

trauma of a lived experience. As Them-binkosi explains: ‘growing up, the tavern was a space filled with activities and fun things to do. We enjoyed playing pool with my friends and some patrons. But there were also experiences of stabbings and even dead bodies being loaded into an emergency van. After all patrons had gone, we are left to scrape off marks left on the floors and walls of our home. We find our way to deal with the traumatic experiences and energies that are engraved in the fabric of our home.’

Them-binkosi utilises visual metaphors in documenting his inner conflict and self-counselling. He re-lives his daily routine of scraping the walls, residues of complex spirits and unwelcomed energies left by patrons in the shebeen. Through treatment of his photographs, he presents a dialogue with this site as he strives to transform it into a site of healing and solace. He places himself in awkward positions in the frame as a way of expressing discomfort while acknowledging and paying homage to the real soul of this family home.

Them-binkosi presents to us his photography as a medium of self-transformation. He attempts to bring us into his own intimate psychological space to experience what is not visible to the many who visit his home each day for pleasure, to de-stress, for company, to drown sorrows and some to act out their angers and frustrations. All these diverse energies that are left and dumped in his home, become a burden that he attempts to erase physically, spiritually and mentally.

This compelling and *hard* visual story not only belongs to Them-binkosi, it is attached to the Black experience in these communities in the margins of our society. A democratic South Africa with its progressive constitution and government policies, does not seem to bring much needed social change that begins to, in totality, rid itself of residues from the Apartheid South Africa. Them-binkosi’s lived experiences are not different to the black youth of 60 years ago. Many communities and families are still forced to experience life in a similar way. Violence lives within the violated traumatised society that has never as yet discovered healing.

The current impact of Covid-19 globally has also found its space at Them-binkosi’s site. Their livelihood has become stagnant due to ‘social distancing’ guidelines as well as lockdown regulations that prohibit sale of alcohol across the country. The traffic of patrons seeking a daily fix of a beer, friendly chat, solitude, robust political conversation and release of tension have become a strange occurrence. He speaks of this as a much needed but strange break in his life. The walls and floors of his dear home are on a break. Maybe this is also a strange opportune break in our lives to revisit and be honest with our trauma as a society. A need to redefine a new normal in the post-Covid-19 world where communities claim back their dignity and begin to evolve into a new society with less occurrences of violations in all its forms. *Slaghu* is a symbol of a society that is continually in conflict with itself, a restrained society that recognises the need for urgent transformation.

— Text by Lekgetho Makola

All the images from the series *Slaghu*
© Them-binkosi Hlatshwayo, courtesy
of the artist

THEMBINKOSI HLATSHWAYO is a photographer based in Johannesburg, making work that looks at the silent traumas of growing up in a shebeen. In 2018, Hlatshwayo successfully completed the year-long Advanced Programme in Photography at Market Photo Workshop. He is the recipient of the Gisèle Wulfsohn Mentorship in Photography (2019) and one of the shortlisted artists of the CAP Prize (2019). His work titled *Betterment Promised* was part of a group exhibition at Photo Fest, Thokoza and exhibited at Art Africa Fair, Capetown (2017).

LEKGETHO MAKOLA is an artist, filmmaker and head of Market Photo Workshop, Johannesburg. He holds an MFA from Howard University, USA and has worked for leading art institutions such as the Durban Art Gallery, the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Robben Island Museum and the Market Photo Workshop as Manager for Programmes and Projects 2013–2016.

















Afterlife

Photography, for Vasantha Yoganathan, is not about truth or falsehood but what one as an artist wishes to create. Over the last eight years Yoganathan, a French national of French and Sri Lankan descent, has been travelling India, Nepal and Sri Lanka extensively for what is becoming a seven-volume book project called *A Myth of Two Souls*, published by Chose Commune, the publishing house Yoganathan founded with Cécile Poimboeuf-Koizumi. Each of the seven books, five of which have been published between 2016 and 2019, comprises a modern, predominantly photographic *retelling* of a 'kanda' (book) from the *Ramayana*, a classic Sanskrit epic first compiled and put to paper by the poet Valmiki in the third century BCE. *Afterlife*, the sixth book in Yoganathan's series, will be published in 2020 while *Amma*, the seventh and final book is scheduled for publication in 2021.

