

## Freedom or Death exhibition and book launch

Opening Speech by Farieda Nazier<sup>1</sup>

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Artco Gallery, Woodstock, Cape Town - RSA

Good evening and welcome to this very pertinent gathering – which commemorates our history through the work (and witnessing) of Gideon Mendel. Thank you, Gideon and Yoachim for inviting me to deliver some thoughts-ramblings in two parts. Part one, On imaging the unseen, fantasies made real and part two, Photographs as past presences and memory work today.

### Part One On imaging the unseen, fantasies made real

Imaging human struggle is riddled with layers of complexity. Accurate depictions, therefore, require a high level of skill, consideration and discernment – as well as deep understanding of one's own positionality. As an artist who uses image-making as a means of activism, there is always the danger of falling into the trap of [furthering] reinscribing hegemonic political agendas [amongst other things]. Derek Hook, in his book *Post-Apartheid Conditions* [2013], discusses such continuities within journalistic photographic practices produced in the '80s and later in the 2000s. To elucidate on his commentary he provides examples from his own memories:

These images were of black labourers who tossed bricks to one another or dug ditches together in a seemingly untiring fashion; the supreme physicality of the legendary Shaka Zulu adorning the cover of E.A. Ritter's eponymous novel (1955); ) and (I too had witnessed the scene of a stabbing in my youth.

Derek Hooks, *Post Apartheid Conditions*

For me, two relevant themes come to the fore in the above. In the first instance, Hooks highlights the problematics of imaging black bodies<sup>2</sup> as hyper-physical and heroic and in the second, he refers to imaging the black body as broken. For Hook, both instances border on oppressive rhetoric, based on white fantasy propaganda produced during the apartheid regime. He infers that the portrayal of the black body [black persons] as [a] mindless physical machine[s], may allude to notions of strength and power, but is subverted in the psycho-social context through the proliferation of precursory fantasies of black virility. Similarly, in depicting black bodies [black persons] as dispensable lifeless objects or broken in death, limp and defeated; this type of imaging allude to fungibility, weakness and so on. Hook by no means suggests that this is intentional on the part of the image-maker. However, he means to highlight what he calls the 'predominant norms of discursive presentation'. I would extend these 'norms' as potential rabbit holes for artist/ image-makers, some which are mostly unavoidable. Let me expand here by providing a parallel interpretation [a provocation] of Hook's idea:

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<sup>1</sup> In retrospect (as highlighted in discussions with Gideon on positionality and his own privilege, power, intentions and gains during and consequent of his career as a documentary photographer) I considered and raised the notion of reparations. What could this mean within the context of the 'imaging, commodifying and consuming the pain and suffering of others.' This topic, however, is for another day, another essay.

<sup>2</sup> During group facilitation, as part of the Politics of Architecture seminar (2019) hosted by the Graduate School of Architecture at the University of Johannesburg, Jabu Absalom Mkhubu aptly noted our liberal usage of the term 'black bodies'. In his view, reducing blackness to mere bodies continues our objectification.

The tormented victim, black body [black person]. Stripped of dignity, often unnamed, grotesquely bloodied or deformed. Eternally, exposed and vulnerable.

Foregrounding victimhood eradicates the possibility of reading human agency, humanity and dignity. Instead, we are left to read weakness and demise in relation to the all-encompassing power of the state – the causality of the death itself. In Hook's second thematic we refer to the virile masculinity and strength – concretized through media, the mythology of bestial sexuality and the volatility of encounters with blackness ending in mindless adrenalin-filled rage. I exaggerate but you get the picture.

I'd like to suggest an unfolding narrative here – black opposition to the state will meet with certain death?

Considering the aforementioned, it is clear that the risk I speak of is linked to the potential flattening, romanticizing, glamorizing or abstracting of the adversity of others, (refer to Sontag's poverty porn) thereby buying into the apartheid fantasy. Imaging human struggle is riddled with layers of complexity. ANY accuracy on the part of the image-maker, therefore, requires a high level of skill, consideration and discernment – as well as deep understanding of your own positionality.

