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Communicatio: South African Journal for Communication Theory and Research
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcsa20

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Published online: 28 Jun 2013.

To cite this article: Stella Viljoen (2013) Men are interesting too: Photography, crisis and the masculine, Communicatio: South African Journal for Communication Theory and Research, 39:2, 233-255, DOI: 10.1080/02500167.2013.804674

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02500167.2013.804674

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COMMUNICATIO Volume 39 (2) 2013 pp. 233–255
Copyright: Unisa Press ISSN 0250-0167/ONLINE 1753-5379
DOI: 10.1080/02500167.2013.804674

Men are interesting too: Photography, crisis and the masculine

Stella Viljoen*

Abstract

This article, in part, tries to introduce some of the difficulties in writing about the realm of 'represented' or 'representational' masculinity that I have faced in my own limited research on the representation of men in South African art and media. My encounter of visualised masculinities is briefly sketched in the hope that having this backstory will add depth and texture to my analysis of the ways in which 'South African masculinity' might have been communicated to or be 'read' by the viewers of the *Figures & Fictions: Contemporary South African Photography* exhibition held at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London in 2011. This exhibition is specifically chosen as the subject of this article as an example of the representational construction of South African-ness by South Africans but curated with a predominantly non-South African viewer in mind. A photographic exhibition seems a helpful site to talk about the importance of the representational realm since photography seems intuitively geared towards selecting and amplifying subject matter which, on a collective level, is thought to be curios, worthy of attention or interesting. As a photographic exhibition, *Figures & Fictions* is also balanced between the genre of 'documentary' with all the associations of objectivity, activism and agenda this brings with it and the critique of these connotations typically embedded in postmodern photographic art. Photographic art has been at the forefront of exposing a sort of masculine crisis and for this reason too forms the focal point of this essay. Throughout I return to Susan Sontag's conception of 'the interesting' as tool for unpacking whether the representation of men specifically is interesting and what exactly this might mean.

Keywords: crisis, *Figures & Fictions*, masculinity, photography, South Africa, Susan Sontag

> [A] society becomes 'modern' when one of its chief activities is producing and consuming images, when images that have extraordinary powers to determine our demands upon reality, and are themselves coveted substitutes for first-hand experience, become indispensable to the health of the economy, the stability of the polity, and the pursuit of private happiness.
>
> – Susan Sontag (1999, 153)

> Finally, the most grandiose result of the photographic enterprise is to give us the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads – as an anthology of images
>
> – Susan Sontag (2008, 3)

PHOTOGRAPHY, MASCULINITY AND 'THE INTERESTING'[1]

For the American theorist, novelist and critic, Susan Sontag, photography was the medium of art where 'the interesting' first prevailed, with the camera lens serving as the measure of interest we

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take in a person, thing or reality. According to her the truthfulness of the relegation, whether a subject is really worthy of attention, is of little importance since '[o]ne calls something interesting precisely so as not to have to commit to a judgment of beauty (or of goodness)' (Sontag 2002, 24). Photographs that attempt to offer social commentary may, in particular, be recognised as relying heavily on Sontag's concept of the interesting, perhaps because of their concern for underscoring their own interest in the 'real'. In *The image world* (1977) Sontag mooted that '[t]o possess the world in the form of images is, precisely, to re-experience the unreality and remoteness of the real' (Sontag 1999, 163–164). Within apartheid South Africa, the genre of struggle photography had a sort of moral and aesthetic predominance that reached well into the new South Africa and has rightly earned its place in history. But, as Annabelle Wienand (2011) has argued, there were a number of (even struggle) photographers during apartheid who were working in more lyrical and analytical ways, artists[2] this author would describe as attuned to the ways in which small, personal narratives and details, 'subjects such as family, spiritual experiences and the everyday' were interesting in ways akin to, but different from, the dominant and prescribed narratives overtly tied to political ends (Wienand refers to David Goldblatt, Santo Mofokeng, Cedric Nunn, Guy Tillim and Paul Weinberg). The images overtly recognisable as 'struggle photography' are no less interesting, they just do not seem to showcase the photographer's pleasure in 'the interesting' per se, which is not to say that they are less concerned with 'reality'. Although recycled, decontextualised and manipulated, the tactics employed by these more lyrical photographers were and are designed to highlight the real, not obscure it. Illuminating a setting or personal fragment, a reference to a narrative incident but not the incident itself, may emotively charge a story but the story is no less real. Santu Mofokeng has garnered critical acclaim for his haunting portrayals of spaces and scenes both familiar and strange, political and apolitical. 'I can't say I developed that language consciously,' says Mofokeng of the dramatic, almost surreal lighting for which he is known. 'Even a flash light, it's an imposition. If you are going to document something and you bring in your own light – you are actually disturbing the truth.' … 'The photograph is an infidel' (*Figures & Fictions: Santo Mofokeng* Vimeo 2011).

This emphasis on the unusual (or the usual-made-unusual), the surreal and 'interesting' is less apparent in mainstream commercial photography that most often seems to be perpetually regurgitating the same photo-shopped images. The stylised and plastic élan of commercial photography is most evident (and well theorised) in gender-specific glossy magazines where the perfectibility of the gendered body is a belief-system endorsed by the photographic. But the line between art and commercial photography is increasingly difficult to find, with many photographers working in a style that seems to easily straddle art, documentation and commercial photography. Having said this, the fact that in terms of subject matter photographs made for different purposes (art, advertising, pornography, news reportage) are now difficult to place in only one of these categories does not make these categories redundant. The loss of discrete aesthetic styles between genres of photography has sparked an interest in the value – if any – of genre and genre crossing.

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This article comprises an introductory analysis of the representation of masculine subjectivities in *Figures & Fictions*, an exhibition of South African photography held at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London in 2011. This photographic initiative, at this moment in time, brought together a number of disciplines and discourses pertinent to the visualisation of South Africans today, and also served as a platform from which to retrospectively consider how gender, race and class – and, for the purposes of this article, masculinity – emerged as a central theme for a new generation of feminist visual culture theorists. The fact that the camera is good at highlighting the fashionable interests of the day, that which we find curious and 'interesting' as consumers, artists, or academics, forms part of this discussion, as does the question of how one determines whether attention is warranted. Is it meaningful to focus one's attention on gender (as a theorist of the visual), for instance, or does this distract from more important concerns? My interest in the entry of global media into post-apartheid South Africa was most naturally, for me, situated in gender representation, specifically the (photographic) representation of the masculine. Not the study of 'real' men or 'real' trends amongst 'real' men in thinking about their manhood, but rather in the ways in which such tendencies were constructed by the media for male (and female) consumers. I briefly plot the course of my research on masculinity in the media as a crude example of how scholars from outlier disciplines, such as media and the arts, entered masculinity studies, approaching it with a different set of questions and different methodologies than those in, for instance, the health sciences, where much of the preliminary work on masculinity has been done.[3]

