

“What Goals and Whose Vision? Present Trends and Future Challenges for South African Photography”

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At a recent colloquium held at Rhodes University, writer and academic, Ashraf Jamal admonished South African artists for their dour palettes and monochromatic art works. In his view the absence of bold colour in the South African art canon is a manifestation of a state of mind that pervades South African art, in which moral seriousness overrides a playful form of expression, which he likened to a kind of “wakefulness”. . Jamal suggested that such choices are not stylistically determined but are ideologically and culturally motivated, reflecting a vexed and existentialist relationship with the South African landscape. In the realm of photography I propose that this palette is not necessarily determined by a particular kind of mindset but rather an understanding of photography’s function.

Based on the entries into the Bonani Africa Photography competition many of the established and emerging photographers in this country favour working with a monochromatic palette, thus continuing this staid artistic tradition that Jamal believes suffocates imaginative engagement with the present. The predominant subject-matter of the photographic essays – either documenting life on the fringes of society or some other kind of social phenomenon – seems to support their decision to shoot in black and white: this stark, no-nonsense palette is the language of the objective documenter. Colour is aligned with emotion thus its use may be seen to introducing subjectivity into the art making. Thus there is this sense that these photographers view themselves as the dispassionate arbitrators of truth, drawing attention to the ‘unseen’ aspects of society.

On the other end of the spectrum there is a group of young artists, such as Lawrence Lemaoana, Mary Sibande, Athi Patra Ruga and Gabrielle Goliath, who use photography in their art production and are employing the medium in a manner which contradicts this traditional or journalistic interpretation of photography and coincides with Bhabha’s (1994: 73) assertion that photography should not be associated with truth; that it is a ‘metaphoric substitution, an illusion of presence, and by that same token a metonym, a sign of absence and loss’. Aware of the manner in which photographic imagery was a popular mode in fixing and inscribing relations between the self and other during colonial times and the apartheid era these young artists have identified ways to subvert the function of photography and its role in the representation of the other. They achieve this by occupying the dual position of both author and subject, thereby suggesting that the roles pertaining to other and self are easily disrupted and with the aid of dress they confront their viewers with a synthesised and stylised view of themselves in which their ‘true’ identity is obscured. Some of these artists, Lemaoana, Sibande and Goliath, also place their subjects in a non-descript backdrop that is suggestive of an abstract realm. This enhances the photograph’s status as a ‘metaphoric substitution’ of the real and thereby denounces photography’s validity as reliable documentation of otherness.