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Social Skin

Initiation through the bodily transformation of four South African women

An exploration using documentary photography

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Proposal

This dissertation sets out to explore female initiation through documentary photography. My focus is on the rites of passage of four women from diverse South African sub-cultures. In each case, there is a process of transformation involving mapping the edges of the body – hair, teeth or skin. I will analyse how, in all four situations, ritualised body markings with varying degrees of permanence become the canvas for identity formation. The photographic images of the initiations are the platform for discussion of the representation of private moments, and inform the basis for posing a number of ethical and aesthetic questions around the signification of the female body within contemporary visual practice.

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Introduction

Fashion, violence, status, sex, drugs and gangsterism mark some of the contemporary ritual initiations, which alongside arcane and deeply religious traditional cultural ceremonies, signify transitions into womanhood. In this essay, I discuss ritual both as a reflection of society's superstructures, and as the result of the breakdown of those superstructures. I suggest the ritual process can sometimes be situated between those two apparent poles. A ritual can reflect orthodoxy within a religious subculture but at the same time be in conflict with the jural system of the state, for example with female circumcision.

David Cohen, editor of *The Circle of Life*, comments that 'Western cultures have largely abandoned the initiation rites that honour the adolescent transition' (1991: 45). This paper suggests on the contrary, that many of these rites are still very much in evidence, and that in addition, young people are acting as cultural entrepreneurs and bricoleurs of a new hybrid culture as a substitute for, or in addition to, conventional rituals of transition. For many, the practice of body piercing and tattooing represents a need for a rite of passage, to establish the transition from adolescent to adult. It incorporates traditions and practises from ancient cultures assimilated into a Western culture. Many of the subjects, although not necessarily conscious of it themselves, appear to have a need to explore, in an urban secular context, the ancient tribal rituals which use ritualised pain to conquer the physical body and explore the power of the mind, thereby providing a rite of passage in opposition to traditional conventions of mainstream religion. This is the 'modern primitivism' often referred to in texts on the subject.

Adolescence is synonymous with change, shifting boundaries and phases of transition, a period of risk-taking as well as the potential flourishing of growth and maturity. Teenage girls are often spirited and optimistic about their

future, but many do not survive the pressures of female adolescence, emerging as adults with damaged states of self-confidence and low expectations.

Processes of initiation, and rites of passage are inherently ambiguous. On the one hand they provide the gift of the boundaries on which we depend: what Charles Taylor refers to as 'horizons of significance' (1991: 39-40). These events, markers in one's life, provide the boundaries wherein we define ourselves. While providing a sense of self, they may be potentially abusive in the constraints on individuality or physical being.

Some rituals of transformation are chosen, while others are imposed, and still others are somewhere in between, with varying degrees of obligation. I focus on the transformation of the body within these rituals. Some transformations of the body are reversible, such as the shaving of hair or painting the skin. Others are irreversible, like the extraction of front teeth. Some of the rituals which adolescents create for themselves require the performance of dangerous or life-threatening actions. Rituals involving the body can be an expression of a duality: empowerment, the feeling of being special and privileged, but often with the potential for physical or emotional scarring. The transformation may involve a test of courage or endurance, as in the case of Ntombovuyo and Noluthando, who had to carry extremely heavy bundles of wood and water, having to walk great distances to obtain it.

My photographs highlight issues around the coming of age, the rites of passage, and the rituals and symbols of growing up in South Africa in the twenty-first century – a period characterised by tensions between local ethnic identities, a South African national identity, and a cultural homogenisation consequent on the forces of globalisation. In

Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures, R. Ferguson describes how bringing marginalised people into representation in ways which explore their multifaceted experience is crucial in revising existing stereotypes and placing alternative viewpoints in a public arena (1990: 9).

Much contemporary theory assumes that the body is the first model of one's sense of self. It is the key site and reference point with which one first experiences the world. The physical body is a central site of cultural identity. 'What makes the marking of the skin different from marking paper, what seems in fact to make it the origin or model of the marking of paper, is its reference to time. The marked skin means memory, means never being able or willing to forget' (Connors 2002: 9). Some traditional modes of cultural inscription and identity formation are scarification (*Ukuchaziwa*) of some Bhabha; the removal of a finger digit (*Ingqithi*); genital manipulation (a Southern Sotho custom to stretch the labia); female circumcision (practiced by some South African communities and until the 1950s by Muslim South Africans); the covering of the hair with a wig (*shaitel*) by some orthodox Jewish married women. Body piercing, tooth extraction, tattooing, to mention a few, are all less conventional physical signs of a woman's cultural and social identity, and which situate her within the styles of her particular generation.

In each situation, these women are passing through a transitional phase in their lives, a liminal phase which takes them into adulthood, and involves the transformation to varying degrees of permanence of an aspect of their physical body. Each individual's process is infused with both chosen and imposed consequences, each with very different historical and social contexts. Their common link is that they are people conventionally seen as being on the margins of the mainstream.

My work questions social and cultural constructs of 'normality' and, by focusing on the practices of marginalised communities, questions dominant cultural conventions of female identity, beauty and sexuality. Within visual media, if the private or unsaid of female experience is said, it is seen as subversive. By focusing on four female initiations, my intention is to develop a specific yet complex comparison of different types of initiations. Embedded within the communities I have photographed are unique perceptions of beauty, each of which differs from mainstream notions. My intention is not to exoticise any particular community, but to explore some sub-cultures of female youth in South Africa, and to unfold how these women position themselves in post-Apartheid South Africa.

An important component of the work is the relationship of the subject to the documentary process. I hope both to raise questions and also provide some answers concerning how the means of signification functions for the subjects. As the photographer of their transformation process, I am positioned as an outsider in their lives. As a means of acknowledging this, I include a series of photographs taken or directed by the women themselves, alongside my own. In doing so, my intention is to create a visual dialogue with the subjects, effectively offering them the opportunity to reply to my images with their own. This is not meant as a patronising gesture of political correctness, but as a means of attaining a more complete narrative while at the same time exploring complexities inherent in the play between 'inside' and 'outside' perspectives. My editing of their self-portraits positions me as a curator in this facet of the project.

Inevitably, the content of my images and those of my subjects differ – not only in terms of the construction of the frame, but also in terms of what each of the subjects chooses to project and reveal publicly about herself. One

would assume the 'insider's' insight into the nuances of her life would necessarily be more revealing. However, while this is true for Tanya (a person with no experience with a camera) whose photographs, are playful, raw, uninhibited and exciting, Sarah (someone who is quite familiar with a camera and photographs) has presented a largely posed set of pictures, which are self-consciously constructed and framed.

The question of whether photography violates ritual is asked of the women themselves. In general it was felt that the presence of the camera lent significance to the ritual and did not detract from its meaning. However, the father of one Xhosa initiate questioned whether I should be allowed to enter the hut where the girls were in seclusion. He feared the ancestors might not approve of the presence of an outsider. The consensus of the Chiefs and elders was that it would in fact not be a problem for me to enter the hut. Direct family of the initiates are not allowed to enter into their space, although their friends and a few women appeared to wander in and out without any problem.

Similarly with the Jewish family there were restrictions placed on my access to some aspects of the rituals involving the wedding. When a Jewish woman gets married, a few days prior to the wedding she is required to have a ritual bath, called a *mikvah*. I thought it would make a beautiful photograph, of the bride to be, submerged in the deep water of the bath (*mikvah*), with just her hair floating on the surface of the water. The viewer would not be exposed to her nakedness because she would be totally submerged, vertically, in the deep bath. I thought it would be particularly appropriate for my focus on the transformation of the hair, in this story. However the mother of the bride refused me permission to do this, thereby suggesting her sense of the photograph as a potential violation of the sanctity of the ritual in the *mikvah*.

My study focuses on three types of initiation:

- the clearly-defined religious and spiritual initiation which has been prescribed across generations in social groups (for example, Xhosa *Intonjane* and a Hasidic Jewish Brides ritual);
- initiation which is practiced across generations but does not contain spiritual or religious doctrine (for example, the practice of extracting healthy front teeth),
- sub-cultural styles and rituals of rebellion created by adolescents themselves, with varying functions:
 - a) in opposition to pre-adolescent socialization, to the older generation or to the conventions of the mainstream;
 - b) as a means of self-definition suggesting graduation from a younger group (for example by doing something dangerous);
 - c) as a means to distinguish themselves from other adolescent groups.

Some initiations combine two or three of the above (for example, the practice of body piercing and tattooing in a western context). In each situation the woman positions herself as a bearer of the cultural practice of her community, so that the stereotypical juxtaposition of femininity with nature, and masculinity with culture is subverted.

In this project, the rites of passage of four South African women are used to explore various aesthetic and ethical issues relating to the practice of contemporary documentary photography. The link between the four initiations is the

transformation of the body, where the body becomes a vehicle for identity formation and a symbol of sexual maturity. I am interested in how ritual operates as a frame in which people identify themselves, especially where the body becomes the canvas on which women create their 'social skin' to set themselves apart from general society. This body marking becomes a means of recognising others who subscribe to a similar identity within the cultural practice of a social group. By extracting their front teeth, by piercing or tattooing the skin or by wearing a wig or head covering, these women externalise a central aspect of themselves, and in so doing, publicly display the signification of their very different identities.

I am present during some of the most intimate moments in the lives of the women I photograph. My intention is to represent the nuances, cross-influences, adherence to tradition and subversion of tradition in diverse female experience, rejecting the colonialist ethnographic approach of many nineteenth and twentieth century photographer-anthropologists. The objectification of the colonised 'other', evident in tourist coffee table books, tends to situate people as decorative objects with a superficial, one-dimensional fixed identity. I try to avoid this trap. For instance, I take care to represent Noluthando not only as defined in a rural African context, but also as she connects to the impact of globalisation: her sister eating a burger at McDonalds in Adderley Street, Cape Town. Although this process informed my approach, the resulting photographs did not always fit within the main narrative, and were sometimes edited out of the primary series of images. Throughout, the challenge for me has been to subvert the ethnographic approach and to represent the most intimate stories in a way that would be respectful of the subjects, and to a degree consultative, without foregoing my aesthetic concerns as a photographer.



Ntombozuko Thamele in Adderley Street, 2002.

My work attempts to address the body as 'signifier of self-perception and self-deception, and as fetish object' (Meskimmon 1996: 21). Griselda Pollock describes the concept of fetishism as a process in which the individual (or community), invests an imagined power in the 'gaze'. Scopophilia – the love of looking, at the core of fetishism – imbues objects (or in this case parts of the body) with a beauty and power, which can become obsessive and sexualised in and of itself (1988: 148). My work explores how vulnerability and empowerment, privacy and exhibitionism, confinement and freedom, simultaneously resonate and contradict each other. This is invoked through shifting associations with hair, teeth and skin. These interior and exterior bodily surfaces and spaces put the female body in a social and personal context.

While the content of each initiation is very different, I explore the congruencies in each. The arrangement of the photographs as one body of work encourages the viewer to acknowledge the links and commonalities across cultural

boundaries. Homi Bhabha suggests that with colonial and postcolonial discourse as a theoretical and cultural intervention in our contemporary debates, the need to contest singularities of difference and to articulate diverse 'subjects' of differentiation is important (Bhabha 2001). Here Bhabha suggests that people everywhere are 'multidimensional'. They are not fixed as a singular instantiation of the 'other', but their identities consist in fluid and hybrid combinations of cultural practices. Indeed, my first meeting with Ntombovuyo Mtengwane illustrated the point: it took place at dusk, mid-winter in a dark thatch-and-mud hut in deep rural Transkei. Lit only by flickering candle light, she stood in a line with five other woman initiates (*Intonjane*) to meet us (the two chiefs of the community, my friend Barry Tyson and myself. Anele Mafika, the traditional healer, who accompanied me from Cape Town, was not permitted in the hut because of his particular status as healer). The *Intonjane* were covered with rough blankets and each covered her shaven head with a black scarf. Within minutes of our meeting, Ntombovuyo's cell phone, which was concealed under her blanket, rang. She answered a call from her boyfriend in Cape Town.

With regard to each of the four essays, the photographs are the primary element, and are able to be read in isolation, but I use the text as an integral part of each essay. It serves both to contextualize each image, as well as quote the individuals around which each story revolves. I use the nuances of their own colloquial language to communicate beyond the visual image. I intend my documentary to be both a window into the world of a predominantly sub-adult culture and a subjective view into unexplored aspects of female experience in South African society – from rural initiate to urban raver.



Ntombovuyo Mtengwane and her sisters during their Intonjane (initiation), Tsolo, Transkei, 2002.



Ntombovuyo Mtengwane on her cell phone, Tsolo, Transkei, 2002.

Photographic representation of the body in an art historical context



Social skin and the representation of the Female Body

The late 17th century ushered in the age of Enlightenment, with its fascination with the markings of the skin, the medical dissecting of the human body, and the dangerous presumptions of the 'science' of physiognomy: the 'science' of judging character using a person's facial features or expression as its basis. The period was associated with the bizarre idea of the possibility of a construction of a set of guidelines of ethical conventions for beauty or ugliness. The simultaneous extrapolations included: the body surface as a reflection of intellectual capacity, innate social class and physical health. This forms a historical background to the preoccupation with the body surface, enmeshed with a peculiar understanding of psychology and illness of the period. The body was 'a site for the display of purity and pollution. As a complexly bordered zone, it was amalgamated from a nexus of physiological and psychological processes' (Stafford 1993: 16). A series of superficial preoccupations with disease and irregularities of the surface carried its opposite obsession in the idealistic notions of the human body: 'dermatological aesthetics transfigured the squamose and scurfy natural body into an icon unlike anything seen in ordinary life' (Stafford 1993: 298). The intention, during this period was to create certainty in an era of uncertainty, and to reveal finite identities with 'accurate scientific' proof. Stafford refers to an 'enlightenment aesthetic of longing'...