Men's Health South Africa launched its first issue in 1997, followed by the local editions of *GQ* and *FHM* in 2000. All three entered South Africa at a time when our collective identity as a nation was undecided, a state of combined confusion and excitement that required that we contend with an influx of international media while developing a visual language suited to the ethos of our new democracy. Against this backdrop, it seemed pertinent to investigate the nature of international publications such as the men's lifestyle magazines, especially given their promise of a vernacular tone and content. With Art History and Media Studies now formally wedded under the new title of 'Visual Studies', students of visual culture such as I, were, at this time, increasingly concerned with the democratisation of the visual – what had been thought of as high art and low-brow media were now, somewhat scandalously, treated as equal. Thus my first research on gender representation was a comparative analysis between the aestheticised representation of women in *GQ South Africa* and 19th-century erotic art, most notably that of Frenchman Eduard Manet.[4] Here, art and media seemed of one mind, both untouchable in their enlightened enjoyment of what I termed '*gentlemen's* pornography'. Sometime later, I shifted my attention from the portrayal of women to that of men, as I became more and more curious about how these magazines would negotiate the tenuous formation of new masculinities in a South Africa eager for change. From the start, all three these magazines felt the pressure of a (predominantly white) market determined to shake off the burdens of the past and find a portal into the global West. Like their international counterparts, the local editions of *Men's Health*, *GQ* and *FHM* offered their readers a means of escape from the difficulties of daily life and potentially allowed them to feel part of a global community. Metrosexuality subsequently became part of the aspirational syntax of men's lifestyle magazines that aimed to procure the

support of high-end advertisers; and in doing so endorsed the connection between masculinity, escapism and consumption. This phenomenon was overtly present in all the South African men's lifestyle magazines from the outset, and became an important signifier in redefining masculine identity (regardless of race) in this context, affirming Sean Nixon's (1996, 70) sense that 'modern forms of consumption privilege certain public masculinities as the subject of the look'.[5]

For a time my research was centred on media not art, but in keeping with the methodologies of Visual Studies at the time, it seemed necessary to consider whether the dominant appearance of the masculine differed in the different contexts. Men's magazines democratised a sort of sanctioned narcissism, by no means original in the visual arts but positioned, perhaps for the first time, as a dominant cultural norm (even for heterosexual men). On the pages of *GQ*, for instance, visualised masculinity was made to be almost fetishistically *interesting* for men.[6] Thus, the photographs in men's lifestyle magazines seemed culturally significant by virtue of their situation between (1) the world of high and low culture, and (2) the objectification of women and then the shift of the media gaze onto men. As photographs they also seemed a more 'treacherous form of leaching out the world' (Sontag 2008, 4) than paintings, and I argued that to set up gender or aesthetics as binary was to engender a false dichotomy that undermines the hybrid mutuality of visual culture and gender as they function in reality.

The network of theories that emerged in the 1990s across the health and social sciences, that is loosely referred to as 'masculinity in crisis', is often embedded in studies concerning the popularity and commercial success of men's lifestyle magazines in the West. Yet in spite of this (or perhaps because of it), whatever crisis there may or may not be in South Africa has been largely absent from the pages of our men's magazines (see Viljoen 2008). The tendencies amongst men towards self-destructive behaviour that had fuelled the sense of crisis abroad were compounded in South Africa by especially high rates of rape and domestic violence (South African Institute of Race Relations 2007), the ceaseless threat of the HIV pandemic, wide-scale unemployment (although women earn 45 per cent of the income of South African men; see Brandt [2006]; Chadwick & Foster [2007, 27]), fatherlessness amongst particularly the poor, the visibility of corruption amongst especially male political role-models, and what Liz Walker (2005, 225) notoriously referred to as the destabilising of male privilege in the 'New' South Africa.[7] A number of South African theorists have engaged with the concept, most notably Robert Morrell (2001), Graham Reid and Liz Walker (2005), but the notion and rhetoric of crisis have also been queried since, in South Africa at least, men are still largely the purveyors of power in the private and the public spheres. The sense that a general crisis may have been brought on by small steps taken against hegemonically patriarchal masculinities has also increased the disrepute of and resistance to this concept. Whether justified or not, the theme of crisis recurs in discourses on harmful masculinities both locally and internationally. Furthermore, that a crisis might be unwarranted (which is not what I am saying, but the notion has been proffered) does not take away the sense of crisis.

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In tracing the rise of men's magazines in South Africa I also analysed the masculine ideals that accompanied them, both in the local editions of international glossy men's magazines and in more local or 'niche' men's publications (like *MaksiMan* and *BL!NK*).[8] As mentioned, the far-reaching socio-economic shifts implied in a new democracy (for better or for worse) made the mainstream popular mass media fertile ground for imagining strains of masculine identity marked by the vernacular circumstances of this context. However, as a collective, the men's lifestyle press maintained a more-or-less buoyant rhetoric of globalised sameness and a masculine ideal that excludes the vast majority of South African men. Even today it is impressive to see the consistency with which this medium omits – and thus virtually denies – the very real challenges and incongruities of being a man in post-apartheid South Africa, indeed the visual textures and diversities of manhood itself. They also generally tend to avoid or ignore the rhetoric of crisis or defer it to health and fitness pages, where lumbar crunches and protein shakes trivialise any allusion to a problem. If the notion of a masculine crisis holds some truth, then signs, rumours, murmurings of crisis should be seen and heard somewhere within the diverse spectrum of cultural expressions practised in South Africa. If not in glossy men's magazines, then where is the visual evidence of crisis? And if masculinity-in-crisis, so absent from high-end magazines, emerges as a rhetoric and subject matter in the visual arts, then is this an honest engagement with masculine diversity, or has 'crisis', in the broadest sense, become a visual shorthand for 'the interesting'?

FIGURES & FICTIONS

In April 2011 the exhibition titled *Figures & Fictions: Contemporary South African Photography* opened at the Victoria & Albert Museum. Seventeen photographers were selected by co-curators Tamar Garb and Martin Barnes in order to explore 'the way contemporary and recent South African photography stages, complicates and contests identity in a huge variety of practices' (2011).[9] Garb (*Vimeo Transcript* 2011) explains the figure's centrality in contemporary South African photography as related to a history of political aggression and oppression in this country, noting that 'the figure has been the locus for thinking through many questions, both about the past and about the present'. All the work was produced over the past decade by artists living and working in South Africa, and it foregrounds the burden of South Africa's fraught history as it weighs down those situated in the present.[10] Lucy Davies (2011), writing in the *British Journal of Photography*, noted of the show: 'Its collective memory has the butting insistence of the head of an animal that needs to be fed.' To this end, the exhibition also collectively served as an awkward confrontation with the country's disreputable photographic past – the use of ethnographic photography to racially cast the roles of coloniser and colonised during the colonial period, for instance, or the damning manner in which 'documentary' was used to validate police brutality (typically against apparently unruly black mobs) under apartheid. Portraiture, too, is mentioned by Garb as a prominent genre in the history of South African photography and, thus, the exhibition includes portraits taken by specific photographers, but also alludes to the 'distinctive photographic voices' of each photographic auteur: 'local in character and subject matter, but of wider international interest because of their combined intensity' (*Figures & Fictions* online catalogue 2011).

