to the success of this essay is the unrestricted access Sobekwa was given to a shack owned by a youth named Mabuthi. His makeshift dosshouse is a place of retreat, of narcotic pleasure and fitful sleep. It is also where the users photographed by Sobekwa return after days spent begging for money and foraging for scrap metal to sell. Sobekwa quickly learnt that working with his subjects required improvising. When they wandered off, so did he. When they said no, he left. "You can't work according to a pre-planned schedule," he says.

Mabuthi first started smoking nyaope after his family abandoned him. Not everyone shared his impoverished circumstances. One user, Lukhanyo, comes from a stable family without any financial problems. "Now he looks like a street kid, like this abandoned person, a social outcast," says Sobekwa. Although many of his photographs focus on the uncomplicated domestic habits of drug users – idleness, argument, drug use, and collapse into narcotic sleep – he also followed them around Thokoza's flat industrial landscapes. Along the way he met a white drug user, Jerry, who he also photographed (but did not include in this essay). The repetition of the routine, of constantly entering and exiting Mabuthi's shack, created a bond of sorts between the photographer and his subjects, a bond of intimacy not dependency. "I learnt a lot from those guys, not just how bad they are," says Sobekwa.

Urban drug abuse is not a new phenomenon in South Africa, but during the apartheid years its frequency was heavily policed and localised. As a result, there are no significant bodies of photographic work locally portraying the degradations that come with sustained drug abuse. Still, Sobekwa's candlelit interior studies possess affinities to earlier studies of social hardship. I think particularly of Drum magazine photographer Jürgen Schadeberg's 1955 photograph of a four young gamblers squatted on a street corner in Sophiatown, a former slum in central Johannesburg. Sobekwa's work evidences the same attention to mood, pose and lighting.

Photographs of drug addiction share with pictures of poverty a certain generic sameness. Bare circumstances mirror bare lives. A key difficulty for any photographer here is avoiding repetition and sameness. Photographers essaying drug abuse have found various ways around this. Nan Goldin, for instance, chose to hone in on particular protagonists, notably Greer Lankton and Cookie Mueller. In the manner of Larry Clark in Tulsa, Sobekwa's Thokoza essay is defined by its focus on a fragile family, a family created by circumstance rather than biology. But, in distinction to both Goldin and Clark, Sobekwa's essay 'Nyaope' is not an autobiographical portrait. He is not implicated in these photographs; he is not a nyaope user. Rather, and this

is crucial, he considers himself a dispassionate observer, a documentarian motivated by a belief that his photographs might have an educational value.

"I hope people, especially youth, will learn a lot from the project: how dangerous this drug is," he says. The twinning of photography with social purpose is hardly new. In South Africa, members of the Afrapix collective of photographers, active during the 1980s, viewed photography as a means to express solidarity with social activism. Lewis Hine is an older expression of this belief. "Photography has always been a tool to teach people about life," says Sobekwa. "I learnt history through photographs. Mandela. June 16. I believe that photography can be a tool to teach people." Working with his mentors, he purposefully set out to produce an essay that would not only teach but also dissuade. "Don't do drugs. It is hell. I have seen a lot of ugly things that happen when people use nyaope." Although compelled by an anti-drug message, Sobekwa's work is not propaganda. His photographs speak of the subtle complications of circumstances in a community he personally knows and lives in. Perhaps it is this that accounts for his essay's defining quality: the raw dignity he allows his subjects.

LINDOKUHLE SOBEKWA

Lindokuhle Sobekwa was born in 1995 in Katlehong Johannesburg, South Africa. He currently lives and works in Thokoza. In 2012 he was introduced to photography in high school through the *Of Soul and Joy* project. He then joined Live magazine as a part time photographer. His work has been exhibited, among others, at the Kalashnikovv Gallery in South Africa and at the No Man's Art Gallery in The Netherlands, in South Africa and in Norway. In 2013, Sobekwa was part of the group show 'In Thokoza' organised by Rubis Mécénat Cultural Fund at the Ithuba Arts Gallery in Johannesburg. His essay 'Nyaope' was published in 2014 in South African newspaper the *Mail & Guardian*.

