

# Chasing Shadows

# Santu Mofokeng

Nr. 2 / 2012

Thirty Years of  
Photographic Essays

Curated by  
Corinne Diserens



# Introduction

For his significant contribution to research on human development in the South African context and for his acute understanding of the cultural meanings of landscape, Santu Mofokeng is regarded as one of the most important and influential African photographers living today.

Mofokeng's work has been presented worldwide, yet has never been the subject of thorough research. Together with the artist, curator Corinne Diserens delved deep into the artist's archives and selected more than 200 images from the last thirty years. The work presented in the exhibition is complemented with extensive attention to texts written by Mofokeng, and various documents contextualizing his projects.

Mofokeng's photo-essays (some of which have been elaborated over a period of several years and are still on-going) highlight a range of different topics: the Soweto of the artist's youth, his studies of quotidian life on farms and in townships, with a special focus on self representation and family histories of black South Africans, and pictures, which betray a concern with spirituality and typologies of landscapes.

Stretching the use of the word landscape to its fullest in order to "invoke literal, colloquial, psychological, philosophical, mystical, metaphysical and metonymic meanings and applications," Santu Mofokeng reclaims the land for himself and posits that "landscape appreciation is informed by personal experience, myth, and memory, amongst other things. Suffice to say, it is also informed by ideology, indoctrination, projection and prejudice."

These concerns also inform the polluted landscapes of the new series *Radiant Landscapes*, which was made specially for this retrospective.



*Eyes-wide-shut, Motouleng Cave, Clarens–Free State, 2004, Courtesy Lunetta Bartz, MAKER, Johannesburg*

## Santu Mofokeng Biographical Notes

Santu Mofokeng started as a street photographer during the 1970s, portraying his family and friends in Soweto. In 1981, he began work in the darkroom of *Beeld* newspaper, before moving the following year to the *Chamber of Mines* newspapers. In 1985 he joined *Afrapix*, a photographers' collective founded in 1982 to document the anti-Apartheid struggle. Covering what was topical, his work was published in the *Weekly Mail*, now known as 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 addition to being member of the *Afrapix* collective, Mofokeng took up a position at the *New Nation*, an ‘alternative’ newspaper as photographer and picture buyer. The editor, Zwelakhe Sisulu, was in detention and Gabu Tugwana was caretaker editor in this time. At the same time, Mofokeng was starting to develop a project called *Fictional Biography*, a sort of metaphorical biography of his life, looking at his own community.

“Home is an appropriated space. It does not exist objectively in reality. The notion of ‘home’ is a fiction we create out of a need to belong.”

In 1986, Mofokeng began work on a major project, now seen as his first photographic essay: *Train Church*. This series revealed an interest in religious rituals that still informs his work today. At the time South Africa was in a state of emergency, and the Apartheid regime was becoming more radical and stringent. Most photographic coverage of events at this time was strictly documentary in nature and overtly political in its depiction of repression and resistance, whereas the essay format allowed for greater complexity.

In 1988, at the suggestion of the photographer David Goldblatt and the writer and historian Tim Couzens, Mofokeng was invited to join the African Studies Institute (ASI). During nearly ten years at the ASI as a researcher and photographer he produced his photographic essay *Rumours | The Bloemhof Portfolio*.

For his 1990 exhibition *Like Shifting Sand* at the Johannesburg Market Galleries, showing life in the townships, on the farms and life in the colored 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 and Brian Weil’s classes, his two foremost influences.

In April 1994 the artist went back to Bloemhof to observe and record the elections and the ushering in of democracy.

“What struck me most on this visit was the mixture of confidence and apprehension and the disbelief that the coming elections are going to bring about changes in the lives of the seasonal farm workers and tenant labourers, township dwellers who compete for jobs at the creamery, grocery stores as shop assistants-cum-cleaners at banks, hotels (there are 2) and a few diamond

speculators ... Excitement and fear was everywhere. Paranoia, rumor and disbelief passed for normal conversation. Fear that election results are going to be rigged ...”

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* shown as a slideshow in the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale in 1997.

“These are images that urban black working and middle-class families had commissioned, requested or tacitly sanctioned. They have been left behind by dead relatives, where they sometimes hang on obscure parlor 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.”

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 as he made them. In creating this juxtaposition, Mofokeng explored a different way of telling by establishing a dialogue that raises new questions about the politics of visual representation. For Mofokeng, while black people in South Africa have suffered centuries of denial and oppression, the proliferation of images bespeaking monotony, gloom and despair, however valid, are incomplete.