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Although the exhibition clearly reflected a critical concern for the revision and reimagining of gender, belonging, nationality, precarity, home, domination, diaspora and race, it was not, in any explicit sense, about masculinity. And yet, to the extent that Garb and Barnes curated an exhibition representing post-apartheid subjectivity, it was very much about masculinity. Masculine crisis, then, is a mere spin-off of the multiple crises that, in part, delineate us as South Africans, among them the crisis of race. Our collective gaze is historically biased in that we find it difficult to look without seeing race. In naming this reality over and again in lots of different ways, the artists in the exhibition attest to the richness and danger of photography as an active archive. The fact that the *Figures & Fictions* exhibition was not curated as a site of overt engagement with gender may very well make it a more suitable or less guarded platform for the investigation of gender than an exhibition with this express goal. The question, then, is how the photographs engage with the masculine and how this visual enactment might work to communicate specific ideas about contemporary masculinities in the current South African context.[11]

The *Figures & Fictions* exhibition was criticised by some for the manner in which the show lumped very different photographers and projects together and split photographic series apart. But critics such as Carli Coetzee (2011) defended this as part of the ethos of the exhibition: 'Viewed as a whole, these works are not a coherent group. However, that seems to be the intention of the curatorial project. The exhibition makes a number of references to the larger series these works are taken from, drawing attention to the fragmentary nature of what we see.' Although not convinced by what feels like a glib resolution of the fragmentary nature of *Figures & Fictions*, I do think the exhibition is more coherent and makes more sense when seen through a specific lens such as that of gender. I have focused my discussion of the exhibition on images taken by men of men, as a way of narrowing the scope of the conversation. Although these criteria of selection may serve to further fragment an already fractured picture, even in looking at this small, awkward sample perhaps one can begin to see something of the power of the whole. It is as a collection that these photographs are most articulate as frozen moments, settings or looks actively involved in the making of the masculine. Furthermore, the leitmotifs identified and named in my analyses as complicit in the mythic construction of South African masculinity and masculinities (such as precarity, misapprehension and ambiguity) may be pertinent to photographs taken by women of women, or women of men, or men of women, but to separate one kind of looking will hopefully demonstrate the idiosyncrasies within this grouping. The gender of the photographer or subject is, in all probability, less important than the rumours of gender performativity (and its erosion) in certain photographic instances, but the gender of the photographer is not completely without significance as the visual currency (or credibility) of images taken from within a gender is invariably greater than those taken from the outside looking in. My selection is also made in order to understand the visualisation of the theme of 'crisis', be it the crisis of representation or of the masculine. While the form of interiority differs from one image and photographer to the next, the sample of photographs under discussion all fall into what Garb describes as 'participatory ethnography', meaning that they are documented from an internal view point (in Gevisser 2011). Perhaps even considering a handful of photographs taken by five photographers will give one some sense of the

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representational diversity and power of the masculine as visual theme in *Figures & Fictions* but, it must be said, isolating these photographs from the exhibition/series they form part of involves setting them up or framing them in a way that will almost certainly impoverish the images and diverge from the intentions of the photographers. Again, I am hoping to understand some of the ways in which they might be read by an audience looking at 'South Africa' from the outside in.

Figure 1: Hasan and Husain Essop, *Night Before Eid* (2009). Courtesy of the artists and Goodman Gallery.

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In *Night Before Eid* (2009), twin brothers Hasan and Husain Essop once again create a tableau simultaneously recognisable as an actual or documentary-style image, and yet also strange because of its subject matter and 'message' being opaque. Whereas the conventions of photo-journalism dictate a measure of didactic clarity in order to be meaningful, this image is all the more compelling for its incongruity. That the title describes the scene makes it no less surreal, as the brothers have cloaked this typically festive and communal occasion, known as a time of celebration and togetherness, in an apocalyptic stillness.[12] As in past projects they use their own bodies to circumvent the dictums of Islam that prevent them from photographing others. Through their self-portraits they 'managed to find a loophole' in Muslim teaching, meaning that since only they are implicated 'any judgment that occurs is going to be only on [themselves]' (*Figures & Fictions: Hasan and Husain Essop Vimeo* 2011). The power of the image is, partly due to their

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fluent translation of the conventions of news reportage into art, an occurrence indebted to their visual proficiency in both languages. The brothers have cited their infatuation with secular popular culture and their commitment to the faith they were raised in as a source of some conflict for them – a tension that informs their photographs. Husain explains: 'We love dancing, we love movies, we love music, we love everything, but then we have the strict teachings of Islam that forbids us to do certain things' (ibid.). 'Art is about your beliefs,' says Husain. 'So for us it had to be about religion' (in Davies 2011). While his words could be those of any number of South Africans struggling to balance the dual demands of faith and culture, and are not all that unusual in and of themselves, the image is resonant with foreboding. In the place documented and occupied by the Essops in *Night Before Eid,* the masculine alone fills the frame and renders reality threatening. The many cooks and party-goers who should be gathered around the pots of food stewing on the fires have been expelled from view, casting the scene and the solitary characters that occupy it in an ominous light. Rather than two brothers pursuing their faith on an evening of religious togetherness, the Essops portray themselves as gangsters or hoodlums wielding intimidating objects. Their visual anonymity only serves to accentuate the viewer's knowledge that they are the subjects of this scene. The effect of the gaze of the camera being turned back onto the photographer (the subject becoming the object, in other words), is that the determining male gaze of the camera is disturbed. The photographer who has stealthily documented the scene and the members of the gang that have been caught out here, are one and the same.[13] The purpose of documentary as exposing the viewer to the unfamiliar or strange is amplified by the Essops, who themselves play the role of that which the camera finds interesting. Here, the generalised visual memory of the viewer is ruptured as it encounters the strange.

