



From left: Santu Mofokeng, *Eyes Wide Shut*, Motouleng Cave, Clarens, Free State, 2000, black-and-white photograph, dimensions variable. Santu Mofokeng, *The Black Photo Album/Look at Me: 1890–1950* (detail), 1997, black-and-white photograph from slide projection, dimensions variable. Santu Mofokeng, *Unsupervised Veld Fire Near Zebedi Limpopo*, 2010, color photograph, dimensions variable.



Santu Mofokeng

JEU DE PAUME, PARIS

Leora Maltz-Leca

"DAVID GOLDBLATT IS CONCERNED with the is-ness of things," Santu Mofokeng said of his onetime mentor earlier this year. "I'm interested in their isn't-ness." It is this negative metaphysics that largely shapes the South African photographer's long-overdue retrospective, titled "Chasing Shadows: Santu Mofokeng, Thirty Years of Photographic Essays" and curated by Corinne Diserens for the Jeu de Paume. While Goldblatt has long probed the stubborn objectness of the world—the intractable presence of things—Mofokeng's work reveals a progressive destabilization of material form: People dissolve into apparitions, objects scatter into wisps, and Mofokeng chases both across the haunted South African landscape. Through his self-described "gossamer world," the photographer discloses the wobbly illusion by which we tame the flux of the world into decorous solids. Indeed, all that seemed solid in the apartheid years—from the weight of tyranny to the certainty of moral high ground—had melted into air by the early 1990s.

The exhibition is named for Mofokeng's ethereal series "Chasing Shadows," 1996–, a breakthrough body of work that officially launched his pursuit of the ghostly. Set against the vertiginous hollows of the Free State's Motouleng Cave, sacred ground where *sangomas* (natural healers), prophets, and the Zionist Apostolic Church all conduct their syncretic ceremonies, spectral figures glide between the living and the dead. Their spiritual traffic glazes the

photographs with fluttering vestiges of movement that suggest the ethereal nimbuses of the otherworldly but also act as visual stutters marking the limits of vision, the spots where the camera founders. Smearing bodies into painterly blurs, Mofokeng's signature streaks of light emerge as residues of the camera's awkward limitations as it struggles to portray even material realities, let alone spiritual ones: hence the need to squint at vanishing signs, to dash after shadows.

But the man and his camera are themselves being stalked in these elegiac photographs: Shadows of death pursue Mofokeng, leaving their marks in lingering trails of smoke, auratic flashes, and phantom glows. At the Jeu de Paume, this signal series was dominated by one of Mofokeng's rare portraits, *Eyes Wide Shut*, Motouleng Cave, Clarens, Free State, 2004, which was blown up large and centrally placed: a close-up of the photographer's brother Ishmael, close to death. Ishmael's misty, shrouded lids not only augur his imminent passing but also divulge the limitations of human vision. The camera fails, Mofokeng seems to say, because the eye itself is shuttered—wide-shut—its field dangerously narrow. That Ishmael, a traditional healer, was dying of AIDS despite believing himself immune to its course underscores the lethal result of a blinkered outlook that has likewise characterized the highest levels of South African public health policy.

The exhibition opened with photographs from a time of more concrete enemies, the 1980s and early '90s, when Mofokeng was a member of the Afrapix collective and working primarily for newspapers. Through a focus on the private and quotidian, this work revises the tired narratives of late apartheid that cast the townships as sites of violence and despair, highlighting instead a little boy's first day at school, two people dancing, a woman cooking at home. Mofokeng subsequently took a hiatus from photography, turning to the archival research that would result in *The Black Photo Album/Look at Me: 1890–1950*, 1997. Unearthing turn-of-the-century family albums in order to rephotograph them, Mofokeng was shocked to discover a visual record of prosperous black working and middle classes that had been erased from apartheid his-

stories that perpetuated stereotypes of poor tribal African

When Mofokeng returned to making photographs after this meditative gap, he described ruing his naive belief that photographs could be marshaled toward any semblance of documentary truth telling. Embracing the lyrical as the means with which to trouble lingering claims of veracity, the work that followed hewed close to the landscape, particularly the terrain of trauma. The exhibition concluded on these grounds, by tracing the distance—or, rather, insinuating the proximity—between Paris and Soweto, highlighting the cross-cultural connections that Mofokeng draws between apartheid and the European contexts of colonialism.

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ism, racism, and Nazism that spawned it. With subjects from Auschwitz to the British concentration camps of the Anglo-Boer War, Mofokeng explores both the violent propinquity of Europe to Africa and the unsettling contradiction between the land's natural allure—or its banality—and the abominable events it hosted.

In this vein, Mofokeng's latest series, "Radiant Landscapes," 2011 (made especially for this exhibition), addresses the ailing, polluted topography produced by global mining and heavy industries in southern Africa. Color seeps in finally, as a toxic stain, tingeing prints with copper and vermilion aureoles of virulent beauty. This recent chromatism witnesses Mofokeng's definitive repudiation of his documentary origins, as he abandons shadows for the duplicitously gorgeous fields of death. And a new "isn't-ness" emerges, one rooted in our incapacity to reconcile what we see with what we know. □

"Chasing Shadows: Santu Mofokeng, Thirty Years of Photographic Essays" traveled to Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland, Oct. 8–Nov. 27; and will travel to the Bergen Kunsthall, Norway, Jan. 13–Feb. 26, 2012; Extra City Kunsthall Antwerpen, Belgium, Mar. 17–May 15, 2012.

LEORA MALTZ-LECA IS A 2011–12 FELLOW AT THE GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE IN LOS ANGELES.