“The challenge has always been to create images that are free of constraints imposed by the State and those that go beyond the exigencies of the struggle against that State. Is there a way in which one can celebrate achievements people have made of their lives in the face of sheer callousness without necessarily endorsing the State’s case?”

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 practiced, the caves of Motouleng and Mautse. In these pieces Mofokeng probes the relation between landscape, memory and religion.



*Easter Sunday Church Service—Free State, 1996, Courtesy Lunetta Bartz, MAKER, Johannesburg*

“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 my 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.”

With *Chasing Shadows*, Mofokeng began to look at land, being able in 1994 to travel to places he could not go, being black, during Apartheid. He searches for places with memory—and some of them are very bucolic. Landscape is the mute witness of histories and narratives. Looking at sad landscapes, landscapes of trauma, he interrogates the idea of landscape itself. Such questions are raised by his pictures of the world’s first concentration camps established by the British in South Africa and of mass graves in Mozambique:

“... one question currently being addressed is, whether or not there should be a national Holocaust Memorial, or whether the camps themselves should serve as their own memorials. Would a monument invite remembrance or through a kind of containment, forgetting?”

Mofokeng photographed historical sites in Europe and Asia trying to find out how other countries dealt with places associated with negative memories and resolved similar problems to what democratic South Africa experienced, when it was yet to take psychic ownership of the land it had inherited from the Apartheid ancestor. His forays in the European metropolises have since convinced him of the futility of this enquiry, as there is no universal model to follow.

With the exhibition *Rethinking Landscape* in 2003, Mofokeng went one step further and defined the landscape as grasping one's position in the larger scheme of things, including one's own community.

“... appreciation of the landscape is informed by personal experience, myth, and memory, amongst other things. Suffice to say, it is also informed by ideology, indoctrination, projection and prejudice.”

For the outstanding quality and content of his work, for his re-figuration of the powers of photographic representation, for his acute insight into the cultural meanings in landscapes and the reciprocal relations of environment and development, in 2009 Santu Mofokeng was awarded with a prize by the Prince Claus Fund.





*Winter in Tembisa, c. 1991, Courtesy Lunetta Bartz, MAKER, Johannesburg*

## Notes on some photographic essays

### Train Church (1986)

In this series, considered his first fully accomplished photographic essay, Santu Mofokeng studied the phenomenon of 'train churches' that developed on the South African transport system, in which many blacks spent three hours or more traveling to and from work. The packed carriages were transformed into places of worship, with preaching and prayer, thus making the journey an end in itself.

This essay focuses on two of the most significant aspects of life in South Africa: the commuting made necessary by the expulsion and relocation of whole populations and by the country's geographical divisions, and the powerful presence of spirituality. This is where Santu Mofokeng began his exploration of religious rituals and the displacement of places of worship.

### Appropriated Spaces (since 1985)

With this series Mofokeng continued the theme begun with *Train Church*, considering other ways in which people appropriate spaces and endow them with religious significance, a phenomenon that is not specific to South Africa but is particularly significant there.

### Rumours / The Bloemhof Portfolio (1988–1994)

As part of his work as a researcher and photographer at the African Studies Institute (ASI), Santu Mofokeng made several trips to Bloemhof, starting in 1988. There he photographed the tenant farmers and agricultural workers in this small town on the banks of the Vaal and in the outlying region. His images were a contribution to the *Oral History Project*, an oral record of rural activities. Some of them were published in the critically acclaimed book by the historian and ASI director Charles van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine. The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper 1894–1985*.

*Rumours / The Bloemhof Portfolio* constitutes a veritable archive of South African rural history and shows how Mofokeng's research and investigation influenced his work. The image here is conceived not as an immediate result, but as an integral part of a mental investigation.

### Chasing Shadows (since 1996)

On Good Friday 1996, Santu Mofokeng set off for the Motouleng cave in order to photograph the rituals of the Zionist Apostolic Faith, to observe the congregation but also the site itself. He came back with the first images of his photographic essay *Chasing Shadows*.

This essay, which is still in progress today, runs through all Mofokeng's work and reflects his ongoing interest in the relations between memory, landscape and spirituality. Three images stand out from this essay: an ensemble entitled *Magic and Diseases*, evoking the question of AIDS in South Africa.