Most important, on metaphorized procedures hinged the access to an all-important unseen realm. There were proper and improper rituals for scanning, touching, cutting, deforming, abstracting, generating, conceiving, marking, staining, enlarging, reducing, imaging and sensing. Constituting visual styles or manners of behaviour, these procedures provided right or wrong

sensory and intellectual strategies for 'opening' recalcitrant materials and otherwise impenetrable substances. Normal or abnormal processes and modes for proceeding could assure one, or not, of getting a glimpse into secretive physiognomies. Body tropes thus provided critical clues for how insight might be gained into the interior of any concealed territory. This held equally for the realm of the fine arts or that of the material sciences. (1993: 19)

The body was used as a metaphor for the exposure of hidden human experience (and individual motivation for particular behaviour). Cultural theorist Steven Connors' interest in the surface of the body as signifier of the psyche, or the inner life, is completely distinct from Enlightenment presumptions. Some of his assertions, however, can be seen to correspond with notions of the exterior reflecting interior struggles, or, in other words, the external marking of the skin reflecting the psyche (2002: 2).

In his paper entitled *A Skin That Walks*, Connor examines Anzieu's study of Freud, along with Montagu's study of the skin and its relationship to the ego: 'the psychosomatic approach to the study of skin may be regarded as centrifugal; that is, it proceeds from the mind outwards to the skin' (2002: 2). Anzieu, like Montagu, recommends the opposite approach to the problem, proceeding from the skin to the mind: what he called the 'centripetal approach'. In simple terms, the psychosomatic centrifugal approach (moving outwards from the centre), is the understanding that an emotional condition can cause a physical bodily effect, such as the desire to pierce one's body in order to deal with psychological issues of control over one's body, or eczema as the result of severe stress due to a nervous condition. The centripetal approach (moving towards the centre), suggests that the signs or experience of one's skin gives rise to and creates the ego and

sense of self. I would suggest there is merit in both approaches, that the interaction of the skin and ego is in constant motion, inwards and outwards, reshaping and informing each other continuously. Connor goes on to list Anzieu's (Ibid) nine psychological functions of the skin: supporting, containing, shielding, individuating, connecting, sexualizing, recharging, signifying, assaulting – destroying.

Supporting: 'In the same way that the skin functions as a support for the skeleton and its muscles, the Skin Ego fulfills a function of maintaining the psyche' (Anzieu 1989: 98). Individuating: 'In a similar fashion, the Skin Ego performs a function of individuating the Self, thus giving the Self a sense of its own uniqueness (Anzieu 1989: 103). Signifying: 'The Skin Ego fulfills a function of registering tactile sensory traces... Socially an individual's membership of a social group is shown by incisions, scarifications, skin painting, tattooing, by his make-up and hairstyle, and by his clothes, which are another aspect of the same thing. The Skin Ego is the original parchment which preserves, like a palimpsest, the erased, scratched-out, written-over first outlines of an "original" pre-verbal writing made up of traces upon the skin' (Anzieu 1989: 105). Assaulting, Destroying: '[T]ransported to the periphery of the Self, these parts [anger, violence, self-destructiveness emanating from the id] have become encysted in the surface layer which is the Skin Ego, where they cut into its continuity, destroy its cohesiveness and impair its function by reversing the goals of those functions. The imaginary skin which covers the Ego thus becomes a poisoned tunic, suffocating, burning, disintegrating. We might therefore speak in this case of a toxic function of the Skin Ego' (Anzieu 1989: 108).

In contrast to Anzieu's idea of the toxic function of the Skin Ego current psychoanalytic theory postulates a normalising function to self-mutilation and scarring of the skin. Psychic responses to trauma can leave individuals de-sensitised and out of touch with their bodies. Yet a sense of embodiment, or having a skin, is crucial in providing a sense of self definition and containment. Mutilation may, in these cases, assist ego integration by giving the traumatised individual some sense of control, by channeling painful and overwhelming feelings. The sense of feeling as though one is out of touch with one's body, or has no skin, is about the need for containment and definition, provided by the boundaries of identity at the core of interaction: 'The skin is the sign of our transformability, our ability to become other, and yet to persist and survive in that becoming other. This is why the gift of skin, to furnish disguise or transformation, is also so often a means of preservation.' (Connor 2002: 9) In Connor's view, the skin 'has come to mean the body itself; it has become the definite article, the 'the' of the body':

The skin always takes the body with it. The skin is, so to speak, the body's face, the face of its bodiliness. The skinned body is formless, faceless, its face having been taken off with its skin. Where a leg, or a liver or a heart remain what they are once removed from the body, and may be imagined as continuing to function apart from the body which has formed them, the skin itself is no longer a skin once it is detached. By being peeled away from the body, it has ceased to be itself. The skin cannot easily be thought of as a part of the body because, despite the fact that it has its obvious, specialised functions, its principal function is to manifest the complex, co-operative, partitioned wholeness of the body. (5)

Through the process of piercing, extracting, shaving, painting, and covering, the body becomes re-perceived and negotiated through new points and planes of significance which are in turn imbued with new meaning and resonate with history:

We invent with our bodies, and by so doing, reinvent our bodies. Unlike other animals, we have a relation to our bodies, a relation that we invent, and a relation that is our bodies. Our bodies are the kind that are always in question, transition, and are always work in progress. For the Quakers and Camisards and Shakers and other ecstatic sects of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the body is taken to be, lived as if already raised, already glorified, perfected. We have been made accustomed to think the opposite, that the body is subject to discursive regulation. Of course, a languaged body is subjected to the orders of language. A languaged body can be regimented, abjected, insulted by language. (Connor 2002: 5)

Among the women I worked with, the notion of the body as a work in progress was most clearly expressed by Narissa and the sub-culture she is part of, where piercing and tattooing are generally done in stages. The process of piercing often begins with a relatively 'tame' piercing and becomes progressively more radical, with various forms of genital piercing. Adherents also explicitly articulate the idea of piercing their bodies as experimentation, both visually and sexually. Some devotees of tattooing eventually cover large areas of their bodies, usually over a long period. Tattoos, whether large or small, are clear examples of using the skin as a canvas for expression of identity and aesthetics.

As Meskimmon points out, in contemporary visual culture, images of the female body function as carriers of complex and contradictory messages: 'In feminist debates about 'essentialism' (that is, what is essentially feminine) and 'constructionism' (what is socially constructed and culturally determined), 'the meaning of the body itself remains under intense debate' (1996: 154). The body has since the Enlightenment been imbued with the potential of a surface for the play of 'invisible yearnings and visible emotions' (Stafford 1993: 16). Jacques Lacan declared the gendered body, like other components of our human identity, to be socially constructed rather than given. Meskimmon suggests further that, in representation, there are no natural bodies, only constructions of gender and the self.

Within Narissa's subculture, specific alterations of the body are perceived as coded signals of identity. Piercings are often gender-specific, as in genital piercing. Nipple and genital piercing are clearly sexually charged, both as signals and as the potential means of mutual pleasure enhancement.

Tooth extraction in Tanya's community is not gender-specific, but certainly encodes socially constructed signals of sexuality and identity. Participants speak of extraction as symbolic of sexual maturity.

In Ntombovuyo's case, the painting of the skin is the sign to the community to recognise both the process the initiates are undergoing, and the state of maturity they are about to attain. The painting and ceremonial cleansing of the body are temporary markings. In many similar rituals, permanent markings occur, such as the cutting off of the last finger digit (*Inqqithi*) and scarification (*Ukuchazwa*).

In Sarah's community, the covering of a female body part (the hair) is seen as the concealment of a sexual signal that

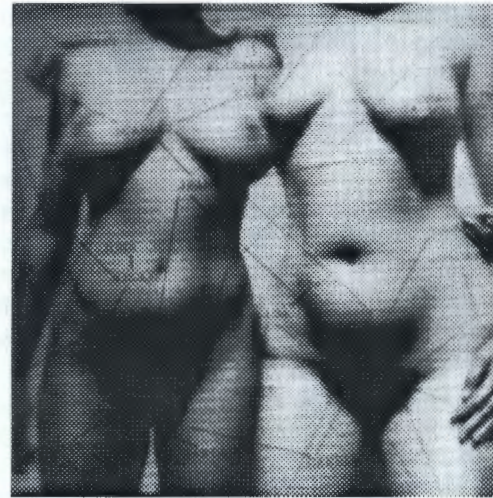
should be visible only to the woman's husband. In this respect, hair is sexualised in a manner more commonly associated in many societies with other body parts.

In the work of South African artists, notably mostly women, the body is employed as the site of cultural mediations. Some artists specifically use photography (Minnette Vari, Berni Searle, Candice Breitz, Jean Brundrit, Terry Kurgan, Penny Siopis, Veronique Malherbe) and others use diverse media (Jane Alexander, Pippa Skotnes, Kaolin Thompson, Lisa Brice, Fritha Langerman, Tracy Payne, Belinda Blignaut). Here the representation signifies political and social challenges to assigned meanings, and becomes an important measure of female subjectivity. These assigned meanings register cultural, historical, political, as well as personal, fears and anxieties.

Jean Brundrit's work, *Valued families* (1995), depicts two naked female bodies, cropped at the neck with a projection of various names, mostly female, onto their skin. The linking of names foregrounds lesbian relationships. The title of the work subverts the convention of the term 'family', which in gay and lesbian circles refers to someone of the same sexual orientation. The photograph is unpretentious in the positioning of the figures and in the use of lighting. The figures face the viewer directly, and the soft lighting creates a sculptural quality. Brundrit's photograph makes a political point, without compromising the aesthetics of the image.

In Meskimmon's words, 'Artists increasingly deploy the body as a site of resistance and a locus for expressions of death, disintegration, horror, and presymbolic forms of expression' (1996: 154).

A specific example of this genre of work is Minnette Vari's video piece, entitled *Oracle* (1999). The work addresses a



JEAN BRUNDRIT
Valued families, 1995

personal response to issues in the media which confront South Africans daily. Her distorted naked body shape is reminiscent of Francesco de Goya's painting of *Saturn Devouring his Children*. With her body movements, she creates a monstrous bald creature, through the distortions of the video lens as it advances and retreats. Vari as monster becomes the metaphor for the consumption and digestion of events and images, which are absorbed and then regurgitated as it plays out its continual miserable narrative. She makes her body into the vehicle for her audience to locate the horror of its social condition: political posturing and civil conflict. 'This figure becomes a metaphor for postcolonial identity, a craving to assimilate every fragment of information into one hybrid body' (Vari in Tilkin 2002: 98). The work becomes a catharsis for those who can locate or identify in visual terms what remains otherwise indescribable verbally. Vari, in her self portrait as 'monster', attempts to challenge traditional views of women as aesthetic objects. She engages with other possibilities of unbounded notions of beauty, subverting the stereotype of



MINNETTE VARI
Oracle, 1999

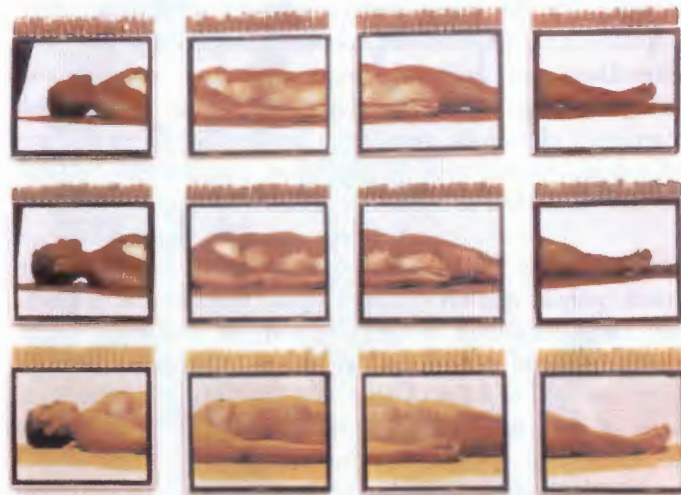
mainstream standards.

In the photographic production of *Colour Me* and the more recent *Discoloured* series, Bernie Searle engages her own naked body. In *Colour Me*, Searle covers her horizontal body with different coloured spices to allude to her personal ancestral cultural history as well as the history of the Cape as a mid-point on the trade route between The Netherlands and the East. The large colour prints reflect degrees of tonal intensities of colour and resonate with issues of skin colour with which people were racially classified and discriminated against.

The influence of Surrealism on women artists working in this context is interesting. During the *Encounters with Photography* photographic conference at the South African Museum, June 2000, Jennifer Law presented a paper in which she cited the influence of Surrealist principles on

South African women artists. Artists such as Sue Williamson and Jane Alexander have produced art as a response to the mass media and cultural imperialism. In some of her work, Alexander synthesises conditions of the psyche with issues concerning social strata in society, such as street children and also female experience. Here art is used as a cultural tool against repressive aspects of society. In *Surrealism, Mirror Image*, Chadwick discusses ways in which contemporary women artists have assimilated the Surrealist idea of the object into their work:

...contemporary artists have sought a new focus for female subjectivity in hybridization, fetishization, and the displacing of self onto artifacts of the body. Such strategies, common both to Surrealism and to later performative acts by women that refuse the body as biologically determined or visually objectified, cannot be reduced to single meanings.



BERNIE SEARLE
Colour me, 1999

Mediated by the specificities of culture and historical moment, they reveal the body as marker of identity, as border between multiple awareness of self, and as the source of complex images that challenge the specularization of the body in Western representation (1998: 30).