OF SOUL AND JOY PROJECT

Of Soul and Joy project is a social art initiative undertaken in 2012 by Rubis Mécénat Cultural Fund in Thokoza, a township located in the southeast of Johannesburg in South Africa. The project aims to expose the students of Buhlebuzile Secondary School to Photography as a vocational skill and as a means of engagement for meaningful employment. It acts as a visual platform and a skills development programme through workshops led by renowned photographers.

Lindokuhle Sobekwa joined the project in 2012.

The project was initiated in 2012 with Easigas and in partnership with Nikon South Africa.

LINDOKUHLE SOBEKWA - Nyaope. Everything you give me my Boss, will do
With an essay by Sean O'Toole

Published on the occasion of the exhibition
FREE FROM MY HAPPINESS
by South African photographers
SIBUSISO BHEKA TSHEPISO MAZIBUKO LINDOKUHLE SOBEKWA
At The International Photo Festival Ghent 2015
Sint-Pietersabdij (Saint Peter's Abbey), Ghent, Belgium
12 June to 30 August 2015

Curated by Belgium photographers
Tjorven Bruyneel and Bieke Depoorter,
associate member at Magnum Photos

An Exhibition within the framework of the *Of Soul and Joy* project
A Rubis Mécénat Cultural Fund initiative

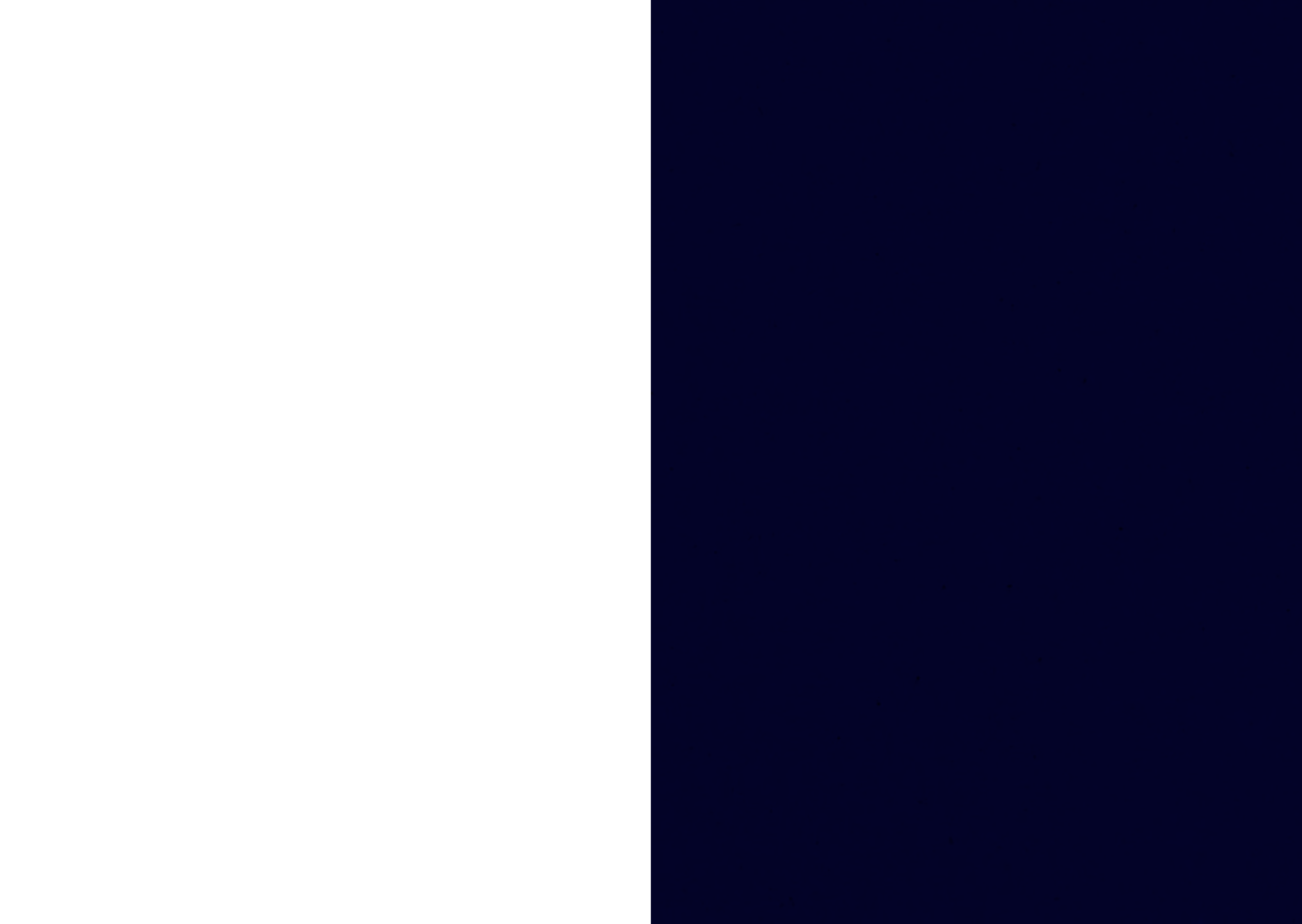
Essay by Sean O'Toole, journalist, art critic and editor living in Cape Town