### Township Billboards: Beauty, Sex and Cellphones (1991–2006)

In this series Santu Mofokeng embarked on a thoroughgoing study of billboards in the townships, from their initial appearance and into the recent past. A distinctive feature of the townships, these billboards are used by the country's leaders as a prime communications tool, and as such they reflect and sum up the ideology and social, economic and political climate of the country, as well as its changes and transitions.

### Child-headed households (2007)

*Child-headed households* takes us into the rural villages of North Province where the death of parents from AIDS leaves children with no choice but to run the household by themselves. Until recently, preventive information campaigns and anti-retroviral drugs were more accessible in the countryside's chieftaincies than in urban townships. Organized by a cluster of Catholics and other churches along with NGOs and philanthropic societies, these campaigns were hampered by the lack of resources and the obstructive effects of the administration and government policies.

In a rural world steeped in tradition, superstition and archaic beliefs, death certificates systematically attribute death to 'natural causes': no other information is given. Whereas death in a family is bound to necessitate an adaptation of roles, in traditional societies (societies 'in transition') it is not uncommon for death to overturn the strict organization of roles between the sexes, especially in homes headed by children.

### Soweto Townships (1982–1989)

In 1993 Santu Mofokeng wrote: "Soweto is now one of the most familiar photographic landscapes on the planet, alongside Somalia, Bosnia, etc. All around the world, people have developed a whole series of preconceived ideas and images on this subject, which are then faithfully reproduced by passing journalists with a keen sense of how the international market for images works. We all know what these images are: records of despair, of monotony, of anxiety, of revolt, of oppression ... It is not that the violence and poverty we are so used to finding in standard photos of the township are not real, it is just that they represent only a partial reality and not the whole of people's lives."

### The Black Photo Album/ Look: 1890–1950 (1997)

The *Black Photo Album* assembles old photographs from family collections (portraits, family photographs, etc.) that Mofokeng found or bought and then re-photographed, and paired with the stories relating to the images. For each picture, the artist carried out careful research into the people shown and the context in which it was taken. This constant research and questioning are at the basis of all Mofokeng's essays. In the exhibition, *the Black Photo Album* is presented in the form of a slide show, as it was at the 1997 Johannesburg Biennale.





*Buddhist Retreat near Ixopo, 2003, Courtesy Lunetta Bartz, MAKER, Johannesburg*

#### Trauma Landscapes & Landscape and Memory (since 1996)

Santu Mofokeng uses the term 'landscape' in its most inclusive sense to embrace literal, familiar, psychological, philosophical, metaphysical and metonymic landscapes.

How do you talk about mass graves and concentration camps? Does a monument foster memory or, by circumscribing it, actively encourage forgetting? Who is the repository of such memories? What is to be done with places that are associated with negative memories or traumatic events?

With *Trauma Landscapes* and *Landscape and Memory*, landscape becomes the silent witness to history and narrative. In photographing places steeped in history and memories, Mofokeng is interrogating the very idea of landscape.

#### Radiant Landscapes (2011)

With *Radiant Landscapes* Santu Mofokeng continues to explore his interest in those 'invisible evils' that are Apartheid and AIDS. As Patricia Hayes wrote in her essay accompanying this



commission, Mofokeng has photographed the way people relate to spiritual worlds, and even to spirits—which, to many South Africans, are an undoubted reality. He takes the same approach to asbestosis and mesothelioma. Mofokeng has also photographed sepulchral landscapes such as concentration camps and tombs, as well as other places of death. In a sense, these concerns also inform the polluted landscapes where human and geographical bodies are poisoned and forced to undergo gradual metamorphosis. For Mofokeng this is not a matter of science, positivism or politics, but of using form to explore a poetics that consists in being at the heart of a problem, of making manifest forms, such as the incrustations that form slowly in sites affected by acid rain, like symptoms produced by the metabolism of a sick body.





*Christmas Church Service, Mautse Cave – Free State, 2000, Courtesy Lunetta Bartz, MAKER, Johannesburg*







All photographs in the exhibition are silver gelatin prints on baryte paper, with the exception of the recently commissioned essay *Radiant Landscapes* which are pigment inkjet prints.

Publication

To the exhibition, an extended monograph was published:  
*Chasing Shadows: Santu Mofokeng Thirty Years of Photographic Essays*

Edited by Corinne Diserens.

With contributions by Adam Ashforth, Okwui Enwezor, Patricia Hayes, Sarat Maharaj, Ivan Vladislavic and Sabine Vogel

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[www.extracity.org/en/shop](http://www.extracity.org/en/shop)

Chasing Shadows  
Santu Mofokeng, Thirty Years  
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