NEW FRAME

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George Hallett's camera was a political instrument

A photojournalist reflects on the life's work of George Hallett, a narrative of thousands of lives, spanning decades, through one man's lens and held in a single archive.

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19 August 2015: George Hallett with his photos on show at Gallery Momo in Bo-Kaap, Cape Town. (Photograph by Yazeed Kamaldien)

Maymoena Hallett, speaking from southern France, was overwhelmed about her father George Hallett's death in Cape Town the previous day. "I'm busy replying to so many messages. It's tough because there's no time to mourn properly. But there will be time later," she says.

Hallett, the well-known South African photographer, died on 1 July. His cremation is planned for 9 July. Maymoena said her father had "died peacefully in his sleep after a long illness". This was almost six months after she had appealed for funds for his medical bills.

Hallett packed a lot of life into 78 years. His many pictures prove it. The award-winning photographer had been bestowed with national honours from the French government, exhibited his work worldwide, inspired generations of picture-makers, but was short on cash to treat acute colitis.

Some people shared how this situation was shocking. One photographer said this was "totally unacceptable", "after all that he [Hallett] has sacrificed … to put South African photography on the map by offering a lot of photographers the platform to showcase their work through exhibitions and books without expecting any financial gain from any of those initiatives".

Donations from friends helped towards the medical bills. Maymoena, along with Hallett's close friend and photographer-comrade Rashid Lombard, based in Cape Town, arranged sales of Hallett's prints to pay for homecare and doctors. Hallett had been hospitalised and then discharged, but eventually succumbed to the painful illness.

Maymoena, in a message about her father's death, wrote: "We will always remember him for his light, his laughter, his boisterous personality, his outrageous jokes and being the life and soul of many a party.

"Nobody can doubt his artistry in capturing beauty and joy in everything he saw through his eyes and his lens, nor his contribution to photography, particularly South African photography."

Memories of Hallett have since been popping up online. Writers, photographers, filmmakers, artists, friends… all with a Hallett story to share. I shared my first meeting with Hallett, too.

It was in the passageway of our photojournalism department at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology in Bellville, Cape Town, where Hallett encouraged me to pursue photography. Hallett said with a smile: "You're going to be great." Obviously this was the most life-affirming thing a young, impressionable, wannabe photojournalist could hear.

A little while later, I witnessed the tougher side of Hallett, though, when he reprimanded a security guard at the Cape Town International Convention Centre for trying to stop him from taking photographs inside that venue. "This isn't apartheid," Hallett said angrily and went on his way.

Early days from District Six

Hallett's life story began in 1942 in multicultural District Six, six years before apartheid's brutality was legitimised. Hallett picked up his camera as a political instrument and documented life in District Six. Apartheid's segregationist forced removals bulldozed his home to the ground from the 1960s to the early 1980s. Families were flung to the Cape Flats and the District was declared an area for white people only.

By 1970, Hallett had chosen self-imposed exile over the stranglehold of apartheid, starting a new life in London in the United Kingdom. The political narrative in his work continued – whether behind the camera or teaching photography – in the UK, France, Holland, the United States and Zimbabwe.

Hallett's archive from his exile years exhibits South African artists and anti-apartheid activists, also in exile, along with storytelling of the people and places where he lived. He documented the political narrative of his

homeland but also the everyday lives of farmers, peasants and city folk wherever he made his home.

There are numerous details to mention about his work during these decades, but it is what happens next that stands out, as Hallett's career catapulted after exile.

Coming home

Nelson Mandela's release from prison brought Hallett home, along with scores of other exiled South Africans. The unbanned ANC commissioned Hallett to photograph the famous political prisoner and the country's first democratic election in 1994. Hallett's seemingly candid photographs of Mandela won a Golden Eye Award from the World Press Photo organisation in Amsterdam in 1995. After that he went on to become the official photographer of the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which started its hearings the following year.

The tables had turned and Hallett was coming full circle, first documenting the start of apartheid, now its demise, and in between the global anti-apartheid movement beyond the country's borders. Through one man's lens and held in a single archive was a narrative of thousands of lives, spanning decades.

1994: *First Encounter*, a portrait of Nelson Mandela taken in Johannesburg. (Photograph by George Hallett)

Hallett's contemporary photographs and exile archive started taking up wall space in galleries worldwide. Books were published, too.

Simultaneously, Hallett continued his focus on the arts. As a documentary photographer he was at the frontline of history, but had always moved in the same circles as writers, musicians, poets and other artists. To this end, he worked on a number of projects with Lombard, who founded the Cape Town International Jazz Festival.

"George had a special eye as an editor. When I decided to bring out a series of five photographic books about the jazz festival, George was the only person I could think of as the pictures editor," recalled Lombard.

"He was also the one who laid out the book in terms of the spread, the type of text. He was highly skilled in producing a body of work."

Lombard is planning a memorial for Hallett in Cape Town. “We will have a memorial where all his friends, colleagues, comrades and family can gather. This will be when we can travel again, and there will be dancing with live music, good curry – George cooked a mean curry – lots of refreshments and a display of iconic photographs,” said Lombard shortly after Hallett’s death.

“One is never ready to say goodbye forever, even though we know that’s part of life. My heart is heavy for losing someone so special.”

A moment that endures

Digging into my own archive and listening back to voice recordings of my interviews with Hallet from his home in Claremont in 2014, I’m reminded of a Capetonian who told stories about our city, a kind host and a generous interview. The focus, then, was on a retrospective of Hallett’s work titled *A Nomad’s Harvest* at the South African National Gallery in Cape Town that year.

In 2015, for a second voice-recorded interview, Hallett was more instructive on how he thought the interview should be conducted. It was at Gallery Momo in Bo-Kaap, Cape Town, where the entire space was to showcase his work under the title *Same Same But Different* in September that year.

February 2016: From left, George Hallett and his friend Rashid Lombard in Cape Town when Hallett was made a Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French Ministry of Culture. (Photograph by Yazeed Kamaldien)

After the interviews with Hallett and the gallery curator, I got the mandatory formal photographs of the newsmaker. And then something lighter, as Hallett blew a kiss to the camera.

The legacy of the photographer and artist whose archive shows a lifeworld of delicately and defiantly created images endures.

Reference:

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