© Rubis Mécénat Cultural Fund, 2015
Images © Lindokuhle Sobekwa, 2015
Text © Sean O'Toole, 2015

Graphic design Sébastien Sans
Printing production Seven7 – Liège
Printing SNEL – Vottem

Paper
Cover Sirio Color 290 g
Interior Condat Matt Périgord 170 g

ISBN 978-2-9543403-3-3



AT NIGHT, THEY WALK WITH ME

SIBUSISO BHEKA

SIBUSISO BHEKA

At night, they walk with me

With an essay by Sean O'Toole

Magical Realism

By Sean O'Toole

Johannesburg, a restive city of can-do aspiration and everywhere sprawl, was founded in 1886, nearly a half century after the invention of the camera. The camera, with its ability to arrest and flatten moving reality, has been a useful tool in recording this city's awkward lurch from get-rich mining encampment to cauldron of cosmopolitan possibility. Curiously, though, given the great many photographs made about this city since its start as a tented encampment of prospectors and labourers, the story of Joburg told by photographers has tended to be a daytime one. Partly this had to do with the limitations of technologies available to early photographers, but given the endurance of this omission into the present one has to wonder. Is Joburg defined by natural light and daytime enterprise? What about its other moods and character traits, the ones that emerge at night? To be precise, what about Joburg after dark?

Photographed in late twilight and early night, Sibusiso Bheka's essay 'At night, they walk with me' sets out to answer these questions, albeit on this young photographer's own terms and not in the grandiloquent way summarized in the introduction. "I was watching TV and saw some amazing nights shots," offers Bheka on his project's origin. "They showed the beautiful lights of Joburg at night. I had an idea that I'd like to do something like that, but I wanted to do it in a township style." Of course, Bheka is not the first South African photographer to make the night a subject of enquiry. Late one night in the mid- 2000s, while making his way east across Joburg's CBD from the Market Photo Workshop, Sabelo Mlangeni saw a group of women sweeping and bundling rubbish into plastic bags. He recognised a relationship between these "invisible women" and the clean city that greeted morning commuters. Shortly

afterwards, he began to document the lives of Joburg's black women street cleaners.
Mlangeni's photographs, which link across time to the photos of black working women in the city from the late 1800s, offer one way of knowing this city after dark. Much like during the day, Joburg after dark is a place of labour and minimum wage. But Joburg after dark is also a time of diversionary pleasures, when the sobriety of a city characterised by discipline and work, also exploitation and alienation, yields to other things. Sometimes violence, as is suggested by Peter Magubane's celebrated night-time photo from 1956, showing township thug and knifeman Boy Mangena lying dead on a pavement outside a cinema in Alexandra. But the city by night is when family's get together, children are told stories, and televisions pimp information with entertainment. For many, especially on Friday and Saturday nights, it is also a time of pleasure, of drinking and dancing. The reputation of the Drum magazine archive partly derives from the commitment of photographers in the 1950s to show black life in Joburg as involving more than just struggle.

But the night is a far richer subject than even this. The dark and its many associative qualities make it a time of myth and intrigue. It is this imprecise territory, the night as a place of projection and unseen otherness, that is the subject of Bheka's essay. Begun in 2013 during his participation in the *Of Soul and Joy* photography project, initiated by Rubis Mécénat, his essay revisits a childhood impulse. "I used to be one of those kids who enjoyed playing outside at night more than during the day," says Bheka, who was born in Kathlehong in 1997 and lives with his mother and grandmother in Phola Park. Evening is a sociable time in the townships as workers return from work and the silence that pervades these labour compounds by day abates.