Night Before Eid is strange precisely because it fractures and accentuates the way in which the camera separates the masculine into those who do wrong and those relegated to the sideline position of documenting it. Thus, in terms of what it says about masculinity for an audience situated outside this context, we see the innocence of the 'witness' being undermined, but so, too, the guilt of the 'perpetrator' is revealed to be deceptive, the predictable moral division between good and bad masculinity is breached. Misunderstanding or misrecognition is encouraged by the image which seems to want to remind the viewer that appearances can be deceiving. The Essop brothers go some way towards troubling the image of South African masculinity evident in the way the international press cover the country. From this 'outside' perspective the portrait is often bleak and without contradiction, and one might be forgiven for assuming that the reason the masculine receives more attention in the global political arena is because it is the masculine that is criminal. Behind this easy reductionism the attentive viewer encounters a consciously ironic and incriminating sense of the masculine, and is made aware of the photograph looking at itself being looked at. Hasan and Husain Essop explain the different forms of identity that shape them as individuals, noting that '[w]e are Capetonian, we are of Indian descent, we are Muslim and we are South African' … 'There are so many identities within us …. The work comes out of all of that' (Davies 2011). But their masculinity is omitted from this list of identities, perhaps remaining invisible to their own gaze.

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Graeme Williams' confrontation with the strange also stems from a revision of the visual trope of documentary. Williams worked as a photo-journalist under apartheid and with the advent of democracy felt the need to 'avoid the conventional photographic documentary approach so much a part of the apartheid documentary tradition' (Graeme Williams, personal website 2012). Instead of constructing autonomous photographs that each tells a contained story with a well-formulated (political) intent, Williams started 'concentrating on fragments of life at the literal and figurative edges of town' (ibid.). Finding a new visual lexicon within which to work first involved unhinging his customary vantage point – a locus that set him up as the objective observer of his subject:

> The way I went about this was to make use of layers of visual information and also to photograph from a position that would give a sense of my involvement and hence communicate something more intimate. I realized over time that the closer one gets in proximity to the subject, the more the photographer's presence shows through in the photographs. In some circumstances this became too dominant and I constantly had to find a balance between achieving a sense of intimacy and objectivity. (ibid.)

Figure 2: Graeme Williams, *The Edge of Town* (*Soweto*) (2006). © Graeme Williams.

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Figure 3: Graeme Williams, *The Edge of Town* (*Graaff-Reinet*) (2006). © Graeme Williams.

The resultant photo-essay, entitled *The Edge of Town*, is an eloquent tribute to the reinvention required by the transition to democracy and the moral complexity this inevitably brought about, even on an aesthetic level. The candid, though composed, images express temperaments and instants rather than evidence or events – a transition also felt in his move from black and white film to colour. Williams describes the photographs as having multiple points of interest, within each frame there are two or three focal points so 'your eye is pulled to various parts of the frame and in a way for me this mirrors the way change is happening in the country' (Williams in Clay, Powell and Duckworth 2011). The decentralisation of power on a socio-political level (and continued deconstruction of an axis of injustice that was the mainstay of struggle photography) reverberates into the toppling of narrative structure, so that instead of images that visually petrify the notion of 'good' and 'bad' role-players (especially on a gendered level) or a narrative arch with a beginning, middle and end, Williams' photographs comprise 'a stream of consciousness that attempts to draw in the elements of both change and of lack of change within this paradoxical country' (Graeme Williams, personal website 2012). That Williams regards his implied presence as photographer to be an important signifier in this post-1994 series signals a more personal-seeming engagement with being on the edge. The series seems to tentatively relish the move (or anticipated move) of the white man from centre to periphery, from dominancy to decentralisation. It also signals the opposite, for

Williams' subject position – his need to visually attest to his involvement in the story – positions him as man as no longer 'outside' the ho-hum daily grind of life (often, in representational culture, the place of women), but metaphorically 'inside' and intimately involved, a move from periphery to centre. His interiority and involvedness as photographer (and man) feel a little bit strange since he is not 'capturing' or 'shooting' a dramatic event, but gently observing that which is too common to be thought noteworthy by a professional documentary photographer. Although he photographs public or communal spaces they feel somehow domestic – a dimension of the visual that seems to forecast a shift in the attention of the masculine from the public to the private. In this sense *The Edge of Town* is as much about Williams as it is about his subjects – once the viewer understands this his series becomes a form of self-portraiture, documenting his own changing subjectivity and that of other South African men.

Figure 4: Zwelethu Mthethwa, *Untitled* (from The Brave Ones series). © Zwelethu Mthethwa. Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York and BRUNDYN + GONSALVES, Cape Town.

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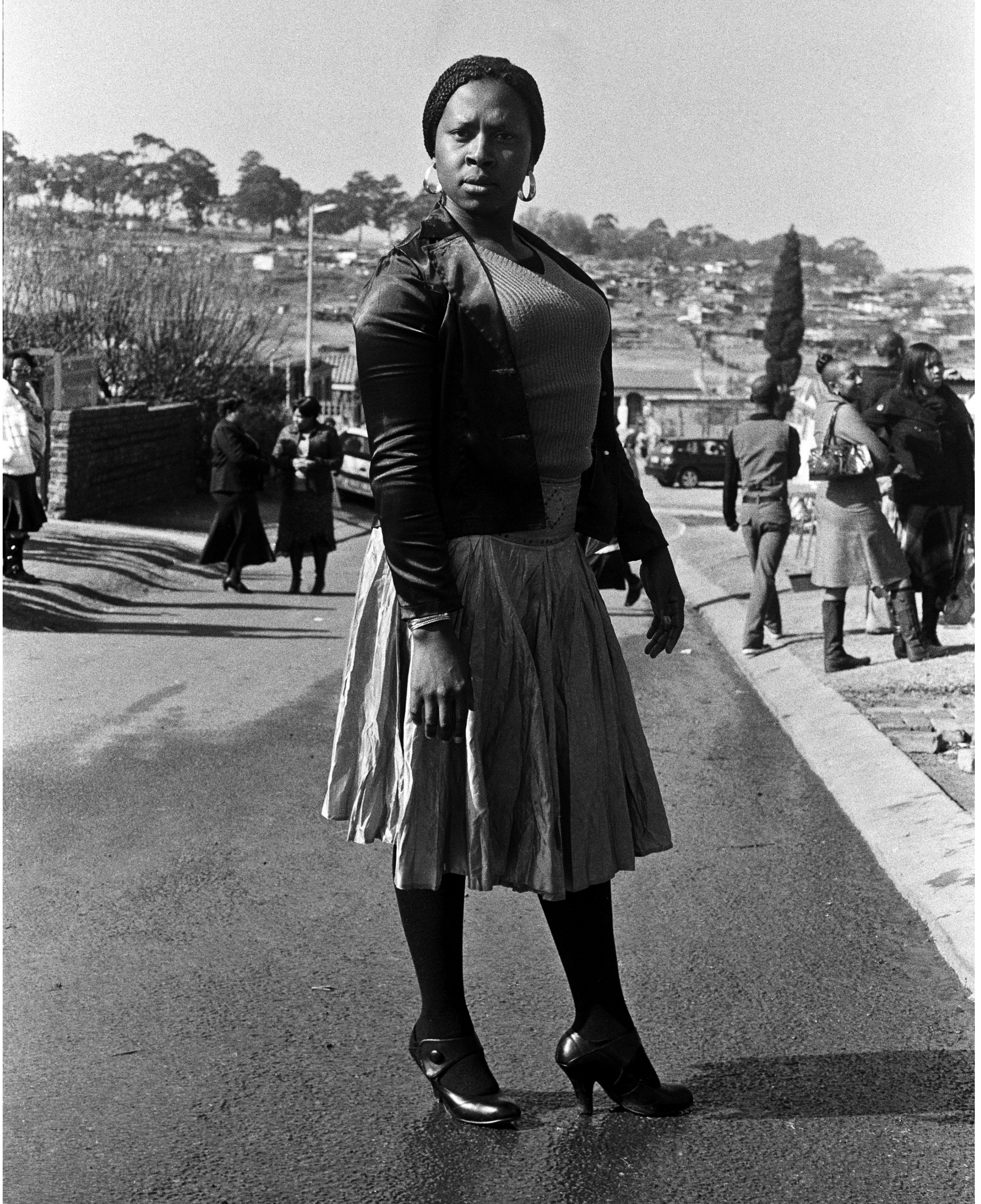