The documentary photographer is left with the difficult task to depict what s(he) has witnessed with SOME level of accuracy. This, amidst the risk of being injured or killed in the line of conflict – (refer to Mendel's image of his 'Sjamboked back' on page 50). In response to these pertinent but certainly not exhaustive examples of variables influencing the making and reading of images– ideology, politics, readership and so forth, I would like to refer to sensitive renderings of death in Mendel's work, of which there are many.

The image of the child burial (Page 24 and 25 of the book), Freedom or Death, displays Mendel's empathetic understanding of the relationship between the human condition, politics and psychologies. I attribute this to skills of discernment – 'what' to picture, 'how to' picture it, and which of these will ultimately make it into the public domain[3]. At the end of the day, the photograph captures the relationality between the position of the maker, content (a funeral) and socio-political context (Atteridgeville Township, a child (named) caught in the political crossfire, a man mournful). Notice, the absence of a mangled body – the size of the coffin, the universal theme of loss, the frame, another funeral image, on the right behind me, shows women in salute; contextualizing the location of THIS particular human struggle, the causality is immanent – deeply flawed politics. In the adjacent room, appears two more images of death – coffins lowered into the earth and a man's protest T-shirt that reads: BULLETS WON'T STOP US... Their only comfort that death is not in vain.

Mendel's contribution here is drawn from his ability to add layers and depth to his 'subjects' – rendering them human. During the apartheid and post-apartheid crisis, Mendel's work acts as an important counter-narrative to mass media and state alike.

Part 2 Photographs as past presences – on memory work, today

To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought.

James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time

Historical artefacts [images] may be viewed as ghosts from a hauntological perspective. They haunt us by re-inserting, partially or wholly, remembrances of past experiences. Our closets, homes, institutions and public spaces act as crypts – housing object and image archives of varied forms. In the present, they may act as reminders that rekindle bygone experiences – but also assist us in contextualizing our histories and locating our present-future selves and worlds. In the instance of the three collections of images on exhibit here today – memory is invoked on the level of materiality, the bodily and the ephemeral.

However, these works have been recently altered. Did altering these archives also alter our memories, or alter historical understandings in some way? I believe that by revisiting and critically engaging with the past [through reimagining them] we may come closer to understanding the present. The aptest way I can describe this process is through the following piece of writing:

The witness

While digging a hole in my back garden

To plant a seed anew

I unearth, by accident perhaps

A coffer.

I am teleported there

To that moment, the past, a few years past

After I witnessed that terrible, thing

That culminated in serial attempts to bury, it

It was covered in hardened soil- almost unrecognizable

and slightly corroded

A fossil really– rendering my bones (cold and the back of my neck really warm)

I opened it

It poured out unprovoked

Unprocessed

Stuff still, raw and unspoken

Happenings –amidst, between and prior to

A very real, really lifelike, unreal moment

(images, charred spaces, faces, unspeakable thoughts)

A nightmare reverberating

strung together as if they'd last a lifetime

I stand there, spade in hand uncertain what to do

Toiling

excavating

Pursuing lost selves

Finding Solace in only the seed

Nazier, 2020

In my own grappling, explorations and studies, this process has been necessarily disturbing and with disturbance, we are afforded the opportunity to unearth the coffers laying silently within their cognitive crypt. With this comes undoubted personal transformation.

Placing the past in the present and viewing it through fresh aged eyes, brings us a new perspective of events gone by. Re-figuring of past images do more than this– it has the potential of critically mirroring and therefore generating new understandings for the individual and the collective.

Part 3

In the exhibition entitled Freedom or Death, Mendel takes up an opportunity to deepen his understandings of what he has witnessed. His [artistic] insights positioned in the public domain, here, provide us with an idea of his personal struggle and transformation. Themes I would like to highlight are:

- dignity and sacrifice - women at funeral donning pained expressions of loss
- resilience and determination - damage book cover by capturing facial expressions of protestors
- solidarity, community, conviction - women overcome by teargas
- compassion, humanity, concern
- [potential], forgiveness, understanding in 'Blacks and whites dance together'

These works [may act as] a counter-narration, to the narrative of mere, tamed and broken blackness noted at the beginning of this address. As an archive in its own right, Mendel's three series of photographs allows us to continue defying colonial ideology within and beyond the apartheid aftermath.

Thank you, Gideon, and thank you all