Magical Realism – By Sean O'Toole

It wasn't that Bheka only played at night. Growing up, he would regularly explore Thokoza on foot. "I would go to those places where my parents told me I am not supposed to go," he says. To fulfil a simple childhood impulse: to see what was being prohibited. "There is a dam nearby, which I used to go to with my friends and try to catch fish," he reminisces. "There is also a train station that I was warned not to cross the tracks of." During these wanderings he would scavenge for pieces of metal to sell to a scrap metal dealer. "I used the money to play video games." These early mappings of Thokoza later played an invaluable role in his photography project. "I got to know where the dangerous places are, where to avoid, especially at night. If an area doesn't have electricity, it isn't safe."

The relationship between light and safety in Bheka's photographs is worth pausing on. "It is safer to make photographs where there is light," he says, but in the same breath admits, "I avoided places where there are a lot of people because you get robbed." Light is only a possible beacon of safety in his photographs, not a guarantee of it. The light sources in Bheka's essay vary: from the last filigree of daylight on the horizon to various forms of electrical sources. Electrical light pours from the hatch of a "spaza shop" (convenience store), spills from an open doorway to a cement-block RDP home (government-built starter home), is filtered by curtained windows (most with burglar bars), and seems strangely isolated in the impossibly tall streetlights. A hangover from the apartheid years, these were nicknamed "UFOs" for their strange hovering appearance. They were once amongst the few indicators of electrification in townships, where coal was the dominant fuel. Up until 1990, access to electricity was a privilege linked to race. Less than a third of South Africans, most of them

white, enjoyed the benefits of electrification. By 2008, 70% of South Africans had access to electricity. Bheka's essay describes this turnaround, although it is not his focus.

Bheka's subject is mythical, not infrastructural. He recalls being reprimanded and told not to play at night. "I was told, if you play at night you are playing with ghosts," he says. In part, his essay is a playful exploration of "the idea of ghosts, whether they exist or not". In a community where rural superstitions are less than a generation old, the existence of a spirit world is an important anchor in a context created out of desperation, in a region where hospitality is often lacking. But stories of spirits and ghosts achieve more than creating continuity with the older customs of the village, for adults they are a way to negotiate the real-world context of cramped townships, where neighbourliness rubs up against poverty, struggle and criminality. A ghost story is a good way to keep a child off the streets, out of harm's way.

In his 2009 book *Native Nostalgia*, journalist Jacob Dlamini recalls the ambiguous mix of community and threat posed by the same dusty street where he lived in Katlehong, a community bordering Thokoza in the east. Close to his home there was an open plot of land, which he describes as "a place of anxiety, a notorious mugging spot, especially on Friday nights when labourers would be returning home with their pay-packets for the week, fortnight or month." He adds, "Our street was a terrain of encounters between neighbours and strangers, mostly friendly but sometimes violent, even deadly." This ambiguity endures. It also underlies Bheka's essay, which explores the changing attitudes of Thokoza youths to the use of public space amidst the endurance of hardship and criminality.

"To be honest, growing up as a child was tough," concedes Bheka. "You witness a lot of things happening in Thokoza." He says xenophobia has been a constant feature of his upbringing. Of course, none of these facets of Thokoza's character are pictured. But they are nonetheless imprinted into the time signature of his photographs. Bheka's photographs only describe a defined period of dark, an early dark. None of his photographs were made late at night. "That is a dangerous hour," says Bheka. "At that late time there is too much alcohol drinking. I have never thought of photographing at that time." Despite the optimistic claim his subjects make to public spaces at night, Bheka's photographs are defined by a prescribed working method. "I usually work alone because people know me here, but if I have to go on the outside section of Phola Park where I live, then I get people from school to join me." Bheka is completing his studies at Buhlebuzile Secondary School in Thokoza.