Complex problems arise when art seeks to reflect social ideologies of feminine experience. Chadwick points out two extremes: Firstly, there is 'art compelled either to submit to the public language of patriarchy' and then there is art which 'invents private languages that keep it marginalized by asserting the uniqueness of its femininity' (1998: 11). By attempting to collapse the projection of the body as sight or spectacle and the awareness of the body as site of meanings (assigned, fabricated or manipulated) I try to to seek out a middle ground between these polarized positions. My intention is to represent the complexities of each individual experience in a language which is familiar to most viewers in order for the more complex issues of the subjects' identities to be accessible. Chadwick discusses problems of generalisations, cultural hegemony and colonialism. Problematising the representation of a generalised experience of women versus the unique experience of an individual. Artists need to question constructed cultural practice presented as natural or innate.

Since the early 1970s, when women artists mobilized the female body as marker of a new sexual and cultural politics, they have continued to use the body to challenge social constructions of gender and sexuality. Although the body seems the logical point of departure from which to identify a sense of self, its location at the boundaries between the biological and the social, the natural and the cultural ensures that our relationship to its forms and processes is always mediated by cultural discourses. At the same time, the body - the object that each of us inhabits in the most

intimate ways, - despite its positioning within cultural discourses and theories of spectatorship, remains a primary source, for the exploration of the presymbolic or nonsymbolic modes of expression through which many women hope to relocate feminine subjectivity (15).

Penny Siopis' work, entitled *Mask and My Self* (1994), uses a traditional African sculpture of a female torso, positioning it over her own naked torso. The title of the work is significant since it refers to the artists 'self', questioning her identity and psyche in an African context.



PENNY SIOPIS
Mask and My Self, 1994

In a multiplicity of South African cultural traditions with their varied constructions of femininity and spectatorship, I am engaging with a few women; their identities, issues of self and body become the subject of representation, while the means of representation becomes the object of the process.



BELINDA BIGNAUT

Belinda Bignaut drinking water and herbs as part of a ceremony of initiation.

The diversity around issues of self, display and spectatorship differ amongst the women I have worked with. What may be normal for one is seen as outlandish for another. For Ntombovuyo and Noluthando, revealing their breasts in public, is a cultural norm and does not become sexualised; for Tanya in Mitchells Plain, it is clearly sexualised and a source of embarrassment; and for Sarah it would be in conflict with her religious belief system and code of behaviour. For Narissa, the partial or complete display of her breasts, altered by piercing, is sexualised, but in her case also an empowering expression of her identity.

The sense of the female 'self' cannot be determined by fixed simple definitions but can be seen as a multidimensional set of 'selves' attributable to an individual. When the women who practice tooth extraction saw some of my photographs of

women with piercings, they were shocked and horrified.

The representation of the female body bordering between woman as subject or object, is complex and risks being misread. Kelly (1996) cites Pollock: The 'politics of looking function around a regime which divides into binary positions, activity / passivity, looking / being seen, voyeur / exhibitionist, subject / object' (Kelly 1996: 87). Even when the politics of representation exploring female subjectivity is contentious, teetering on the border between objectification and acceptability, it serves the crucial purpose of disrupting traditional ways of seeing. It draws attention to the conjunction of the private and the public spheres, where the personal becomes the political.



MINNETTE VÀRI

Alien, 1998

Authority and power

It is interesting to note the similarity, in attitudes to the camera and photography, of some societies unexposed to Western norms and Roland Barthes, a sophisticated French Philosopher of the 1990s. Barthes discusses how the photographic process turns him from 'subject' into 'object'. People unexposed to the camera are known to view it with suspicion. The photographic image is thought of as having the power to rob them of their spirit, rendering them disempowered. After the first time I photographed Tanya and her friends, I encountered an interesting misconception. They had to be reassured that the camera did not have the power to see through their clothes, and record them naked.

Much contemporary theory discusses the power relations inherent in the act of looking, which is further compounded in the representation of the vision. Barthes' response to a photograph taken of him as a child by his mother is discussed by Marianne Hirsch as follows:

In the process of being photographed, Barthes says, he is 'a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death...when I discover myself in the product of this operation, what I see is that I have become Total-Image, which is to say, Death in person'. From this point of view, the mother / photographer has the power to kill, to transform live children into one-dimensional figures, immobilised at a given instant, made into icons or fetishes, robbed of vitality. Rather than bestowing a second birth, the camera becomes a womb/tomb into which the child/object is reabsorbed or reincorporated by a frightening and deadly process of maternal vampirism. (1997: 175)

I cite this reference to parent – child photography in looking at photography and power relationships because of the obvious powerful position of the parent in relation to their child. Hirsch exposes this view, which I would suggest is a reflection of unconscious fantasies. She continues, by tempering this with what is possibly a more rational explanation of the process:

Whether perceived as life-giving or murderous, representations of maternal photography feed fantasies of maternal omnipotence that isolate mother from child and highlight the mother's power in proportion to the child's perceived vulnerability. Yet, if looking can be seen as mutual and connective, does it not enable us to recognise, instead, the interconnected plots of mothers and children and the artificiality of pitting the interest of one against that of the other? (1997: 175)

Hirsch (1997) discusses the complex issues associated with the work of Sally Mann, known for her photographs of her three children. She elaborates on the issue of the insider perspective. However in this case the ethics deal with the power differential between the parent photographer and the child subject:

As long as the visual is equated with distance and objectivity, with disengagement and objectification, the maternal photographic look will always be inherently transgressive. But if we read the mother's look in conjunction with a more connected, mutual, and intersubjective conception of vision, then the fetal image and the work of the maternal photographer might provide the occasion for a feminine and even a maternal claim on technology. (Hirsch 1997: 174)

Hirsch (1997) discusses Petcheski's work on fetal images. This example connects photography and medicine with reproductive rights and its politics. The struggle over reproductive rights typifies how the private female body becomes invested with political agendas. In the chapter entitled 'Maternal Exposures',

Petcheski discusses representational practices of ultrasound imagery and their political implications. She emphasizes the predatory nature of the photographic consciousness, the militarization of ultrasound (one medical description compares it to submarine sightings), and the transformation of the mother into a 'maternal environment' exposed to a 'panoptics of the womb' that transform the fetus into 'evidence'. Petcheski insists that the success of the fetal imagery derives from the fetishistic and mystical aspects of photography as well as the scientific, especially for the anti-abortion movement. The fetal image is supposed to encourage bonding.' Petcheski objects: 'Indeed the very idea of "bonding" based on a photographic image implies a fetish: the investment of erotic feeling in a fantasy.' Yet, she concedes, 'women often feel empowered by reproductive technologies, including fetal imagery. (Hirsch 1997: 174)

Petcheski argues that the apparent empowerment given to the fetal image is illusory. The image distances mother from child, where the mother's primary experience of her fetus is not through her own sensory perception, but through what Petcheski describes as the 'alienating and objectifying, nonmaternal, sense of vision'(Ibid).

The mother becomes the spectator of what goes on inside her own body. This perception contributes to

"ocularphobia"- the connection of vision with distance, neutrality, and thus, traditionally, with scientific inquiry and masculinity- that shapes the negative representations of maternal photographers (Ibid).

Issues of private and public experience and its representation are enmeshed with complexities of authorship and authority. Even when photographing from within one's own ethnic group or family, one is still faced with these complex problems. It becomes a matter of degrees of authority, questioning group membership and belonging. In representing someone else's experience, one is making their private experience public, the unknown become known. The representation from an inside perspective is not necessarily about the essence of the subject, and may indeed be quite superficial when compared to the outsider's representations. Earlier I made the comparison between Sarah's photographs and Tanya's, where Sarah's were posed and more self-conscious, revealing a studied awareness of representation. Similarly with Noluthando's photographs of her friends and family, a definite posed preconception of the camera meant the subjects were contriving to present an image of how they chose to be seen. Hirsch (1997) elaborates: '...engagement with political "re-presentations" of the body of woman will naturally force encounters between external norms and internalised identities and desires. There can be no simple distinction between the public and the private with regard to these issues, yet some works are more directed towards internalised identities and others towards challenges to external establishments' (Hirsch 1997: 164). Thus essence or superficiality, depth or surface, empathy or objectivity, are binary notions which can apply to both perspectives. Abigail Solomon-Godeau discusses the inside/outside relationship, showing how each can be the 'good' position in different contexts. First the inside position –

... in this particular context, the 'good' position - is thus understood to imply a position of engagement, participation, and privileged knowledge, whereas the second, the outsider's position, is taken to produce an alienated and voyeuristic relationship that heightens the distance between subject and object. Along the lines of this binarism hinges much of the debate concerned with either the ethics or the politics of certain forms of photographic practice. The inside/outside dichotomy pivots on the possibility (or lack) of empathy and identification...On the one hand, we frequently assume authenticity and truth to be located on the inside (the truth of the subject), and at the same time, we routinely - culturally - locate and define objectivity (as in reportorial, journalistic, or juridical objectivity) in conditions of exteriority, of non implication. (Solomon- Godeau in Chadwick 1998: 49)

The idea of 'giving a voice' to another individual assumes they are voiceless and carries with it patronising dynamics and unresolved tensions. The representation of another person's private moments always has to be with full informed consent. However, there is submissive consent and informed consent. A seemingly contradictory perspective is held in *The Art of Reflection* (Meskimmon 1996): 'to be represented visually or verbally is to be seen to have a voice, to make a claim for recognition and power. Traditionally it is misrepresentation and lack of representation which marginalise politically disempowered groups, such as women in patriarchal societies' (1996: 154).

The photographic image has an uncanny and distinctive ability to act as a broker between the personal experience of the individual which has no ostensible public dimension, and the formation and

passage of history, the mustering of forces outside any single person's identity or control. It reveals the ambiguity of our condition as individuals in contemporary society, a condition in which we are free agents and yet have little or no influence over the forces that shape our lives. The degree to which we are participants or observers, are active in the creation of meaning or voyeuristic, passive, and manipulated, is not readily resolved. We live in a culture mesmerized by its own power and traumatized by its vulnerability. (Chadwick 1998: 13)

I am interested in the tension between, on the one hand, positioning myself as active constructor of the image and on the other hand allowing the elements of chance and spontaneity, unique to photography and film-making, to dictate the resultant image. Always at issue in the editing process is the choice between an image which clearly depicts a component of the narrative but may be too obvious as a visual image, and alternatively the aesthetically evocative photograph which does not necessarily augment the narrative. Some of my preferred choices in editing involve the subject engaging with her process of initiation, and simultaneously may involve a fleeting glance connecting with me as photographer, thus returning the gaze of the viewer. Within the structure of some of my photographs, spectators positioned in the frame gaze at the subject. The viewer is then engaging with the subject and simultaneously with the spectators.

Culture and Ritual Process

Arnold Van Gennep, a sociologist, (cited in Turner 1979: 94) identifies three phases of rites of passage: separation, liminality (the space of between-ness), and re-incorporation. During the first phase, the initiate is separated from the community. In Xhosa ritual, for example, she is sent into the isolation of a rural hut, thus placed on the margins of society. The phase of liminality is constituted by the content and duration of the learning process, during which the identity of the ritual subject (the 'passenger') is ambiguous: she passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. The final phase, re-incorporation, constitutes the completion of the passage and the initiate is now accepted as a complete, viable individual with 'rights and obligations vis-a-vis others', and is 'expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards' within the community or cultural group. Van Gennep is here describing the traditional rituals whereby a young woman re-enacts the construction of her mother's identity.

While this analysis explores functions of traditional ritual, it may also be applicable to contemporary culture, as in the practice of tooth extraction, which in some instances occurs over three or more generations. Tooth extraction has long been a cultural phenomenon specific to the communities of the Western Cape. The popular term 'passion gap' triggers giggles of embarrassment because it is about unique notions of beauty and sexuality. It is also about positioning oneself as primarily working class in a particular social and racial group. Among the people I interviewed, the majority talked about how choosing to identify one's body by extracting four to eight front teeth was a sign of being grown up and asserting themselves as adults, able to choose how and when they would reinact the identities of their parents, peers and for some, the apparently glamorous lifestyles and practices of the gangsters in the community. For many it is a tradition

passed down through generations. In Tanya's case, her mother, stepfathers, grandparents and other family members had extracted their front teeth. The three phases of rites of passage may also be identified in contemporary rituals of rebellion where the express purpose is to deviate from parental identity. For the majority of pierced or tattooed individuals, this practice is the expression of the rejection of norms and conventions of society and an affirmative symbol of personal identity.

Victor Turner, a symbolic anthropologist, discusses how ritual is both a reflection of society and also mirrors society, informing social superstructures. Turner terms the unique moment of the ritual process as the liminal phase, the state of between-ness, incompleteness, hanging, floating between realities. Here the metaphor of representation of the feminine itself and the liminality of the ritual process compare, where both oscillate in subjective and objective states. 'The antistructural liminality provided in the cores of ritual and aesthetic forms represents the reflexivity of the social process, wherein society becomes at once subject and direct object; it represents also its subjunctive mood, where suppositions, desires, hypotheses, possibilities, and so forth, all become legitimate' (Turner 1979: vii). Here Turner refers to the in-between state of the unbounded ritual process, where imagined realities and aspirations can take on any form, reflecting the nature of the society, wherein both the society and indeed the ritual itself become legitimised.

