Wars incarnated

Review – **The Lost Men**
By Yvette Greslé
Cue Guest Writer

The Lost Men, a site–specific memorial installation, by South African artist Paul Emmanuel, is an evocative piece of work. It speaks of difficult issues: masculinity, war, mortality, loss, emotional and physical pain and memory.

Positioned on Monument Hill, *The Lost Men* is composed of 21, 1 x 2 metre, voile and silk, ink–jet printed photographs installed in three rows on a structure that resembles a washing line. The photographs, taken by photographer Andrew Meintjes, are of Emmanuel himself who stripped naked, shaved off his body hair, and imprinted his flesh with the names of actual Xhosa, British and Boer soldiers who died in battle in the Grahamstown area. Emmanuel selected parts of his body to be imprinted using a technique of blind embossing; an old serif font typeface was set in lead and used to make the imprint. Names of soldiers, sourced from archives, were, for instance, printed above the ears, at the back of the thighs and on the chest.

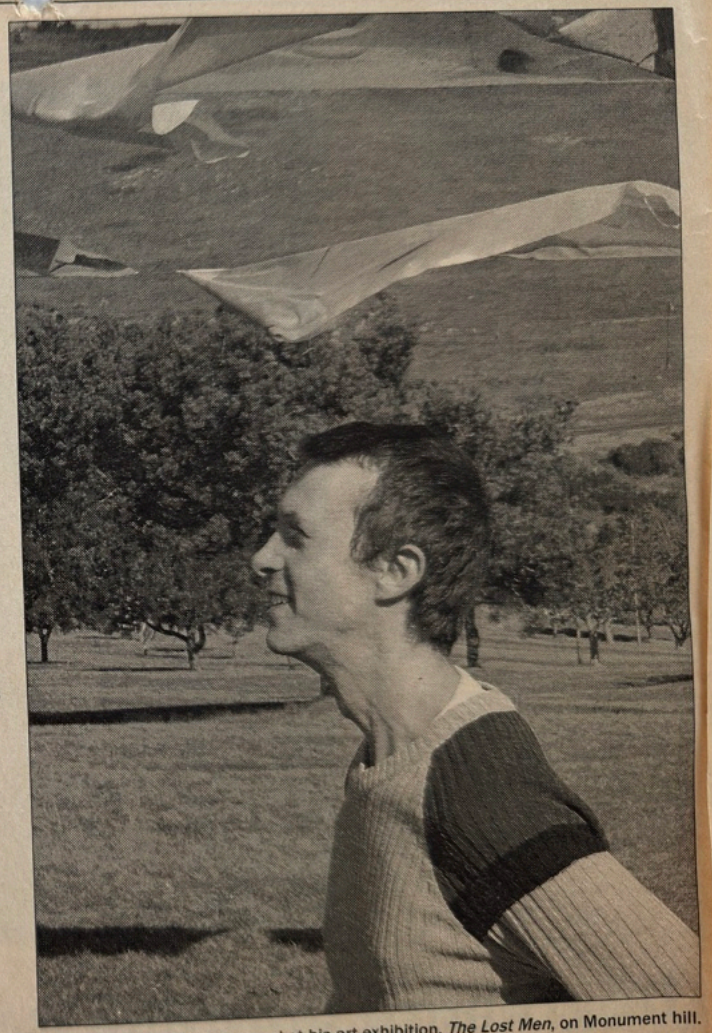
Each photograph crops the artist's body focusing on its most vulnerable parts, backs of legs, the feet, the chest and the face. These kinds of representations suggest historical conceptions of photography as an objective tool with which to document and record "the truth". For instance, in the nineteenth century, photography was appropriated by medical and forensic science, by the police and the military and by disciplines such as anthropology, often embedded within colonialist narratives. Emmanuel draws attention to the vulnerability of subjects held up to the controlling, dehumanising, purportedly objective glare of the scientific lens. But, at the same time, he destabilises this convention through photographs that are simultaneously quite beautiful and fragile in their aesthetic. The translucent voile and silk fabric engage in very sensitive ways with the surrounding landscape. Apart from the visually exciting interplay between artwork and landscape, light and weather conditions, the work enters into complex dialogues with the 1820 Settlers Monument, a bronze sculpture of a settler family positioned nearby, and Grahamstown itself. From the site, the viewer is able to survey the town and is asked to consider its beginnings within the context of the Xhosa, Boer and British conflicts over land, that dominate the histories of the Eastern Cape.

The Monument and the sculpture of the settler family speak of the dominant, colonialist, Christian, heterosexual and patriarchal contexts from which they emerge. Within these contexts, masculinity was defined in terms of a prescribed relationship with God, country and family, and male identities and sexual preferences that dared to transgress the canon, were considered to be psychological, social and spiritual aberrations. Both Monument and sculpture impose and fix a way of remembering that does not allow for any ambiguity or any engagement with the devastating, private experiences and consequences of war, death and loss. Emmanuel's memorial, on the other hand, does.

In *The Lost Men* the artist makes himself extraordinarily vulnerable, allowing intensely personal experiences and emotions to intersect with the public and with public space. In a strikingly physical and intimate way, the artist uses his body as a vehicle through which to explore the public and private experience of masculinity and war. The work resonates powerfully with contemporary battles, most notably those between Iraq and North America, and with Emmanuel's own experiences of masculinity.

The Lost Men is a carefully considered and thought–provoking exhibition and is definitely recommended viewing.

***The Lost Men* can be viewed on Monument hill from 10.00 to 16.30. Walkabouts by the artist daily at 10.00.**



Paul Emmanuel at his art exhibition, *The Lost Men*, on Monument hill.
pic: Tessa Anne Comrie/*Cue* photographer