

ENCOUNTERS

TSHEPISO MAZIBUKO



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With an essay by Sean O'Toole









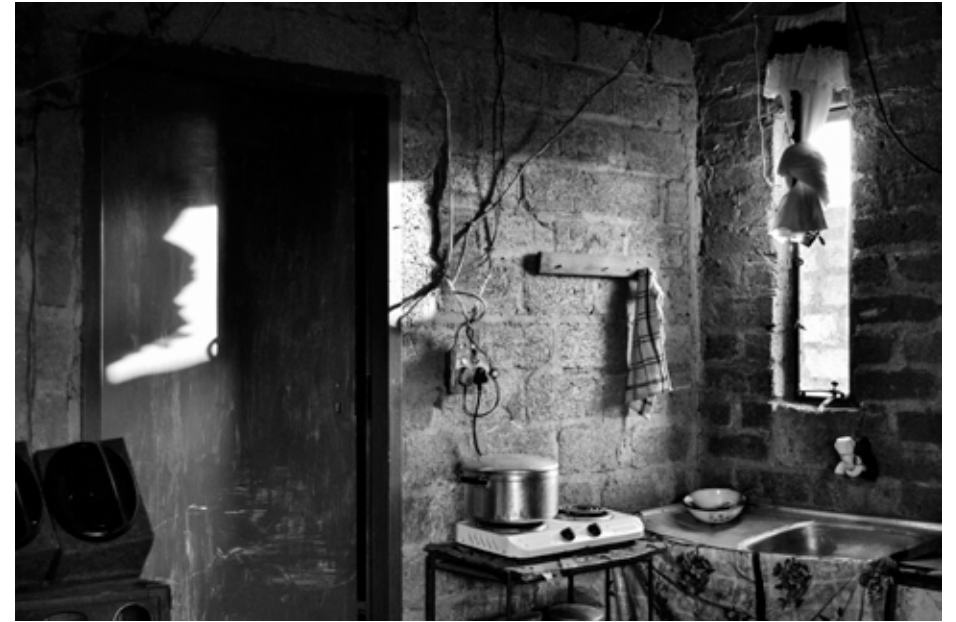
























A Poet's Eye

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

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 Niefertgodien, 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 indiscriminating 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,

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.

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

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