

Transitions

Taryn Cohn explores the realisation of an artist's dream as part of the project management team of *Transitions*, Paul Emmanuel's ambitious artist's project.

Images courtesy of the artist and Art Source South Africa



A still from the twelve-minute film 3SAI A Rite of Passage that is included in the *Transitions* exhibition

Detail from part four of the *Transitions* series, which depicts a dress ritual devoid of context in an exploration of societal constructions of male identities

As I write this article, a heated debate is ensuing about the best way to hang flat works on the walls of a round room, plans are being negotiated on how to transport five three-metre-long framed drawings across town on a busy highway in a bakkie that only has a depth of 2.5 metres, and 1 500 emails are queuing in my outbox.

These are just some of the smaller logistics involved in being part of the team managing *Transitions*, a touring museum exhibition by artist Paul Emmanuel.

"The exhibition consists of five drawings and a twelve-minute artist's film. The drawings, each of which is over three metres long, depict moments of transition in the lives of unidentifiable men"

'Managing an artist's project is about so much more than mounting an exhibition,' says Les Cohn of Art Source South Africa, the project managers and agents of artist Paul Emmanuel. 'It's about developing a strategic roadmap to leverage the artist's career and to successfully implement every step of that plan. It's about working in close partnership with the artist to achieve his/her professional objectives.'

This is the approach that Cohn has applied in nurturing Emmanuel's career and that has brought us to the eve of the opening of his third solo exhibition and second major international project, *Transitions*.

Transitions is a touring museum exhibition that explores shifts in white male identity. Defined as rituals that mark a transition from one stage of life to another, rites of passage can link us to others of our generation and to others like us in the past and the future. They operate as societal 'markers' that define and perpetuate our belief structures.

The exhibition consists of five drawings and a twelve-minute artist's film. The drawings, each of which is over three metres long, depict moments of transition in the lives of unidentifiable

men. They have been obsessively scratched into exposed photographic paper with the edge of a blade to reference film negatives. Almost photographic in their realism and breathtaking in scale, each drawing took the artist between three and five months to complete.

The drawings depict in turn a baby's circumcision, a head shaving, a crowning, a dress ritual and finally bustling crowds of people passing through busy turnstiles.

'These are liminal spaces,' says Emmanuel, 'spaces in which a man is in the process of changing his status, with one foot in one world and the other in another. These are spaces where we can explore how the construction of male identity happens and how it is perpetuated by generations.'

Each spectacle is cropped and no context is given, leaving the audience to contextualise the images based on their own experiences or assumptions. The crowning image, for example, documents a Maronite Catholic wedding ceremony, yet a crowning can at once represent the achievement of the highest possible level or the investment of the highest power of a country in an individual. Ironically (or perhaps significantly), 'crowning'

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is also the term used to describe the moment when a baby's head first appears during the birthing process – perhaps our most significant transition as human beings.

Along with the drawings, a twelve-minute film will also be exhibited. Entitled *3SAI A Rite of Passage*, the film documents the ritual head shaving of new recruits at the Third South African Infantry Battalion in Kimberley. Interspersed with poignant scenes of South African landscapes and accompanied by an original score written by sound designer and engineer, Wilbert Schubel, the film is a cinematic-quality, independent work that took several hundreds of thousands of rands and three years to produce.

Says Emmanuel of his choice of subject, 'These moments of transition, when a young man either voluntarily – or is forced to – let go of one identity and take on a new identity as state property with an assigned force number, prompted me to ask many questions: What was I actually witnessing? What is a "Rite of Passage" and how have similar "rituals" helped to form and perpetuate identities and belief systems throughout history?'

'In previous drawings and original prints, I have been working with sequences of images for many years. A lot of my work comes

from a sense of witnessing an event as if transfixed by an unfolding drama. This is how the idea of developing a film came into being.'

Making this film was no small task. 'My long-time agent and project manager, Les Cohn of Art Source South Africa, took me through the first steps of creating a visual treatment, turning my "art-speak" into "film-speak".'

Nor was it a very cheap one. 'Funding for artist projects is a challenge by its nature,' Cohn explains. 'And making a film of this quality required the financing to be in place before production began. Yet we faced a challenge. Traditional arts funding agencies have too long a turn-around time and shied away from this project due to its large scale film production nature, and film agencies found it too "arty" to fit their criteria mandate.'

Driven by a need to innovate the way they accessed funding, Cohn developed a unique plan that essentially boiled down to selling 'futures' in the artist's work. 'Options' on an editioned series of lithographs, to be realised only after the launch of the project, were offered to selected investors in much the same way as an IPO or Initial Public Offer is used to raise capital on the stock market. To make the deal more attractive, the investor's initial capital is insured should the artist be unable to deliver on the deal due to death or injury.

The scheme proved successful and also proved to be the catalyst for a very important transition in the artist's life.

On the strength of seeing only one drawing (all that the artist had completed at that time), one particular investor

purchased the exhibition in its entirety – 'sight unseen'. This allowed Emmanuel to realise his ambition of becoming a full-time artist, focusing exclusively on the production of his own work. 'This is where the strategic building of an artist's career is so important. The investor – a previous collector of Emmanuel's work – started buying when the artist was relatively unknown. He is also a significant businessman who understands that the way to increase the value of his collection is by building the artist's career.'

'Art is about much more than taste and artistic ideals. If this investor was not secure in the fact that Paul would deliver the finished product, both on time and to a standard that he believed the artist is capable of, he would not have taken the calculated risk to back him,' Cohn notes. 'And others, myself included, would certainly not have put my name behind him.'

'When an artist is serious about his own work and career, the world takes his work and career seriously – and then with professional dedication anything is possible.'

Transitions launched at the Apartheid Museum on 27 September 2008 and will be on exhibition until 31 December, after which it will begin an 18-month tour to major museums around South Africa. Plans are underway to travel the exhibition to a series of international museums for three to five years, after which it will move to its permanent home on the Spier Estate as part of the Spier Contemporary Collection. For more information contact Art Source South Africa on 011 482 1258 or Les Cohn 082 395 7417. **CF**