Joan Laird, an American feminist sociologist, in *Enactments of Power Through Ritual*, discusses how ritual in North American society is used to subordinate women: 'Ritual is a mode of social action fundamental both to gender identity and to the maintenance of the sexual social order. The power of ritual is used by both men and women to maintain particular social positions of dominance, status and prestige'

(1991: 99). From the moment of marriage, a young Hasidic Jewish woman must cover all of her hair at all times when in public, with a wig (*shaitel*) or in some communities a hat. The reasons for the wearing of the *shaitel* include the assertion that it is a sign of modesty (*tznius*) of the married woman so that while her husband is involved in prayer and studying the *Torah* he will not be distracted by her with 'inappropriate thoughts'. This characteristic, although not intended as such, provides the grounds for a seeming paradox. The wearing of a wig attracts attention because it differs from the norm, while the opposite is intended, that is to obscure perception of the natural hair in order to be discreet and 'modest'. The hair is referred to as *erva* which literally means nakedness. It is considered to be an object of beauty, and as private as other parts of the body which are usually covered.

The first menstruation is definitive within some communities as an occasion for festive rituals and initiation rites, especially in communities which emphasise motherhood. In some of these communities, the onset of menstruation is perceived as dangerous and shameful, given that menstruation marks the potential for full sexuality. Her identity within her family, peer group and community is transformed. The adolescent girl must make sense of the social and psychological sensitivities and conflicting messages about female sexuality, and society's ambivalence around relationships. While Laird (1991) argues that ritual impacts negatively on a woman's life, Turner (1979) argues that ritual is used to make sense of all that is confusing in society:

Society... is a process in which any living, relatively well-bonded human group alternates between fixed and 'floating worlds'. By verbal and nonverbal means of classification, we impose upon ourselves

innumerable constraints and boundaries to keep chaos at bay, but often at the cost of failing to make discoveries and inventions: that is to say, not all instances of subversion of the normative are deviant or criminous. Yet in order to live, to breathe, and to generate novelty, human beings have had to create – by structural means – spaces and times in the calendar or, in the cultural cycles of their most cherished groups which cannot be captured in the classificatory nets of their quotidian, routinized spheres of action. These liminal areas of time and space – rituals, carnivals, dramas, and latterly films – are open to the play of thought, feeling, and will; in them are generated new models, often fantastic, some of which may have sufficient power and plausibility to replace eventually the force-backed political and jural models that control the centers of a society's ongoing life. (Turner 1979: vii)

The 21st century brings the emergence of increasing globalisation, consequent partly on the proliferation of information and communications technology. There is evidence of cultural homogenisation influenced by consumerism and an apparently contradictory rise of ethnic nationalism. People are looking inwards, within their communities and within themselves, for more 'authentic' ways of being in a rapidly changing and increasingly consumerist world. The postmodern era creates the desire for authentic experience in order to stabilise and locate the self. The sense of being lost in the modern world, where one is constantly looking for embodiment which can never be found, is reflected in Stafford's (1993) commentary on the digital era: when flesh and blood recede in the communication through 'mediated encounters with artificial persons', existing as bites, bytes, and bits of optical and aural messages simulating the 18th century's aesthetics of

almost' (Stafford 1993: 28). While technology develops, human connections recede. Physical requirements for survival and relating to others and to the environment are being replaced with digital coding and isolation.

The Politics of Representation in South Africa

Numerous issues and debates concerning the question of authorship, authority and its representation, and who has the 'right' to represent or speak for others, arose out of the Johannesburg Biennale of 1997 and were subsequently published in *Grey Areas*, (1999). Addressing these issues has been a major challenge to my work. I have attempted to position my work within these debates of visual social ethics and responsibility, hoping that the work finds a place within contemporary artistic discourse, without compromising aesthetic and formal language. As Okwui Enwezor acknowledges in his essay *Reframing the black subject: Ideology and fantasy in contemporary South African art* (1997: 33), identity must never be turned into a copyright; and become a paradox in which ethnic groups parade their authenticity and retain exclusive user rights of their images. Enwezor suggests the artist should seek out an ethical basis to represent the black body, within a discourse which provides a radical revision, of representation which serves to undermine it or represent the black body in a 'codified narrative of dysfunction'. (Enwezor 1997: 33)

Shortly before his tragic death, Steve Hilton-Barber wrote his response to the controversy which ensued from his photographs of a Northern Sotho male initiation ceremony. A key question was whether photography violates the sacredness of ritual: 'The debate revolved around race and nudity' (Hilton-Barber in Tilkin 2002: 42). Hilton - Barber felt that because he was in fact invited to photograph the event, he had permission from the people he photographed, and therefore he did not violate any 'ethical laws' of representation. He argues that the only pre-condition attached to his access to the initiation school was that he had been circumcised. He goes on to ask the question whether photographs of Jewish or Muslim circumcisions violate those rituals. Hilton - Barber was accused by some of ethno-voyeurism.



STEVE HILTON-BARBER
Northern Sotho Initiation, 1990

Peter Magubane's book of South African indigenous rituals, *Vanishing Cultures* (1998), primarily focusing on initiation schools, caused no controversy when published. This raises the question as to why these photographs by Magubane were not given the same rigorous critique as those of Hilton - Barber. In *Vanishing Cultures*, Magubane does not confine his photographs to his own particular ethnic group. This brings me to the conclusion that perhaps the critical issue is not about the revelation itself of the private experience of a subject, as exposed by an outsider; it is perhaps more about social constructions of prejudice, and South African history of power imbalances based on race. It is possible that because of this history of cultural hegemony and a legacy of apartheid, that it is assumed a white photographer may violate a position of privilege, while a black photographer holds a position of empathy. As Williamson suggests, 'the retrieval of artistic intention can too often lead to allegations against the artist rather than critiquing the work itself' (Williamson in Atkinson and Breitz 1999: 291). Lola Frost



PETER MAGUBANE

White student joining Xhosa initiation

questions the validity of having to specify the 'identity of the producer, and his/her race/class' in order to determine the meaning of the image (Frost in Atkinson and Breitz 1999: 134). While I agree with her assertion that meaning is situated in the codes within the image and by the contexts and audiences they address, one can not disregard the personal perspective intended by the artist.

Brian Keith Axel in *Grey Areas* refers to Enwezor's concern as one dealing not with representation but with the representative. That is, who is represented in the depiction, and whether they recognise themselves or their communities (Atkinson and Breitz 1999: 42). Art which is not purely literal, and which involves conceptual inversion or irony, is invariably misinterpreted by some viewers. The very methods employed to direct the viewer are taken at face value, rather than seen with the irony of the artist's intention. Pippa Skotnes' installation of *Miscast*, caused exactly that conflict. Part of Skotnes's exhibit included a linoleum floor with early ethnographic images of Bushmen men and women printed on to it. In order to negotiate the exhibit, one was



STEVE HILTON-BARBER

Northern Sotho Initiation, 1990

compelled to walk over the images. This device manipulated the viewer into the uncomfortable position of appearing to participate in the colonial abuse of South Africa's indigenous people. It was intended as a critique of that abuse and was not intended to perpetuate it. However some people were deeply offended.

Axel discusses the emergence of a democratic South Africa as the 'quintessential "new" nation' and its importance as the 'historical moment' in South Africa's iconography. This explains the clamouring for a voice in the representation of that 'body politic'. The question of who puts a face on the new South Africa and how it is done is at stake. Enwezor criticises some white (predominantly female) South African artists representing personal and public South African issues using the black body to symbolise those points. Enwezor's extended analysis of their 'representational intentionality', seems to get carried away in exaggerations which undermine his arguments when he refers to their

'masochistic' engagement with the black 'other'. He makes no distinction between the crudest manifestation of apartheid doctrine on the one hand, and the enlightened self-aware questioning of post-apartheid artists on the other. One of Enwezor's central issues is with art which distorts or fragments the black body, and which he argues is symbolic of a black body that is 'homeless' and 'never whole'. Many feminist debates parallel these concerns with regard to the representation of the female body, such as the decapitated body, objectified and spoken for. Where Enwezor implores black artists to represent their own experience, white South Africans will continue to represent their unique white African perspectives. As Axel points out, much of Enwezor's argument is reduced to issues of sexuality and its depictions, which become loaded with revelations of dominance and power which in turn symbolise the development of a new nation, the 'Rainbow Nation'. 'Indeed, nations have historically deployed sexuality - understood as a category of biological - cum - cultural anteriority as a means of linking "bodies politic to bodies personal"' (Axel in Atkinson and Breitz: 1999 55).

In *Dislocacion Imagen & Identidad. SudAfrica*, (2002: 11), Daniela Tilkin, the curator of the exhibition of the same title, discusses how artistic expression in South Africa has changed for artists who use photography. During the apartheid years, art works were 'framed within a context of official censorship, resistance and accusation. It now appears to lean more towards formal and ethical questions of representation on the one hand, and with personal versus collective issues on the other'. The struggle photography of the pre-1994 era was based in the documentation of the injustice of the apartheid regime: events such as forced removals, protest marches, funerals and rallies dominated the visual arena. In her essay in *Dislocacion Imagen & Identidad. SudAfrica*, Kathryn Smith suggests 'art became

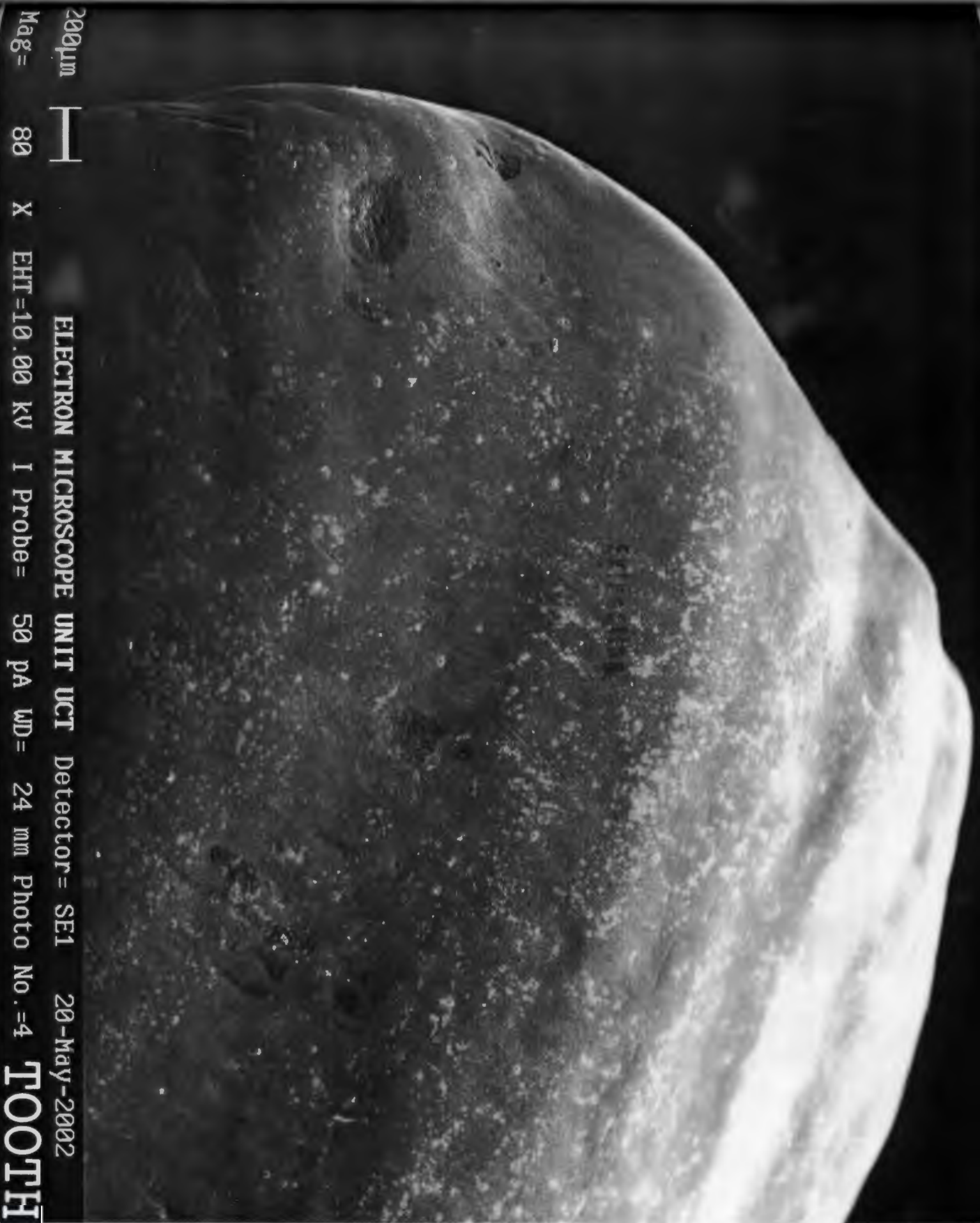
less about the pursuits of aesthetics and more about an alternative political and educational tool. Of all the media associated with the production of visual culture in South Africa, photography has probably undergone the most profound shift - both in terms of how people employ it, read it and ascribe values to it' (Smith 2002: 115).

Smith acknowledges the ambivalence of the artist's and curator's dilemma when she points out 'the sense of freedom gained by being directly complicit in a process of redefining, rebuilding and resurrecting our respective senses of self - and by extension, that of those around us - is as empowering as it is daunting' (Tilkin 2002: 115).



PETER MAGUBANE *Basotho female initiation*

Rites of passage: body marking of four South African women



200µm

Mag =

80 X

EHT =

10.00 kV

I Probe =

50 pA

WD =

24 mm

Photo No. = 4

20-May-2002

TOOTH

ELECTRON MICROSCOPE UNIT UCT Detector = SE1

198g = 80 X EHT = 10.00 KV I Probe = 20 pA WD = 24 mm PHOTO No. = 4
ELECTRON MICROSCOPE UNIT UCL Detector = SEI 50-19A-5095



Extracting

Tooth extraction, unique to pockets of the Western Cape, has been in practice for generations. While it does not contain religious or spiritual significance in its present form, it may have a history which has been lost over generations. It is however a powerful sign of one's identity for those who practice it, within their social milieu. It positions the individual within a largely so-called 'coloured' working class racial group. It distinguishes the followers of this custom from others in this racial group as well as setting themselves apart from the broader community. It forms a marker to display sexual maturity. This convention challenges notions of mainstream perceptions of beauty. The absence of front teeth is imbued with subjective associations. It is seen as 'cute', 'sexy', 'cheeky' and 'adult'.