While Bheka's essay invites sociological readings directed at the meaning of electricity, crime and the changing role of public space in South Africa's slowly transforming townships, he is not a documentarian in the manner of Brassaï in 1930s Paris, or Weegee in New York of the same period. His is a playful and autobiographical project. Many of Bheka's photographs include him as a protagonist. "The reason why some of the pictures are staged is so that you don't get that actual feeling of real events," he says. "I am trying to describe my neighbourhood in a way I see and experience it. I am kind of creating my own scenario of what you would see in Thokoza – its atmosphere. I want you, when you look at the pictures, to experience the atmosphere."

Understood in this sense, the strange off-colours, long shadows, constant blurring and ghostly auras that surround his human subjects are integral to the meaning of his photographs, not mere by-products of shooting at night. They are expressive attributes, not simply examples of photography's on-going struggle to record events in low light. "When I show people who live in my neighbourhood my pictures, they don't believe it is actually Thokoza," he says. This constitutes praise for Bheka, who likens his photographic method in his essay 'At night, they walk with me' to storytelling. "It is like a novel about an old lost town," he says. A forgotten place that has been found and reimagined by an alert young mind.

SIBUSISO BHEKA

Sibusiso Bheka was born in 1997 in Thokoza, South Africa. In 2012 he was introduced to photography in high school through the *Of Soul and Joy* project. He then joined Live magazine as a part time photographer. In 2013, Bheka was part of the group show 'In Thokoza' organised by Rubis Mécénat Cultural Fund at the Ithuba Arts Gallery in Johannesburg. His work was exhibited in 2014 at Addis Foto Fest in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

OF SOUL AND JOY PROJECT

Of Soul and Joy project is a social art initiative undertaken in 2012 by Rubis Mécénat Cultural Fund in Thokoza, a township located in the southeast of Johannesburg in South Africa. The project aims to expose the students of Buhlebuzile Secondary School to Photography as a vocational skill and as a means of engagement for meaningful employment. It acts as a visual platform and a skills development programme through workshops led by renowned photographers.

Sibusiso Bheka joined the project in 2012.

The project was initiated in 2012 with Easigas and in partnership with Nikon South Africa.

SIBUSISO BHEKA - At night, they walk with me
With an essay by Sean O'Toole

Published on the occasion of the exhibition
FREE FROM MY HAPPINESS
by South African photographers
SIBUSISO BHEKA TSHEPISO MAZIBUKO LINDOKUHLE SOBEKWA
At The International Photo Festival Ghent 2015
Sint-Pietersabdij (Saint Peter's Abbey), Ghent, Belgium
12 June to 30 August 2015

Curated by Belgium photographers
Tjorven Bruyneel and Bieke Depoorter,
associate member at Magnum Photos

An Exhibition within the framework of the *Of Soul and Joy* project
A Rubis Mécénat Cultural Fund initiative