Figure 5: Sabelo Mlangeni, *Country Girls* (Madlisa) (2009). © Sabelo Mlangeni. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town.

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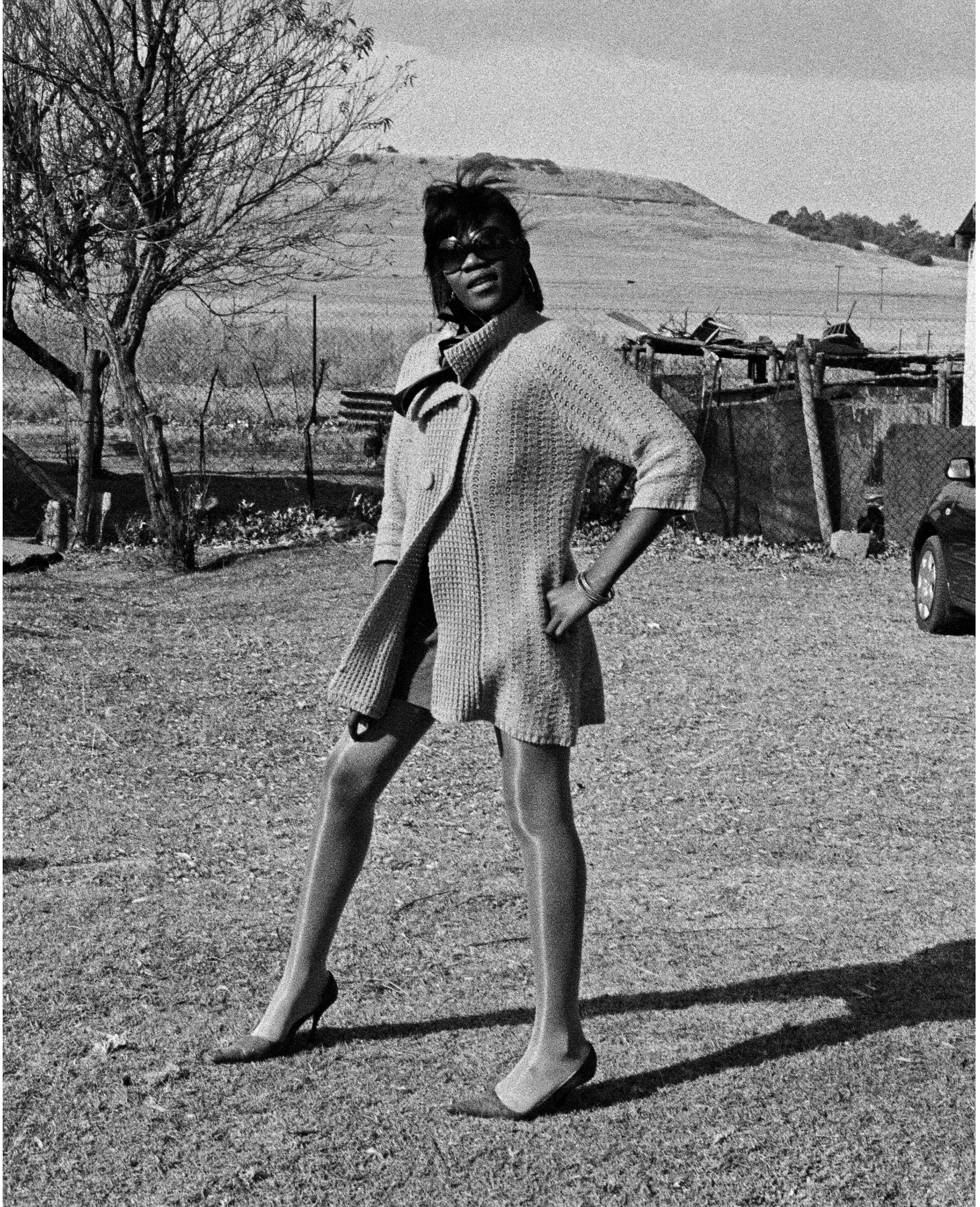

Figure 6: Sabelo Mlangeni, *Country Girls* (Palisa) (2009). © Sabelo Mlangeni. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town.

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Zwelethu Mthethwa's portraits of young Zulu men from the Nazareth Baptist Church, tenderly entitled *The Brave Ones*, visually attest to the layered, interwoven histories that bind the performance of South African masculinity to the sartorial. The combination of girlish pinkish-red, pleated skirts, Scottish tartan and black bowties (references to their own cultural costume as well as the Scottish Highlanders who were stationed in Natal in the late 19th century) should be ridiculous and out of place in the Natal veld, but the coolness of their manner, their self-assurance and the combined effect of their deliberate posing and pretend-disdain of the camera make for a photo-shoot akin to high fashion, rather than ethnographic photography (more *The Sartorialist* than *Life*). The forced integration of peoples and things lends a surreal quality to Mthethwa's series.