I met Tanya through a driver I knew from a photographic laboratory I use. Peter Fuller had four front teeth extracted, and when I asked him about it, he said his daughter Vanita aged fourteen had just had her teeth extracted. I arranged to visit Peter's family in Rocklands, Mitchells Plain and interviewed Vanita and her sister and friends. They in turn introduced me to other teenagers in the community and that was when I met Tanya, aged seventeen at the time. She told me she was soon going to have her teeth extracted and said she would be happy to work with me.

Following the first time I photographed Tanya with her friends in Rocklands, she phoned me to ask whether my camera could see them with their clothes off, and whether I was from Penthouse magazine. The next time I visited, I took photographs from the previous visit, as well as my portfolio of work to introduce myself properly, something I should have done initially, before any suspicion was raised.

After some months, and a few false alarms where for various reasons she couldn't go through with it, Tanya informed me

that she was going to have her teeth extracted the following day. I confirmed with Tanya's mother, Katie Javan that she was aware of Tanya's decision to go ahead with the extraction. She said Tanya had discussed it with her, and felt Tanya could make her own choices and repeated few times 'It's her life.'

I found a lift to Mowbray to the butchery where Tanya sliced red meat for a living. I felt uncomfortable about facilitating her tooth extraction in any way. So I decided I would travel to the Clinic with her on whatever transport she opted for. It would also be an opportunity for me to record her journey. We travelled on the bus to town. The state run dental clinic regularly have young men and women requesting extraction of healthy teeth. The dentists are in a quandary about how to handle these requests and ultimately a state-subsidised medical aid pays for the operation. The dentist gave Tanya a local anaesthetic and extracted five teeth. She had an extra incisor growing in her palate. She said some of the people in her community called her Dracula. They teased her about it, saying she would never get a boy to marry her because of the extra tooth. She told the dentist she had pain in her front teeth. He muttered something about holes in her teeth, but he knew it was another one of those 'tall' stories he had heard so many times before.

People who are not part of this community have various theories to explain tooth extraction. The popular conception is that it is for oral sex. None of the people I spoke to would confirm this. A social worker who works in the prison system suggested the practice was derived from heterosexual men in prisons, who extract their front teeth to facilitate oral sex. Another theory was that some early colonial slave owners of the Cape, would mark their slaves by extracting their teeth.

Although an unlikely link, it is interesting to note that in

Indonesia, Hindu women still have their teeth filed at puberty (Cohen 1991: 132). If girls and boys have not filed their teeth at puberty they do so when they get married. Those who die young must have their teeth filed before they are cremated (Cohen).

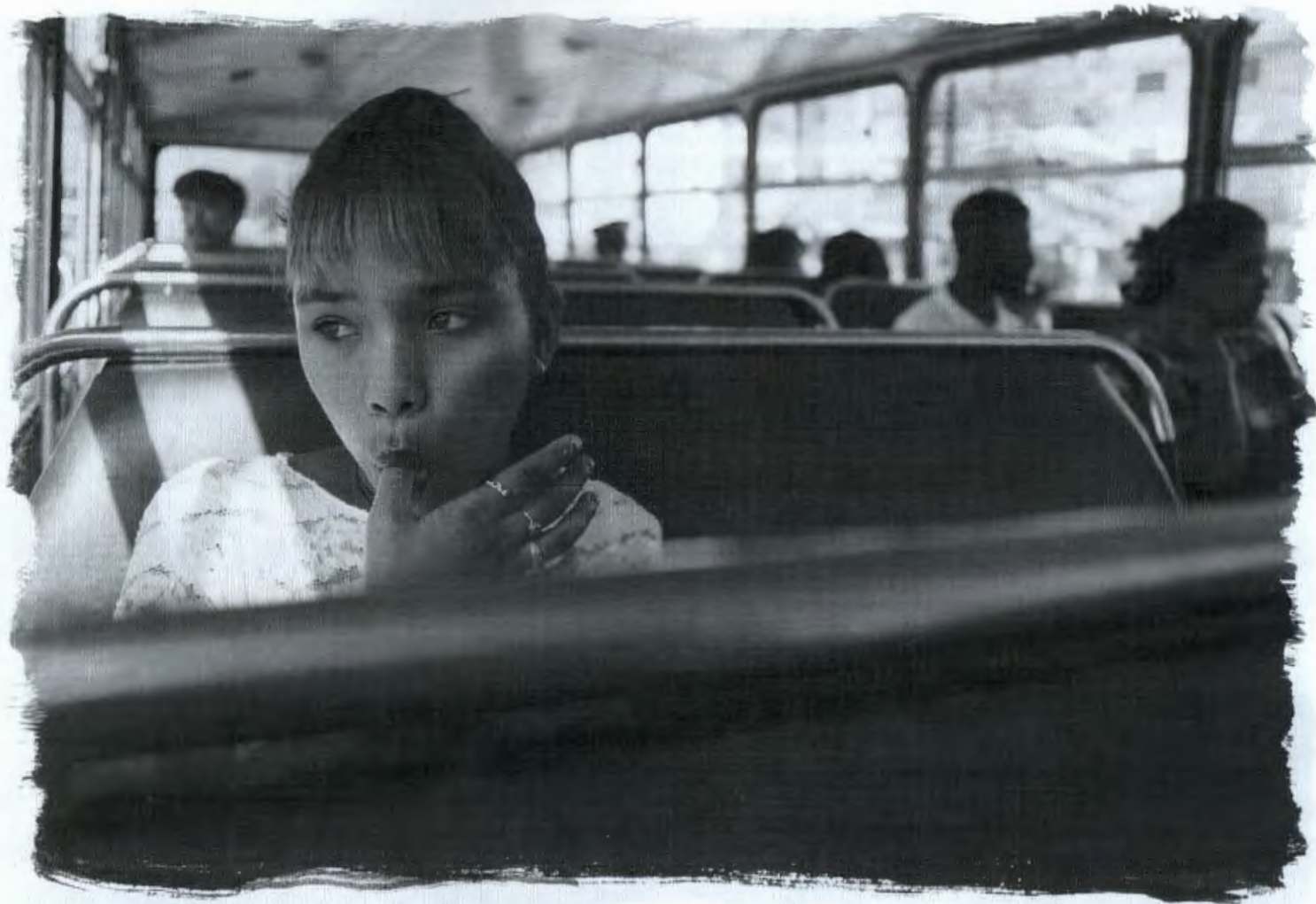
The tooth filing begins with an offering to Semara and Ratth, the gods of sexual love. Then, the initiates lie on a raised platform, placing their heads on soft pillows. A member of the high-ranking Brahmana caste brings out his chisel and file, and the grinding begins. The initiate's canine teeth, the mark of the beast in humanity's heritage, are smoothed, and the upper incisors are filed. (Ibid)

It is thought that through following this ritual, the intensity of six human passions- lust (*kama*), anger (*krodha*), greed (*lobha*), stupidity (*moha*), intoxication (*mada*) and jealousy (*matsarya*) are reduced.

Since little historical evidence of the practice of tooth extraction in the Cape exists, it is difficult locate its exact origin.



Tanya le Roux: 'I have no dreams, I don't know what I want. All I know is that I want to marry Chris, but he can't only have one woman. He's with me on weekends and with another girl during the week. Sometimes we're forty people sleeping in my mommy's house. We're four in a single bed. It won't make a difference with my friends (the extraction), most of my friends have pulled four or six teeth. I want to experience it myself. Most people say it's better to have your own teeth but I won't know until I experience it myself. I do have pains in my front teeth, and most people say dis beter om te soen. People think it's sexy to have the gold in the false teeth, people admire that fashion in Mitchells Plain.'



Most of the gangsters have false teeth with gold in. That is why I admire it very much. I would like to have a plain set, and a set with gold in, because the gold can fall out and leave dents in your teeth. I prefer a boy without teeth - the way he smiles he looks sexier without his teeth. It's much better to kiss. It looks cute, and the guys like us more, without teeth. I'm a "dagirl" my boyfriend is a "daboy" he used to be with the HL (Hard Living gangsters- Staggie's boys). I was 15 when I knew I was going to do it.' Tanya's mother Katie had her teeth out when she was 14, and both Tanya's late grandparents had all their teeth out when they were young teenagers.



'Most girls do it at 14 and most boys do it at 18. After three weeks I will go for fittings and then a week after that I will get the false teeth.'
Tanya a week before her teeth are to be extracted: 'I'm excited to have it done, a new technique, and to experience how it feels, experience something new.' September 1998, Tanya on her way to have the teeth pulled: *'I'm excited of course a little nervous. My boss doesn't want me to do it but I don't care what he says. It's got nothing to do with him, he's not my father.'*



Tanya works at MF Butcheries in Mowbray. She works five days per week plus half days Saturday. Occasionally she has a half day off but then money is deducted from her salary. Her weekly take home pay is R207, of which she often has to buy R160s worth of meat for her family, and R20 to pay off for her Levi jeans. The remainder is for her bus clip card.



Tanya moments after the extraction 'It was so quick, it didn't hurt.' She was still in a state of shock, and quick to admire herself in my car visor mirror. We drove to her home in silence. I wanted to hear how she was feeling, but obviously she couldn't really talk comfortably. I was also experiencing a bit of shock. I hadn't expected it to happen because of all the many previous postponements. On at least eight occasions Tanya couldn't make it. I realised it really had everything to do with her powerlessness in the world, because most of the times she couldn't make it, it had to do with her butcher boss changing his mind or her not having money to catch a taxi. When we arrived at her home there was



much excitement from her young sisters and cousins, all of whom seemingly without exception were in awe of what Tanya had just done. When I asked each one individually whether they would like to have their teeth extracted each reply from eight year olds to sixteen were ready to do it immediately. Katie Javan, Tanya's mother says 'Well I hope you two are satisfied now.' I say 'Are you angry Tanya did this?' 'No,' she says 'It's her mouth not my mouth.' Tanya's mother's ambivalence around her daughter's wish to look just like her continues to fascinate and confuse. She couldn't celebrate and she couldn't mourn, she could only accept the reality.



Some reasons given for extracting teeth by people who either intend doing it or who have done it: – dis lekker om te vry (its great for kissing) – I had pain in my teeth – you never have bad breath – ek wil ougat wees (I wanted to be grownup) – the gangsters do it and we admire the gangsters – I chipped my tooth, so I pulled them all out – It looks so sexy – You never have to worry about brushing your teeth – To be cool.
Cheslen: Born Anglican but had confirmation in Dutch Reform Church, works: at Shoprite Checkers Rondebosch. 'I was 12 when I had six teeth extracted. They wanted to know why, 'cos I had nice teeth, I just said 'cos I wanted to, so they did it, because everyone does it. About 70% do



it, most of my friends got dentures or extract their teeth, most men have it. I felt shy after I had it done because I looked horrible. My mother had hers out she said I must do it. I felt 'kwaai' groot mense trek hulle tanne. I looked too horrible to look sexy. I felt good when I had it done, but afterwards oooh uh uh. On medical aid it cost R500, I'm on medical aid so they pay.'

Shimela: Muslim. Works: night shift at I&J factory, has daughter Zhakiera 11 months. 'My daughter is 11 months old, she can make her own choice, I will leave it to her. Hulle likes die vier tanne uit, van voor af; vir soen is dit beter. False tanne het jou meer groot lyk en jy lyk kwaai.



It's a fashion. Twenty rand for each tooth.'