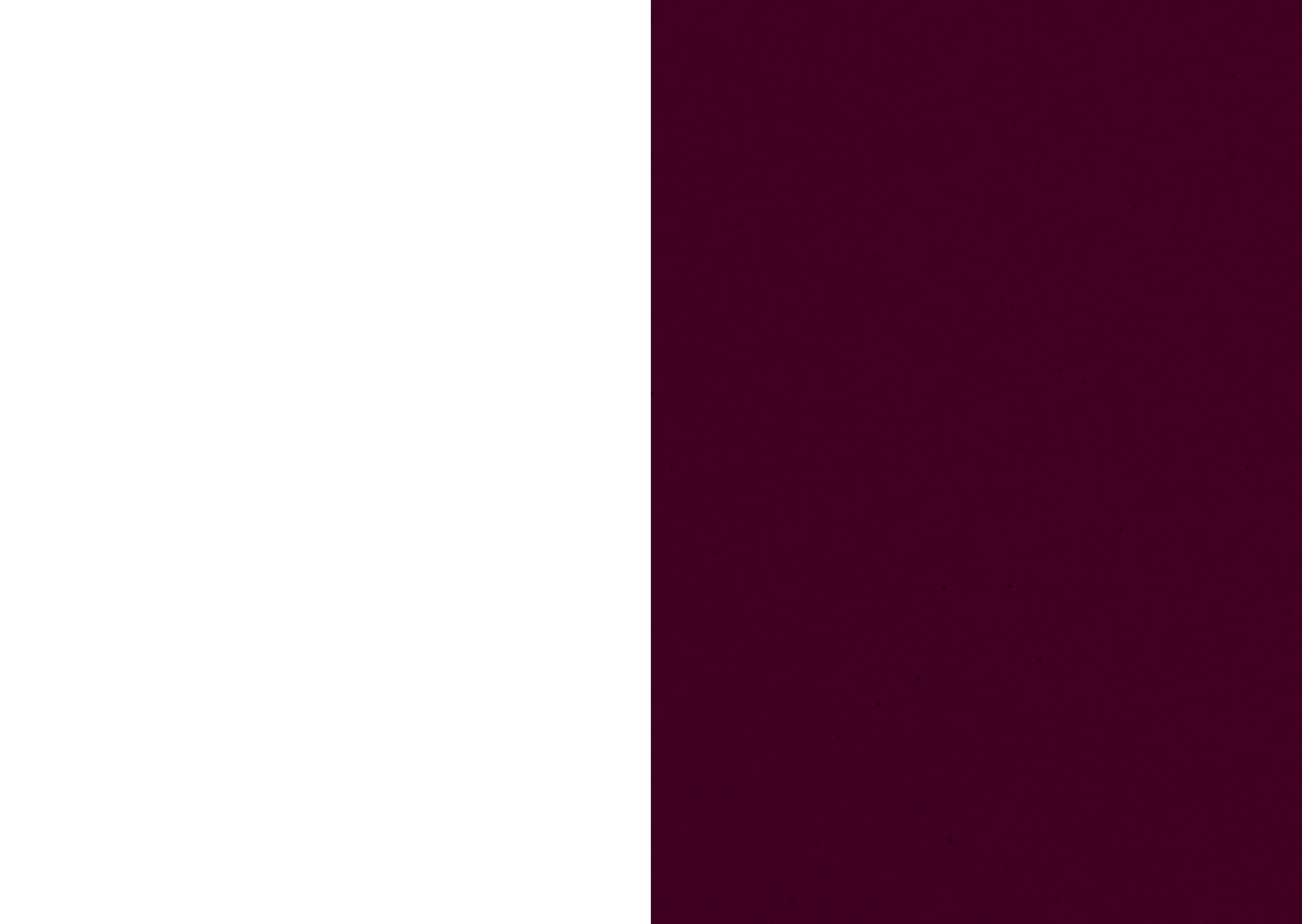
Essay by Sean O'Toole, journalist, art critic and editor living in Cape Town

© Rubis Mécénat Cultural Fund, 2015
Images © Sibusiso Bheka, 2015
Text © Sean O'Toole, 2015

Graphic design Sébastien Sans
Printing production Seven7 – Liège
Printing SNEL – Vottem

Paper
Cover Sirio Color 290 g
Interior Condat Matt Périgord 170 g

ISBN 978-2-9543403-3-3



ENCOUNTERS

TSHEPISO MAZIBUKO

TSHEPISO MAZIBUKO

Encounters

With an essay by Sean O'Toole

42

2015

A Poet's Eye

By Sean O'Toole

"I wanted to be a journalist and wasn't interested in photography," says Tshepiso Mazibuko, referring to the time just before she participated in the *Of Soul and Joy* photography project initiated by Rubis Mécénat. "I used to read a lot, mostly about politics. I like current affairs. I'd also watch documentaries about Thokoza." Photography was not on her radar. When Lindokuhle Sobekwa, a friend at Buhlebuzile Secondary School, told her he was going to participate in the photography project, Mazibuko was unmoved. But after listening to Sobekwa's account of participating in this intensive mentorship programme, she decided to join in. "I still want to be a journalist," Mazibuko now says, "but using photos not words."

The stillness and quiet that characterises her photographs of domestic interiors might, at first glance, suggest an ambition deferred. Not quite. Mazibuko, who was born in 1995, in Thokoza, and lives with her unemployed mother and a younger brother, does not exclusively limit herself to photographing indoors. In 2014, she photographed a group of local residents looting a Somali-owned trading store. Anti-immigrant attacks are commonplace in Thokoza, as they are across the larger Ekurhuleni metropolitan area. In May 2008, Ramaphosaville, an informal settlement 20km north of Thokoza, was a flashpoint for xenophobic violence. The intensity of the urban violence there was reminiscent of the intense strife that had engulfed communities like Thokoza in the early 1990s. "You just wake up and see flames and everything," says Mazibuko of the character of this newer and still current xenophobic violence.

