

BEHIND THE MASK

PHOTOGRAPHER MARC SHOUL UNCOVERS THE CHANGING FACE OF JOHANNESBURG'S INNER CITY

WORDS NATHALIE ROSA BUCHER PHOTOGRAPHY MARC SHOUL

Downtown Johannesburg has always had a reputation for being dirty, dangerous and crowded. However, over the years countless immigrants have come to call it home, as have many artists and musicians such as legendary singer Brenda 'Ma Brrr' Fassie. Today, it's one of the country's most Babylonian, pan-African neighbourhoods.

South African photographer Marc Shoul was drawn to the area to produce *Flatlands*, a body of work that pays tribute to the spirit that pulsates from Jozi's flats, street corners, dingy clubs, gyms, lounges and pavements. Shoul, whose images have appeared in international titles such as *Colors*, *Vice* and *Dazed & Confused*, is known for exploring themes of social relevance and change. It took him five years to complete *Flatlands*, and the results shine a mesmerising light on the city's unhailed underbelly.

"My mother used to live in Hillbrow [a residential neighbourhood] and I have heard so many stories about the Central Business District (CBD) and surrounding area – how it's full of culture, cool places to go and has a great vibe," Shoul explains of his choice of subject. "I've been attracted to the inner city for a long time; it has muscle, it's chaotic, it's alive, and there are people all over the place walking the streets.

"What is amazing about this area is that it has always been a landing pad for immigrants – and now, with its new population, it has been transformed. That cultural mix has brought with it different sets of values, needs, realities and ideas," he continues. "Residents are doing their best to survive and earn enough to move out to the more affluent northern suburbs. People are living their lives as normally as possible... going to work, school, church, bars"

During his time in the area, Shoul noticed a gradual gentrification but its edges remain raw. "There is development and betterment but

not to the extent that Johannesburg as a whole had hoped for. Everyone is watching their back, but going forward. I wanted to see how people are making their way through this amazing matrix of crumbling buildings, while still holding onto the promise of a better future."

Shoul readily admits that working in Hillbrow was a challenge. "It took me a long time to meet people and gain their trust. I was shooting with a Hasselblad, which is a little cumbersome and slow to use, but its quality is fantastic. I couldn't just carry my camera around my neck in full view as I was mugged twice pursuing this project."

But while life in the flatlands is often difficult, Johannesburg has an infectious momentum and relentless energy and drive. "It's the excitement that overpowers the fear," Shoul says. "I'm fascinated with how it has almost done a 180-degree turn from Little New York to Little Lagos, and how the current population utilises and transforms the space. There are pockets of different African, and other, cultures mixed into an area barely able to contain them all"

In between George's Boxing Club, barbed wire and bars, regulars at Harlequins Sports Bar, a beauty pageant in Yeoville and the seedy Mexican Sports Bar, Shoul's images expose his eye for sad humour. His subjects include a young Zulu boy sitting on a bar stool and a white businessman wearing traditional Zulu attire, kneeling in front of a Mercedes, donning the South African flag, praying for his city.

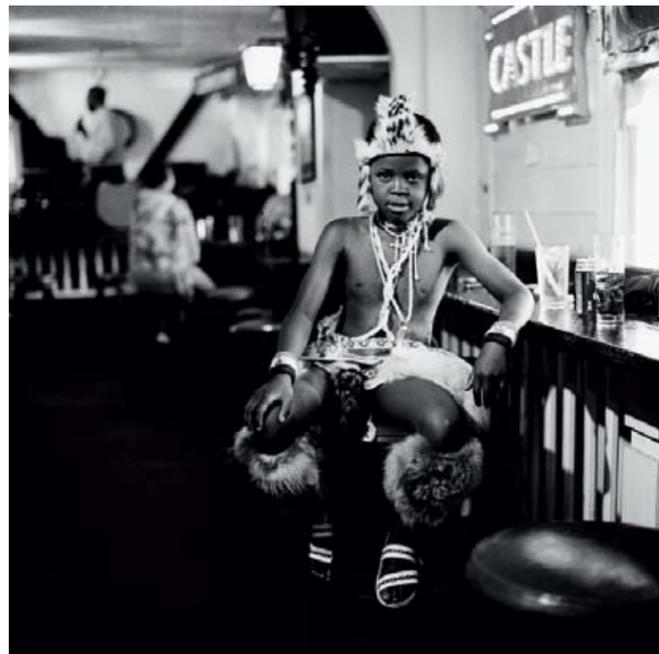
"Effects of irony are bound to happen when the present population is living in an area once forbidden to them, with relics of the past," Shoul says. "I think there is a wide variety of emotions; it's such a mixed-up, crazy, beautiful place." <

□ www.marcshoul.com



CHILDREN IN MASKS OUTSIDE
SONSKYN FLATS, HILLBROW

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
PUBLIC PHONES, VAN BEEK STREET,
NEW DOORNFONTEIN; KHAWULANI,
QUENCHERS PUB, MARSHALLTOWN;
SARDINE BUS, BRAAMFONTEIN;
COKE MAN, MARSHALLTOWN



LAURENCE AND KOBUS, ACTORS ON
THE SET OF WHEN WE WERE BLACK,
MARSHALLTOWN



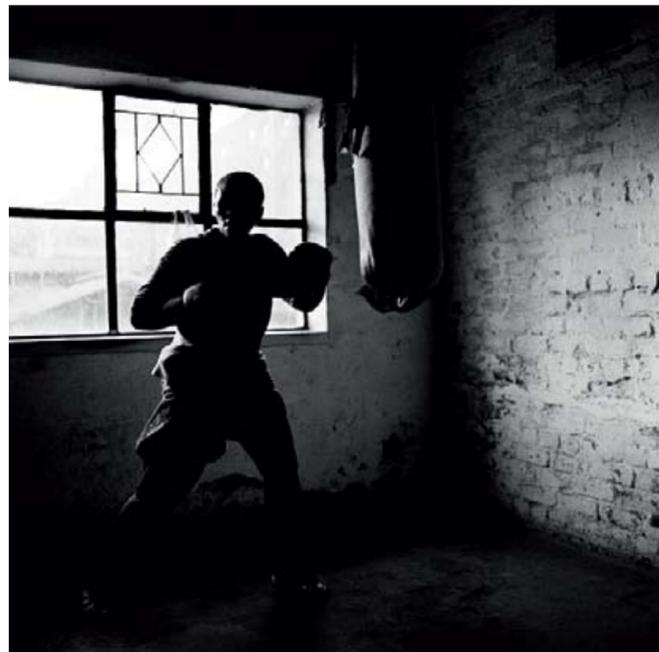
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
LERATO IN THE DJ BOOTH, THE MEXICAN
SPORTS BAR, HILLBROW; DIANE, NADINE,
BERNADEAN, BENJAMIN, NEW DOORNFONTEIN;
PRESIDENT STREET, JOHANNESBURG CENTRAL;
DELIGHT, CHRISTMAS DAY, YEOVILLE



SECURITY GUARD, FIRST NATIONAL BANK,
JORISSEN STREET, BRAAMFONTEIN



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
TONY'S CAFE, SAUNDERS STREET,
YEOVILLE; SIGGY PRAYING OUTSIDE
THE HOUSE OF LEGISLATOR,
JOHANNESBURG CENTRAL;
LILLIAN, GEORGE'S BOXING CLUB,
HILLBROW; HAPPY DOLLS, ELLIS PARK,
NEW DOORNFONTEIN



LOVERS RESTAURANT AND
BAR, NEW DOORNFONTEIN