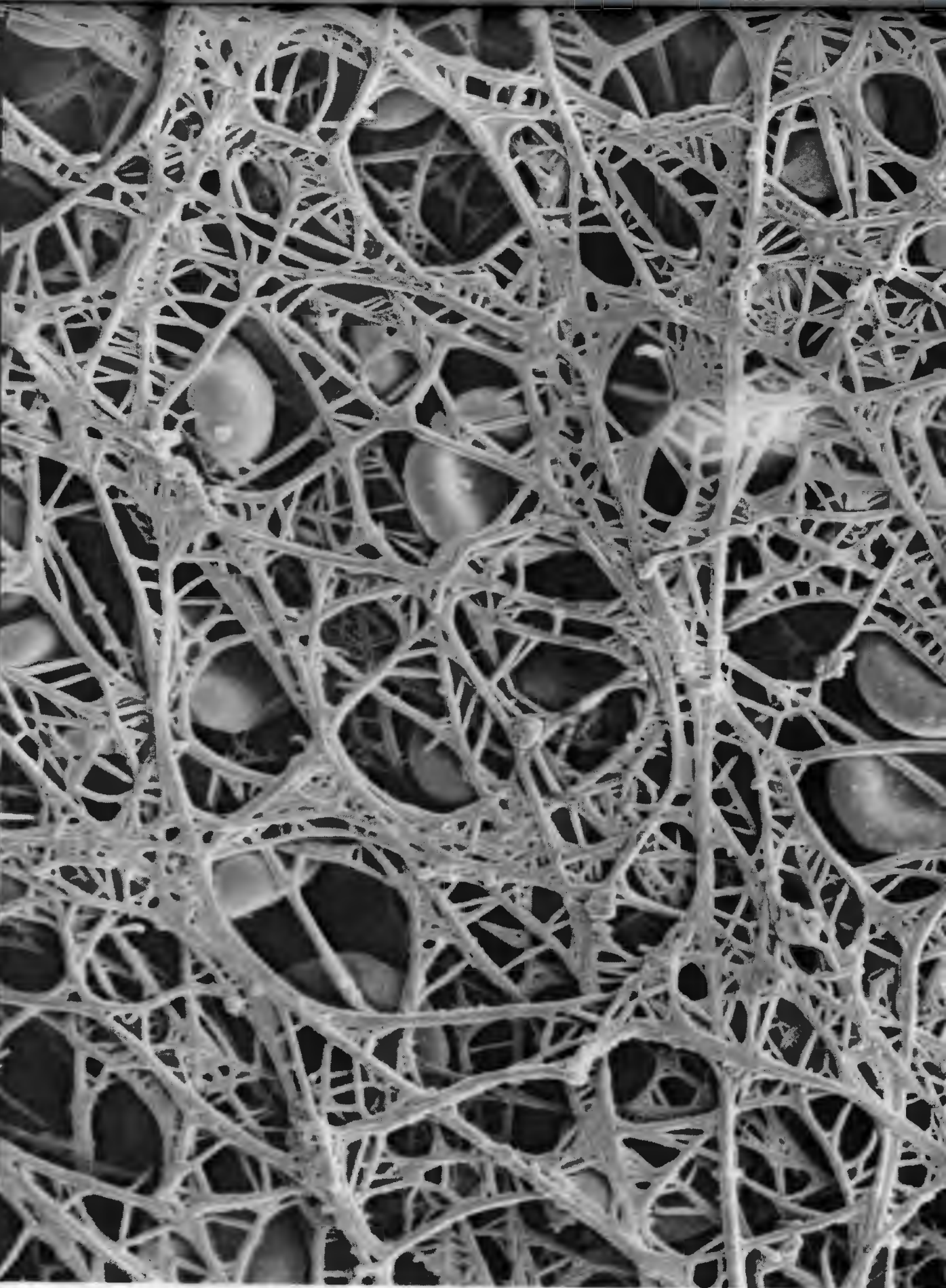
Vanita: (14 years old) Dutch Reform Church, Std 7 Glendale High, Rocklands. 'I did it because I wanted to (now) I feel part of the fashion. I felt nervous, I lost a lot of blood. It cost R80. Sometimes I regret it if I want to bite an apple, I can't, that's frustrating. Ek weet nie van sex nie, vir soen ja. Dis jou gums, tanne dis jou ding.'

Betty, Vanita's mother, General assistant at Red Cross Hospital. 'When I was 18 I had six out then 13 then all.' On why Vanita did it: 'Sexy



lyk, hulle is ougat. She want to be smart, she want to keep her big 'mos. Ougatheid, for kissing.'

Shireen (17 years old) Vanitas sister. 'I won't do it. They do it to be cool. Some say it's better for kissing, her friends said it's because she wanted to kiss better. You must have the false teeth to put the gold and rubies in. She just said (to me) she wanted it out, she had her own money so she could do whatever she wanted. Our parent skelled her out. She went to the dentist where they can pay so he must take it out, she take out four in front. Most boys do it at 16. Girls do it at 13 or 14, they take out 4,6 or 8.'



11µm

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ELECTRON MICROSCOPE UNIT UCT Detector = SE1 28-May-2002

Mag = 10.00 K X EHT = 5.00 KV I Probe = 20 pA WD = 13 mm Photo No. = 4

BLOOD

Piercing and tattooing

Body piercing refers to the incision with a hollow gauge needle into the ear lobe, ear tragus, ear cartilage, tongue, lips, eyebrow, nostril, septum, nipples, naval, labia, perineum, clitoral hood and clitoris; and the installation of surgical grade steel, gold, titanium or surgical plastic jewellery.

People whom I interviewed who were pierced or tattooed carried diverse motivations for pursuing the practice. For many pierced and tattooed people, the moments of being pierced as well as the often private knowledge of the piercing are invested with symbolic power capable of reclaiming previous experiences of powerlessness or even abuse. It provides a test of courage and endurance of physical pain. For others it is about a sense of self, projected into a public space whereby the reflection of being noticed by others reaffirms the individual's desire to be seen, for example the obvious exhibitionism of facial piercing or the navel ring. Some feel positive and empowered by their bodies for the first time. Most find it adds to sexual titillation and stimulation. Some use the activity of piercing to mark significant events in their lives, both as celebrations of joy or commitment to partners as well as icons to memorialise pain and loss. It is interesting to note how the markers of the body, the signs of identity particularly within this social group, situate the individual within the style of a generation, and consequently enter into the construction of social relations. The obtaining of piercings and tattoos provides an entrance into a community which prioritise the physical appearance of the body. The body surface is the canvas for identity formation which is often seen as work in progress. Some individuals said that each tattoo or piercing created the desire for another.

I met Narissa after a few visits to various tattoo shops in Cape Town. I knew Derek, the owner and main practitioner

of one of the popular tattoo shops. Derek used to be the driver for the photographic laboratory where I processed my film. He had often picked up or dropped off film at my studio. I explained to a few of the people at the shop what I was doing and that I wished to work with someone who was willing to be photographed while going through the process. Narissa was very excited and keen to participate. She enjoyed the presence of the camera and was obviously uninhibited by it. The photographs were seen as an affirmation of her sense of self. Rob, Narissa's ex-boyfriend, commented on how the presence of the camera didn't effect him at all, in that he would not modify his behaviour in front of it. He said that he would 'jump at the opportunity to be photographed. I love it, absolutely love it'.

Tracey, who works in the tattoo and piercing shop as a piercer, said that while she was 'camera phobic', many customers enjoyed being photographed or filmed while they were having tattoos done to themselves. This provided them with the opportunity to relive the experience, something they couldn't do at the time because they were too scared or anxious.

Derek, the tattoo artist, said that he didn't care about the camera, as long as he was made to look gorgeous. 'It makes you feel special because it's pointing at you, and it makes you the centre of attraction. Probably because I'm Leo, I'm vain.'

Many people in this community were initially circumspect about being photographed. However, once they felt comfortable with the idea of being photographed, they were relaxed and uninhibited, and actually really enjoyed the exhibitionism of the process, of being on display.



Narissa Hanekom: 'I can't wait to have my tattoo, I've been waiting such a long time to do it. The design is the sign of the unicorn something my sister gave to me when I was nine. I'm going to have it done on my back, either lower back or spine or shoulder. Rob says it's very very painful on the back, but I don't care, I'll do whatever it takes to do it. I like to experiment with different things. Part of the pleasure is the pain.'



With body piercing it's very sexual. Rob's had his nipples pierced three times and had a prince albert (piercing at the base of the penis shaft), so when he gets an erection it moves up the shaft of the penis, and it's very pleasurable during sex for him and the person he sleeps with – but he's taken it out now. He can't pierce his nipples again, he's done it too many times. I don't like his arm tattoos – the skulls etc.



I'm more into fantasy and tribal imagery. He hates tribal. I'm mostly into Native American and Chinese. My sister has tattoos, my big sister, I'm really influenced by her. When I was 12 or 13 I first saw hers and thought it was so cool. My parents are very conservative churchgoing people. They live in Pretoria. I couldn't show them my piercing or tattoos – I couldn't do that to them.



My father was the South African Consul General for the High Commission in London and New York, but then he had to retire, they told him it had to be more black there. Terrible. A few years ago I presented Nelson Mandela with a painting my uncle; my father's best friend did. He's dead now. I don't know which political

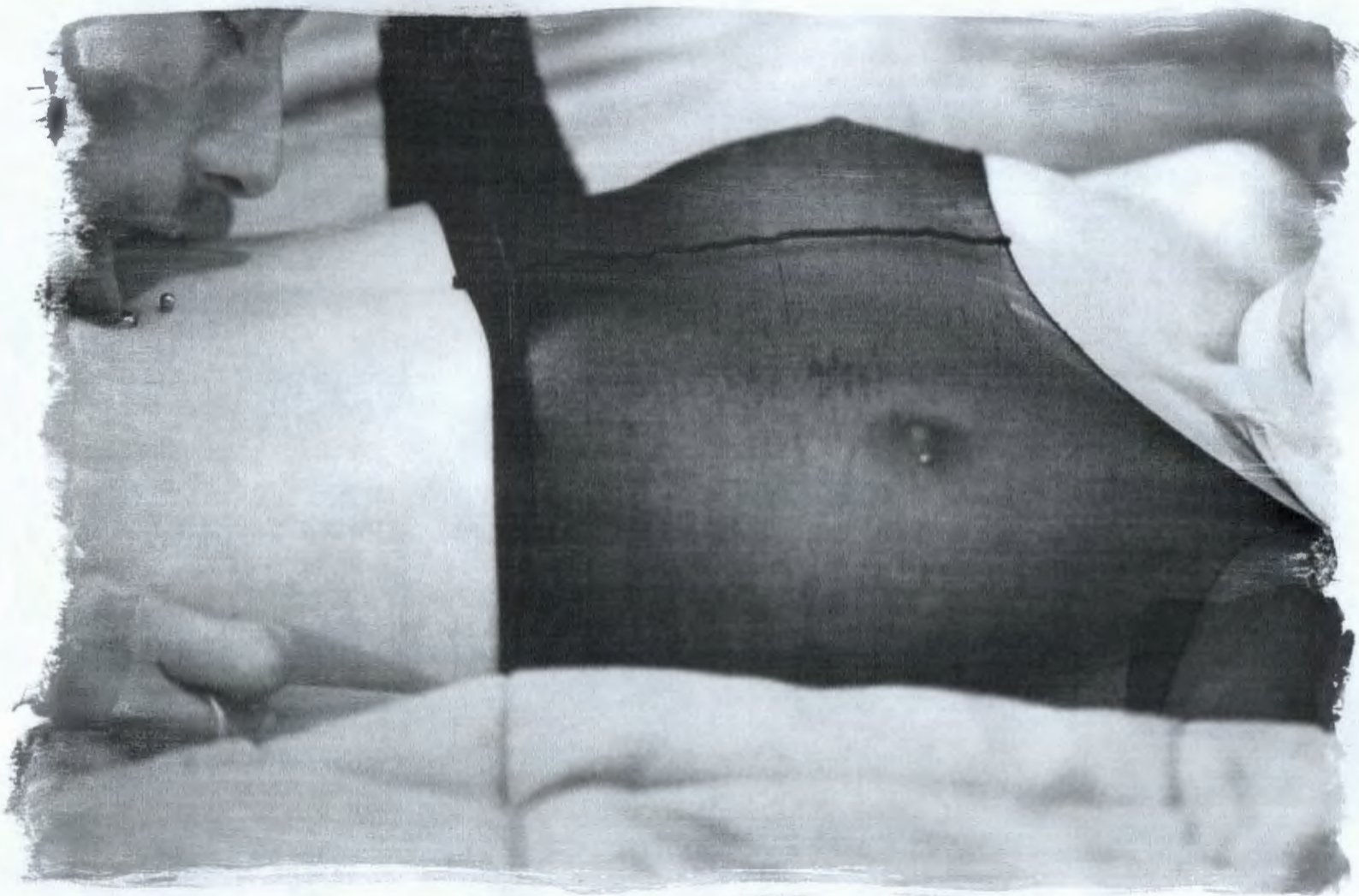


party my father belongs to, we don't talk politics – I know it wasn't the new one, the ANC and it wasn't the other one umm ...the Democratic Party.

When I was living in New York other kids were so cruel to me because I was South African. I tried to commüt suicide three times, the first time



was when I was ten. My parents sent me money for my make up course so I'll use some of that to pay for my tattoo. Derek will do the tattoo. He's really good, has won lots of awards for his work. I have a new boyfriend now, Greg. My father found out what Rob was really like and he wants to place a restraining order on him. Rob knew I was scared of heights so he used to hang me upside down over the balcony of my flat.



Greg pulled too hard on the nipple rings, it tore and now they're infected, so I've taken them out.'

Other comments from pierced or tattooed peers:

'It's addictive, I can't stop piercing myself. It's like changing your dress.' *'It's a symbol of freedom. Showing you can choose.'* *'It's a part of the*



commitment to my lover. I enjoy my piercings because they're sexually stimulating and make me feel positive about my body.' '...to experience my mind and body on different levels and become more self-aware.' '...to claim my body and take pleasure in the look and feel of the piercing.' 'Invisible piercings give me personal confidence.' 'I feel powerful.'



marking and marking

ELECTRON MICROSCOPE UNIT UCT Detector = SE1 20-May-2002

X EHT=10.00 kV I Probe= 50 pA WD= 28 mm Photo No.=13

SKIN

X EHT=10.00 KV I Probe= 20 pA WD= 28 mm Photo No.=13

ELECTRON MICROSCOPE UNIT UCL Detector= SE1 SO-M9A-2002

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Cutting and marking

Intonjane (initiation of women) is a traditional ritual to mark the rite of passage of women in the Xhosa community to 'denote maturity. Currently, due to western religious and educational influences this tradition is lost in many areas though it is still practised with vigour and enthusiasm in other areas' (Mlisa 2002). The details of the customs vary according to each family, and their tribal influence. Some common aspects include: the young women are separated from the general community in a rural hut. They are put into isolation for a period of approximately ten days to two weeks.

I travelled to rural Transkei on two occasions, with a traditional healer, Anele Mafika, whom I had worked with on a previous project for the Cancer association which targeted township women. Anele introduced me to the senior chief in the rural village of Balasi, and explained to chief Samela what we were doing there. He in turn introduced me to the second chief in the area the following day. We were then taken to the village where the *Intonjane* were in seclusion. We were invited to a public meeting with the elders of the village, including the fathers, uncles and on the perimeters the mother of the initiates and the other women of the community. Through interpreters we established an understanding and ultimately we were welcomed with incredible hospitality and pride in the sharing of Xhosa tradition. I stayed with Chief Samela's family during both periods in the village.