Shortly after witnessing the looting Mazibuko was confronted by police. They wanted to see her photographs so that they could identify suspects. She refused.

"It felt like I was going to be a traitor and I decided not to show the images," elaborates Mazibuko, who uses Facebook as a digital resource to share her work. The police were unimpressed by her attitude. "I spent one night in jail." Why did she refuse their request? "I know how my community thinks," she says. "As much as you or I may look at the photographs as reports about something horrible, you have to also see it from the point of the looters. They were trying to put food on the table. I understand their situation." Mazibuko precisely understands because this is how she grew up, in a struggling single-parent household. The modest circumstances of some (not all) of the homes depicted in her 'Encounters' essay are signifiers of this need.

Mazibuko admits that her night in police custody chastened her, but not greatly. "I was a bit sceptical about wanting to be a journalist," she says. "But then I realised this is what other journalists encounter. And what I suffered was the least of it. It kind of motivated me to keep on doing what I'm doing." What she did is not journalism, not exactly. In formal terms, Mazibuko's essay comprises portraits and still lifes made in various homesteads in Thokoza and its neighbouring communities. Her photographs are marked by their unhurried mood and Mazibuko's accomplished use of light. But this is a literal transcription. As she tells it, her series is about human encounter, more specifically the chance meetings that took place between this young photographer and ordinary residents of her community.

"I go out with my camera and meet people," elaborates Mazibuko. The camera, like babies in prams and puppy dogs, is a great broker of human exchange. For Mazibuko, the conversations sometimes went nowhere. But more often than not, her confidant and vibrant personality

A Poet's Eye – By Sean O'Toole

led to a positive response when she asked to see her interlocutor's home. "I am very observant person and I like to study how people behave," she says of her method. It is an emotional method, or "sentimental" as Mazibuko prefers to describe it, but definitely not forensic. It is also a method that involves a lot of talking in the home. "I enjoy the intimacy that develops between me and my subjects," she says. Sometimes this intimacy – of two people freely sharing their thoughts and circumstances – was prefaced by some awkwardness. After all, Mazibuko is a young woman. Many of her subjects are men.

During the early development of her 'Encounters' essay, Mazibuko focussed only on female subjects. As the project grew, and conversations with her mentors settled, she started talking to and photographing men. They included Sipho, the shirtless young man pictured seated on a weathered couch, looking straight at Mazibuko's camera. It was morning and Sipho was getting ready for the day ahead in his Phola Park home. A handful of Mazibuko's photographs are set in Phola Park. They include a still life of a bare kitchen with a hotplate, aluminium pot and knotted curtain. The scene, which is not staged, was photographed in the house of an unemployed man in his 60s. "I never really saw the kitchen at first as I was aiming to photograph him," says Mazibuko, "but then I saw the light entering the kitchen. It was amazing. I asked if I could photograph in his kitchen. He was a bit awkward, but then he said sure."

These photographs of Phola Park are important. They address an imbalance. War photographer João Silva made his first pictures of violence in Phola Park; it is also where he met fellow Bang-Bang Club member Ken Oosterbroek. Founded in the mid-1980s, as apartheid's urban influx control

laws were slowly crumbling, Thokoza acquired among the highest number of shack dwellers in the larger Johannesburg and Pretoria area. According to social historians Philip Bonner and Noor Nieftagodien, Thokoza had more than double the number of shacks compared to houses (35 000 to 17 000). These cramped conditions inflamed existing ethnic tensions and in 1990 Phola Park became a flashpoint for politically motivated battles involving Zulu hostel dwellers and the largely Xhosa inhabitants of the shack settlements.

The violence was extreme. In December 1990, when Nelson Mandela unsuccessfully attempted to visit Phola Park, 124 people had died in a week of fighting. "As much as the war has ended," says Mazibuko, who is of Sotho ethnicity, "I sense a bit of division that is still present in the people who live in the hostels and the free households. You still have that thing about hostels being rough. I have been to a hostel, but I don't see that thing." Perhaps it is a condition of being born free, of not having witnessed what that freedom is founded on. Whatever the truth, her undiscriminating eye is certainly an asset.