Sontag regards photography as surrealist by nature because, in Johan Swinnen's (1997, 136) words, 'it is a duplication of reality, a sur-reality ... The surrealist desire to eradicate the limits between art and life, consciousness and unconsciousness, professional and amateur, the deliberate and the unintentional, is realized in the practice of photography.' Kaplan (2010, 54) extends this line of thought with his claim that '[t]he secret of the photograph, the very clear mystery of its being lost and straying, is its flight into the strange in the very midst of the familiar. The photo captures the familiar, and immediately, instantaneously, it strays into strangeness. By capturing its own straying, it leads what it captures astray. The photograph estranges, it estranges us.' 'Ethnographic' photography, traditionally employed to 'document', classify and regulate differences in race, ethnicity and culture from a position of Western normativity, is itself made strange by Mthethwa. Instead of the men in these portraits being the subject of our gaze, the ethnographic tradition itself is pastiched. Mthethwa's subjects seem less surreal because of their collusion in the pleasure of the visual, their active assertion of their identities as visual. These are portraits, not pseudo-scientific tools. In *The Times Higher Education*, Matthew Reisz (2011) states that 'the most interesting [photographs in *Figures & Fictions* are] consciously designed to address, mock and undermine the country's complex and often painful visual heritage'.

In an interview with Mthethwa in 2010, Tamar Garb asked the artist about the incongruity of the setting for these portraits – the outfits the men have on are usually worn for pilgrimages and celebrations within the Shembe religious community, but here Mthethwa 'isolates his subjects from the context of the festival and poses them against the Arcadian landscape of KwaZulu-Natal'. Mthethwa explained this disjuncture:

> For me, by separating them from the ritual and anchoring them in that landscape, I am telling you a story. Photography for me is all about editing. When you edit you retell stories and create new stories. I am not interested in the church per se, or in the ritual; that's why I found the women very boring because they are wearing their traditional stuff and I am so used to traditional hair, traditional skirts. For me the young men were just amazing because of the clash of identities. You know, where does the bowtie come from, why are they wearing the bowtie during the day? Because in my western thinking it's very formal evening attire. Why do their shirts look like women's blouses with frills? It's fascinating.

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Mthethwa's *Brave Ones* is shot in colour and printed in the large format typical of fine art photography, thus adding to the sense of the visual flamboyance of the portraits. But the men's serious expressions seem to want to imply a manly detachment. Mthethwa apparently instructed the men not to smile, and thus the viewer regards them with a mixture of respect and suspicion. As a photographic series they speak of community and togetherness as well as the ways in which small differences can be exaggerated by overarching similarities, trends or historical styles. To isolate one of these men from the group would invest the image (and the man) with different meanings. As it is, the series reverberates with the machismo of male youthfulness in the collective, but this is juxtaposed with signifiers of a feminine kind – those that lend an element of subversion to their performance. This is not the metrosexuality of the upwardly mobile but an altogether more Romantic contestation of the pervasive articulation of black masculinity as uncomplicated by the 'feminine'. From the perspective of youth culture these images show the way in which subculture often pivots on masculine bravado, at least on a visual level.

The emphatic and serious masculinity of the Shembe men photographed by Mthethwa is more obvious when compared to the portrait Sabelo Mlangeni took of *Palisa* (2009). The surreptitious use of black and white film by Mlangeni perhaps serves to reinsert the image into the archive of South African history that, in photographic terms at least, bears little witness to Other or 'interesting'[14] black masculinities. As curator Michael Stevenson (in Davies 2011) notes in *Surviving the lens*, South African photographic history paints an impoverished picture of black culture and is fairly consistent in casting black people as being on the peripheries of white culture. Mlangeni's portraits of cross-dressers in the rural setting of Mpumalanga province, entitled *Country Girls*, were taken over a period of six years. The images offer a counterfoil to the dominant culture of representation around black men, but even where the 'girls' are confident and sass the camera (like *Madlisa*), the images are imbued with a sense of the subject's physical and ideological precarity. Palisa's tenuous balance on shoes that seem to want to give way under her emphasise the imminent danger for transvestites (and Lesbian/Bisexual/Gay/Transgender communities) in South Africa. Much like Zanele Muholi's photographs of black lesbian women (that are included in the *Figures & Fictions* exhibition), Mlangeni's *Country Girls* are acts of activism because in showing themselves to the public they are asserting political agency, their right to be photographed without it leading to violence.

Sontag (2002, 25) aptly moots that the viewer's 'ascription of beauty is never unmixed with moral values', therefore '[a]rguments about beauty … are stocked with questions about the proper relation to the beautiful'. What *The Brave Ones* and the *Country Girls* contribute to the viewer's sense of South African masculinity will depend on their relation to the beautiful. As in the preceding two cases, race plays an indelible role in answering this question. In particular, black masculinity is portrayed as aesthetically brazen and trumped up, performative of masculine authority and power. But the confidence of the brave ones, not unlike that of the country girls, seems under threat of being found out: the brave ones are not men but boys, the country girls not women but men. In looking at the artworks of Mthethwa and Mlangeni the viewer is led to believe that in South Africa we are all filled with a sense of our vulnerability.[15]

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Figure 7: Pieter Hugo, *Pieter and Maryna Vermeulen with Timana Phosiwa* (2006). © Pieter Hugo. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town/Johannesburg and Yossi Milo, New York.

Pieter Hugo could arguably be said to have built his career on creating interesting representations of men. Whether 'documenting' the mysterious *Wild Honey Collectors* of the Techiman District in Ghana (2005) or *The Hyena Men* of Nigeria (2005–2006) or the young Afrikaans farm boys he photographed for the series *Boerseun* (2006), Hugo demonstrates a propensity for highlighting masculinity-as-interesting. The portrait of *Pieter and Maryna Vermeulen with Timana Phosiwa*, taken in 2006 as part of his *Messina/Musina* series, and included in the *Figures & Fictions* exhibition, continues his trend towards invasive portraiture, but this time his lens is turned toward a (white) married couple. In an article in the *Observer*, Sean O'Hagan (2011) reflects that

> it has all the forced formality of a classic family portrait: a middle-aged couple with an infant boy nestled between them. Yet it immediately challenges all our received wisdoms about South Africa. The couple are poor and white; the child is black, neatly dressed, brimming with health. It is both intimate and oddly disturbing, full of odd details: the man's prosthetic leg, the makeshift sofa that looks like a recycled minibus seat.

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Carli Coetzee (2011) observes that '[t]he work forces the viewer to remember South Africa's embodied past; the two ageing and broken white bodies cradling the healthy black infant in a nativity scene that heralds the new order'.

Hugo explains that the Vermeulens are renting a room from the child's father. They live in an area that used to consist of mostly white families dependent on the railroad for an income. Black middle-class families are increasingly moving into the area and many of the poorer white people are moving out or moving into the former servants' quarters of houses, as is the case with the Vermeulens. To complicate matters further, Timana's father was shot in the spine during a heist, and while he was convalescing for a number of months in a hospital in Johannesburg, the Vermeulens took care of the child (Hugo in Lehan 2007). In an interview Mark Gevisser conducted with Tamara Garb (2011), the curator of *Figures & Fictions* says that Hugo's work is significant for her because it allows for 'a fiction of hope', built on the wreckage of the past: 'It allows me to indulge myself in the fantasy of a non-racial world, which because of my own story is vital to me; the ideal that we might see beyond the lens of race'. And yet, it is difficult not to see race as the subject of Hugo's photograph.