Much rumour and speculation exists about whether female circumcision forms part of the *Intonjane* ritual. I was informed that indeed something must be cut, and that if any group in the Xhosa community practised female circumcision, it would most likely occur amongst the rural people of Tsolo. Even amongst the traditional healers and chiefs of the area there was apparent confusion about whether female circumcision was practised. In preparing for

the shoot I had been apprehensive about how I would approach photographing a ritual, also described as female genital mutilation. I felt this exemplified the classic photographer's dilemma: having to decide to what degree I might become a participant in a practice I found problematic, versus the need for the practice to be exposed to the public. It was only when I was face to face with the women themselves in Tsolo, that I knew body marking in the form of ritual shaving of hair and painting of the skin was very much in evidence and that female circumcision was not part of their ritual experience. When I realised I would not have to confront this problem, I was relieved. They claimed that it was the Basutho over the hills who performed female circumcision. The search for the answer always appeared over the next hill.

The *Intonjane* is not allowed to emerge or be seen out of the confines of the hut. She is only allowed to emerge at night when it is dark in order to relieve herself. 'She must be accompanied. She has a nurse called - *ikhankatha*. This is the person who looks after her needs: cooks, washes and feeds her. Whilst the boys go to the bush, the girls stay at home. One house is used and the *Intonjane* - the neophyte is placed in this house in a private place' (Ibid). As she enters into the process of her *Intonjane* her hair may be shaved by her father or a senior woman of the community. Her face and body are painted with white clay. 'The *Intonjane* uses - *imbola* (a special traditional mask) and wears a black scarf to hide her face' (Ibid). She is committed to quiet contemplation and may only talk in whispers. 'During this time she is not called by her name but by the ritual name - *Intonjane* and she speaks softly, she does not raise her voice' (Ibid).

Usually a group of women, anything from one to ten, will go through the process together. Each group of young women is

usually made up of sisters or relatives from the same family. They are usually teenagers or in their twenties, but girls as young as seven and women as old as forty have been known to go through the process. Usually older women are encouraged to go through the *Intonjane* if they are experiencing difficulties in their lives. Their problems are attributed to the fact that they have not yet gone through the initiation.

The young women are expected to remain behind a woven reed curtain (*umdiya-diya*) when sleeping or when awake. This curtain is attached at various high points on the wall on one side of the rondavel and stretches down to the floor. The floor is covered with a special grass found along the river banks called - *inxopo*. It is traditional that only this type of grass is used'(Ibid). They are practically naked and use only blankets for warmth and covering. 'During this time the senior nurse also shares a lot with Intonjane about life. She socializes the Intonjane to womanhood life'(sic)(Ibid).

The letting of blood is symbolic of the 'cleansing and bonding with ancestors. The goat is slaughtered at the beginning to appease the ancestors'(Ibid). On the day of communal celebration for the *Intonjane*, a sheep is slaughtered, a cow is slaughtered for each initiate and each one in turn eats the meat of her specific cow. There is a particular process for this. The braaied meat is eaten from a woven mat, with a stick which is whittled into a sharp point resembling a pencil. Each *Intonjane* eats in turn, from eldest first through to the youngest. The party occurs in some communities during the two week confinement period and in other communities after the period has ended and this marks the 'coming out' of the *Intonjane*. The *Intonjane* emerge from seclusion naked above the waist and covered in an ochre coloured clay. They walk in a line towards the river with the eldest holding the family spears. Additional girls

join the 'parade' in solidarity. At a point near the river, one of the women in charge shouts the signal for the girls to run. Once at the river the *Intonjane* wash themselves or are washed by the women in charge. The ochre is removed and Vaseline applied to the skin. The girls huddle together to preserve warmth (in winter months the temperature often drops to below zero). Their bodies are adorned with a reed display. Once they are finally dressed they return to the centre of the celebration and present themselves to the patriarch of the family, kneeling before him, returning the family spears in front of him, at his feet. They respectfully look at the ground while he delivers a message to them. 'The party is called a marriage ceremony - *ukutshata kwentonjane*. On this day the *Intonjane* and nurses (*amakhankatha*) - are presented with presents'(Ibid). Finally the *Intonjane* and their entourage return to the hut to change into their final outfit which includes a black scarf, a shirt, shawl and a skirt. 'She dresses herself beautifully with new clothes - clothes she has never used before'(Ibid).

While many of these women felt proud to have done something that met the approval of their families and community, there were aspects of the process they had difficulty with. This is described in the interviews. For some the shaving of their hair was a source of irritation; for others wearing the black *doeks*, or having to eat with sticks was uncomfortable. Those who were accustomed to living in urban centres seemed to view the process with a slight patronising attitude, attributing illiteracy and paganism to the followers of these traditional customs.

Most said they found my photographs, which I distributed, curious and affirming. In one case a local photographer who was expected to record the event had not arrived and so the *Intonjane* were relieved to have a record of their experience.



Ntombovuyo Alice Mtengwane: 'Before we go in we go to the forest to bring wood. When we come back we go to river to wash. When we at home we go to big house with family, they tell us what we must do. The father of the family told us we must not speak loud we must whisper. They don't tell us why. We are not allowed to ask why. My brothers daughter ask why we must not go out during the day. He said she must not ask why everything. We sleep first day. Second day they slaughter a goat for each girl. One must eat the left leg of the goat, eaten without salt, bile



is mixed in, the green substance next to the liver. Not anyone can eat that part, except the Intonjane who must eat it. We stay in the house for one week until the party. During the day of the party, we must each eat our own cow and also a special part of the left leg of the cow.. They braai it. After eight days fetch wood in forest, paint our bodies and again after another eight days we go to river to wash. The older woman tells us not to talk load, to be very cool, no boyfriends allowed. If they want to talk to Intonjane they must pay R20. I was feeling nothing before



the Intonjane because I was not sick. I didn't feel bad. I do that Intonjane because we must its our custom, but other people can be sick she can't get right, but when she make Intonjane she feel good. The hardest thing about the Intonjane process is to make everything organised, to buy goats, sheep, cattle and all the food, and also the clothes, we must wear new blankets, the mats, all that must be buyed. It is not good to stay in the house the whole day, not to go out the house. Mustn't even go to toilet only out at night. I don't like to eat meat with sticks. The only



thing I liked was to rest there. You are not cooking, doing nothing, someone bring food for you. Its nice to stay as a family – very nice with my sisters and brothers daughters. I like to wash morning and every afternoon without having to carry the water. We must paint the face twice or three times a day. As the paint go out of your face you must renew it. I felt so good to be finished the Intonjane. Now I've got knowledge of it. My brother shaved my hair, he's like my father (I don't have parents, our father is my brother). It's too hard having my hair shaved, but it's



compulsory to cut our hair. Sometimes when the hair comes out there is a rash it's painful and it's cold on your head. We are shaved only once, when you go in. After we come out we must paint the face and whole body with that red paint for eight days. It make me feel good, when something say it your custom you can't feel bad, you always like it. I felt proud because I'm just like a man who's circumcised. I felt very nice when I was being photographed. I did organise a man to photograph us, he didn't come, so I was very glad when you came. I was happy,



nothing was irritating. Most of the others (Intonjane) wanted to talk to you but they couldn't understand you (english). You are powerful with the camera, it makes me afraid when the light comes through. I liked to be photographed but when someone makes a photo of me I don't feel relaxed.

Everything was good being photographed. I did get the photo's which I have framed, so my child can see that I have done Intonjane. There was



nothing wrong with you there. We didn't go out the house all the photos were inside. The people there they were very excited about you, because there aren't people like you who come there. We felt different, we felt special to be photographed, other Intonjane before didn't get a chance. Ntombozuko Thamila: When I went in for my Intonjane we hade just permed my hair so I was unhappy about it being shaved. My aunt shaved my hair. People were excited to see you and be photographed by you. It is unusual to see white people there. It made the Intonjane feel different



and special. My father believes in ancestors. He thought maybe the ancestors will be angry if you go into the hut. He is illiterate. He feels happy that you were there but also afraid because of the ancestors because you are not Xhosa. You are interested in our custom. We are Xhosa but they say we are Amafingo. Because you photographed different things you gain something about different customs and you see different cultures. Nomfundo Mlisa: 'With reference to altering of body I never felt bad about that. In our area we do not cut our hair. Intonjane braids and make



up her hair as she wishes. Painting and decorating the skin was not a problem either we are used to painting and decorating our skins as young girls. The only thing that worried me at the begin was the black doek. I hate putting any thing black on my head or even wearing a black dress. I was shocked that nothing happened and I was at peace with it. Perhaps again knowing why I had to do it helped. I was told that if I do not do it people may take all my luck - so I had to hide my face so that I could protect my luck. Again with the skin - painting whole body because I was in house I had nothing to worry about. It is difficult to know who has done Intonjane and who has not done it unless someone speaks



about it. I understand that in traditional village this becomes a big and critical issue but again in our area this is not such a big issue. One can brag about being a proper woman because she has gone through the ritual but it is always more of a joke than a serious issue. At the end of the day there is actually no physical body transformation as I experienced by emotional change. Again even if I had to cut my hair as we do with other ritual it is always a matter of when you still have to cut, once it is cut again you soon forget about it as again cutting hair is always done amongst us Xhosas especially. However, cutting hair to me has always been a compromise because you have to do it more than



anything else. I hate bald head. I like my hair - but that is a temporal thing. To me the experience was like I am in a retreat. At the beginning it was boring and frustrating especially since I was alone. It gave me time to read my bible and sing and pray. The soft speaking process trained me in controlling my anger and just ignoring some of the things. There is actually no time to act out no matter how you feel. I learned to talk to myself and also learned to concentrate on positive things. I had enough time to relax. I used most of the time sleeping. For the first time in my life I could sleep during the day and at night too a thing I would never do. This changed my sleeping pattern I never experience any problems



in falling asleep ever since. It was difficult to idling and not doing anything. I could not bear the reality that for twenty days I was going to be faced with an empty day in front of me. There was nothing actually satisfying and enjoyable. I had to adjust to the situation. It was more a compromise than happiness. I felt relieved when it was finished, it was gone and I had done it. I also had a sense of being myself. Something I do not have words for. I had a certain feeling that there was something missing in me and that it had been magically replaced. I was also in touch and had an incredible control of my emotions. Spiritually I was so sensitive even if I touched another person I could not help but would



feel her or his negative vibes in so much that I sought avoided greeting people by holding hands. My dreams were so clear and what was funny was that at times I would dream even the exact words that a person that I have not yet met would use when I meet him later. This made me to be some how vulnerable and other people were like they were avoiding me. I could feel like seeing through people, they were so transparent that I had to make means to adjust to this feeling. I do not think it changed anything to me. I have no different feelings about any one. I still relate to people as I was before. Shaving hair and painting the body didn't make me behave differently privately or publicly.'



ELECTRON MICROSCOPE UNIT UCI Detector = SE1 20-May-2002

50 K X EHT=10.00 KV I Probe= 50 pA WD= 30 mm Photo No.=5 HAIR

28 K X EHT=10.00 kV I Probe= 20 pA WD= 39 mm Photo No.=2 HAIR

ELECTRON MICROSCOPE UNIT UCL Detector= SEI SB-M9A-S99S



Covering

At the time of marriage, the Hasidic Jewish woman is required to wear a wig called a *shaitel* in order to mark her status as a married woman and to reflect her identity in a manner which is considered in keeping with the expectations of her new position. The term modesty is consistently used by this community to describe the function of the shaitel. In Jewish law a shaitel is called a foreign wig (*peah nochris*), because it is not the woman's hair. However some Rabbis allow the married woman to wear a wig made of her own hair.

I met Sarah through the wife of a local Hasidic Rabbi who I had approached to obtain help in locating a potential bride willing to participate in my project. The Hasidic Jewish community is small in Cape Town and so the occasion for an orthodox wedding is rare, occurring approximately once a year. The first bride-to-be I was advised to approach was not willing to be photographed. Sarah was the second person I asked.

There are three different opinions among the Rabbinical authorities concerning when exactly the bride (*kallah*) should first wear her *shaitel*. Some say it is from the time she receives a ring from the groom under the four posted canopy (*chuppah*); after the bride and groom are finished under the *chuppah*, they go into the seclusion of a private room (*yichud*) for the first time in their relationship and after the *yichud* the bride could be expected to wear her *shaitel*; the third option is after the couple have consummated their marriage, that is the morning after the wedding.

There is debate as to how much hair a woman has to cover and how much she is allowed to expose. The Rabbis offer opinions on whether hair that shows near the temples needs to be covered, agreeing that a hat that covers only the top of the head, allowing the hair to be seen at the back of the

head, is not acceptable. There are those that state that a woman is not allowed to reveal even one hair, even the hair at the temples. Another Rabbi suggests that a woman may expose two finger breadths of hair across the front of her head, although preferring all to be covered. In the privacy of her own home, provided no men are present, a married woman is not obligated to cover her hair in the presence of her husband and children. However it is considered a blessing (*mitzvah*) if she undertakes to cover her hair at all times so that it is not exposed even to the 'walls, the rafters or beams of her house' (Rabbi Sauer 1991: 9-12). The notion of being able to achieve a higher level of spirituality is attached to a woman who follows this dogma. To cover the hair in public is considered a biblical commandment from Moses (*da's Moshe*), to cover the hair in private is a law of the Rabbinical authority (*da's Yehudis*) a lower level of authority and therefore is open to interpretation and to the practices of the local community under the directorship of the local Rabbi.