Although portraiture is a strong focus of her essay, Mazibuko has also produced a number of still life scenes. These particular photographs possess the same poetic affect as the work of Santu Mofokeng, who in the late 1980s photographed the impoverished living conditions of black tenant farmers in Bloemhof. Like Mofokeng, Mazibuko's still lifes – of beds, kitchens, curtain windows, facecloths pinned up to dry – communicate her deep respect for the basic decency of her subjects. It is a way of seeing and telling through objects that has many precedents. Walker Evans in the 1930s is one example, as is Zwelethu Mthethwa,

A Poet's Eye – By Sean O'Toole

who in 2002 produced a series of colour photographs showing empty beds in various Cape Town shack settlements. Beds and bedrooms are perhaps the most intimate places in a home. Mazibuko, who tended to photograph instinctually rather than with a set plan, says that this sometimes led to awkward moments with her subjects. "I'm a female and most of the people I photographed are men," she states. "It gets a bit awkward when I say, 'Can I photograph you in your bedroom?' or 'Can I see how your bedroom looks?' People would be a bit sceptical. Most were not comfortable with me taking a portrait in their bedroom. But what was inspiring was that they let me in in the first place."

Despite its basis in documentary, Mazibuko's photographs showcase her sense for theatricality. Many of her subjects are aware that they are being looked at and respond accordingly: with pride and curiosity. Curtains variously function as backdrops, focal points and light filters. In one particular interior study, a coiled-up curtain hooked onto a burglar bar is reflected in a mirror. Next to this mirror is a portrait of the homeowner in military attire. The photograph recalls the austere sense of self that pervaded the white homes photographed by David Goldblatt in 1979 and 1980 in nearby Boksburg. One barely notices the turned back of a woman in the right-hand corner of Mazibuko's articulate photograph. It is these details that distinguish her photography, and point to the talents of a young photographer capable of recognising in the bare facts of human circumstance something close to poetry.

TSHEPISO MAZIBUKO

Tshepiso Mazibuko was born in 1995 in Thokoza, South Africa. In 2012 she was introduced to photography in high school through the *Of Soul and Joy* project, which, in 2014, awarded her a scholarship to pursue her photography studies at the Market Photo Workshop in Johannesburg. In 2013, Mazibuko's work was exhibited in the group show 'In Thokoza' organised by Rubis Mécénat Cultural Fund at the Ithuba Arts Gallery in Johannesburg.

OF SOUL AND JOY PROJECT

Of Soul and Joy project is a social art initiative undertaken in 2012 by Rubis Mécénat Cultural Fund in Thokoza, a township located in the southeast of Johannesburg in South Africa. The project aims to expose the students of Buhlebuzile Secondary School to Photography as a vocational skill and as a means of engagement for meaningful employment. It acts as a visual platform and a skills development programme through workshops led by renowned photographers.

Tshepiso Mazibuko joined the project in 2012.

The project was initiated in 2012 with Easigas and in partnership with Nikon South Africa.

TSHEPISO MAZIBUKO - Encounters
With an essay by Sean O'Toole

Published on the occasion of the exhibition
FREE FROM MY HAPPINESS
by South African photographers
SIBUSISO BHEKA TSHEPISO MAZIBUKO LINDOKUHLE SOBEKWA
At The International Photo Festival Ghent 2015
Sint-Pietersabdij (Saint Peter's Abbey), Ghent, Belgium
12 June to 30 August 2015

Curated by Belgium photographers
Tjorven Bruyneel and Bieke Depoorter,
associate member at Magnum Photos

An Exhibition within the framework of the *Of Soul and Joy* project
A Rubis Mécénat Cultural Fund initiative

Essay by Sean O'Toole, journalist, art critic and editor living in Cape Town

© Rubis Mécénat Cultural Fund, 2015
Images © Tshepiso Mazibuko, 2015
Text © Sean O'Toole, 2015

Graphic design Sébastien Sans
Printing production Seven7 – Liège
Printing SNEL – Vottem

Paper
Cover Sirio Color 290 g
Interior Condat Matt Périgord 170 g

ISBN 978-2-9543403-3-3