'I don't know if the picture is ironic,' says Hugo in an interview with Joanna Lehan (2007), 'but I think there is an irony in the fact that the family wants to have a portrait taken together. To me, almost all problems in life are born out of trauma that in some way or another relates to family relationships.' In response to the question whether Hugo thinks his portraits offer a voice to his subjects, he answers, to his credit, that he does not consider his intentions to be as noble as that: 'It's more curiosity. I feel like an outsider, and I'm fascinated by people and things that are outsiders in some way or another' (ibid.).

Musina is a border town between South Africa and Zimbabwe, a place where people stop to buy supplies on their way north, a town numerous travellers, migrant workers and truckers pass through. Hugo explains his attraction to Musina that, like so many other parts of South Africa, has been afflicted with a name change designed to correct the past[16] and attract new inhabitants: 'It's an isolated community that exists solely because of an economic situation. There's no cultural heritage there, everyone migrated there' (ibid.). He notes that he was interested to know '[w]hat happens when you put people like that together, in the middle of nowhere, on a dry riverbed? What comes to the fore?' (ibid.). As an artist his questions are as aesthetic as they are human. 'On one level, what you find in these family and group portraits,' says Hugo, 'is that an economic homogeneity sets in, there's a forming of new identity, whether you see it in the furniture that's bought from the same stores, or the same art reproductions hung on the walls. To me it's reassuring in a way, but also sad. It's the abandonment of their own culture' (ibid.). Lehan (2007) says of the family portraits: 'They are so nearly straight – like the bright, commercial family portraits that people have taken in downmarket department stores in the US – but there is something off about them'. What makes the image so surprising is that the Vermeulens are so alike. Pieter is a big man, in no way 'womanly' and Maryna is apparently and obviously a woman, but they seem somehow

more the same than we have come to expect from family portraits, as if wear and tear have worn off the veneer of difference. Male or female, when it comes down to it, doesn't really matter.

Sontag uses the misleadingly simplistic concept of the interesting to highlight the often unconscious motive of the photographer to make strange that which might otherwise be perceived as quite ordinary. She explains that photography does not reproduce or copy reality, it recycles it and this process is driven by the desire to find new meanings, with the result that any dualistic discrepancy between beauty/ugliness, truth/lies, good/bad taste is eliminated: 'What makes something interesting is that it can be seen to be like, or analogous to, something else' (Sontag 1990, 363, 364). In this sense the masculine is made like (not unlike) the feminine, and it is here, in the very real experience of the (visual) similarity between a man and woman, that we encounter the interesting anew. At the end of the interview with Garb, Gevisser (2011) asks whether there is any hope for her fantasy that South Africans will be able to look beyond the racial lens. ''No,' she says, citing the difficulty of finding images of mixed groups. But she believes that her exhibition tracks another breath-taking process in South African society today, namely 'the dissolution of the oppositions between masculine and feminine, and the new possibilities that can be imagined there'.[17]

What makes Hugo's photograph (and many others taken in South Africa in the past 15 years) exciting and inventive is its clever, intuitive and complex communication of crises – multiple, overlapping and bastardised crises that are entangled and in competition with our sense of 'health', 'freedom' and 'hope', as if these, too, are hybrid and evolving.[18] Sontag (2002, 24) remarks that '[c]onnoisseurs of the interesting – whose antonym is the boring – appreciate clash, not harmony'. In terms of an impression of the specific reality of the masculine in South Africa, the viewers of *Figures & Fictions* might be forgiven for thinking that what makes it 'interesting' (in Sontag's sense) is 'clash, not harmony', but this would be a mistake as there are rumours of likeness and accord holding this photographic narrative together, and in this sense it is really interesting.

CONCLUSION

Individual crisis has always been a dominant subject in the arts, especially since the emergence of the Byronic hero in the 19th century. But a collective sense of the masculine gender as 'in crisis', confused or diseased has mostly taken the form of a counter-cultural undercurrent or subversive strain that, by its supposed resistance to the norm, in fact serves to both endorse the hegemony of the dominant masculinity and assert that all alternatives, all the interesting roles on the stage of Western history (those of the heroes and anti-heroes), are occupied by men. With the advent of feminism in art history and media studies, theorists of the visual became interested (not for the first time, but in more convincing ways than ever before) in the ways in which this foregrounding of the masculine-as-interesting often occurred at the expense of textured, diverse and believable (or interesting) representations of femininity.

A few decades on one cannot help but wonder whether masculinity-in-crisis is not just another way of making the masculine interesting, of injecting it with a polemic that serves to reposition it as the

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primary subject of concern (whether for scholars and theorists or in the representational cultures of the media and arts). Nevertheless, this set of theories (on masculine crisis) has also prompted researchers to explore crisis in a more expansive way – the crisis of the real, for instance. By considering the way we look at each other we are, perhaps, enabled to recognise ourselves as family in the traits that we share. Why representations of men have occupied me may be precisely because there is a sort of distance from which to analyse and review. With the question of a masculine crisis in mind, for instance, *Figures & Fictions* becomes a viewfinder through which a family portrait can be seen as it may appear to people not included in the family. As such, the exhibition also promised to offer clues about the validity of a broader rhetoric of crisis in South Africa today. The exhibition thus functioned as a witness of South Africa, its health and diss-ease 20 years on, all the more because it was seen by those literally 'outside'.

There are two conclusions to be drawn from this discussion. In the first instance, the article briefly outlined my own research on the subject of masculinity as a means of underscoring the increasing pervasiveness of this subject. My hope is that in giving an account of my research as it changed in tandem with disciplinary developments I have illustrated, albeit in a single instance, that the study of the masculine (like the masculine itself) always happens in context.

According to Sontag (2008, 3), 'being educated by photographs is not like being educated by older, more artisanal images. For one thing, there are a great many more images around, claiming our attention.' The images discussed here are only a taste of the very expansive reach of the photographic, and the sample has been limited to the arts, which significantly narrows the scope. 'In teaching us a new visual code,' adds Sontag, 'photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe'. Looking is also different in different contexts, whether geographical or in terms of different media. I detailed my frustrations and increasing boredom with men's lifestyle magazines at the start of this article – in spite of being filled with images of women, the magazines convey a sense of the masculine for the sake of the masculine, about itself, to itself, in and of itself so contained as to be simulacral. And, of course, without much to differentiate 'South African masculinity' from that found in other places. One could almost say masculinity is especially uninteresting when taken out of context. In the second place, then, in looking at the visualisation of masculinity through photographic art I hope to have demonstrated that the *jouissance* of the masculine – for me, but hopefully also in broader terms – is to be found in the specificity of context. South African masculinities and, in the collective, 'South African masculinity', is contextual, meaning that they not only make more sense in context but are also more interesting when understood in relation to South Africa's socio-political context.