Wona Lazarus was Sarah's teacher before her marriage ceremony. Her role was to explain to Sarah all the expectations of her with regard to her new role as a Jewish wife. Wona Lazarus explains her own experience of the *shaitel*: 'I didn't grow up religious. I became religious when I was in my twenties. It was a very emotional time for me, becoming religious. For me, wearing the *shaitel* was a milestone in my life. It was also a status symbol. I found it exciting, it's not difficult for me. I remember buying three wigs. I enjoyed shopping for it, and thought of it with the same excitement of shopping for my wedding dress and ring. It was very exciting. It was not difficult. I accepted it as part of my entrance into marriage, like the symbol of the wedding ring, it was no different. It didn't change the way I related to people. My hair is a reflection of who I am, but not necessarily who I am inside. I don't always look perfect but

I would hate to have a dowdy appearance. I try to look good and wear fashionable clothing, as long as it's modest. I feel uncomfortable seeing teenagers exposing their bodies in skimpy clothing. I feel embarrassed for them. To me they are inappropriately dressed, and I feel I am appropriately dressed. My *shaitel* is part of my appropriate dress. One can draw attention to oneself in different ways, in modesty or in order to create an attraction. If a woman wearing a *shaitel* draws attention to herself, it's a good thing. It's making a statement, pointing out to other Jewish women that they should be dressed in the same way. It is not making a feature of oneself in order to create an attraction. Most people don't know it's a wig. Quite frankly, if they do notice, I don't care. I feel appropriately dressed. It's part of one's natural life, and there is nothing unnatural about it.'

'I wouldn't take my *shaitel* off in front of anyone. At home I wear a *snood*. It's like a turban. I never uncover my hair in front of my children or my husband. This is something I have committed myself to as an added level of modesty. There are levels of modesty and that is a level I took upon myself. It's not required in Jewish law, but is associated with holiness, imbuing something spiritual.'

'It wouldn't make any difference if the *shaitel* is made from one's own hair or someone else's. When one is married, you change and develop as a person. Modesty is critical in terms of how one relates to men. I feel that public displays of affection are embarrassing. Even after the *shabbat* service on a Friday evening, when men kiss their wives, or worse, other people's wives, to wish them a good *shabbat*. When a friend tried to explain to me that it means nothing, I felt that that illustrated my point. Kissing has come to mean nothing. People are desensitised to that contact. For those of us involved with spirituality, the separation between the physical and the spiritual is far more stark. We are highly

sensitised to the physical. Most secular people have to go to extremes in order to evoke a sexual response.'

Mrs Popack the wife of a local Rabbi, relates her experience: 'Some women are actually enhanced by the wearing of the *shaitel*. If you saw my daughter with her *shaitel* and her bandana, you would never know she was wearing one. For me it was very difficult to adjust to wearing it. For a young woman in her twenties with lovely hair, it's difficult to have to cover it. Not that one won't do it, one knows one will wear it. It's about subservience, about reaching upwards to a spirituality above oneself. It's a reminder to connect with freedom and the glory of the *Torah*, and literally capturing that spirituality in your head and your hair. The *Torah* is a blueprint, it is about submitting to what you believe in. It's not about being provocative, it's not meant to make one stand out. It's for ourselves, concerning ourselves with the higher elements of life. This is similar to the men who wear the *kippah* (skull cap), remembering above oneself. However the *shaitel* takes this a step further.'

'A woman's hair after marriage is seen as a private domain. One is mature and involved in a particular relationship with one individual. The wearing of the *shaitel* becomes an accepted decision, like the candles I light for *shabbat*, or the *mikvah* I take. It's my contribution to myself.'

Wona Lazarus continued: 'With regard to photography, I think it beautiful the way the camera can capture a moment. I think with a sense of loss about my own wedding photographs, how they have faded. I would love to create a display of those milestones, like the moment the ring is placed on the finger. The photograph can recapture the moment and help to remind one, in order to describe it to anyone else. I do have a problem when the women are photographed or filmed dancing, for instance at a wedding. I

love to dance.' At Hasidic wedding, women sit and dance separately from men. 'You never know who will view the photographs or video. It would be immodest to be seen to be exposed. There is a fine line. With the ultra-orthodox *Hasidim* in the old quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, they consider the photograph as a graven image, bordering on idolatrous.'

Sarah's father Coleman Green, commented on the way in which the presence of the camera/photographer, had 'become a cultural norm - something expected, something to be joked about, while at the same time appreciated for its implicit promise of "eternal" memories'. He said he felt comfortable with the presence of the camera, 'especially yours - taking the informal, unposed, spontaneous shots. Your skill at capturing the "moment" was very special and much realer than forced poses.'



Sarah Sherman: 'Since it is customary not to see one's fiancé a week before the wedding, I hadn't seen my husband on the wedding day. When the wedding started where we were both in separate rooms, I was with the women and he with the men. After about an hour or so, he came in flanked by both fathers and all the men behind him. He was given the veil and looked at me and put the veil on my face. Then he proceeded



to the chupah.

Before he left, both my father and father in law blessed me. After the men left for the chupah, the women made their exit and I last with my mother, mother in law and grandmother. The chupah took place at dusk when the stars were out. The ketubah was read, 7 blessings were said,



a letter written by the Lubavitcher Rebbe - Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson- to all couples getting married was read. This is a letter full of blessings for the future of the couple. After my husband placed my ring on my finger and he stamped on a glass. Once the glass was broken the chupah was over and we were married.



The process of the wedding and wearing a shaitel the next day was a sign for me that I belonged to someone now - I had found my soul mate. The experience of the wedding process was many things. There was elation, trepidation, a sense of intense spirituality in the air and a disbelief that it was all happening to me. There were moments that I cried out of happiness and out of a certain sadness that I was leaving home in



the sense that I now needed to make my own home.

There was also a strong sense of G-dliness for me in that I felt during the chupah that I was right in front of G-d and He was watching us all and getting pleasure from seeing us so happy. Thank G-d.



I didn't find any part of the wedding difficult - it was all an awesome experience that happens once in a lifetime...it is hard to describe trepidation within elation and immense happiness coupled with a tinge of sadness for leaving home - the whole thing is one package of the inexplicable yet profound happiness.



When dealing with people after the wedding, I felt more secure with myself. Wearing a shaitel has not made me behave as such differently. Being married makes one more mature, seeing things not through one pair of eyes, but two pairs of eyes. I still have my girlish side and enjoy having fun and wearing a shaitel has not stopped me from being me...

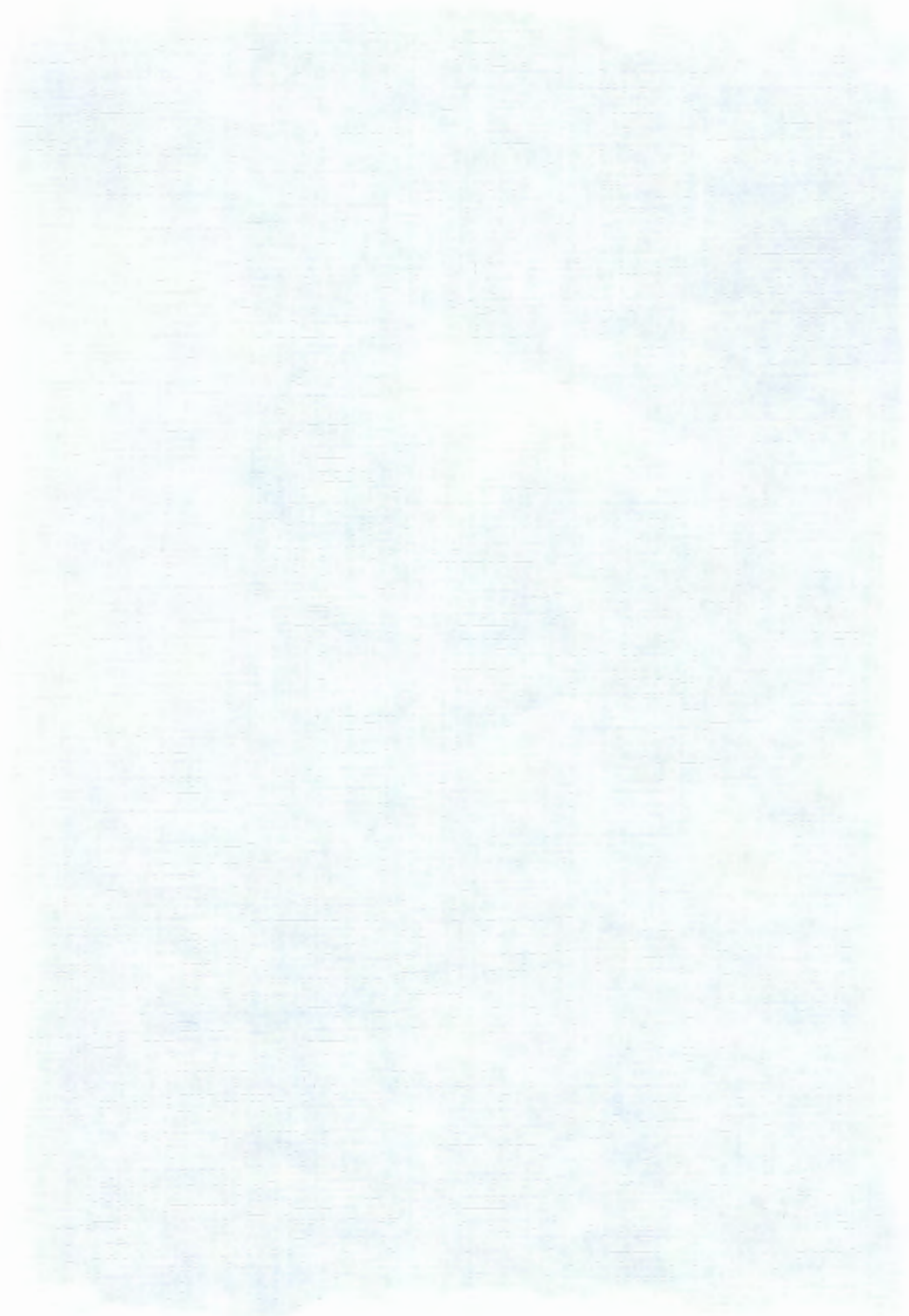


At times it was fine (being photographed) and there were times when it felt obtrusive. Most of the time it was fine having the camera around me. I am the type of person that will put my foot down when I so wish. I think in most ways it treasures the memory as a basic. When one looks at the photos – in order for them to mean anything, the memories that the person has of the captured moment coupled with the photo



make the complete treasure. From what I remember of the photographs they seemed to capture a lot of the experience and special moments that occurred.'

Toby Lieder: 'Wearing a sheitel takes getting used to. In the beginning it is hard but it doesn't take long to feel comfortable.'



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Creative Method and Technical Data

Each image is printed with archival inks on 100% cotton based art paper. I have intentionally manipulated my photographs by creating a painterly brushstroke effect to represent my authorship and personal view, literally my hand. While this is to an extent manipulation of the image, I do still subscribe to the photojournalistic notion of the integrity of the frame of the photograph. I have not cropped any of the original format 35mm frame other than rendering its original borders with an irregular ambiguous edge. The image is not tampered with or changed in any way in terms of the content of the image. The painted brushstrokes are painted on to a card and scanned in layers which are then amalgamated with the scan of the negative in Photoshop. I have chosen to use Photoshop as a tool to achieve the best of two processes: the effect of hand applied emulsion and the tonal range that Photoshop offers. With the hand applied liquid light Luminos emulsion, after much time spent attempting to perfect the result, I was not satisfied with the depth of the black tones. I found that the inconsistent outcome of the resultant image often lost information crucial for the documentary genre. With Photoshop I found I could achieve a painterly brushstroke effect similar to the hand applied emulsion, and I was also able to maintain more control.

With the method of framing the images by dipping the cotton paper into a hot wax bath after printing, I intend to allude to the many evocative uses for wax: used by women to remove hair from their skin; the wax of a candle used in rituals of celebration and mourning to evoke memory; and the use of wax by ethnographic anthropologists to create casts of body parts of indigenous South African people during the Colonial era. The intention here is also to create a smooth skin-like surface, with the occasional textured wrinkled effect, alluding to the imperfections of the skin. This also provided the practical means to give the image

enough stability to stitch it to its stainless steel frame. The frame, which remains hidden from view behind the waxed paper represents the skeleton of the human form, on which the vulnerable skin is displayed and supported. The image, like the skin, represents the imperfect surface and both literally and figuratively casts its own shadow. The stitching process represents an aspect of the healing of broken damaged skin as well as the activity of sewing, a livelihood largely ascribed to women over the century's and across most cultures. The process of attaching the waxed print by stitching it to its frame and thereby marking and piercing it, transgresses the sacred surface of the photographic print. As with the women featured in this thesis the surface is altered or interfered with. This frame is in turn attached to a four legged curved support consisting of a central four pointed star which attaches at its centre to the wall. Each point of the star represents each of the four women featured in the project. The impression is of an image hovering in front of the wall as in the liminal phase of transition, between identities. The edges of the waxed paper are torn to create the impression of a deckled edge, the rough raw state of manufactured art paper and the beauty of imperfection as in the human body. The image, without the conventions of a wooden or metal frame to protect it hovers vulnerable to abrasion and abuse. Another component of the work are four images on clear film taken with an electron microscope. Each represents the extreme physical interior of each of the four women of a hair, a tooth, skin and blood.

In addition to my work, four photo albums contain the photographs taken by or directed by the women themselves. Each reveals her experience of who she is and who she is surrounded by. The intention here is to create a visual dialogue with my images of their transitional process.

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