

RE-BIRTH

by Edgar Allen Beem

When London-based photographers Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin photographed a South African migrant worker named Mr. Mkhize (pronounced McKeeza) in 2003, it was only the third time in his life that Mr. Mkhize had been photographed. The first time was for his Pass Book, the official document the South African government used to enforce apartheid. The second was for his Identity Book, the official document that allowed him to vote in the first democratic elections in 1994.

"His story was indicative of the whole country," says Broomberg of Mr. Mkhize. "There was now freedom of movement, so there was no real official reason to take his picture. He was still living in poverty, but the whole emotional landscape had changed as a result of the new progressive government."

For Broomberg and Chanarin, the photograph of the gaunt, denim-clad labourer with the distended earlobes of a traditional tribesman, became the symbol of South Africa after apartheid. Mr. Mkhize's Portrait therefore became the title not only of the exhibition the South African government had commissioned them to create but also of a video documentary of their three-month journey across South Africa and their new book, *Mr. Mkhize's Portrait & Other Stories from the New South Africa* (Trolley, London, 2004. \$18.95 soft cover).

"Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin have developed a strong reputation for making socially engaged work that deals with, at times, highly emotive subjects. This body of work in South Africa is one of their most ambitious and complex projects to date," says Camilla Jackson, a curator and program organizer at The Photographers' Gallery in London where the project was exhibited last summer.

Mr. Mkhize's Portrait began with a government commission to document South Africa 10 years after apartheid for the opening of South Africa's new Constitutional Court building. Broomberg and Chanarin spent September through November of 2003 driving all over the country while a team of researchers directed them to promising people and places.

Among the most powerful images in the book is a photograph of Tessa Davis, a strikingly beautiful young female boxer. "She was a rape victim," says Broomberg, "but she was also a brave, tough woman. She was living in poverty, but she was literally fighting her way out."

Another arresting image is a picture of a woman asleep in the heat on the side of an endless desert highway. This photograph presented Broomberg and Chanarin with an ethical dilemma that more and more young photographers wrestle with - how to photograph without simply being voyeuristic and

exploitive.

"How can we take her picture without asking permission? That's everything we're against," the pair asked one another.

They decided to take the woman's photograph; then they woke her, gave her water and a Polaroid snapshot, got her permission and gave her a ride. Broomberg and Chanarin see themselves collaborating not only with each other but also with the people they portray. Working with a 50 year old, large-format Linhof 4x5 camera furthers that aim.

"The large-format camera is slow and cumbersome," explains Chanarin, "so it gives the sitter more of a chance to collaborate on the picture."

Broomberg and Chanarin have collaborated on two previous Trolley books. *Trust* (2001) is a conceptual series of portraits of people who are paying no attention to the photographers. *Ghetto* (2003) is a study of a dozen closed communities including military bases, refugee camps, psychiatric hospitals and prisons. The nature of their collaboration is total; who finally clicks the shutter is a minor detail in a long process of conceptualization and negotiation.

The duo, both 34, met as teenagers in South Africa. They did not discover until just recently that their grandparents emigrated from the same village in Lithuania. Broomberg is a native South African who studied sociology and art history at the University of the Witwatersrand. Chanarin, who was born in London to South African parents, grew up in South Africa but studied philosophy at Sussex University.

The two men have been working together for eight years, ever since Adam, who studied at Fabbrica Benetton's research and development center outside Venice, invited his old friend Oliver to join him in Italy to work on *Colors*, the Benetton magazine devoted to globalism and multiculturalism.

Both men say their primary photographic education was looking at other photographers' work, using photo archives and image banks to create narratives for *Colors*. As they became more confident in their own visual senses, Broomberg and Chanarin began assigning themselves to photograph a series of communities, ranging from a retirement community in California and a psychiatric hospital in Cuba to a gypsy camp in Macedonia to a "community" of one, a hermit in Patagonia. Those closed community features for *Colors* became the basis for *Ghetto*.

Mr. Mkhize's *Portrait* features 85 full-page colour photographs accompanied by text that includes both the authors' commentary and comments by the subjects. It is an unusual physical object, just 6.25 x 7.8 inches and bound as a hardcover book but without the board covers. "It was a humble project," says Broomberg, "and the product was meant to reflect that."

But while it is compact in format, Mr. Mkhize's *Portrait* takes in a broad sweep of new South African society, celebrating new-found freedoms while

highlighting the persistence of poverty, racism, violence, rape, and AIDS. The most curious image in the book is a photograph of a wax sculpture of Nelson Mandela taken at Caesar's Place Casino outside Johannesburg. The picture of the Mandela mannequin with its removable head of clay was not well received in South Africa.

"People are very politically correct and super-sensitive," says Broomberg.
"They saw no irony or humor in it. To us it was about a sense of vulnerability and how we construct - and de-construct - our icons."