Sontag argues for 'the interesting' as a catch-all replacement for the beautiful, a gimmick to soften an insult – in other words something is not beautiful, intelligent or good, but it is a sort of curiosity. I would argue that the word is more powerful than this. Insofar as it is not used in this more cynical way, the interesting has the subversive potential of pointing to things that move or challenge us, engage our thoughts and show us the world in a way we have not seen it before. It interests us, holds our attention, and therefore it is interesting. I may be inventing the significance of the photographs

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discussed in this article, but I believe they provide clues of a contextual nature that frame the masculine as visually interesting because it tells us something about our context. It is not crisis that makes men interesting, not context in this sense, but reality, humanity – an obvious point, but one I am beginning to understand in visual terms. That capturing 'the interesting' (as Sontag describes it) is its own sort of formula is not under dispute, but the extent to which the photograph captures human experience in all its narrative generosity and particularity is the extent to which it redeems our curiosity in the other – my curiosity, for instance, in the masculine.

ENDNOTES

1 In an essay written in 2002, Susan Sontag articulates her belief in the devaluation of beauty as a universal, transient ideal. She pins this depreciation on a relativistic insistence on taste and laments the contemporary bias against the beautiful, not for its porous ineffability but for 'excluding too much' (ibid, 23). This aesthetic shift implied a linguistic turn of sorts: 'Our appreciations, it was felt, could be so much more inclusive if we said that something, instead of being beautiful, was "interesting"' (ibid.). Sontag couples the beautiful and interesting with the feminine and masculine respectively. She considers the 'problem' of the beautiful as its easy reduction to the decorative, passive and inconsequential – the extent to which beauty is coupled with the eternal feminine is the extent to which it is not taken seriously. So while the beautiful may refer to the sublime, 'the interesting' is about the real. But, in a poetic inversion, 'the true modern primitivism is not to regard the image as a real thing: photographic images are hardly that real. Instead reality has come to seem more and more like what we are shown by cameras.' We feel like we are images 'and are made real by photographs' (Sontag 1999, 84).

2 'Art' as opposed to 'documentation' is a dichotomy increasingly being undermined and eroded by current photographic practice and discourse worldwide, but this erosion is amplified in post-apartheid South Africa by the migration of many former 'photojournalists' into more lyrical or 'artistic' modes of representation after apartheid.

3 Underlying this story as a case study is the added narrative thread of the interdisciplinary appropriation of certain discourses on masculinity (such as 'crisis'), sometimes in fairly blunt or reductive terms.

4 See Viljoen (2006).

5 Soft-porn magazines such as *Scope* and later *Loslyf* as well as women's lifestyle magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* (and even the more conservative *Sarie* and *Fairlady*), had long entrenched the idealising optic by which women were visually represented, but the regime of the photographically perfected male body was only introduced into mainstream South African visual culture by men's lifestyle magazines.

6 Thus *Men's Health*, the men's magazine with consistently the highest circulation figures, has a bare-chested man on the cover of each issue, and the gaze of the male viewer is not met by that of a sultry, pouting woman but by a perfectly photo-shopped, game and glamorous man.

7 Walker localised the interests of sociologists, psychologists and gender theorists elsewhere in what Stephen Frosh, Ann Phoenix and Rob Pattman (2002, 1) describe as 'challenges to the dominance of the forms of rationality with which masculinity has been identified, at least in the West'.

8 See, for instance, Viljoen (2008, 2011, 2012).

9 This quote is taken from the abstract for the conference held 24–25 June 2011 that accompanied

the exhibition and included, among others, guest-speakers Annie Coombes, Achille Mbembe, Jo Ractliffe and Faisal abdu'allah. (See *Figures & Fictions: The Ethics and Poetics of Photographic Depictions of People* 2011.)

10 In 1987, David Goldblatt donated 120 of his best prints to the Victoria & Albert thinking they would be safer there than in South Africa where draconian policing and censorship (what Garb terms the 'iconophobia' of the apartheid government) were in effect. Garb discovered Goldblatt's images at the Victoria & Albert 20 years later, which prompted her to start a conversation with the museum's senior photographic curator, Martin Barnes, about Goldblatt – a conversation that eventually led to the *Figures & Fictions* exhibition (see Gevisser 2011).

11 The exhibition comprised photographs arranged by artists, many of which belonged to larger photo-essays for which the artists have become known (at least in South Africa). The exhibition was also accessible via a digital photo book from MAPP that showcases the art and artists as well as an extensive printed catalogue.

12 Eid al-Fitr is a day of festive celebration that marks the end of the Ramadan fast for Muslims worldwide. On the night before Eid preparations are made for the community (rich and poor) to come together and share a meal. The Essop brothers took the photographs around 3am and photographed only the pots of food cooking on the fires, not the people who are usually gathered around the pots *(Figures & Fictions: Hasan and Husain Essop Vimeo 2011)*.

13 In this way the photographers differentiate their image from those typically found in popular media. Where men's magazines, for example, offer a mirror image of masculinity without much complexity, the Essops trouble their 'look' back at themselves through the literal lens – a process repeated by their appearance as twins.

14 Here the term 'interesting' is derogatory in its catch-all relegation of that which is strange rather than 'beautiful': 'One calls something interesting precisely so as not to have to commit to a judgement of beauty (or of goodness)' (Sontag 2002, 24).

15 The visual tension between confidence and precarious vulnerability is also evident in the photographs taken by women of women, such as those of Jodi Bieber that appear in *Figures & Fictions*. Bieber's series of images, entitled *Real Beauty* (2008), for instance addresses the misapprehension of the feminine through the female body. The glorious spectacle of the women photographed by Bieber in their underwear offers a similar kind of visual bravado to that evident in Zwelethu Mthethwa's *The Brave Ones* and Sabelo Mlangeni's *Country Girls*. The ways in which these images echo one another is important to consider, since my selection of photographs underplays the possibility of conversations between male and female photographers and subjects – a real shortcoming given the spirit of the *Figures & Fictions* project.

16 'Correcting' the past in this instance presumably means addressing imbalances in the socio-economic and racial constitution of the community, as well as the erroneous spelling of the name (*Messina*) under apartheid.

17 After a pause she adds: 'It's still as if you can't do that with race' (Garb in Gevisser 2011).

18 'And yet, in their attempt to make sense of post-apartheid society and devise new approaches to its complexities, the dynamism and urgency of these photographers has caught worldwide attention, and they are now being recognised as some of the most *exciting and inventive* artists at work' (Davies 2011, emphasis added).

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