Although there have been hundreds of versions, adaptations and translations of the *Ramayana*, Yoganathan's is the first photographic version. According to a statement by the artist, *A Myth of Two Souls* draws inspiration from imagery associated

with the *Ramayana* and its pervasiveness in everyday Indian life. The story might be ancient but still has things to say about modern India, in which imagery depicting scenes from the epic are widespread. Yoganathan's photographic journey, for which he has traveled thousands of miles, amounts to a type of time travelling as well, connecting the stories and images evoking scenes and episodes from the time of the epic's inception to the present. For Yoganathan it was important to discover how to photograph an epic story and an epic journey from northern to southern India that is rooted in storytelling as much as it is tied to the land. For *A Myth of Two Souls* he blends photographs in a more or less documentary mode with staged scenes in which people freely interpret scenes and their favorite characters from the *Ramayana* upon Yoganathan's request. For some people this meant they could enter a fictional space and play roles that in their daily lives would be impossible because of social or legal restrictions.

Photographically there's also a lot of room for play in the project and the photographs themselves travel through

time as well. There are features disclosing the contemporaneity of the images, such as the presence of modern means of transportation or modern ways of dressing, but in general the photographs are breathing a sort of atmospheric ethereality and monumentality that pervade many great nineteenth-century photographs. Yoganathan also taps into the old tradition of hand-painted photography, having shared another part of his authorship besides the role-playing subjects with one of the few remaining craftsmen in the field, allowing him to colour the photographs the way he likes yet not straying too far from visual reality. While traditionally reserved for wealthy patrons from the higher castes, this time the hand-colouring encompassed people from all social strata. Furthermore, Yoganathan includes photo collages in the series.

Despite the pictorial variety the series is remarkably coherent. *Afterlife* is different. It departs from the lightness of the first five books in that its images have been shot during nighttime (the opening image shows a clock pointing at one minute past midnight) and are situated against black

backgrounds. Visually it deviates from the earlier work through close-up portraiture and wilder cut-ups. The immersive imagery is sparsely interrupted by short lines such as *Walk with me as we awaken the dead. / Walk with me as we disappear into darkness. / We shall lock our lips, we shall lock our thighs*. The imagery for *Afterlife* was shot by Yogananthan during several festivals devoted to the *Ramayana*, in the north as well in India's south and Sri Lanka, celebrating the victory of good over evil. By shooting among the people dressing and face-painting themselves as characters from the epic (blue is the colour of the skins of Gods, for example, and black for the soldiers), the images came out differently from the register of the earlier chapters. Among the sometimes thousands

of people Yogananthan didn't quite know where to position himself as a photographer. By using 35 mm instead of his usual medium-format camera he allowed himself more freedom to move but also to give up control. As such, *Afterlife* became a transition from one world to the next also visually, meandering trance-like in the great unknown, where celebration alternates with the sense of loss and mourning and where the exuberant yet focused pictures become metaphors for feelings.

I have never read any of the verbal renderings of the *Ramayana* and if I ever get around to doing so it might prove impossible not to think about Yogananthan's own epic photographic translation.

— Text by Taco Hidde Bakker

All images from the series *Afterlife* © Vasantha Yogananthan, courtesy of the artist

VASANTHA YOGANANTHAN is a photographer working around the genres of portrait, still life and landscape. He has received several awards, including the Prix Levallois (2016) and an ICP Infinity Award as Emerging Photographer of the Year (2017). In 2018 and 2019 he was awarded the Prix Camera Clara and the Rencontres d'Arles Photo-Text Book Award. Yogananthan's work is included in private and public collections, including the V&A, Musée de l'Élysée, Foam Museum and the Musée Français de la Photographie.

TACO HIDDE BAKKER is a writer, translator and researcher based in Amsterdam. In 2007 he graduated in MA Photographic Studies at Leiden University and since publishes on photography and visual arts for a variety of magazines, art venues and artists. Additionally he is editor at EXTRA, a Dutch-language biannual magazine on photography published by FotoMuseum Antwerp and Fw:Books.